Neither Markets Nor Militaries: On the critical importance of restoring the commons

Pierre Du Plessis
June, 2020

In Southern Africa – where South Africa and Botswana account for two of the most economically unequal countries in the world according to the GINI index – the coronavirus lays bare longstanding, systemic and structural faultlines that now serve as conduits for viral distribution. In South Africa, the transition from apartheid to neoliberal, market-driven governance has proven to be cruel, giving

way to widespread economic disparity, and market-driven injustice. Botswana, once touted as a model of development and an African success story of democracy, has become overwhelmed by the logics of growth upon which so much of its democracy is founded and, in recent years, has become increasingly militarised. The promises of infrastructure and social services have been wrapped in red-tape, and human rights and equality rendered as inessential "nice-to-haves". The Corona virus, however, has lifted the red-tape that, like band-aids left on too long, reveals social wounds that are a threat not only to the poor and marginalised, but also the elite. All are potentially infected.

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Inequities in access to clean water, sanitation and shelter have long been addressed by engineers, policy makers, publics, courts, and universities, but each within their own specialist ambit: with the result that service delivery has been stymied by un-navigable or corrupt procurement processes, and hobbled when accusations of "politics" been leveled at those who have dared to criticise the absence of equality. COVID-19, however, exposes the brutalities of neoliberalism for what they have generated: vectors through which the virus proliferates. The failures of accountancy-driven policy, driven by the privatisation of the commons and the division of privatised subscription services to education, healthcare – in which particular forms of care can be purchased – and security for the wealthy while the poor suffer the dysfunctional commons, serve to highlight the critical importance of restoring a commons based on a politics of care.

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Governments in South Africa and Botswana have responded to COVID-19 with appeals to the forces of the market and the military. In South Africa, the military

and police were quickly deployed to townships to enforce the movement restrictions of a strict lockdown, leading to the arrest of more than 200,000 people, mostly black, for crimes such as walking without grocery store receipts used to legitimize their movements and for smoking cigarettes, as tobacco sales have been also banned during lockdown. This policing has disproportionately targeted poor households whose basic needs require the ability to move, including the daily procurement of water from community standpipes. Botswana, like South Africa, activated its military reserves to secure its closed borders, deployed police services to escort cargo trucks that brought vital supplies into the country, made special priority trade route arrangements with neighboring Namibia, and issued hefty fines to citizens violating movement restrictions, though arrests have been much more limited. Yet that pair – South Africa and Botswana, respectively – represents a misdiagnosis of the problem: The issue is that the unmaking of the commons, through two decades of neoliberalism, has generated inequities that have the potential to provoke food riots and other violent responses. With the military carrying live ammunition, the risks to fragile societies are immense.

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On the same day Botswana prepared for its lockdown on April 2nd after announcing its first four coronavirus cases, including the first death, the government proudly announced that the Botswana Defense Force (BDF) had shot and killed five poachers who were carrying “weapons of war.” Sure not to omit – and even capitalise on – the immediacy of the Corona virus threat, the very next sentence in the press release read: “As a professional, prompt, and decisive force, the BDF will continue to execute its mission and other assigned tasks, whilst concurrently in collaboration with all Batswana fight a war against the invisible enemy in the form of the COVID19 pandemic” (Dikole 2020). The phrasing represents the mobilisation of militaristic discourse deployed against the “invisible enemy” that is the virus, being explicitly conflated with the Botswana

militaristic approach to conservation with its “shoot-to-kill” policy directed towards poachers. Rather than environmental, or even multispecies care, we get warfare. Such brutalities cluster and become conflated with one another as they proliferate, normalising surreptitious violences.

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The government of Botswana has, however, been proactive in activating its public services to mobilise food distribution schemes, provide wage subsidies, create a fund that calls on citizens to make innovative responses to COVID-19 actionable, and more. In many ways, the state’s immediate response to COVID-19 has been

both forceful and *care*-full, while reflecting the growing tensions between its increasingly liberal logics of governance and the long and rich, but troubled, history of the commons connecting the populace to the state. Botswana's militarised response to poaching is often argued to be an act of defending the commons, a tenuous position that simultaneously invokes claims to the commons and private property.

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Relatedly, Botswana announced that its controversial plans to reintroduce commercial hunting this year in its Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs), one form of remaining land commons (the other being Tribal Grazing Lands), will now likely be suspended until next year due to the global pandemic and associated travel restrictions. Rather ironically, liberal market logics drove the decision to reintroduce hunting as a means to finance the wildlife commons and its local communities. In parts of the Kalahari, however, remote community leases on these commons are set to expire in 2021, and if they cannot show sufficient development plans and income generation via tourism and hunting, large swaths of the WMAs will be rezoned for private cattle ranches, redistributed away from community-wildlife commons and towards privately-owned, for profit industries. Out of sight, movement restrictions and border closures allow for the capitalist creep of the commercial beef industry into the commons, dividing and privatising. Capitalist creep is the undoing of the possibility of the Commons. In this case, the nonresponse from the state is already trapped by its own neoliberal logics of accounting, further disintegrating the possibility to care for the commons even as food trucks rattle their way down dusty roads to make deliveries.

Capitalist creep is the undoing of the possibility of the Commons.

In South Africa, day 12 of the South African shutdown closed with nine COVID-19

deaths and eight deaths from military and policing operations. The number of deaths at the hands of police and military has since grown to at least 12, while arrests top 230,000. The effect of forcible compliance is to destroy relationships at a time when they most need to be built. The Defence Force should be mobilised not for policing but to deliver functional sanitation and running water, and do what 20 years of the brutalist neoliberal red tape has failed to do, because without soap, running water and functioning sanitation, lockdowns in shack settlements with shared taps and toilets are not only meaningless, but unbearable. The presumption that any "national threat" requires a military response to "combat" it potentially undermines societies, and risks putting governance on a war footing against its citizens. Militarised approaches to health and wellbeing are antithetical to the resolution of the crises they purport to address. Compare, for example, the self-reflection of Doctors Without Borders in early 2019 after their Ebola response teams in the Democratic Republic of Congo were attacked (Nguyen 2019).

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In South Africa, *Farmers Weekly* reported more than 1,500 official complaints of unjustifiable and excessive pricing on food items in early May, ranging from canned goods and flour to fresh produce. And yet, in the face of the neoliberal failures, where people in need of food supplies from the state during the lockdown have had to stand in kilometer-long queues, many South Africans have mobilised their own communities to procure and deliver food and hygiene supplies to those in need. The social responsibility demanded from citizens, while admirable and perhaps an attempt to reclaim the commons through care, also cements the neoliberal government's position in displacing social and moral responsibility onto individual citizens. The accountability of the state appears is reduced to its aspect as a military and market force, while the account-ability of care is dangerously displaced to privileged individuals in a free market.

COVID-19 serves as a stark warning that it is possible for neither markets nor militaries to facilitate social cohesion in times of pandemic, or multi-country ecological crises. The crisis – and the current wave of price-gouging by supermarket chains that benefit neither farm worker nor consumer – highlights the limitations of market-driven approaches to governance that have characterised post-democracy neoliberalism in South Africa and the growth-without-end approach to Botswana's governance.

The presumption that global capital will deliver solutions is profoundly flawed.

In dealing with COVID-19, research scientists point out that corporations are not disclosing vital research on vaccines, out of concern for intellectual property rights. Business-driven and market-driven solutions to food distribution, in the current crisis, have not proven viable, with extensive documentation, on social media and in food-system think-tanks, of South African supermarkets hiking food prices.

Globally, COVID-19 induced economic shutdowns have brought into view the shortcomings of contemporary market-based, and military-based, solutions to major crises. Their shortcomings in respect of human rights and social solidarity are both global and specifically local. Societies are much more than markets and militaries, however, and what is not in view in market- and military-driven responses is the networks and forms of social solidarity formed at local levels, via which precarious households find the support they need to survive.

> *Bring in the military, by all means, to fix toilets, ensure running water, and do what 20 years of the brutalist bureaucracies of neoliberal municipal procurement have failed to do.*

Neoliberalism has long ignored the non-monetised work of care that holds societies together. Following economist Kate Raworth, we identify the core economy as one where households, predominantly through the labour of women, provide the "time, knowledge, skill, care, empathy, teaching and reciprocity" that

is needed to sustain societies (Raworth 2017, 68). We do so, however, acknowledging that cores – as collectives – vary, encompassing the relations of care provided by both biological and non-biological kin, neighbours and elders, and alternative queer formations that sustain social groups across varying scales of solidarity. While it is widely recognized that care is frequently appropriated by heteronormative family and consumer-oriented projects (Cooper 2017), a care for the commons can be operationalized otherwise. Care, as Annemarie Mol (2008) has shown, provides an alternative to the liberal logic of choice. Whereas choice presupposes an individual, modern, rational human actor, we should instead acknowledge a more distributed collective. What the time of COVID-19 highlights is not a liberal, individual actor – that supposedly universal figure of the Enlightenment – but rather our distributed collectives, our commons, our cores. Care must be recuperated to recuperate the commons.

Bring in the military, by all means, to fix toilets, ensure running water, and do what 20 years of the brutalist bureaucracies of neoliberal municipal procurement have failed to do. But the work of statecraft, in this moment, cannot quickly repair disastrously damaged economies. The only option is to restore and strengthen the economy of care that still functions, to repair the brutal inequalities that flourished under privatisation and neoliberalism, whose faultlines have become conduits for Covid-19.

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Image:

Community rangers guard elephants in Sera Conservancy, Northern Rangelands, Kenya – Found on Flickr, photo by USAID Biodiversity & Forestry (CC BY-NC 2.0)

Connection and Inequality in the Remote Classroom

Lauren Sealy Krishnamurti
June, 2020

The switchover to remote teaching in the wake of COVID-19 has prompted a flurry of conversation among academics regarding technology's (in)capabilities in replicating the conventional in-person classroom. Among my colleagues across institutions, reactions have ranged from flat refusals to meaningfully engage with video software to hours spent meticulously pre-recording lectures that many students will probably not watch with the same level of enthusiasm. On the administrative side is the familiar corporate push for educators to become more knowledgeable, if almost excited, about the transition. We are encouraged to maximize our creativity, to attend workshops on how to use breakout rooms, to read this and that article on disseminating course content online, to let our productivity surge—or, as I see it, to justify tuition as still appearing worthwhile in the face of a face-to-face-less classroom.

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use breakout rooms, to read this and that article on disseminating course content online, to let our productivity surge—or, as I see it, to justify tuition as still appearing worthwhile in the face of a face-to-face-less classroom.

But there is also an unexpected silver lining to remote instruction for those who are able to participate in learning online. Despite its reputation as being somewhat inherently impersonal, engaging with each other online can also bring about new ways of seeing each other, a different kind of connectivity, and greater visibility of students' diverse needs. Learning from within their own homes (or, in contrast, not having a home to learn from) highlights students' individuality and exposes inequality in important ways that typical university classrooms are built to ignore.

At the beginning of the spring semester, which now seems a lifetime ago, I did an ice-breaker with my 18-person seminar class on culture and mental health. It was one of those requisite getting-to-know-you exercises that carries much higher expectations than are ever met in practice. On that somewhat awkward first day, we may have learned each other's majors and favorite movies, but the playful nature of the exercise made us all aware that we weren't digging too deep here – that's what the rest of the semester was for. Just as in fieldwork, there was a certain expectation that our collective time together would bring about a sense of community and with it, a greater sense of confidence and trust. And, as this was a course that would be discussing mental health, it seemed especially important for students to ease into their own comfort with each other.

This is how human connection works—for educators, anthropologists, and people in general. Whether we're in the field, in the classroom, in the work place or in any sort of collective environment, the more time that we spend with other people, the more we are able to create relationships with them, share thoughts and experiences, and get to know each other.

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vanish along with the rest of our planned activities for the foreseeable future.

This is what we anthropologists affectionately refer to as “building rapport”, and it’s a wonderful thing when it happens organically. With the abrupt shift to online instruction when the pandemic hit, I shared my colleagues’ anxieties that this rapport may no longer be possible, that it would vanish along with the rest of our planned activities for the foreseeable future. I anticipated that my class, which was just finding its rhythm as a group, would be replaced with static, asynchronous discussion posts in those last few weeks of the semester. But as our course took on a new (and admittedly sometimes clumsy) shape, we instead became differently connected to each other in ways that our in-person classroom might have restricted.

One of these ways was the addition of new voices. For those with some anxiety about speaking up in class, the comfort of remote learning allowed them a chance to thrive in our discussions. Those who had been more subdued in-person were suddenly vocal, sharing their opinions and reactions to our course material. Likewise, the more confident students who had formerly dominated our in-person discussions were forced into a more structured turn-taking style of conversation. The side-effect of this online technology was an evening-out of the classroom’s participatory mechanics, and it resulted in a more democratic learning process for everyone.

There was also an important reconfiguration of the physical space of the classroom that happened when it was translated to the internet. In the university classroom, students are typically clustered together, stuck in their too-small desks as the educator teaches from a slightly bigger desk at the front of the room.

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In the conventional classroom space, you can visualize the process of learning as a flow of information from one part of a room to another. The hierarchy implied by this setup can create something of an imbalance where learning becomes directional—teaching *at* your students—as opposed to more interactive. But in the online classroom, we became positioned in a much more neutral way relative to each other. In the case of my class, everyone occupied the same size space, positioned on the screen in the order that they logged in. Those who were speaking would light up green, taking their moment while the rest of us remained red, silent. The more egalitarian setup of the classroom seemed to relax the overall mood of the class from the start. This physical-to-virtual shift is a simple change-up, sure – but it's also an opportunity to rethink the stubborn academic dynamics that can flatten the experiences of students and elevate the educator in ways that don't enhance the learning process and, more significantly, don't at all reflect reality beyond the institution.

Just as this pandemic has revealed the fragility of our society in so many other ways, the move to online teaching has further exposed the reality of the stark inequalities that exist among university students in America. The move to remote teaching was a privileged one. The efforts of university administrations to adapt to this new format cast some broad assumptions on the abilities of a "student body" that simply does not exist**.** Those who cannot afford the machines, the time, or the luxury of safe, personal spaces were placed at an immediate disadvantage. Some students have been forced to fall off the radar completely while others have never missed a single class. Some students, already plunged deep into debt to pay for their college education, will be refunded for living costs; most others will not.

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The slightly softer reality of my classroom, for those who were able to continue the semester online, was unexpected and surprisingly endearing. For those of us

who chose to share our video screens, the familiarity of meeting and seeing people's pets, partners, family members and hobbies allowed us to connect in everyday, humanizing ways that were less possible in the space of our on-campus classroom. We tagged along as some students went on walks or showed off their apartments, their artwork, their views from various windows, their sprouting seedlings and overflowing houseplants, or cluttered counters. Some students attended our early morning class still cocooned in blankets and some, on the other side of the world now, were shadowed in warmly lit rooms as the sun went down around them. We watched people's cats step on keyboards and heard parents interrupt our discussions with breakfast requests. We learned who drank coffee and who preferred tea in the morning. Likewise, my students overheard the chaos of my own home, seeing my toddler burst in on my lecturing more times than I can count.

These kinds of micro-encounters might seem unimportant, but on a wider scale, they can reveal a diversity of life experience that otherwise struggles to exist within the homogenizing halls of a university system. While small, these nuanced enhancements of our personal lives can make us more aware of *who* we are talking with, *who* we are teaching or learning beside. Viewing each other on a screen simultaneously brought attention to the class as a collective of individual people, all there for different reasons, from and going to different places. Online, students were no longer just bodies in classroom chairs—they were people with interests, with connections to others, with altogether unique lives, taking up the same amount of space. This simple recognition of others' lives, including the awareness of their own spaces and the joys and difficulties encountered in those spaces, can be just as important as any content covered in a course's syllabus.

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In looking ahead to the next academic year, more students than usual will fall

through the cracks as COVID-19 reshapes the economy of our everyday lives. As universities move quickly to adapt to the remote model, we must challenge the assumptions that come along with this sudden change. This extreme cultural moment reminds us that equality in education, and in so many other critical areas in America, is an unfulfilled promise.

Because of this, and certainly magnified by the overall sense of loss that this pandemic has brought upon us, the absence of a student from class somehow felt more significant to me online. Whether just a name missing from the group chat list or a student's video being replaced by a muted gray square, it sometimes felt like we were much further away from each other—because we were, and not just by our physical distance.

Pushing boundaries: Homelessness and addiction during Covid-19

Johannes Lenhard
June, 2020

“Ben really isn’t keeping up well. He looks fine, but he’s been complaining and he’s constantly out. […] You don’t see a change with everyone, but with him […] it’s so obvious. He is back on the crack, too. And he was supposed to move out soon – but at the moment nobody is moving, really. They are all staying longer than the 28 days [the supposed length of an average stay at the homeless hostel].”

I am standing behind the counter in the kitchen with my co-volunteer Dannie on a Wednesday evening in early April as we are watching Ben enter the extensive ‘lounge’ area in the Hostel. He nervously walked in zig-zag through the room towards us, watching his every step. Grabbing a bag of chips out of one of the big, donated cartons, he comes to a stand in front of us. The dinner behind us is

bubbling away; everything is ready and the first group of people is already sitting on the tables spread out across the room. There isn't exactly enough space to keep social distance over dinner, but people are being reasonably careful. A handful of the residents are lounging on the big couches, one couch per person; most of the faces turned towards the TV. As often in recent months, as Dannie also explained to me, some action movie was on. "They like all these movies in which gangsters win against the police. I don't know what it is at the moment. Lots of violence."

I smile at Ben whom I had not met before: "Do you also want dinner? Any special requests?"

His face looked swollen and his teeth were grinding. He couldn't stand still and barely looked me in the eye mumbling a short "No." He fumbles with his pants as I prepare his plate, and I observe him sitting down alone and within minutes disappear downstairs.

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In a recent Harvard Health post, a US-frontline doctor (and recovered opiate user) reports on the intersection of what he calls the 'two great epidemics of our generation'. Not only does he argue that people suffering from addiction 'are vastly more vulnerable to coronavirus', they also suffer additionally from shortages of supplies (of methadone and other medications, for instance, at times even clean needles) and of increased issues of isolation, specifically when it comes to the lack of access to their recovery community and peer-support groups.

> *Accessing services such as drug testing and mental health support was temporarily impossible indeed.*

In the context I observed in the UK, not only was accessing supply but also specialised services complicated when the 'stay-at-home' orders were introduced

in March. Accessing services such as drug testing and mental health support was temporarily impossible indeed. Many addiction, mental health and move-on services were inaccessible for the first phase of lockdown in late March and early April. The focus was on protecting staff and putting rules and guidelines in place first. In effect, this made it even more important to provide the appropriate kind of support, particularly for people with complex needs, such as addiction, in the institutions where they were finding shelter.

How did health institutions deal with the additional pressure, particularly given the absence of specific government guidance? What kind of problems became particularly pressing? Which rules changed and how did responsibilities shift? This takes us back to Ben disappearing downstairs.

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In my ongoing conversations with one of the Hostel managers, John, I learnt how over time, many rules were adapted; some guidelines had to be turned upside down more or less immediately, others shifted more slowly over the weeks after the virus started spreading and people were locked down completely. Many of the changes marked attempts to balance accommodating residents' (individual) needs and the overall responsibility of staff and management for the health of all residents.

> *Four weeks into the lockdown, there were no restrictions anymore on which alcoholic drinks were allowed.*

One of the almost immediate adaptations of rules concerned the consumption of alcohol. Downstairs – Ben's refuge straight after dinner – was where alcohol was now allowed in the Hostel. First, it was only for beverages with up to 5% alcohol; that rule was quickly relaxed further to anything but glass bottles. Four weeks into the lockdown, there were no restrictions anymore on which alcoholic drinks were allowed. However, consumption was still only permitted in a specific section downstairs; people's bedrooms remained taboo. Before Covid-19, the Hostel was

‘dry’, with a strict no-alcohol-inside policy. “But how are we supposed to keep that up when people aren’t allowed to leave? They aren’t even allowed to sit in the park. […] Many of our residents have an addiction problem. […] That’s the least I can do. We even buy it for people if they are self-isolating and ask us to. […] One of our biggest problem is keeping people inside, behavioral issues, really.” John was considerate from the beginning, thoughtfully reflecting about rules, action and their effects. But alcohol was indeed only the starting point, *one* of the substances that people were consuming, but not the one with the strongest attraction and biggest complications.

Another one of the hostel staff, Ollie, made this point even more poignantly in a conversation with me early on during the first weeks of ‘stay-at-home’ orders: “I know from personal experience, if you are in a [heroin] withdrawal, nothing will stop you going out to get your substance; coronavirus won’t even cross your mind.” Already before Covid-19, most people working (and volunteering) in the Hostel knew that many of its coming-and-going inhabitants had substance-use issues; mostly, it was heroin and crack that people consumed, on top of alcohol and Marijuana. But while considering the complications that came with addiction during lockdown, Ollie was also concerned about giving up on rules too quickly and too extensively: “If you turn a blind eye to it: drug-dealing, drug-sharing, violence, reliance on each other – it’s a whole different culture!” Ollie was weary of relaxing all the rules as he expected the situation to slide out of control, leading to a broad shift of modes of interaction that would not be beneficial for the overall situation at the Hostel.

> *What was the best practice to both support people in managing their addiction and to keep the Hostel as a whole secure?*

John was possibly even slightly more open to experimentation than Ollie, particularly regarding the short-term goal of protecting the whole community from the quickly spreading virus. The most important immediate goal for him as the manager was to enable every resident (and member of staff) to follow the

government guidance of staying in as much as possible.

What was the best practice to both support people in managing their addiction and to keep the Hostel as a whole secure? In a slightly longer-term view, it wasn't clear how far one could and should go when relaxing rules; how easily would you be able go back 'to normal', to stricter rules, once the lockdown was rolled back? John was open to seeing this phase of changing rules as a trial period: "Once this whole coronavirus has died down, it will give us a possibility to re-evaluate what worked well, what didn't work well."

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While in the beginning, everyone was experimenting – there was no playbook, no government-issued guidance – more recently, after several weeks of 'stay-at-home' orders, things started to calm down. When rules were tried out and not necessarily fully enforced originally (people like Ben leaving often and for long stretches of time for instance), recent weeks saw a re-enactment of a more solid structure. On the one hand, the very regular meetings between key workers and residents resumed; these meetings are in many ways the most important support for many people, including with solving problems like linking people up to adequate care for their addiction. On the other hand, rules, particularly about staying inside, were more strictly enforced. Several people were evicted for repeated transgressions of rules; residents were warned twice when breaking rules and made aware of the eventual consequences but eventual several people were asked to leave when a third breach occurred. The atmosphere was in fact calmer as a result; there was an understanding that while individual needs were met as much as possible – by providing methadone scripts, for instance and resuming on-site drug testing –, the overall goal was keeping the shelter and *all* inhabitants (and staff) safe. Surely also as a result of this strategy, there still had not been a case of Covid-19 inside; none of the residents had even been self-isolating for weeks.

> *Some people were left out of this focus, they fell through the cracks of the*

service institution.

Was there a flipside to this strategy, however? You could perhaps describe it as focused on the majority, on the 'average homeless person'. The goal – as with the much broader public health-strategy implied by containment and 'stay-at-home' orders – was to keep as many people as possible safe. Some people were left out of this focus, they fell through the cracks of the service institution.

What if you weren't able to keep your consumption of – say – heroin as low as twice a day – the number of times you were allowed to leave the Hostel, for instance? What if you had special support needs when it came to your mental health? What if because these needs were unmet you were not able to follow the guidance as easily?

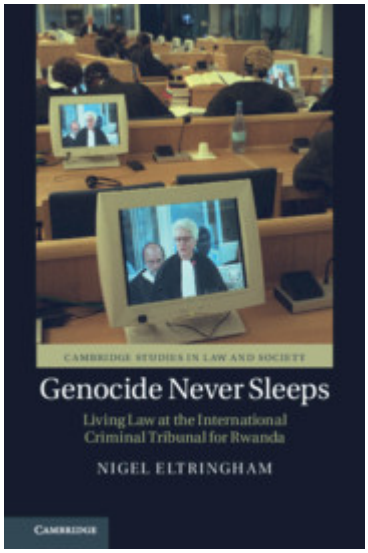
The focus on keeping the Hostel safe – the reasonable thing to do from a health and institutional perspective – leads a group of people to be exposed at least during the first weeks of confusion and uncertainty. In this sense, Covid-19 and the rules that swept across the world with it can be seen as a stress test. For the most part, the homeless institutions I observed scored very well. But certain people, often the most vulnerable when it came to substance use, were the hardest hit. Going forward, can we design an institutional infrastructure for homeless people that would be prepared to protect *particularly* these people in terms of crisis?

Notes

The research for this piece has been conducted in the UK as a volunteer and interviewer in a set of different homeless institutions from March to June 2020. All individuals have been informed about my role as a researcher and all names of individuals and institutions have been changed to safeguard people's anonymity. I choose 'Hostel' as a descriptor for the different institutions throughout.

Genocide Never Sleeps

Senem Kaptan
June, 2020



Established in 1994, the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), along with its predecessor, the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), was, at the time of its inception, the most significant effort of international criminal justice after the Nuremberg and Tokyo trials. The ICTR was an ambitious project of the international community to hold accountable perpetrators of mass atrocities, as well as a much-delayed reaction of the United Nations Security Council to the genocide in Rwanda. *Genocide Never Sleeps: Living Law at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda chronicles* the social life of the ICTR, based on two years of ethnographic research conducted between 2005 and 2007, eight months of which were spent in the ICTR's premises in Arusha, Tanzania. Through "deep hanging out" (p. 23) at the scene of this complex project of transnational justice, Nigel Eltringham takes us inside the ICTR and demonstrates the inner, often quite messy, workings of the tribunal which contrast with its distant, usually sterile, depictions found in official proclamations.

> *Nigel Eltringham takes us inside the ICTR and demonstrates the inner, often quite messy, workings of the tribunal which contrast with its distant, usually sterile, depictions found in official proclamations*

In five carefully constructed chapters, each of which expounds a facet of the tribunal's work (lawyers and judges' assessments of the tribunal's purpose and legacy; the spatial and visual dimensions of the proceedings; challenges to the "hidden script" of habitual legal practice; the problematic construction of legal truth and evidence in witness testimonies; and law's role in producing a historical record vs. determining guilt or innocence), Eltringham diligently demonstrates the arduous process of bringing international criminal law to life. Though Eltringham is an anthropologist by training, and provides extensive coverage of political and legal anthropological literature in this study, the book is also

addressed to legal scholars. More specifically, Eltringham is critical of the body of international criminal law scholarship that has been dominated by textual analyses of law without much interest in the day-to-day work that sustains tribunals. Instead, by focusing on the people, rather than the rules and regulations, that bring law to life, Eltringham urges for a study of law as a social and "flawed human process" (p. 23)–one that is shaped by the complex and dynamic actions of people that enact the law rather than by a simplified and detached code of legal conduct. In doing so, he skilfully resituates the ICTR as an institution that has a life beyond the documents that produced it.

As ironic a conclusion as it may seem for a book whose call is to move away from a textual study of law, in essence, Eltringham's major focus in this book is on narrative constructions. This is evident in his analysis on two levels: narratives put forth by and about the ICTR as well as narratives about legal practice. As Eltringham tactfully demonstrates, the ICTR is made up of a multiplicity of legal actors (lawyers, judges, and administrative officials, among others), each with their own, at times contradictory, version of what the tribunal did and achieved. The diverging opinions about the tribunal's status vis-à-vis truth commissions is prime example of this. Therefore, by actively engaging with these narratives, Eltringham approaches the ICTR not as a "disembodied, abstract 'super-person'" but as "a collection of situated persons" (p. 19). In this vein, one can also read Genocide Never Sleeps as a scholar's intervention into the narrative construction of the ICTR's work and legacy, challenging the idea that the tribunal's archive (court transcripts) along with its legal actors (primarily lawyers and judges) are the only ones entitled to recount the ICTR's history. This is particularly evident in Eltringham's scrutiny of legal practitioners' accounts of allegedly problematic witness testimonies touted as symptomatic of "Rwandan culture." To counter this claim, Eltringham carefully analyses lawyers' and judges' thoughts on and various moments from witness testimonies (such as misunderstandings that may be caused by lack of contextual knowledge and distort intent if left unaddressed (p. 128) as well as underscoring the dialogical nature of these testimonies. In doing so, he demonstrates that the impediment to the production of "conventional"

witness statements may be the result of the constraints posed by legal culture rather than the culture of a particular people (p. 151).

> *By focusing on the people, rather than the rules and regulations, that bring law to life, Eltringham urges for a study of law as a social and "flawed human process" (p. 23).*

As seen above, narratives about what the ICTR did and achieved are deeply entangled with narratives of legal practice. These narratives are also interrelated with the perpetual tension between legal text and legal action. In Genocide Never Sleeps, this tension can be observed in multiple instances, especially since the improvised nature of the ICTR, along with its international, multilingual environment, turned the proceedings, and hence the legal procedures that underlie them, into a constant work in progress. Eltringham demonstrates this through the ICTR's Rules of Procedure and Evidence (RPE). Amended on a continual basis through an annual plenary session, the RPE provided legal practitioners with a supposedly "static, autonomous and authorless" referent (the ICTR acting "independently of human volition" (p. 18)). In reality, it was, of course, a rather direct response to the challenges of courtroom practice, "accomplished by the (re)constructive work of the judges themselves" (p. 115). Likewise, Eltringham's discussion of LiveNote, the transcription management software that immediately made available witness testimony on lawyers' and judges' laptops (which was then used to produce "witness summaries" used in the judgement), is a case in point for the recurring prioritization of legal text over legal action, or purported stability over theatricality (p. 82). On the other hand, the direct challenge posed to courtroom practice by the presence of simultaneous interpretation is an interesting contrast to the above examples. Supposedly neutral bystanders of the trials (unrecognised even in court transcripts or case minutes), interpreters actively contributed to trial content through the censoring of witness testimony they deemed sensitive and interrupting lawyers with technical warnings (about pace and procedure). The lawyers' frustrated statements about how simplifying their language choice for the sake of

interpretation makes it “difficult to control the courtroom” (p. 93) hints at a loss of narrative control in shaping the trial–a sense of control that the RPE and LiveNote both provided.

> *The lawyers’ frustrated statements about how simplifying their language choice for the sake of interpretation makes it “difficult to control the courtroom” (p. 93) hints at a loss of narrative control in shaping the trial.*

There is no doubt, as the above analysis shows, that Eltringham’s account of the ICTR successfully provides “thick descriptions” of the day-to-day workings of the tribunal and superbly demonstrates what it takes to make international law work. I do think, however, that a wholesome view of the individual characters of legal actors (usually heard through snippets of interviews as “a defence lawyer” or “a judge”) is palpably absent in this account. Given that the book’s unsettingly apt title, for instance, is based on an after-hours conversation that Eltringham witnessed between two ICTR lawyers, I was left with a desire to learn more about who these legal actors were beyond their identities in the trial chamber. What did life look like for lawyers and judges, for instance, once a hearing was over? Who was able to enter this legal community of “cosmopolitan locals” (p. 13)? What of those other legal actors (interpreters, stenographers, registry officials, among others) whose voices we do not hear as much as the lawyers and judges? What about the gendered dimensions (noticeably absent from Eltringham’s analysis of the tribunal) of this community and their legal actions? Of course, one can argue that focusing on tribunal dynamics alone through anonymised narratives is an intentional methodological choice (resulting, perhaps, from priority preference of research sites, protection of individuals, or lack of in-depth access). Nevertheless, given the book’s emphasis on seeing law as a social process, providing a more thorough discussion of the social lives (or lack thereof) of the people who made law happen would not only have bolstered the book’s core argument, but also contributed to methodological debates on legal research in anthropology and beyond.

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This absence, however, does not take away from the unique insights provided by Genocide Never Sleeps, one of which is Eltringham's great success in demonstrating that law is as much about human intervention and improvisation (especially in the unique context of the ICTR) as it is about procedures and regulations. Ground rules still undergird the hearings, but Eltringham exposes the intricate ways in which they get questioned, bent and quite literally negotiated amongst the various actors that bring law to life. Eltringham's observations about the exceptional case of the ICTR also provide fertile ground to further assess the everyday legal practices normalised and taken for granted in domestic contexts (p. 25). Furthermore, by putting legal actors, rather than texts or files, front and centre, Eltringham also draws much-needed attention to the affective components of international criminal law (emotional and psychological toll of the trials; boredom endured in hearings; frustration experienced over technical details and expectations). By attending to the minute and often invisible components of legal practice, Eltringham underscores the need for and value of focusing on process (messy and intangible) as opposed to merely outcome (sterile and quantifiable) in order to better assess the workings of international criminal law. Overall, in full reverence to the old anthropological adage of making the familiar strange, Eltringham does a superb job of turning the site of international tribunals into an unfamiliar new terrain with fascinating insights to debate for anthropologists and legal scholars alike.

Eltringham, N. (2019). *Genocide Never Sleeps: Living Law at the International*

Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (Cambridge Studies in Law and Society). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/9781108757195

Featured Image: Kigali Genocide Memorial Wall of Names. Photo (cropped) by Laurent de Walick, Flickr (CC BY 2.0)

Uberland

Cheyne Anderson
June, 2020


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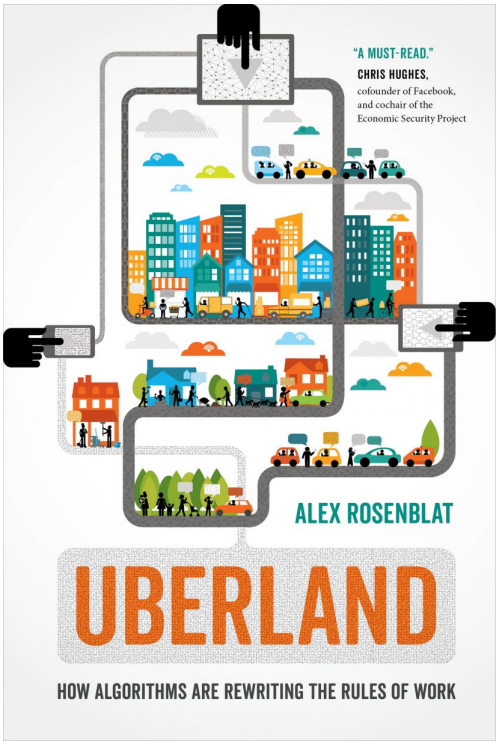
152

In *Uberland: How algorithms are rewriting the future of work*, technology ethnographer Alex Rosenblat tackles the political realities of the Silicon Valley mythos through one of its most successful companies. Rosenblat spent just over four years from 2014 to 2018 conducting research with drivers for Uber and Lyft – Uber's slightly smaller cousin operating in North America. The result is a detailed ethnographic work which centres on the diverse human stories of drivers whose labour is embedded in a complex web of big data, surveillance and the economic and cultural rise of the 'tech start-up'.



Thematically, *Uberland* follows three main ideas. First, the author highlights how Uber uses its technologies to nudge, and sometimes outright force, the behaviour of its drivers. Second, she demonstrates how drivers themselves navigate algorithmic control and the spaces in which they gather and assert autonomy. Third, and most importantly, the reader is introduced to how the complex politics of the first two serve to undermine Uber's carefully constructed narrative. Together the book paints a complicated picture of the uneven realities of the gig economy set against the glossy sales pitch of Uber as the future of work.

I will address these ideas in turn. The actual number of Uber drivers worldwide is not an easy sum to arrive at. In late 2018, the company boasted of 3.8 million active drivers across 63 countries. However thanks to the tangled web of Uber's "flexible" infrastructure, there's an enormous diversity in experience when it comes to being an "Uber driver". This 3.8 million figure only counts "active" rather than "inactive" drivers, and it's difficult to tell how many of these people would actually describe themselves as full-time Uber drivers. Despite an enormous diversity of experience, as Rosenblat observes, every single one of these driver's experiences is funnelled through the same app.

Gamification of work: a faceless boss

The Uber app is key to the driver's experience, and like all algorithms, it is not a neutral interface. The app acts as a faceless boss. It is capable of responding to real-time data that takes everything into account from traffic, user-demand and shifts in company policy. The app uses this data to push drivers to work longer hours, and can punish or incentivize accordingly. The result is a tapestry of algorithmic manipulation which veers into the dystopian. It rewards drivers with positive messages when it detects "smooth brakes and accelerations"; or it can bombard drivers with messages such as "your next rider is going to be awesome!" if they attempt to log out of the app.

This gamification of work is a pervasive symptom of the gig economy. Apps that profit from human interaction often look to elements of digital gaming and gambling to find new strategies for holding our attention. As seen with the Uber app, this can involve tangible interface designs like the idea of unlocking achievements and rewards. Some view these kinds of gamification as the secret to a more engaged and motivated workforce (see Dale 2012). But Rosenblat shows this can also deploy the more insidious elements of gaming to keep drivers engaged. The app essentially "games" its drivers by obscuring as much as it reveals.

> *The app acts as a faceless boss, responding to real-time data and using it to push drivers to work longer hours, and can punish or incentivize accordingly. The result is a tapestry of algorithmic manipulation which veers into the dystopian*

An example of this is the phenomenon of "phantom cabs" where the Uber app maps shows groupings of drivers in neighbourhoods where, in reality, there are none. These ghost cars represent an attempt to manipulate the appearance of surges in popularity, and in doing so, uses the app interface to distort reality. But these artificial surges can also act as algorithmic shields protecting their actual

drivers from potentially hostile regulatory authorities.

The second theme is the humans at the centre of the Uber story. Rosenblat meets many drivers who are satisfied with Uber. Some of these people, like Mariana – a mother of four who migrated from the Dominican Republic – are held up as examples of migrant workers who feel that the benefits of the job outweight the precariousness of the sharing economy. When Rosenblat meets Mariana, she tells her that she appreciates the flexible work hours because it lets her see her family, and that she enjoys getting to meet new people in a way that she could not in her former job as a childcare worker.

But ultimately, the actual experience of drivers does not match this rosy picture. Rosenblat stresses that how Uber imagines its drivers and its workers is fundamentally different from the driver's experience. I will elaborate on this below, but for now, suffice to say that the high attrition rates of drivers speaks to the overall lack of satisfaction with the job. As Rosenblat notes, more than half of the participants in the gig economy are likely to quit within a year.

'Conversations with taxi drivers'

I'd like to point out the storytelling trope of "conversations with taxi drivers". These aren't Rosenblatt's only source throughout the ethnography: the analysis is supplemented by secondary data from forums and podcasts, which she seems to be active on as a researcher and advocate of drivers' rights. Reading this book gives the impression that she cares deeply about her informants and has struck up genuine friendships with many of them. However, there's a power imbalance in these conversations and the relationships developed around them that goes unaddressed. At the end of the day, she is the one with the capital and mobility to be a regular Uber passenger, and this gives her power over the drivers, whether this is a power of representation in her ethnography, or the power of a 5-star driver review.

Rosenblat's ethnography illustrates how the Uberland ideology flourishes in

spite of a less-than-satisfying reality.

Many of these drivers are drawn to the kind of mobility and autonomy that Rosenblat represents as an ethnographer who travels the country riding Ubers. For drivers, this is wrapped up in the idea of "entrepreneurship". The ethnography shows how this image is intentionally crafted by Uber, and is illustrative of the third theme: Uber's own tech positivist narrative. Uber frames itself as a company altruistically paving the way towards the future of work. Both this and the experience of drivers are driven by a similar force, that of stories: on one level the stories of drivers, on the other the stories concocted by Uber.

However, technology itself is also a language of power. Rosenblat writes that where "Uber truly shines [is] when it uses the power of rhetoric to make the case that its sharing technology can create entrepreneurship for everyone" (2020:74). This power is inscribed in the algorithms that operate the app, but it's also part of their intentional marketing. Uber drivers become "consumers" of Uber technology and are depicted in glossy billboard portraits as upwardly mobile millennials building their own future.

Researchers and technology: the ethics of funding

In *Uberland*, we see moments when Rosenblat breaks out of the ethnographer role and becomes a journalist. Rosenblat broke the "phantom cabs" story for Vice in 2015. But in becoming a journalist here she raises some interesting questions about the role of ethnographers when it comes to documenting big tech. Undertaking this ethnography has required her to confront the inequalities of the Uber experience. She has the power to use journalism to expose unethical labour practices. However, she is simultaneously feeding the machine as a consumer.

Is it possible to undertake this kind of ethnographic research without incidentally perpetuating its power? In general, Rosenblat is transparent about where she

draws the line. She positions herself throughout as something of an adversarial force against Uber, even detailing a scene in which the company tries to recruit her as a means of silencing her research.

There is also a broader issue at play. Rosenblat is situated in the wider entanglement of tech research and big tech. She is a researcher at the Data & Society Research Institute, which has attracted criticism because its director is a former Microsoft researcher and was initially funded by a Microsoft grant. This problem is not unique to Data & Society, but it links back to bigger discussions around the ethics of funding for many of these technology research institutes.

The Future of Work? Uber and the Pandemic

This book comes at an eerily prescient point. As Rosenblat points out, the sharing economy has its roots in the 2007-08 recession. During this time in the US the national unemployment rate was around 10% and many working-class towns and cities were economically destroyed. *Uberland* gives us some hints as to what the sharing economy might look like amid a pandemic-triggered recession. On the one hand, amid the disillusionment of big tech and the mounting court cases of drivers against Uber, the current circumstances have the potential to expose the doublethink once and for all. Uber's recent announcements, such as concessions to give drivers sick leave, directly contradict the narrative of "micro-entrepreneurs". But as the New York Times reports, it has also intensified pre-existing issues with unethical labour practices associated with platforms like Uber and Amazon.

Rosenblat's ethnography illustrates how the Uberland ideology flourishes in spite of a less-than-satisfying reality. And it flourishes in a context where tech companies don't actually need to be profitable in order to grow. It might not actually matter if nobody can catch an Uber in a lockdown. Whether it pushes forward with its cousins like *Ubereats*; or grows new platforms implementing

imaginative ways of capitalising on downturn, the spread of the *Uberland* ideology seems a likely possibility.

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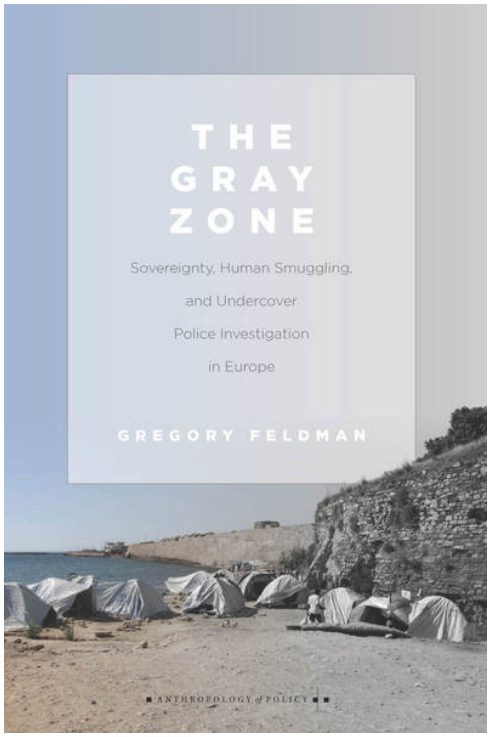
Featured Image: Yellow Taxi Cab (cropped) by Marco Verch (CC BY 2.0)

The Gray Zone

Dafna Rachok
June, 2020

Irregular migration has been one of the most popular topics of the political debates in Europe for already a few years. Issues of border policing and border control have regularly made national and international headlines. It is then unsurprising that these questions have attracted the attention of ethnographers who have since tried to understand the relationship between irregular migration, border policing, and state sovereignty and its limits in order to ponder the potential possibilities of reimagining the sphere of the political.



Engaging with the themes of sovereignty, political action, biopower and biopolitics, *The Gray Zone* is not a usual ethnography. The book is very theoretically and philosophically thick, as Gregory Feldman interweaves the story of an undercover investigative police team with the political philosophies of Hannah Arendt, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Carl Schmitt, and Primo Levi (to name a few).

The book opens with an in-depth discussion of two sovereign forms that Feldman refers to throughout the book. The first sovereign form is more vertical, hierarchical, and conceives of equality of the citizens through the principle of sameness. According to Feldman, the first sovereign form is best exemplified by the nation-state. By contrast, the second sovereign form is more horizontal, egalitarian and achieves equality through "equal empowerment" of different citizens (p.14). And it is this elusive second sovereign form that Feldman is interested in. The author claims that his participants strive to imagine and to enact the second sovereign form: thus, he looks at the relationships among the team members, absence of hierarchy within the team, and how the team members negotiate the questions of ethics among themselves. Feldman then contrasts egalitarianism of the undercover police unit with a rather hierarchical structure of the bureaucratic institution of which the unit is a part: according to him, the organization and behavior of this unit provide a glimpse into one of the possible ways to reorganize political space.

> *Gray zones enable both ethical and unethical action outside the realm of the law.*

However, in order to understand any sovereign form, it is imperative to take a look at the gray zone that is the *sine qua non* of any sovereign form. The gray zone, according to the author, is not so much a place as "an effect of human relations" (p.17); it is a "point in space-time free of the constraints and contours of moral code and law" (p.17). What is most prominent and important about the gray zone is that it shines a light on "tendencies already present in normal order" (p.25) by exaggerating them, by making them more pronounced. Thus, the author's insistence that the "difference between the normal order and the gray zone is a matter of degree, not of kind" (p.25). Consequently, looking at the way his participants behave "in the gray zone" enables the author to hypothesize about the tendencies that might be present in the second sovereign form.

After laying out theoretical premises, the next four chapters of the book, building on the ethnographic data, discuss the co-existence of the two forms of sovereignty and their gray zones. Chapter one introduces the investigative team that Feldman was a part of and describes how the team's egalitarian orientation, deep familiarity with each other, and empathy for their "targets" shape the team's actions in the gray zone. Feldman insists that the team tries to distance itself from a more hierarchical bureaucracy that it is a part of by asserting the principle of egalitarianism. For instance, according to the author, the team's formal leader foregoes "the hierarchy and its incumbent command structure" (p.67): instead of giving orders, he allows all members to present their assessments of a situation and to persuade each other to take a certain course of actions. Feldman praises the team's emphasis on a dialogue as this preserves the personhood of each team member that would otherwise be "lost in a hierarchical arrangement" (p.67) because simply following orders does not require "thinking assessment … of the ethical validity and significance of what should be done" (p.67).

> *The team members had to enter the gray zone and break the law for the sake of the investigation and for the sake of their own consciences.*

Chapter two explores the topic of violence and sovereignty. It argues that it is the

negotiated principle of honor that regulates the team's actions in the gray zone: the team's actions are based not "on universalised notions of right and wrong but rather on shared understandings of what those notions should be" (p.104). In other words, the chapter discusses how the team distinguishes between what is ethical and what is legal (since these two categories don't always overlap). Feldman describes situations when the team members exceeded their authority (e.g. they used physical force against one of the suspects and broke the law by illegally entering the suspect's premises) in order to do what they all deemed to be "the right thing" (p.79). The author argues that in the eyes of the team, breaking the law was justified because of the ends the team pursued: to catch the leaders who operated a human trafficking ring. As Feldman puts it, **"**they [the team members] had to enter the grey zone [e.g. break the law] for the sake of the investigation and for the sake of their own consciences" (p.79).

Chapter three continues the discussion of (il)legality and ethics started in the previous chapter by elaborating the topic of secrecy and its uses by the team and the state. Zooming in on the process of recruitment of informants and on surveillance, Feldman shows that despite the fact that secrecy is necessary for the first sovereign form (i.e. the state) because of security concerns, the team doesn't find secrecy to be appealing—rather, they find it frustrating because secrecy imposes limits on the scope of what the unit can do, while at the same time preventing the team members from effectively showing their work to the public.

Chapter four takes the discussion of sovereignty and gray zone to the international level. Exploring the limits of the first sovereign form and its shadow areas, Feldman focuses on the team entering the gray zone in order to deal with three international clandestine crime networks, consisting of an illegal brothel in a rural area that tailored to middle-class clients and employed women migrants; a sex trafficking ring that trafficked young women from Nigeria; and a Roma criminal ring that focused on begging, pickpocketing, burglary, and prostitution.

Feldman's approach to police ethnography is original and innovative for at least

two reasons. Firstly, it is an incredible example of studying up as it offers a glimpse of the lives of actors who act on behalf of the state and routinely deal with vulnerable and marginalised populations. Feldman portrays his participants with a lot of empathy in his discussion of their ethical dilemmas and ways to legitimise "bending the rules." Secondly, because of the sheer scope of theoretical questions that the book engages with, it shifts the conversation from talking about what the police do to talking about the various networks that the police are embedded in. This therefore highlights **why** they do what they do and what the implications of those actions are.

> *It is difficult to overstate how thought-provoking The Gray Zone is, and therefore it is unsurprising that the book's unconventional approach leaves the reader with myriad of questions.*

It is difficult to overstate how thought-provoking The Gray Zone is. It is thus unsurprising that the book's unconventional approach leaves the reader with myriad of questions. One of these is how the author actually conceives of the state. On the one hand, Feldman consistently uses the state as an example of the first sovereign form; on the other, he insists from page one that "states don't do things; people do" (p.1) and that "there are no such *things* as states, only actions conducted in their names by particular people" (p.1, emphasis in original). But where does this leave the investigative team? The team's actions and considerations are influenced by the institutions that the team is embedded in; moreover, the team acts on behalf of the state and for the state, just as the team targets' act despite the state or against it. Thus, the state, or the idea of the state and the understanding of the consequences of disobeying this idea, are constantly on people's minds.

Feldman's ambivalence about the state seems to stem from the fact that to view the state as the first sovereign form presupposes treating the state as a coherent unity, which it isn't. This leaves Feldman claiming the non-existence of states as entities. However, instead of completely denying the existence of states as

entities, it is possible to nuance the view of the state as a coherent entity by bringing into the conversation Matthew Hull's *Government of Paper* and Elif Babül's *Bureaucratic Intimacies*. Based on ethnographic fieldwork with Pakistani bureaucrats, Hull refuses to treat the state as a unitary entity that is capable of total control and manipulation and proposes instead to theorize it as an assemblage of various documents, discourses, and practices that mediate relationships between people and organizations. Likewise, Elif Babül, based on her ethnographic research of the process of translation of human rights in Turkey, insists that the state is rather a fiction of unity: it is a patchy and uneven constellation of institutions and discourses. Such approaches to the state could have brought good middle ground to *The Gray Zone's* two extreme views of the state.

> *There are no such things as states, only actions conducted in their names by particular people*

If gray zones enable both ethical and unethical action outside the realm of the law, how do we reconcile the actions of the team and of their "targets," given that what is ethical in the gray zone is a product of a group's shared understanding? In other words, Feldman's take on the gray zone also provides us with the possibility of understanding and explaining the actions of the criminal networks that the team acts against. Are the ethical standards of the team and that of their targets commensurable and reconcilable in the gray zone? And how do the "criminals'" shared understandings of (il)legality and ethics fit in with the two sovereign forms? Though the book does not really discuss it, it would have been really interesting to see the author engage with the themes of ethical relativism and ethical pluralism.

Overall, the fact that the book elicits so many questions indicates the novelty and power of Feldman's approach. *The Gray Zone* defies the expectations of what an ethnography is by bringing to the fore complicated theoretical questions and reconsidering them through the details of the undercover police team's work.

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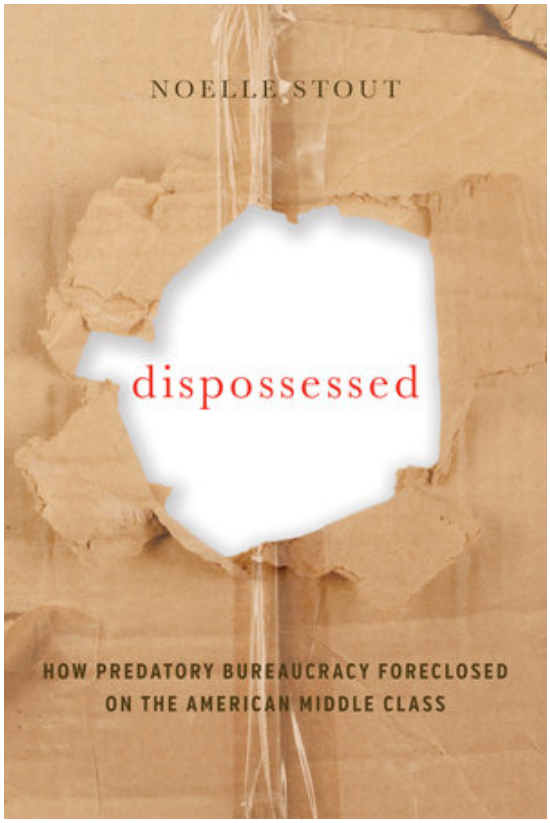
This book review is a response to Allegralab's call for reviews on Law, Technology and Bureaucracy

Featured Image: Metal02 by Betty Hime, Flickr, (CC BY 2.0)

Dispossessed

Sophie Andreetta
June, 2020



Drawing on two years of ethnographic fieldwork, *Dispossessed* considers the 2008 subprime crisis through the eyes of Sacramento homeowners and the daily work of bank officers tasked to enforce the Home Affordable Modification Program (HAMP), intended to encourage lenders to modify mortgages. It analyses how public assistance programs such as HAMP can eventually benefit those tasked to enforce them rather than their target beneficiaries – in the same way development funds sometimes fail to reach local populations.

> *In this case, because HAMP was outsourced to lending companies with incredibly complicated, absurd, opaque and often predatory bureaucratic practices, it eventually facilitated foreclosures instead of helping residents keep their properties.*

Based on a series of in-depth case-studies, the first two chapters of the book describe how Sacramento residents signed up for subprime mortgages on their house, often as a result of deceptive, sometimes even fraudulent practices, how they struggled to make their increased mortgage payments during economic recession and eventually applied for a modification of their mortgage, hoping to be able to keep their house.

In the third chapter, Stout describes how residents' applications got sucked into the inextricable labyrinth of mortgage modifications' predatory bureaucracies: documents kept getting lost or expired, intermediary payments deleted, and phone calls redirected until, months or years later, the request was eventually

denied – or the house foreclosed. She delves into the affects (Laszczkowski & Reeves 2015) of homeowners, describing the future that they envisioned in their homes and their emotional attachment to particular places, people, and lifelong projects on the one hand, and their frustrations and anger towards mortgage bureaucracies on the other. Residents' difficult experiences with these bureaucracies were indeed unprecedented: their other routine interactions with public services or sales representatives normally allowed them to use intermediaries who could either facilitate or take over the administrative burden. By making face-to-face interactions rare and social leverage nearly impossible, mortgage modifications bureaucracies made the middle-class's usual strategies redundant.

> *Homeowners, Stout argues, often understood the difficulties that they experienced as a form of betrayal, a breach of the social contract underlying American society as a whole.*

Chapter four turns to the loan modification bureaucracies themselves, the daily work and the conflicted feelings of their employees. Contrary to street-level bureaucrats working within public institutions (Spire 2008, Dubois 2010, Evans 2020), loan modification officers have very little discretion in the way they handle modification requests. Their work and conversations with applicants were surveilled and followed a specific script; the paperwork that they collected was fed to automated systems producing administrative decisions eventually aimed at maximizing profits for the banks, which often meant foreclosing people's homes. These algorithms also ended up discriminating against black and Latino homeowners, whose properties were located in lower value neighborhoods and therefore, were almost always denied mortgage assistance – confirming the fact that underneath their often assumed neutrality, algorithms can also (re)produce biases. Between the lines, this book therefore reads as a story about new governance models involving private actors and new technologies.

> *In certain contexts, hybrid governance – the idea that public service are, in*

> *part, provided by private groups or individuals – seems to compensate for the ineffectiveness of the state (Poncelet, André & de Herdt 2010 ; Tshitenge 2018; De Herdt & Titeca 2019). By contrast, Stout demonstrates how, instead of providing relief, private banks robbed the American middle class of their homes, and of the tax dollars that were meant to help save these homes.*

Still following residents' trajectories, the last chapter of the book describes homeowners' strategies once their application had been denied and they were facing foreclosure: some squatted their home until eviction, others left after they stopped paying for their mortgage. Stories of people destroying their properties flourished, suicidal rates increased.

Beyond daily interactions between homeowners and mortgage bureaucracies, *Dispossessed* shows how predatory finance resulted in the downward mobility of millions of Americans, whose middle-class subjectivities – and hopes for a stable, more prosperous future – were altered. It also raises questions about governance and the nature of statehood, describing dynamics similar to those associated with African states in the 1990s (Darbon 1990) – such as the idea that public funds are appropriated by those close to, or working for the state. I personally would have appreciated a more in depth discussion of some analytical issues, such as the (social, political and legal) meaning of property, the role of affects and the place of law in Sacramento's foreclosure epidemic, but Stout's thick description of people, places and situations nevertheless make for a fascinating read.

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Boarded Up House, Arizona: Photo by Circe Denyer, found on Public Domain (CC0 Public Domain)

Abandoned house: Photo by unknown, found on Phxhere (CC0 Public Domain)

On Pandemic Prophecy, Unsustainable Lockdowns and the Magic of Numbers: A Conversation with Carlo Caduff

Till Mostowlansky
June, 2020

As vast parts of the world went into Covid-19 lockdown over the past months critics of this approach have emerged from a broad spectrum: amongst others, libertarians who abhor the intruding state, business owners who see their profits

at stake and activists who observe dramatic consequences for the poor. However, comparatively few voices have come forward to criticize the global spread of the lockdown approach from a grounded public health and social science perspective, and based on the history of pandemic preparedness.

Taking such a stance, Carlo Caduff, medical anthropologist and associate professor at King's College London, has been vocal on Twitter and in his paper "What Went Wrong: Corona and the World after the Full Stop" (forthcoming in *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*). In "What Went Wrong" Caduff urgently calls to "to look beyond the virus if we really want to understand what is happening today" and to abandon a model-based policy that brackets out the social and economic consequences of the pandemic response. Caduff's critical perspective on the present ties in with his earlier work on a decade of global pandemic preparedness which he published in his 2015 book *The Pandemic Perhaps: Dramatic Events in a Public Culture of Danger*. Over the past two weeks, I conversed with Carlo Caduff in written form on central themes in his critique of the current pandemic response, the contradictions of preparedness and the struggle to come.

TM: Governments around the world have introduced drastic lockdowns that are explained as measures to "save lives" and "flatten the curve" of new Covid-19 infections. In your recent paper "What went wrong" you provide a radical critique of such lockdowns and their overemphasis on epidemiological modelling. What are the central points in this critique of the "magic of numbers" and, to use your own words, "the assumption that biological life is an absolute value separate from politics"?

CC: Clearly, mathematical disease modelling has played a crucial role in this pandemic – it has been used to shift government policies and justify lockdowns. It has also side-lined a classic public health approach, namely to test, trace and isolate.

South Korea and Germany put all emphasis on testing early on and managed the

pandemic quite well – other countries put testing at scale second and left local public health officials without any ground data. These local public health officials are now flying blind – they have no idea what's going on in their communities because they don't have enough testing capacity. This has hampered the response a lot.

So, in a sense, we have some numbers, the speculative/calculative numbers derived from modelling, but in many countries, we still don't have systematic surveillance, using both RT-PCR as well as serological tests. Without this kind of surveillance, it becomes difficult to know what's going on.

We should also keep in mind that disease modelers always said that lockdowns need to stay in place until a vaccine becomes available. So that basically means for 12-18 months or even more. It's a puzzle to me how this unsustainable strategy became an international norm. We can see how difficult it is to get out of a lockdown once it has been imposed and we always knew that it wouldn't solve the problem that this virus is posing. The virus is still spreading; it can't be eradicated.

Last but not least, people died, both in countries where there was a lockdown as well as in countries where there was no lockdown. To say it prevented more deaths in countries where it was imposed *early on* is misleading because we really don't know when the virus started to spread – it increasingly turns out that the virus was present for a much longer time than we thought. So, what does "early" mean? A lot of what people say these days is speculation.

TM: In your 2015 book The Pandemic Perhaps *you discuss how past "pandemic prophecy," fostered by experts on pandemic preparedness, invoked apocalyptic tropes, but was void of any sort of hope or vision for the post-apocalyptic world. Now that large parts of the world have come to a "full stop" such visions seem to mushroom in the form of authoritarian fantasies – destruction, a clean slate, control, surveillance, border closures and national sovereignty. How do you assess the link between the culture of danger that has resulted from pandemic*

preparedness and the ruthless, if not brutal, actions taken in the name of containment today?

CC: This is a key point. The pandemic has become an opportunity, an opening for many actors and institutions. All kinds of things are happening today. In India, the government started suspending key labour laws. In Hungary, the Prime Minister has now more power than ever. There are all kinds of political agendas that are put into practice. Some people even think today's state of exception should be the "new normal."

Pandemic times are auspicious times. Things that were not possible a year ago, are now suddenly possible, and there seems to be little resistance because everyone is confined at home and mentally exhausted by the isolation, the home schooling and childcare, and the fear and panic that has been spreading like a wildfire. Also, many are deeply worried about the future. Millions have lost their jobs. There's a lot of depression and despair, especially in the Global South, where lockdowns have pushed societies to the edge of collapse. In Lebanon, 50% of the population is now living below the poverty line. 75% need food aid. Jobs disappeared. Salary cuts are the norm. Inflation has made basic goods extremely expensive, including rents. The consequences of the lockdown are catastrophic. As I have written in "What Went Wrong", this pandemic response will haunt us for decades in ways that we can barely imagine at this point.

Today, many attribute incredible power and agency to the virus. However, a virus causes disease, not hunger and unemployment. It's not the pandemic, but the response to it that threatens the livelihood of millions of people. We need to take responsibility for what we are doing to people in the name of survival.

TM: In "What went wrong" you sketch a diffusion of lockdown methods from China to Europe and the United States to countries of the Global South. You suggest that in many of these contexts the lockdown conceals the complete lack of preparedness for such a pandemic – despite years of apparent preparations on a global scale. What are, in your view, the larger political and economic processes

that have led to this wide gap between expected and actual preparedness?

> *Pandemic times are auspicious times. Things that were not possible a year ago, are now suddenly possible.*

CC: This is a complex question that will require detailed empirical investigation. Part of it may have to do with institutional forgetting. However, it is stunning how governments across the world came forward with an improvised and untested pandemic response – when they had been preparing for over 15 years for such an event and had drawn up extremely detailed plans and guidelines. Unfortunately, very few of these plans and guidelines were put into practice when the virus emerged. For some reason, a crude version of China's locked-city approach became the norm. When the locked-city approach was taken up by Italy and other European governments it became a locked-country approach. This was even more extreme than what China had done to manage the crisis. No one knew – nor seemed to be concerned with – the costs and consequences of such an extreme intervention.

National lockdowns were not part of pandemic preparedness plans. They figured only in mathematical disease models. Disease modelers were playing with the idea as a theoretical option – but no one else took it seriously because it seemed extreme, unprecedented and unjustifiable.

To some extent, fragility has always been both a condition as well as a result of preparedness – this may sound contradictory, but preparedness in the United States has always been a contradictory project, as I have argued in my book. Governments closed down hospitals to "rationalize" medical care and make it more "efficient." The remaining hospitals were asked to prepare for a pandemic. This contradiction has been at the heart of preparedness under neoliberalism. Preparedness always assumed that the public health infrastructure would not be able to deal with a pandemic – hence the emphasis on coming up with ideas to minimize the disaster, not prevent it.

In April, in the midst of the pandemic, American hospitals cut salaries, laid off hundreds of staff and send others on unpaid leave because the pandemic response cut off a main source of income, with patients avoiding hospitals due to fear of infection. In the midst of the pandemic, the system got weakened further. While the virus was spreading, hospitals and nursing homes in the United States laid off over 260,000 staff in one single month… This is how preparedness works in the United States.

The Johns Hopkins Global Health Security Index assessed the preparedness of countries last year. The international panel of experts gave the first rank for "preparedness" to the US, the second rank went to the UK. Germany got rank 14, Greece 37 and Vietnam 50. It looks like the ranking needs revision. A few questions might also be raised about the politics of preparedness expertise.

TM: In your analysis, South Korea features as a positive example that followed a classic infectious disease intervention approach and avoided a lockdown through early mass testing, rigorous contact tracing and the isolation of cases. Possibly other examples such as Hong Kong and Taiwan could be named here as well. Why do you think these examples did not more prominently influence responses in other parts of the globe?

CC: I wish I had an answer to this question. My sense is that Italy played a crucial role, because it was the first country in this pandemic with a national lockdown. It appropriated the Chinese locked-city strategy and turned it into something else: a locked-country strategy. As I already mentioned, this strategy figured only in mathematical disease models, but not in official pandemic preparedness plans.

The Imperial College disease model report released a few days after Italy's surprising national lockdown announcement played an important role. The report garnered a lot of attention, created a sense of urgency and amplified the political pressure because the numbers were alarming. The model predicted 510,000 deaths in the United Kingdom and 2,2 million deaths in the United States. It suggested "suppression" of the pandemic as the only possible strategy. This

moment of shock and surprise triggered a chain reaction in the pandemic response. The horizon shifted, the inconceivable became possible, and life suddenly felt surreal.

TM: Your conclusions, both in your book and in "What went wrong", are not only sobering assessments of pandemic preparedness, but of the state of our present more generally. You mention that we live in a world in which a lack of imagination forces us to adopt a language that "is contaminated with words that are stiff, stale and corrupt like putrid air." While the pandemic is not the source of global inequality and suffering it will no doubt bring these to new levels. What, in your opinion, needs to be urgently done to move beyond what you call a "strange space of thinking, acting and feeling that has normalized extremes"?

CC: As many have said, the pandemic and the response to it, are an opportunity to rethink and rebuild the world, in ways that will hopefully be less toxic. The struggle will be between those who want to use the current situation and impose a "new normal" and those who are invested in thinking the world otherwise.

Featured image by Paulo Silva on Unsplash

Keeping social distance and keeping them out

Tom Marshall
June, 2020

'The last time I saw my friends, I was invited to their place inside the refugee camp for lunch. It was long before the introduction of coronavirus quarantine. When I entered their container, I bent to hug and kiss them on both cheeks, as we always did when we met. However, they kept me at a distance: "Excuse me my dear! I'm afraid of coronavirus. Would you like alcohol for your hands?" Their first act of welcoming was antiseptic to protect themselves and me.' (Chrysi's fieldwork diary, 19/2/2020)

The protagonists of the vignette, refugees in a Greek reception centre, understood the threat of coronavirus through family and friends in countries affected by the virus. Awareness of the threat and measures to prevent its spread were raised through official reports and word of mouth. The edges of the threads of the pandemic reached them through the virtual connections with concerned friends and family.

We use the binary classification ‘we/us’ and ‘they/them’ to illustrate divisions between host-citizens and (unwelcome) refugees, which permeate the politics of exclusion. While we explicitly do not endorse this terminology, our experience and the specific vignette is articulated around it. Othering, perceiving through the pejorative ‘*them*’, is not exclusive to refugees, but rather refers to other people perceived as migrants just as well, as the following example illustrates. *‘I was shocked as a stranger passed me by, gesturing to a single Asian pedestrian across the road. “Careful”, the stranger said, “they’ll have the [corona] virus].”* (Tom’s fieldwork notes in the early stages of the coronavirus pandemic, 1/3/2020)

Some camp residents considered the threat of an invisible virus insignificant compared with surviving wars, deprivation, shootings at border-crossings, and other threats they had faced. Nevertheless, camp residents sought to prevent coronavirus spread much earlier than *we* had become worried about the pandemic, let alone took precautions.

‘Before eating the lunch prepared by my friend and served in perfectly geometric arrangements, pleasant to sight and taste, we cleaned our hands again with alcohol. However, what struck me was not the food, hospitality, or the care for our health. It was the feeling of the space. Everything was perfectly clean and ordered, so that not one square centimetre of the minimal space was wasted. Yet I felt suffocated. It was two steps from my chair on the one side of the room to the bed placed against the opposite (plastic) “wall”. The bed was too small for couple in a space shared by a small family. I felt discomfort in this situation. It was obvious to me that this “accommodation” was not made to meet people’s needs; instead, the space was allocated to them. The residents have no other choice but to fit into this space.’ (Chrysi’s fieldwork diary)

> *Some camp residents considered the threat of an invisible virus insignificant compared with surviving wars, deprivation, shootings at border-crossings, and other threats they had faced.*

Residents of the camps face additional burdens. Having fled from ravaged

societies, the novel-coronavirus (hereafter coronavirus) and the ensuing restrictions of quarantine add enormously to refugees' vulnerability and their physical and emotional precarity. The biosocial perspective of syndemic vulnerability enables us to consider the multi-layered intersections that impact refugees (ill) health. Syndemic vulnerability 'describes situations in which adverse social conditions, such as poverty and oppressive social relationships, stress a population, weaken its natural defences, and expose it to a constellation of potentially adversely interacting diseases' (Baer et al. 2013: 315). A biosocial approach avoids a reductionist perspective of disease because it 'is focused on the ways in which biology and society interact to shape health' (Baer et al. 2013: 306). Furthermore, dominant political paradigms impact further the vulnerability to disease as we elaborate below, a prime example being the policy of putting camps in lockdown.

Refugees are syndemically vulnerable in the refugee camp where past and present social and biological precarities collide, exacerbated by state-sanctioned isolation within overburdened and confined spaces. Syndemic vulnerability provides a perspective on the normality of a friendly welcome (albeit with social distancing and antiseptic) which belies the lived reality of layers of fleeing trauma and current confinement.

Contrast the situation described above with that experienced by many members of the host society, who can implement social distancing to help limit the spread of coronavirus. Conversely, refugees, often perceived as carriers of actual and potential infection (Khan et al. 2016; see also Ahmed 2004), are controlled through enhanced restrictive policies. The principle of infection control through isolation has been declared necessary for humanity. However, the isolation controls imposed on refugees intensify their already cramped living existence. Refugee camps are symbolic of states' humanitarian understanding of Othered populations. Residents' needs are reduced to the minimum for survival. Camps are viewed as potential simmering pots of infection, literally and metaphorically, and a danger to host-citizens who live many kilometres away.

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Refugees reconstructed in this biosocial-political paradigm are a body to be feared. The gates of camps are locked and guarded to ensure that the imagined status of the residents as embodying infection risk, remains contained.

Isolation and Social Distance

The implementation of quarantine as a measure to limit the spread of coronavirus leads *us – members of the host society, at least the privileged ones with roofs over their heads* – to *our* homes and refugees in Greek reception centres to *their* camps. For *us,* "staying at home" already fulfils the demands for "social-distancing" and "isolation" vital for our (and 'society's') protection from the pandemic. For *us*, "staying at home" is difficult, and going out is an adventure. For *them, residents of reception centres,* "staying at home" means remaining in their allocated room; "home" is a plastic container shared with family members, other refugees, or other families. "Going out" means walking around the paths of the overcrowded camp. Furthermore, each week, one person per container is allowed to leave the camp to procure supplies for members of the allocated "home".

> *Refugees reconstructed in this biosocial-political paradigm are a body to be feared.*

Refugee reception centres are located on Greek territory – thus, refugees have already managed to pass through Europe's borders. The presence of refugees in Greece is officially recognised, and what is now pending is the prospect of their integration (see Titley 2012). Yet refugee reception centres are outside of urban areas. Excluded from urban surroundings, they are marked further by

surrounding walls and/or fences; gates are monitored by security guards and police. In this way, national borders become visually represented by the state within its territory, to mark the space allocated to asylum seekers. The desire to keep out whomever does not belong to what has been imagined as constituting the "host" (physically and politically), even as they are already inside, is visualised by these boundaries (see Brown 2010). In times of "normality", boundaries are allegedly for the protection of the residents of the camp.

The current emergency reinforces boundaries because of fear of the pandemic or the detection of coronavirus in specific camps. Those supposedly responsible for the protection of the refugees closed the camp's gates to prevent residents from leaving, ensuring the well-being of the distant (host) society.

One might wonder whether refugees are isolated and restricted, perversely not for their own well-being but for the biological safety of the host population.

> *Those supposedly responsible for the protection of the refugees closed the camp's gates to prevent residents from leaving, ensuring the well-being of the distant (host) society.*

While isolation is one infection control measure, practically, refugees' state-imposed isolation increases rather than reduces cross-infection. The biopolitical landscape exposes refugees in reception camps to syndemic vulnerability and structural exclusion, exposing them to additional, overlapping, and aggravated vulnerability, social precarity and biological infection. Furthermore, living conditions contribute to disease exacerbation, 'social and environmental factors … promote and enhance the negative effects of disease interaction' (Singer et al. 2017: 941). We apply this argument to the social and environmental conditions and disease amplification in refugee camps where residents are 'transformed… into disposable bodies' (Kober and Re Cruz, 2017: 135). The cramped space of a refugee camp, and the politics of exclusion, do not allow room for the segregation of infected and non-infected residents. For refugees, keeping social distance is practically impossible.

The impossibility of keeping social-distance increased awareness – at least for the protagonists of the vignette – of vulnerability, enhancing the sense of self-responsibility for their own biosocial well-being, as well as those who live with them.

Ironically and realistically, it was Chrysi, coming 'from the city', a space 'out of the camp', who might carry the virus. To break the chain of spreading it, Chrysi had to be disinfected before touching anything or anybody within the container.

Differentiating subjects on spatial terms

The logic that supports refugees' space allocation relates to how they are perceived by those in privileged positions. Nyers discussing the (socio-political) position refugees hold, focuses on the 'primary political category of the modern era', 'sovereignty' (2006: xi). This sovereignty ensures political order by 'establishing the conditions for legitimate authority over time and within a particular space' (ibid.). The spatial approach involves the constitution of identities based on legitimate belonging within the dominant political landscape. Thus, those who possess legitimate belonging are privileged with allocating space to those [refugees] who are not [currently] entitled to equal rights, or rather their 'right to have rights' (see DeGooyer et al. 2018 for a recent take on Hannah Arendt's work). Refugees' rights are more conveniently put under discussion, as recent developments have elaborately shown.

> *The impossibility of keeping social-distance increased awareness – at least for the protagonists of the vignette – of vulnerability, enhancing the sense of self-responsibility for their own biosocial well-being, as well as those who live with them.*

Ong argues that Foucault's conceptualisation of biopolitics 'refers to the strategic use of knowledges which invest bodies and populations with properties making

them amenable to various technologies of control' (1995: 1243). Biopolitical strategies are restrictive and reductionist, not progressive. Biopolitics constructs the refugee as a viral organism and not a living, feeling, thinking and connected human with biosocial needs. Refugee camps, especially in lock-down, restrict those embodied as imagined sites of infection, ensuring residents are exposed to (coronavirus) infection and re-infection; currently, it is uncertain if past coronavirus infection provides immunity. Perceived as super-vectors of infection, refugees are restricted by the state, a view supported and mediatised by like-minded proponents. Refugees become unwelcome on a basic level and a danger to life and society on a macrolevel, as they are 'construct[ed] as the contagious Other' (Ong 1995: 1245).

Restriction in a place of syndemic vulnerability exposes refugees to additional biosocial disadvantages exacerbating their marginalisation and susceptibility to diseases.

The state acts to reify refugees' perceived biosocial status as "infected". Billions of dollars and its equivalents are provided for state-citizen's health. Nevertheless, refugees are deemed less human and undeserving of improved living spaces without the fear of infection and a heightening possibility of death. The millions spent making refugees' settlements on the margins of the host society to minimise the possibility of "infection" contributes to their susceptibility to infection and the implications this could have for "public health".

Finally

Refugees' syndemic vulnerability distinguishes them from host-citizens, entitled with proportionate rights (as the latter are understood). The usually cramped living conditions in reception centres exemplify that sovereignty and human rights may not move in tandem, despite the former being held responsible for ensuring the latter.

Restriction in a place of syndemic vulnerability exposes refugees to additional

> *biosocial disadvantages exacerbating their marginalisation and susceptibility to diseases.*

Refugees sheltering in reception centres are vulnerable. Vulnerability exists due to the current coronavirus pandemic restrictions and the refugees living conditions which ensure they are perceived as "infected", literally (biologically) and metaphorically (socially). Nevertheless, it is refugees themselves, being aware of their vulnerability and conscious of their well-being, who have been striving to ensure the protection of their health.

If public health is the goal, then this goal can only be achieved when human beings sharing the same ground are granted equal access to health-services, ensuring living conditions that – as for our case – limit susceptibility to infections.

The protagonists of the vignette, like other refugees fleeing their country, exercise their right to life. From the space they are given as "asylum seekers" waiting for the outcome of their application process, they are figuring out ways not to take back their "normality", but rather ways to develop and thrive in harsh conditions. The current lock-down for them further limits their capacity to act for their own prosperity, where options are reduced to the mere basics of bodily existence. The only choice left to exercise their agency is to protect themselves – no one else will do it for them.

> *If public health is the goal, then this goal can only be achieved when human beings sharing the same ground are granted equal access to health-services, ensuring living conditions that – as for our case – limit susceptibility to infections.*

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The Chaos of Asynchronous Grief

S.A. Applin
June, 2020

Spoiler: I hate to say it, but Americans have only begun the five stages of grief, and [we aren't all going through it in the same way and at the same time](). This can be problematic for cooperation – something we need if we are going to get through a global pandemic.

For the first time in our lived memory, the entire planet has experienced the same horror and the same fear at the same time in a broad and deep way. Yes, many of us have been concerned about climate change, but the immediacy of COVID-19, and its threat of sudden death, shocked us into compliance with our local health departments and authorities. At the start of the worldwide infection, most of the globe was on the same page for how to stay safe. All over the world, we were scared, and we stayed home as much as we could. This mostly worked in the United States – until recently, when it suddenly didn't, and some people hit the streets to protest, claiming a burning need for, of all things, haircuts.

This action came on the tail of US politicians and the powerfully wealthy seemingly more concerned about 'The Economy' than human lives, publicly urging us to risk infection for the good of commerce, rather than staying home as advised. That didn't play well for those of us who were scared and staying home, and many of us were outraged by this declaration. However, for some people, it sparked something, enough so that the people who liked these new ideas began to organise.

> *This organising seemed manufactured, and in many ways it began that way.*

This organising seemed manufactured, and in many ways it began that way. The websites that posted information about how or where to protest the "lockdowns" were coordinated efforts, with many of the domains registered to the same person. The protest turnouts were eerily similar, and seemed to be occurring in key political states in which voters of either party could be harmed by an increase of COVID-19 cases (pretty much all states, really), or states where the President is against a Governor (nearly all Democratic ones). But it may not just be about the President's preferences. Some have rightly argued that structural racism has played a huge part in who gets COVID-19. Proportionally, the virus is taking a higher toll in lower income, disadvantaged communities, and racism may be part of where the impetus for some to protest comes from: the idea from those protesting the lockdown that the spread of the virus could result in the

eradication of certain minority members of society, who are on their lists to remove.

The protests mimic the audience participation portion of Trump's campaign rallies. Just as the President misses his podium, the crowds miss being there as well. Trump's rallies offered his supporters camaraderie, and the chance to yell and join together against common enemies.

In psychological parlance, a Narcissist like Trump needs both an Apath (an enabler) and an Empath (a victim). Apaths are dangerous because their actions normalise "the toxic individual and their harmful behaviours towards others." The rallies have provided a place for these dangerous Apath enablers to get support and strokes for pleasing the Narcissist, whilst being able to vent, scapegoat and blame his (their) victims, who do not conform to the Narcissist's whims. With sporting events shut, many people lack the constructive ways to express themselves and their feelings that games and playoffs can provide, and with Trump's campaign rallies currently suspended, his supporters also lack the public space they usually have to get that emotional charge—as well as to scapegoat, blame, and bully others. Trump's Apaths are simultaneously suppressed and powder kegs about to blow. They need a regular outlet, so they've created one: protesting against the lockdown offers them a way to let off steam, please their leader, and get those emotional strokes they rely on from him, and from banding together.

> *However, what people are protesting seems odd. They are protesting change, and this is realised by them protesting having to stay home.*

However, what people are protesting seems odd. They are protesting change, and this is realised by them protesting having to stay home. Cloaked in the label of "Freedom," these gun-toting, flag-waving folk are crowding together in public. Some of these protestors are likely COVID-19 positive but asymptomatic, creating disease vectors, which at best could further imprison them at home or in a ICU hospital ward, and at worst, kill them and their loved ones. That aspect doesn't

seem to matter as they chant displeasure towards the rational common sense enacted by health departments and state governments, as well as a dislike for the rest of us who choose to stay home, potentially denying the protestors sources for the goods and services that they desire and imagine will be accessible to them when things open. It doesn't make sense, as acts of passion rarely do, to those not directly involved.

Perhaps these protests aren't about freedom at all, but are leveraging the concept to validate other, more irrational actions. The protestors aren't for everyone else's freedom, for they don't seem to want some subset of the population (hairdressers to name one group) to be at home, either, which would be an expression of another's freedom to choose. No, these protests are about something else underneath their chants.

I argue that this new faction of protestors taking action arises from people being at various stages in a grief cycle, combined with different imagined realities of outcomes for the future (Applin 2016). Throughout the 20th century, scholars and psychologists have developed models for understanding and processing the complex human emotions that arise as we are able to extend the human life span. As we live longer, we live with illnesses that can last decades. As a result, we have had to come to terms with slower processes of dying. COVID-19 has created conditions where we are all Schrödinger's Cat: sequestered in our homes, unsure if we are ill or not ill, and lacking ways to get reliable confirmation one way or another.

This produces feelings. Lots of them. One of the more well known volumes on the subject of grieving is Kübler-Ross' 1969 book, On Death and Dying. In it, Kübler-Ross outlines the stages of a grief and/or bereavement as a process and offers a psychological tool for humans to understand and accept terminal illness and death.

> *While Kübler-Ross was not the first psychologist to develop the idea that grief can come in stages, her book signified the first time that the ideas within it*

about grief were more widely distributed.

While Kübler-Ross was not the first psychologist to develop the idea that grief can come in stages, her book signified the first time that the ideas within it about grief were more widely distributed. Thanks to the efforts of her publisher, readers, and a general trend towards acceptance of psychology in North American contemporary culture at the time of publishing, many people who read On Death and Dying became familiar with the concept of grief as a process with an organizational structure.

Initially, Kübler-Ross segmented grief as being composed of the stages of Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance. In her book, Denial falls within the Information and Communication organisation of the stages, and includes Fear, Shock, Elation, Confusion, and Avoidance. Although there are stages, Kübler-Ross later acknowledged that grieving is not a linear process as she initially thought. However, most of us do start at denial.

If we look at how the stages of grief have played out on the American COVID-19 stage, we can very clearly see early denial, confusion, shock, fear, avoidance, and elation. At the beginning of the lockdown, we might have been elated at 'time off from work' and had imagined things returning to 'normal' after a few weeks. As things progressed, we hoped that perhaps we were spared, or that an "easy cure" could be found. When those were proven to be false, we clung to the suggestion that gradual changes implemented when it was deemed safe to do so, would get us back to "normal." This was also reinforced by the government and health departments, and we stayed inside while we developed with them an alternate reality of this shared future we envisioned (Applin 2016). This provided a goal to sustain us and keep up safe from the terror and fear we were increasingly enmeshed in as we watched fatalities rise worldwide.

Denial has helped us cope. It has also harmed us.

Denial has helped us cope. It has also harmed us. Many of us are still sitting at home, waiting for things to calm down, hoping that a flat curve will reduce our risk, knowing that we will have to change, but hoping and believing that the change can be mitigated, and that we can return to familiar ways.

We are still in denial, but it is a hopeful denial. Let's say we're in "hope".

The anger part of grieving is where people blame others for the cause of grief, feel abandoned (by those who have died and by those who were supposed protect them), and feel that things are unjust. It includes feelings of frustration, irritation, and anxiety. People in the anger phase can become anxious about an uncertain future, too. While the protestors are still partially in denial (this is how grief can be non-linear), they have realised that the alternate reality they have shared with us for several weeks isn't sustainable for them, and they have become angry.

To express this anger, the protestors are rejecting the reality that is shared and was agreed upon between various governments and health departments, since the beginning of the outbreak. This reality included the ideas that we can stay safe (and alive) by staying home, wearing a mask, washing our hands, keeping apart, and avoiding touching our faces. Instead of sticking to this narrative, the protestors (and now some State governments) are constructing a different reality that contains pieces of the former one (some do wear masks) combined with parts of the beliefs and symbols from the Trump rallies, which resonate more closely with their beliefs.

For example, deep down, most of us complying with the earlier shared reality of beliefs know that even when our states re-open, they will never be the same or return to what they were. We know that. We wish for that history, but we also see things changing. The protestors are unwilling to realise or accept that. The protestors' different shared reality (Applin 2016) declares the virus a "hoax", reaffirming the President's earliest statements, where he claimed that the virus would "disappear", and later described COVID19 as "no worse than a flu".

Unfortunately, the beliefs that the protestors have constructed and shared

> *amongst themselves are more real to them than the ones the rest of us are sharing.*

Unfortunately, the beliefs that the protestors have constructed and shared amongst themselves are more real to them than the ones the rest of us are sharing. As such, there is a conflict of beliefs. The protestors believe that staying at home is unnecessary, and that they deserve to get haircuts and tattoos and go where they like. Some believe that they don't need to wear a mask. Some wear a mask but in doing so, do not completely cover their faces with it. Many believe that the virus isn't real. The tragedy is that the protestors' beliefs are actualised through bullying, intimidation, and ignoring medical science. This puts the health of many others at risk, including the police officers and other authorities who must face them.

In a viral pandemic, it isn't safe to take such stances as the protestors, when we could all be asymptomatic carriers of a highly contagious disease. Their right to freedom that they claim, squelches everyone else's right to be safe and have their health. It's a terrible situation.

If we are fortunate enough to stay alive in the US during this fragmentation of beliefs and actions in response to COVID-19, we might make it through denial to anger, depression, and finally acceptance.

Acceptance is where we see what is happening for what it is, and like a terminally ill patient, find the joy and happiness in what is before us. Acceptance seems a long way from where we are now in our grief. Some of us may not make it to the next phase. The risks people take, fuelled by anger, could kill them, their families, and those who encounter them (whether willingly or unwillingly). They may take others with them, if they aren't careful—and not being concerned for others, seems to be at the heart of their philosophy.

The rest of us can only hope we will survive long enough to move through the grief cycle, to finally accept how things have changed, and to learn how to

emerge with new insights and compassion for life. We will get through this if enough of us share a similar envisioned future at the same time, which is inclusive, respectful, kind, sensible, and cooperative.

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Privilege and Certainty: Middle Classes and Confinement

María Florencia Blanco Esmoris
June, 2020

The house and the body are the protagonists of isolation. In Argentina, staying at home is experienced as an unequal privilege. The coronavirus put on the table such inequalities: the structural and naturalized ones and the less perceivable ones. For metropolitan middle classes – in Buenos Aires – taking care of themselves in confinement is shown as a challenge, an odyssey and another duty: care of one's body in order to feel pleasure and well-being. Productivity and self-governance intersect with the fear of getting fat as an undesirable effect of quarantine. Physical training is a way to position ourselves competitively: not to lose the status we have reached, to demonstrate our "self-management", our will to strength and improvement. "With what you have, you do" or "The one who wants, can" are the phrases we heard the most.

> *We are asked to be the architects of the solutions, to be hyper-available. The entrepreneurial spirit drives us to make this a new opportunity to test*

ourselves. The language of coaching filters words and instructions into different areas and homogenised experiences.

The Instagram lives, the YouTube tutorials, or the parodies in TikTok place us in front of a supposed democratization of the contents. People share experiences on how to "set the mood" to workout in that house that we have turned into a Multipurpose Room. The logic of "do it yourself": online recipe books, caloric regulations, fitfluencers and cooking influences sponsored by quasi-nutritionists fill the digital world. In this new show, the domestic landscape is condensed into objects such as dumbbells, sanitizers and repellents. The elastic capacity of our houses and our bodies is assumed.

Before the spaces of sociability were on the outside, now the body and the house are shown from the living room: as a form of constructed intimacy. However, new and intimate routines are displayed on social networks: practices are unveiled.

We call this an experience of *extimacy* (Sibilia, 2008) as a way of being in the world.

Spaces are transformed, efforts are multiplied, with the aim of participating in workouts, now online. Gym chain videos are exploding with Zumba and Hiitbox classes encouraging those who were previously inactive. Runners racing in one-room apartments show off their skills. Those who reaffirmed their identity through exposure to contingency, today are the stars of the news: amateur athletes – "without limits" – who complete 42 kilometres on 7 m^2 balconies, cyclists who violate quarantine and are filmed pedalling in the mountains, influencers and communicators who finish triathlons in their backyards "to encourage the awareness of staying at home". People share experiences on how to create an environment to exercise or meditate: moving a piece of furniture to gain space, using a blanket instead of a mat, creating a climate with incense or candles, are some of the tips to "set the mood" in that house that we have turned

into a Multipurpose Room. We hear that spaces are more “friendly” if they have natural light or that they are more “livable” if they are versatile and have good ventilation while others see their living conditions threatened.

> *The streaming transmissions saturate us in front of a time and space that we no longer feel as our own. There are no schedules when everything can be done at any time.*

The everyday rhythm we used to have is permanently broken when a family video call surprises you while you are taking a Twerk class or listening to your college professor. The temporalities overlap. How do we deal with the hyper availability of offers that overwhelm our bodies and spaces? We fix or maintain the house at the same time as we find ourselves. We develop from disastrous events and value risk positively. What niches of certainty do we produce in the midst of this pandemic?

As a counterpart to this we find Argentinian President Alberto Fernández criticizing this neoliberal preaching: “We were led to believe that the secret was individualism”. “No one comes out a champion alone”, announces a video released by the Argentine Football Association (AFA), the governing body of this sport in the country. The global fragmentation of the intimate experience is answered with local solidarity actions. “Do you need help? Shall I do your shopping?” says a sign posted in a building’s elevator. Coming home is a coming back to ourselves, but also a need to help others. Today, as older adults are “at-risk groups”, networks and proposals for cooperation among neighbours are being activated. In moments of social isolation, the intention to feel that we are all together is amplified. Going to the supermarket or the pharmacy for someone who cannot go out, inhabiting the balconies, singing the hymn. Notes of patriotism creep into these solidarity actions. Every crisis has its contradictions: some maintaining their privileges, others surfing the uncertainty. At the end of the quarantine, which *communitas* will prevail?

We study practices and imaginaries around the body and the spaces that urban middle sectors inhabit. Although the article was written jointly using the first person in plural, the two ethnographic experiences arise from our own individual researches: the one linked to the body and sport practices is derived from the work of Nemesia Hijós with runners and amateur athletes in training groups, and the one referring to the house and ways of living in Haedo (Province of Buenos Aires) is based on María Florencia Blanco Esmoris research. We recognize ourselves as part of the socio-cultural universe we study. For this reflection, we used field notes taken in March and April 2020.

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Pictures from the series "Visual note of the quarantine" by the artist Ignacio de Lucca (@ignaciodelucca), works made in a single format and technique, 41 x 31 cm, watercolor on paper.

If Meat Could Tell Stories: A Tale of Assam during Coronavirus

Rituparna Patgiri
June, 2020

I can smell it, someone is cooking chicken, I screamed and ran to my sister.

I think it is the neighbours. Let us call them and find out where they got it from, she suggested.

It would seem that my sister and I are talking about something forbidden, something extraordinary. But we were just talking about literal meat.

The north-eastern state of Assam in India is an essentially non-vegetarian state with easy availability and regular consumption of different types of meat, fish, and eggs. According to an IndiaSpend report of 2015-16, more than 80% of its population consumes meat. Non-vegetarian food is a part of the regular diet, of ceremonial feasts, and even religious festivals of most communities in the state.

But after the outbreak of the coronavirus and the subsequent imposition of the lockdown on 25th March 2020 in India, meat quickly became a 'rare' food item, especially in the urban areas of Assam. The lockdown affected the supply chain of meat, fruits, and vegetables – as they generally come from the villages to the cities. While the distribution of fruits and vegetables was re-started by local delivery channels soon, this was not the case with meat. It had become a 'scarce' and over-priced (when available) item.

People who eat fish and meat almost regularly had to spend days without them, and many were messaging each other and asking if someone had any luck procuring meat.

> *Suddenly, a food item that had been considered utterly regular had become rare. We, too, were part of this dynamic as we griped about the lack of meat on our dinner plates. No friends could guide us to stores where any was available; we checked if any online delivery service could help, but there were none.*

This experience led us to question the value and meaning of meat in our lives in Assam. Of course, meat consumption has always been of great interest to sociologists and social anthropologists. It has been linked to social status and class positions, notions of masculinity, and ideas of purity and impurity. Our essay echoes these concerns as well as unearths more specific meanings of meat. Take the case of the 2019 Assamese movie *Aamis*, a title that literally means *The Non-Vegetarian*. At first glance, its story can be understood as romantic – Suman, a young male student, falls in love with Nirmali, a married female doctor. Initially, their meetings are mostly about going out to eat, and together they explore different kinds of meat – rabbit, catfish, bat, and insects. Suman is a researcher

working on the meat-eating habits of north-east India and introduces Nirmali to these different meat types.

Nirmali is shown as someone who juggles her time between her job and her household responsibilities. As her husband is away most of the time, she has been living a dreary life; and she soon starts looking forward to meeting Suman. As he introduces Nirmali to different forms of meat that are ‘new’ to her, she starts enjoying these novel tastes.

The director highlights the distinction between meat and vegetables, as ‘exciting’ and ‘boring’, respectively. One scene in the movie sums this up: Nirmali asks her household help what is there for dinner, to which the latter replies, ‘your favourite vegetable curry.’ Nirmali’s face falls. Before meeting Suman and exploring different kinds of meat, Nirmali might have been excited to eat ‘her favourite vegetable dish’, but that had changed.

However, the story slowly delves into darker spaces as Suman eventually cooks and feeds Nirmali his flesh. Although initially apprehensive, Nirmali soon craves it and Suman keeps providing it, again and again. Consuming Suman’s flesh, or rather human meat in general in this case, signifies their forbidden love and passion, becoming the way they communicate their love. Slowly this craving takes over Nirmali’s mind entirely, eventually leading Suman to kill another person to feed her. Meat becomes an ‘obsession’, a ‘craving’ that is never sated.

As mentioned above, most people in Assam are non-vegetarians and the common forms of meat are chicken, mutton, duck, pigeon, and pork.

> *Eating bat or rabbit meat is seen as adventurous and does not invite condemnation. In Aamis, the meat that Suman and Nirmali eat when they go out is portrayed as different, yet tasty and edible. But as Nirmali starts craving human flesh, the movie reaches a turning point.*

This shift is also visible in the way they eat: while their earlier dates had been in

public spaces, human 'meat' was consumed clandestinely. The movie does not make any judgments on the practice of cannibalism, and viewers are free to make up their minds on this.

Aamis was screened at the MAMI Film Festival as well as at the Tribeca Film Festival, where it was critically acclaimed and praised for its fresh concept and ideas. But some sceptics thought that it was a dangerous movie and too dark. Questions were raised about its potential repercussions. In an interview, the director admitted that the older generation in Assam did not particularly enjoy the movie, as it highlighted how the obsession for meat can become a dangerous thing and can engender a drive to kill.

The coronavirus pandemic has raised similar questions about what meat is acceptable to eat. Allegedly, the crisis began in a wet market in Hubei, in the Wuhan province of China, where 'bat meat' was sold or consumed. Thus, the entire global coronavirus outbreak has been blamed on the consumption of bat meat, even as the WHO has not yet confirmed this claim. And while various kinds of (partly racist) criticisms were levied against Chinese food habits, it is interesting that bat meat is also consumed elsewhere: In Assam, it is believed that 'bat meat' can cure asthma, but bat consumption is not very popular; still, in *Aamis*, Nirmali and Suman once specifically go out to consume it. Whether bat meat is a food fit for consumption or not has been at the centre of discussions on this pandemic.

Advocates of vegetarianism have taken this as a chance to speak about the 'benefit' of eating vegetarian food and how eating meat is unhealthy. This is part of a larger debate on the benefits of vegetarianism versus non-vegetarianism, and not just in Assam or India. There is however an association of vegetarianism with notions of purity in India, although not so much in Assam, as in the state, even many ritually higher caste groups consume meat (Patgiri 2016).

But beyond bats, there is a difference in the kinds of meat that different groups consume on different occasions, and there is a gradation in terms of value and

purity, with mutton at the top, followed by duck and pigeon, and chicken and pork at the bottom. Besides, traditionally, chicken was a prohibited item for caste Hindus because most chicken rearers were Muslims (Choudhury 1959), but today chicken is one of the preferred meats in Assam and easily available. But the severe decline of the poultry sector in India reveals how vulnerable 'meat' as a food item remains to cultural taboos and crises.

> *During the pandemic, WhatsApp messages circulated that said that the virus could be transmitted from poultry to humans. Medical experts had to clear these rumours but despite that, many people are still apprehensive of eating meat, and the poultry sector suffered because of decreasing demand – so a meat that had once managed to escape cultural taboos became suspicious again.*

One event played a particular role here: As Assam reeled with a rising number of coronavirus cases, most of them were attributed to an Islamic religious event – the Tablighi Jamaat – that was organized in New Delhi from 13th-15th March 2020, well before the lockdown had been enforced by the government. Many of its participants were from Assam and had returned to the state by 25th March. The Tablighi Jamaat event was identified as one of the hotspots of the outbreak in Assam and became the centre of debates on Islamophobia in India. As one of our neighbours casually commented, *'I am scared to eat chicken, most of the sellers are Muslims. What if they have come in contact with attendees of Tablighi Jamaat?*'

Some people became scared that eating meat, in general, would cause diseases, a sentiment aggravated by reports that in a few areas in Guwahati, the capital city of Assam, even rotten meat was sold in certain shops. Others were apprehensive about eating meat that was being sold in the coronavirus hotspot areas within the state and recently, the Assam state government even issued an order prohibiting people from eating pigs, as there was an outbreak of swine flu in the state. Pork is considered lower in the hierarchy of meat in Assam anyway, so both chicken and

pork meat came to be endowed with new negative associations that were in fact quite old. Meat was once again viewed as potentially dangerous and polluting, but not by all:

While such rumours and fears might have impacted the supply chain as well, even when the lockdown was in force, many people flocked to the markets seeking meat, often violating the rules of physical distancing. According to Marvin Harris (1986), people in Poland did not mind queuing just for meat back in 1981 when the Polish government had cut down the supply of meat because of a shortage and set limits on each buyer. But the situation became such that martial law was needed to restore order and the government had to eventually give in to the demand of the public for more meat, even if that meant an increasing strain to the country's economy. Such was the obsession for meat. Similarly in Assam, despite the difference in socio-political contexts, once meat became available again after the first week of lockdown, the government had to make provisions for the home delivery of meat and fish through selected suppliers to prevent people from disrupting the markets.

> *While for some, meat became a thing to be 'avoided' and feared', many still craved and obsessed about it, an obsession seen as madness by others.*

An elderly lady from our neighbourhood would react to news of people violating lockdown orders just for buying meat by commenting that '*what is this craze for meat? People cannot go a few weeks without meat?*' Craving meat as an 'obsession', a form of 'madness', has also found expression in *Aamis*. After all, even in the movie, it was a newfound 'taste' for different types of meat that had led Suman and Nirmali towards the path of eventually consuming human meat.

The meaning of meat in a meat-eating society is more than that just food. It becomes a source of ethno-religious stereotype, as seen in the examples of pork and chicken, but also enough of a motivation to break the rules of a lockdown. For some, it is dangerous and can cause diseases; whereas for others, it is an obsession, an integral part of their lives. While the former group urges that all

forms of meat need to be avoided, *Aamis* explores the boundaries of this obsession for meat.

Aamis' director had stated that he was trying to lower the consumption of meat because of its detrimental environmental effects, and due to the coronavirus pandemic, many people even in a non-vegetarian state like Assam now question the very idea of eating meat. In this sense, the pandemic with its associated general worries about disease and echoes of cultural taboos brings advocacy for vegetarianism to the fore: Questions on the acceptability of eating meat are back on the table.

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