

Borders, Logistics and Unequal Lives: Webinar Summary

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With the COVID-19 outbreak, people around the world were told to self-isolate, practise social distancing, and in some extreme cases, entire cities and countries were put under lockdown. It is fair to say that this pandemic brought much of the world to a near standstill. However, for many migrants, self-isolation and social distancing were luxuries that they could not afford. While some migrants had to continue working to make ends meet, others had to stay on the move in a world of proliferating borders. This webinar was held to discuss the migrant experience in a world ravaged by the coronavirus.

Keywords: logistics, migration, borders, inequality, COVID-19

This summary captures the webinar proceedings held on September 22nd, 2020, on *Borders, Logistics, and Unequal Lives*. This was the first webinar planned by the CHCI-GLOBAL HUMANITIES INSTITUTE 2020-2021: Migration, Logistics, and Unequal Citizenship in Contemporary Global Context (henceforth CHCI-GHI). Prof. Joyce Liu explains that the program's tripartite structure – migration, logistics, and unequal citizenship – are analytical angles for the program to articulate the struggles of migrants around the world. Although the entire program was supposed to take place at National Chiao Tung University, Taiwan, in June 2020, the COVID-19 outbreak forced the program to go digital in the time being.

There were four speakers at the webinar, namely:

- Prof. Joyce Liu (Director, International Center for Cultural Studies, NCTU)
- Prof. Brett Neilson (Professor, Institute for Culture and Society, Western Sydney University)
- Prof. Ranabir Samaddar (Director, Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group, India)
- Prof. Sandro Mezzadra (Associate Professor, The University of Bologna)

Each speaker was given 20 minutes to present their talk. Below is a summary of each speaker's presentation. I will attempt to make connections between the speakers' talks. Finally, I will relate the proceeding of the webinar with my own research interests.

Professor Joyce C. H. Liu

Prof. Liu's presentation was titled *Global Governance and Global Civil War? How do we think about COVID-19? What comes after the lockdown?* First, Prof. Liu pointed out that the word 'exacerbation' seemed to dominate a range of discourse related to COVID-19. Whether we are talking about the

spread of infection, the frailty of health systems, increased unemployment, or the intensification of xenophobic sentiments, the word exacerbation is almost sure to feature in the discussion.

Prof. Liu then showed a global heat map showing how the virus has engulfed almost the whole world. She then asks the question of where are the Dead Zones? According to the map shown by Prof. Liu, there are clearly no geographic boundaries to the spread of COVID-19. This virus knows no geographic borders or a north/south divide. However, that is not to say that the virus spread uniformly across all populations. The poverty gap within countries, according to Prof. Liu, was the dividing line for groups more or less affected by the virus.

Prof. Liu then provides examples from Southeast Asia, citing cases in Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Singapore. In Indonesia, for example, the government first claimed that the virus did not exist in the country. As a result, no precautions were taken to contain the spread of the virus. In the Philippines, the government announced a state of calamity and then deployed military troops internally to impose the lockdown. As of August 2020, police in the Philippines had arrested over 76,000 people for breaching the lockdown. The government went as far as imposing 'shoot to kill' methods to impose the lockdown. Malaysia also imposed military interventions to enforce the lockdown. During May and June, troops were deployed to Kuala Lumpur and Selangor – the two cities with the largest number of migrant workers, refugee detention centers, and slums. Prof. Liu also connects these practices of military intervention in Malaysia to colonial origins. She argues that the large-scale military raids during the lockdown echoed the new village policy during the State of Emergency (1948-1960) in Malaysia under British colonial rule. During this period, half a million ethnic Chinese Malaysians were forced into concentration camps.

Finally, Prof. Liu proposes a push forward for a reconceptualization of the common and the citizen. She argues that all who live here and work here should belong here and have equal access to the social space. She ends her presentation by asking three questions. First, how do we expose the colonial matrix of power and the juridical procedure that legitimize the lockdown and civil war mentality? Can we reinvent the notion of citizen and citizenship? Can we conceive alternative logistics for the common?

Professor Brett Neilson

Prof. Neilson starts his talk by pointing to the much talked about idea of the 'the normal.' He acknowledges that the techniques and technologies of control that Prof. Liu spoke about may remain with us for some time. He calls for scholars in the social sciences to develop a strong and necessary critique of this new regulatory framework masqueraded as the 'new normal.' Prof. Neilson argues that it is normal and quite necessary for critical scholars to be wary of regulatory terminology. As critical scholars, it is easy to ask whose normal and what part of it is new?

Prof. Neilson then talks about the question of border hardening and re-nationalization – both of which were intensified and exacerbated during the pandemic. He argues that during the pandemic, it is not only territorial borders that hardened but also those within nation-states, especially within the urban space. Prof. Neilson argues that under current pandemic conditions, we need to rethink the concepts of border hardening and re-nationalization. There are more significant and troublesome borders within a nation-state than simply those along the sea or neighboring countries.

Prof. Neilson also talks about the logistical angle to analyze migration. He argues that since logistics primarily refers to the movement of stuff worldwide, adopting a logistical approach to analyzing migration is rather cold when we are talking about the movement of warm bodies. He further argues that the logistics approach to migration is only one approach. Here Prof. Neilson introduces the concept of the logistification of migration. Referring to the labor mobility in East and Southeast Asia as examples, Prof. Neilson argues that migration's logistification was already in place in the years before the pandemic. This logistification of migration, according to Prof. Neilson, is being exacerbated in the pandemic and is part of the colonial legacy that Prof. Liu spoke about earlier.

Professor Ranabir Samaddar

Prof. Samaddar opens up by first sharing India's migrant experience based on his own work with them. He mentions that during the pandemic, many migrants had to travel back to their homes. Forced to travel in horrid conditions, several hundred – a moderate estimation – of migrants died of heat or starvation along their journey. According to Prof. Samaddar, the Indian government is unsure how many migrants died attempting to return home.

Prof. Samaddar then goes on to talk about the visibility/invisibility of the migrant. He argues that the question of visibility and invisibility of the migrant is crucial for the topic of Migration, Logistics, and Unequal Lives. Why is there differential visibility, and what is it that makes the migrant visible/invisible? Prof. Samaddar argues that although migrants are visible in the economy, e.g., in the factories, construction sites, and so forth, they remain politically invisible. Politically they are not counted. When the pandemic hit, these divisions were laid bare. Those who are considered less productive are jettisoned in favor of the more productive. Prof. Samaddar provides an example by asking who exactly constitutes the public when we talk about public healthcare? Are migrants counted? This question relates to what Prof. Liu mentioned earlier that we need to conceptualize the citizen and the common.

Professor Sandro Mezzadra

Prof. Mezzadra starts his presentation by talking briefly about migration's logistification, which Prof. Neilson referred to earlier. Contrary to the thinking that the COVID-19 pandemic halted things and people in motion, Prof. Mezzadra argues that the pandemic actually opened up a new field of experimentation and transformation. Referring to migrants worldwide, Prof. Mezzadra contends that the pandemic brought about a new economy of mobility and de-mobility. While many had to be on the move, many were halted along the way, as in India's case. The determining feature of the pandemic, according to Prof. Mezzadra, is the reorganization of the whole economy of mobility and immobility with far reaching consequences for structures and subjective experiences of domination and exploitation.

Prof. Mezzadra then goes on to say that the reference to 'unequal lives' in the title of the webinar refers to the selective impact of the pandemic in many parts of the world. Around the world, the spread of the virus was shaped largely by colonial legacies. Prof. Mezzadra refers to the disproportionate spread of the virus in the US among African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans, as examples.

Logistification to Datafication

At this point, I wish to relate the proceedings of the webinar to my own research interest in big data and algorithms. Recognizing that algorithms are increasingly being used in migration, the question that I raised during the webinar was on the datafication of migration. Posing the question to either Prof. Neilson or Prof. Mezzadra, I asked how to problematize further the datafication of migration, which seems to me to have become an exacerbated issue during the pandemic. Take, for example, the use of contact tracing technology to monitor the spread of COVID-19. Singaporean authorities experimented with this technology by mandating the use of contact tracing devices by migrant and local workers living in dormitories (CNA, 2020). For the sake of clarity, by datafication, I simply meant the making of migratory bodies into subjects of computation.

Prof. Neilson responded to my question by saying that he looks at the datafication of migration as part of migration's logistification. He explains that he sees these as two processes that fold into each other rather than two separate processes. In terms of problematizing the datafication of migration, Prof. Neilson proposes an approach that tests the boundaries between humanistic and technical forms of knowledge. One thing to consider is that these technical processes are not transparent in their decision-making and have their makers' bias built into them. This is particularly the case when it comes to black-boxed algorithms. Prof. Neilson further argues that these are rather obvious aspects of the operations of algorithms. Instead, we need to ask what kind of accounts are they giving? What kind of norms are they setting? What kind of order are they bringing into being? These questions, explains Prof. Neilson further, allow us to explore beyond the horizon of algorithmic bias.

When it comes to the use of algorithms and big data in migration management, there is a growing body of work that investigates and exposes the border regime's data practices. For instance, Metcalfe and Dencik (2019) argue that the use of big data at the border 'functions to systematically stigmatize, exclude and oppress 'unwanted' migrant populations through mechanisms of criminalization, identification, and social sorting' (p. 1). I see the datafication of migration and migrants is somewhat related to the technologies and techniques of control and domination that Prof. Liu referred to in her talk. The logic behind the use of big data and algorithms in migration control seems to be based on the belief that human migration's complexity can be reduced to mere data. As Prof. Neilson said earlier, it is easy to say that migration algorithms are biased. After all, the outcomes that are algorithmically produced depend on the data that were into the algorithm. Following Prof. Neilson's suggestions on going beyond algorithmic bias, I would like to propose further questions for investigating the algorithmic intervention in migration. What accounts are migration algorithms giving? What kind of norms are they setting? Finally, what kind of order are they bringing into existence?

References

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