

Social Distancing, Interaction, and (Un)crowded Public Space in Mass Transit in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

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Abstract

Vietnam's national response to the COVID-19 pandemic is informed by its past experiences of fighting endemic disease. This response involves an emerging biosocial paradigm of long-term adaptation to living with the co-presence of viral infections. Moving beyond traditional anthropological work, this article issues an invitation to (re)think crowds and COVID-19. I offer a path forward by engaging in an interdisciplinary dialogue, drawing inspiration from a wide range of sources to understand this unfolding problematic. Through the lens of its public transport service Saigon Bus and environmental protests, I examine how the 2020–21 'pandemic season' (*mùa dịch*) in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam's largest city, has transformed consciousness about crowds, ways of being in (un)crowded public spaces, and the regulation of networked public space. In doing so, this article explores existing and emerging shifts in policymaking and transformations of urban Vietnamese social relations, in the context of the emerging biosocial paradigm. The article contributes to medical anthropology by analysing the impact of pandemic prevention policies on the transformation of crowds—from being viewed as anti-state assemblies requiring social control into a form of pro-state participatory citizenship, exemplified by public engagement with networked activist communities in a 'more-than-human' world.

Keywords

Crowds, Social distancing, Mass transit, Public space, Ho Chi Minh City.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is described in Vietnamese as temporary and seasonal—literally, a ‘pandemic season’ (*mùa dịch*)—but the prevention measures that have been implemented highlight a transformation in how the crowd is conceptualised—beyond semantics to a ‘new normal’ condition. In April 2020, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam paused for three weeks of national ‘social distancing’ (*giãn cách xã hội*) that aimed to mitigate the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic (measures referred to in other places as a ‘lockdown’; see Long 2020). In June 2021 Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), Vietnam’s largest city, with a population of approximately 13 million, entered a second period of social distancing that was extended across the mega-urban region every two weeks until October 2021. The sub-law documents¹ that implemented these social distancing periods are noteworthy in their focus on crowd control as a public health and safety measure. This illustrates a notable transformation in the idea of a crowd. Previously, control of mass gatherings and assembly in Vietnam, a single-party communist state, was approached in terms of a centralised authoritarian government quashing anti-state demonstrations, exemplified by policy responses to mass demonstrations in 2004 (Wang and Truong 2021). A shift away from this approach in Vietnam is evident in examples of pro-state participatory citizenship that emerged with the redrafting of Vietnam’s constitution in 2013 (Kurfürst 2015; Wang and Truong 2021). The new biosocial paradigm of 2020 highlights a profound shift towards the protection of citizens’ constitutional rights and their individual safety as being a core responsibility of the government. Taken together, these shifts indicate a further re-conceptualisation of the crowd in Vietnam.

This article examines how the 2020–21 pandemic season has transformed consciousness about crowds and the regulation of networked public space. Deploying concepts of Adriana Petryna (2018), Erving Goffman (1963, 1972), Ulf Hannerz (1980), Saskia Sassen (2011), Scott McQuire (2016), and others, this article moves beyond traditional anthropological work and past the ‘horizon of the known’ (Boellstorff 2020) to issue an invitation to (re)think crowds and COVID-19. I offer a path forward by engaging in an interdisciplinary dialogue, drawing inspiration from a wide range of sources to understand this unfolding problematic. I examine transformations in ways of being in (un)crowded public spaces in the context of the ‘new normal’ biosocial paradigm that has emerged through Vietnam’s pandemic prevention policies. In doing so, this article explores existing and emerging shifts in policymaking and the transformations of urban Vietnamese social relations through the lens of the public bus service and environmental protests. My article contributes to medical anthropology by analysing the impact of

1 In Vietnam most laws are made by the central government; sub-laws—which include decrees, circulars, and decisions, and which are legally enforceable—are also made by government agencies.

pandemic prevention policies on the transformation of crowds that are (un)formed in a more-than-human world.

The emerging biosocial paradigm of crowding in 2020

Vietnam's pandemic season links the medical clinic with the lifeworld through the emerging social condition that is being referred to as 'the new normal'. This condition frames living with infectious disease as an experience that is not extraordinary. Rather than a pause within which to await the end of a disruptive acute outbreak, the new normal is a long-term adaptation to lifestyles that are lived in the co-presence of endemic disease. Vietnam's past exposures to Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS), and H5N1 avian flu, among others, have shaped conceptualisations of biosocial normality as involving more-than-human relations (La et al. 2020; Le et al. 2021; Porter 2019). Living with microbes, medical anthropologist Koch (2013) contends, is woven into the experience of the lifeworld. In the context of Vietnam, as Porter (2019, 19) notes, the contribution of the productive dialogue between science and technology studies, social anthropology, and medicine has called into question the relevance of continuing to think of viruses as parasitic and destructive, rather than thinking with 'microbial exchange relations' that are unequally distributed across more-than-human worlds. Such relations between humans and microbes in the COVID-19 pandemic have rearranged the whole world and, adopting an assertion made by social anthropologists Dawson and Dennis (2020, 4), may further stimulate macrocosmic imaginings of new worlds.

While a post-pandemic future has not yet been fully conceptualised, pandemic preparedness in Vietnam for unknown and unknowable future circumstances has been informed by past experiences of fighting pandemics. In combat against the invisible agents of the pandemic, Vietnam has mobilised its whole political system, including its entire military, and the consensus of society. This full-capacity offensive has been reported to have achieved one of the highest satisfaction ratings in the world in relation to the government's pandemic responses (e.g., 62% approval cited in Le et al. 2021, 14; 81% in Dinh and Ho 2020, 514). Although unknown, Vietnam's post-pandemic future is already proposed to involve living well with viruses and endemic disease in a new normal condition. Nevertheless, management of the pandemic in Vietnam did initially see the deployment of emergency measures. Medical anthropologist Adriana Petryna (2018, 573) argues that the process of implementing practical action in the present to intervene in 'an unknown or runaway future' is an exercise in 'horizoning'. She writes: 'This is a race to secure (actionable) time, which calls for a fine-tuned awareness of jeopardy amid incomplete knowledge, and for labors of continuous recalibration amid physical worlds on edge' (idem). Furthermore, Petryna and Rendell (2021) outline

the specific horizon of expectation beyond COVID-19 that recovers social futures and reimagines medicine. Horizons work applied to the context of pandemic management in a single-party communist state reveals a state-led framing of the nation as a communicative, collaborative, and cooperative global partner in the fight to control the pandemic. At the local level, that state's horizons work can be framed as being in alignment with the discourse of living well with the pandemic in a biosocial paradigm. This emerging paradigm can be analysed through three intersecting lenses. The first relates to how living in the biosocial paradigm involves adopting new social distancing and transmission-reducing behaviours that shape interactions in the new normal world. In the absence of vaccines at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, an ethos of preparedness generated policies and practices based on past pandemic experience. Responses, for example, centred on non-pharmaceutical preventative behaviours, defined in terms of avoiding contact with strangers and taking part in transmission-reducing activities—responses that have been informed by the country's experience of MERS in 2015 (Jang, Jang, and Lee 2020). In Vietnam in January 2020, medical treatment policy documents for COVID-19 were published a week before the first confirmed cases were reported in the country, and additional policies were issued almost daily for the next six months (Le et al. 2021, 6). In addition to the experiences of MERS, these responses were also informed by the SARS outbreak of 2003 and by previous H5N1 avian flu outbreaks. Typical of global pandemic response policies, a 'safe distance' is defined in policy and practice in terms of measurable physical proximity between humans, and this designated distance changes according to an increased or decreased risk of transmission. Personal protection involves repeating hygiene practices such as handwashing and wearing a face mask. Mask-wearing measures may be framed as protecting the self from others but may also protect others from the self—the manner in which mask wearing is interpreted in Vietnam (Earl 2020b). Together, safe distance and personal protection are designed to contribute to reducing infection risk. Policy measures taken in many countries were focused on physical distancing, suspending public events, closure of schools, workplaces and mass transit, and placing controls on population movement. In terms of living with the pandemic, the policies monitored by researchers from the Blavatnik School of Government at the University of Oxford were discovered to have generated pandemic policy fatigue (Petherick et al. 2021) on the one hand and, on the other, to have created a suite of lessons learned (Hale 2021; see also Vo et al. 2020).

The second lens through which to analyse this new paradigm relates to existing social behaviours that express closeness and connection and which persist in face-to-face interactions in this new normal world of endemic disease monitoring and regulation. In HCMC, social anthropologist Christophe Robert (2020) points out that neighbourhood friends in inner-city laneways, at local shops, and in small

wet markets often drop their face masks below their chins when chatting in close physical proximity. This observation highlights that practices of normative politeness and sociality continue to be enacted among people with existing close social relations even during times of preventative social distancing. Established relations of social closeness displace new expectations of physical distance and avoidance. Medical anthropologist and physician Sara Rendell (2021) usefully points out the transformation of meaning and conflation of 'social' and 'physical' distancing that overlooks differences between social connectivity and physical proximity. By focusing on the 'social containment' of households (Long 2020), pandemic policies and practices deprioritise intersubjective relationships by narrowing ideas of kinship to those located in a single household and neglecting neighbouring relations that are as close as kin. In classic urban sociology, Hannerz (1980) usefully differentiates between neighbourhood relationships and traffic relationships along a continuum of what he terms 'relationships of propinquity' (105). For him, 'neighbourhood relationships' involve stable levels of closeness and extended personal recognition of one another; by contrast, 'traffic relationships' involve fleeting and, generally, anonymous interactions. Pandemic policies deal with social relationships outside the household as though they are traffic relationships. Yet, in practice, desires to maintain neighbourhood relationships can breach policy (such as by dropping a face mask to chat). Complaints on social media in HCMC suggest that ward level officials were not policing such breaches inside local laneways as thoroughly as they might.

The third lens through which the emerging biosocial paradigm can be viewed is how living with endemic disease in a more-than-human world has reshaped social interactions between strangers. Individuals negotiating crowded public places deploy 'civil inattention', argued Goffman (1963), a microsociologist who examined social interactions in clinical settings and public spaces. Civil inattention enables individuals to preserve their own privacy by acknowledging strangers yet remaining disinterested, for example by appearing to ignore others on crowded public transport. Yet, in pandemic prevention, individuals cultivate a heightened awareness of their proximity to others and the risk presented by their behaviour. What is considered an appropriate level of indifference to others has radically altered. Rather than ignoring strangers, new forms of participatory surveillance in the biosocial paradigm of pandemic crowding ensure that social interactions involve monitoring and evaluation of strangers' behaviours. Surveillance of scaled-down mass gatherings involves human and more-than-human intrusions among strangers, with guards and ushers, and by the deployment of surveillance technologies. Here, I transition from lessons of classic sociology to those from the philosophy of COVID-19 pandemic policies. Facial recognition and other forms of networked surveillance in the pandemic, Sharon and Koops (2021) contend, challenge how individuals are able to practice civil inattention. Lorenzini (2021,

S40-S41) deploys Foucault's (1978, 143) term to suggest pandemic policymakers crossed a 'threshold of biological modernity' that saw citizens no longer governed as political subjects of law but through a focus on biological processes in decision making that lasted beyond the initial pandemic crisis and into the new normal condition.

The pandemic policy path to Vietnam's 'new normal' biosocial paradigm

The suite of social distancing measures implemented by the Vietnamese government recommended or enforced new limits on crowds that require monitoring. The April 2020 national lockdown was regulated by clearly defined restrictions, starting with the social distancing recommendations of Directive No. 15/CT-TTg issued by the Prime Minister's office on 27 March 2020 on the climax stage of the COVID-19 control effort. Directive 15 banned events of more than 20 people; limited mass gatherings to 10 people, separated by 2 metres; closed all but essential trading services; and limited public transport and air travel. Five days later, social distancing was enforced by Directive No. 16/CT-TTg issued by the Prime Minister's office on 31 March 2020 on the implementation of urgent measures for prevention and control of COVID-19. It required residents to stay at home, limited mass gatherings to no more than 2 people, separated by 2 metres, extended the closure of all but essential trading services, and suspended public transport and air travel. Fines were put in place for transgressions. The April 2020 lockdown ended when Directive 19/CT-TTg was issued by the Prime Minister's office on 24 April 2020, which laid out the COVID-19 prevention and control strategies which would be in operation in the 'new normal' condition (Vo et al. 2020).

Similarly, the HCMC lockdown in June 2021 was regulated by policy documents that clearly defined the limits of the physical crowd. Directive No. 10/CT-UBND issued by the HCMC People's Committee on 19 June 2021 on the enhancement of COVID-19 prevention and control measures in the city, implemented new measures that limited gatherings to 3 people, separated by 1.5 metres; recommended online working arrangements; and suspended public transport and car ride-sharing (although allowed motorbike ride-sharing to continue). This was updated by Official Dispatch No. 2279/UBND-VX, issued by the HCMC People's Committee on 8 July 2021, which implemented measures to prevent and control the COVID-19 pandemic in line with the Prime Minister's Directive No. 16/CT-TTg, dated 31 March 2020. On 14 July 2021, measures were further tightened by the HCMC People's Committee's Announcement 615/TB-VP that enforced working at home (except for essential operational staff such as factory workers, who must be housed on site) and suspended all ride-sharing, with fines imposed for

transgressions. These policies show that the idea of the crowd is relational and oriented to local practices, dependent on location, and situated in a specific socio-historical context. The scaling down (or up) of recommended mass gatherings is informed by past experience of infectious disease transmission rather than civil unrest, and with a view to future expectations.

Vietnam's set of social distancing sub-law documents provides an additional update to the prevailing definition of 'mass gathering' that aligns with a biosocial paradigm of public health and safety. The first two noteworthy factors about this change follow recent state policymaking and are discussed below: they include, firstly, an openness to redefining mass gatherings and assembly and, secondly, a shift away from control and concern around the security issues associated with crowds in public spaces towards a concern for the safety of citizens and the protection of their individual constitutional rights. A third factor is that, rather than framing participants as docile and obedient biopolitical subjects, they are encouraged to engage in forms of self- and peer-surveillance. Yet, the behaviours of urban people contrast among friends in neighbourhoods and among strangers in (un)crowded public spaces.

Fieldwork context transformed by the biosocial paradigm of crowding

The impact of pandemic policies and the emerging biosocial paradigm of crowding is evident in Vietnamese urban social relations when explored through the lens of the public bus service. During the periods of strictest social distancing in 2020 and 2021, the Saigon Bus service was suspended. When social distancing was eased, services restarted and resumed usual operations. The only mode of mass transport in HCMC at the time of writing, the Saigon Bus service, demonstrates the transformative powers of vehicles and transport infrastructures on social lives and interactions in public spaces.

The introduction of mass transit to metropolitan HCMC is indicative of Vietnam's intention to globalise. Discourses of global modernity that shape Vietnam's national narratives share a number of features: they are linear; they are progressive and path-dependent in moving towards an imagined yet undefined future endpoint; and they align to Vietnam's self-positioning alongside the achievements of leading industrialised economies (although they do not necessarily espouse comparable values). At the same time, these discourses refer to practices that are deeply and firmly embedded in a place-dependent and socio-historically situated context.

Here I turn not to the past but to the future in order to frame the emergence of mass transit in HCMC and its associated state and public expectations. The future

orientation to expectations about as-yet-unknown realities is, as we have seen, a form of horizoning work (Petryna 2018; Petryna and Rendell 2021). Social development in HCMC is framed as a normative pathway from rural poverty and hardship towards urbanised wealth and luxury (Harms 2016). Its simplistic linearity, however, fails to recognise the heterogeneity of urban social and material life. Moreover, it fails to consider the possibility of other dimensions of heterogeneity, such as political orientation, online participation, and distributed relations, that are generated through social interaction of the embodied lifeworld with networked public space. Path-dependent models of development shape expectations about the future without knowing for sure what that future will bring.

Future visions for transport mobilities in HCMC are imagined in line with mass transit systems in other cities in Southeast Asia and beyond. Plans to construct new infrastructures, and the progress made towards actually constructing them, shows that horizoning of the future city aligns with a global sustainability agenda that mitigates the climate crisis (Oh et al. 2019). HCMC's plans include a metro rapid transit network; electric vehicles for short-distance commuting; minibus commuter services from city hubs to peri-urban estates; a skyrail; and a water bus service. These modes of mass transit are at varying stages of planning and construction and locate HCMC on a discursive continuum of development with its regional neighbours Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, Bangkok, Jakarta, and (perhaps) Seoul.

Besides the physical, material, and symbolic aspects of infrastructure, the Saigon Bus is also connected to informational systems, and like other transport modes it is a work in progress that includes plans and unevenly implemented communication and monitoring technologies. Ticketing practices on routes 139 and 68 in 2021 provide an example, with buses on the former route having self-service automated ticketing machines with digital payment options, and the latter having a conductor who sells paper tickets in exchange for cash payments. Sheller (2017) notes that some mobility systems move bodies using physical infrastructure and others move data, code, and images in informational systems. These two dimensions—the physical and informational—indicate the growing complexity of mobility systems and highlight the interdependence of social spaces in the lifeworld and the digital world. The new normal context of the pandemic season adds a heightened awareness of the co-presence of strangers as well as new regulations enforcing ways of being co-present with them in the physical lifeworld.

My analysis of the biosocial paradigm of crowding draws on long-term ethnographic fieldwork on public transport in HCMC. I started riding daily on the Saigon Bus in 2012, carrying out around 20 months of fieldwork over the next seven years, before settling in Ho Chi Minh City in 2019. Inspired by Wacquant

(2006), who became a club boxer, I learned the ropes and embodied the practices of bus riding in order to become a bus rider. I also discussed bus riding with non-riders at bus stops (e.g., drinks sellers) and in the community (e.g., motorbike riders and car drivers). Yet, by riding along in-situ to capitalise on an immediacy of context and capture experiences (McGuinness, Fincham, and Murray 2010), I experience and explore practices, social relations, and interactions of public bus riding in HCMC (see Nash 1975). As a co-rider, I participate in riding along and observe how others ride along. I make written narrative field notes, which centre on phenomenal and sensory experiences, and make simple sketches in a post-hoc chronological journal soon after taking a journey. I present data in performative vignettes inspired by the ‘lively ethnography’ of van Dooren and Rose (2016). In doing so, I move beyond a normative discursive paradigm fixed on the collection of personal narratives (Culhane 2017). Rather than recording informants’ narratives, I engage with Pink’s (2015) reflexivity in sensory ethnography to explore the practices of people in their lifeworld. Primarily, I use participant observation and ‘deep hanging out’ with mobile research subjects (Geertz 2005). Riding on the bus, I am an observing participant on the move. I ride with a destination in mind, such as a workplace, a university campus, or a friend’s house. In HCMC, the Saigon Bus is my primary form of transport and I travel on different routes and at different times of day. Since it is generally a diurnal service, with most routes ending around 7 p.m., the bus is not the only mode of transport I use. In this ongoing project, I explore ethnographic moments in which interactions among highly mobile residents of HCMC in crowded and uncrowded public spaces of the Saigon Bus take place (Earl 2016, 2018, 2020b, 2021). As an empirical example, the Saigon Bus offers a lens through which to analyse the impact of the emerging biosocial paradigm of crowding on the ground.

Self, surveillance, and crowd behaviour on the Saigon Bus

After strict social distancing in 2020 is relaxed, Saigon Bus services resume. During my first morning back on campus in HCMC after the lockdown, I plan to take the public bus to work. I will wear a face mask as recommended by public health advice and enforced by government regulations for moving about in public space, including riding the public bus. With some uncertainty about what to expect, I go out and wait at the bus stop. The situation of the current pandemic season is out of the ordinary. Being different to normal, it may be a cause for concern or even alarm, although I do not know yet. Eventually I see the bus approaching. I raise my arm to hail it. The driver flashes the indicator and crosses from the centre lane through the lane of motorbikes to the curb. The bus pulls up and I board. I buy a ticket from the automatic ticketing machine and look for a seat.

The bus has people. I feel somewhat concerned that all around me there are people. It strikes me that in each double seat there are people. Some have one person; others two people side-by-side. Their co-presence makes the bus feel crowded. The crowd makes me feel nervous in the new normal situation. To take a seat I make my way along the aisle. It is difficult to find my balance in the moving bus. I grasp each seat rail as I pass, asking myself if it is safe to touch the surface others have surely touched. I reach the back of the bus and take the last vacant seat. I am on the aisle side, next to another passenger. She is sitting very straight and contracts herself towards the window to ensure we do not accidentally touch. I also sit up straight to ensure nothing of mine spreads on to her side and I make no intrusion in her space. We each enact our 'personal space' and 'possessional territory' that in Goffman's (1972) microsociological analysis constitute 'territories of the self'. After experiencing lockdown, individual possessional territory is widened and awareness of its boundaries is heightened and more strictly policed.

As a Saigon Bus rider, I am familiar with riding HCMC's public buses, and I know what to expect. In pandemic season, the idea of personal space feels much the same as usual but the comfortable distance between co-present strangers—me and others—grew a little, and my awareness of others has become more conscious. The practical action of boarding the bus and taking a seat has not changed, unsurprisingly. The practice recurs each time a passenger boards, although it is not repeated exactly. Bus-riding in Saigon is generally the same as usual: standing at a bus stop in the street, hailing the bus to alert the driver to stop, buying the single-use ticket on board, holding the rail to keep balance, alighting only at a designated bus stop (although not necessarily if it is raining very heavily). Yet the practices of Saigon Bus riding are place-dependent. Riding a public bus in HCMC is akin to but not quite the same as riding a public bus elsewhere, say in Asunción or Zagreb. The standardised practices of mass transit systems vary. In HCMC in the pandemic season bus riding is the same as usual but at the same time different. It is the situation of bus riding that is different—riding it is now socio-historically situated in the time after (we became aware of) social distancing practices adopted in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The bus pulls up at a stop and more passengers enter. It becomes crowded enough that there is standing room only. New passengers stand in the aisle, leaning on the edge of the seats, or holding on with two hands—to both left and right rails—in order to keep their balance. Some passengers seated on the aisle shuffle away a little. In doing so, they show not 'civil inattention' (Goffman 1963) but a heightened awareness of the need to monitor the co-presence of others. While the biosocial paradigm of social distancing delineates what is a safe physical proximity, these are distances that change with feelings of discomfort and on the basis of informal risk assessments. Dealing with the co-presence of strangers in

public space, especially when it is crowded and its limits are constrained to 1, 1.5, or 2 metres, involves behaving more or less in harmony with others. Even though the bus seems to be crowded, it carries fewer than half the passengers of a normal morning rush hour service. The level of crowding is in line with current public health and mass transit regulations. When the passenger limit is reached, the bus bypasses the bus stops and leaves waiting passengers behind.

On board, we all wear face masks. Clearly visible in multiple places in the bus—near the door, on the window, above the windscreen—are copies of a typed sign stating that passengers must wear a mask before entering the bus. A photocopied paper taped on the bus window shows a copy of a street billboard with a nurse reminding passengers how to correctly wear a face mask.² My co-riders, wearing their masks, are seated side-by-side. Some edge away from others who are sharing their seat or standing in the aisle too near to them. This moment shows that a consciousness of crowding is heightened and an awareness of being (too) near strangers may generate discomfort and a feeling of being encroached upon or contaminated by others through sensory violations or intrusions into one's territory (Goffman 1972). When a passenger drops her mask to talk to her fellow traveller, the conductor catches her attention and gestures for her to replace it. This demonstrates how behaviours in public are monitored and policed more closely than before.

All the action on the bus that I describe above was captured on the security camera positioned above the driver's head. Cameras were installed on buses before the pandemic to monitor the bus crew's behaviour: to check they were dealing with customers politely, ensuring that passengers purchased tickets, and handling cash responsibly. Yet, the camera view is directed over the driver's head into the body of the bus, where the passengers are located. The passengers are strangers sharing co-presence not just with each other inside the bus but also with others, who cannot be seen, in the digital world of bus operations and camera footage storage. The presence of cameras, and the potential for facial recognition services, inhibit passengers from using appropriate civil inattention—which might include pulling faces or making rude gestures—to deal with one another.

Moreover, single contacts between strangers on mass transit occur by chance. They are unintended, unplanned, and, in the words of Hannerz (1980), 'scattered' among individuals who are 'within convenient reach'. Yet, in the new normal condition, the movements of individual bus passengers should be trackable. The detection of a positive case at a peri-urban bus terminal in HCMC, for instance, prompted authorities to ask bus passengers to register their journey using an

2 Although mask wearing became mandatory in order to ride the bus under the new normal conditions, wearing a face mask on public transport in HCMC was normative before the pandemic (Earl 2020b).

onboard QR code or, for passengers unable to do so, to fill out a paper form with their contact details, the route, and the time at which they travelled. Such attempts to track single contacts and identify who went where and when—then to limit their movements—required new forms of self-monitoring and public surveillance. Constraining and reporting movements in this manner potentially provides an alternative rationale for population control and public security in the context of an authoritarian state. In linking these ideas to the biosocial paradigm of crowding, I turn to medical anthropologist Natalie Porter (2019) who describes pandemic policy and practice as being made and remade on the ground. Definitions of safe physical proximity change with context since they are practice-oriented, place-dependent, and socio-historically situated.

The crowd as a contact zone

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic has prompted, among other things, a heightened awareness of crowding and more self-regulation concerning the closeness of social interactions and contact with strangers, for example among passengers on Saigon Bus services. In less than three decades, an idea of the crowd in Vietnam has undergone transformation: from being seen as mass gatherings for anti-state demonstration that require social control, to being viewed as pro-state engagement via networked participatory communities, and whole-of-society participation in and surveillance of more-than-human relations in a biosocial paradigm. In an early paper on crowds in Hanoi, Vietnam's capital city, Thomas (2001) was inspired by the flows of Vietnamese football fans into the city streets to celebrate the country's wins over Indonesia in the 1997 SEA Games and over Thailand in the 1998 Tiger Cup. Her analysis centred on the potential for public disorder in the physical crowd that occupies bounded public spaces. This conceptualisation of the crowd juxtaposes the purpose of assembly and state interests or actions.

Fast forward two decades to December 2019 and a crowd of Vietnamese football fans floods into the streets (*đi bão*, literally: go like a storm, storming) of HCMC to celebrate Vietnam's win against rival Indonesia in the 2019 SEA Games final. The crowd is huge, its size unable to be estimated, and it is unlimited by the width of the streets; individuals of the crowds, after all, are also connected online, in cities all over Vietnam. Those physically in the crowd post videos, selfies, and messages which are reported and republished in the online mass media. The national broadcaster livestreams the match, the crowded city squares, and the gridlocked streets. Amid a sea of nationalist red banners and yellow stars, the occupied public spaces and my slow progress across the epicentre in Nguyễn Huệ pedestrian mall are simultaneously monitored by street cameras, which capture the crowds and duplicate them in the digital world—albeit in a manner that, this time, offers no opportunities for participation. This experience converges the embodied and

networked spaces where the crowd interacts and a contact zone that connects pro-state fans with the state. Public space is, media and communications theorist McQuire (2016) contends, a contact zone that comprises a variety of contested social spaces that involve the digital and the physical, but which do not compel participation, action, inclusion, or a sense of belonging.

Online participation and networked public space have become part of the crowd, and its increased distribution and feedback capacity enhances its reach and influence. Facebook and other online tools generate a means of contact between the physical lifeworld and digital world. In the global street, sociologist Sassen (2011) argues, digital communication tools are situated as part of a larger urban ecology that operates by particular logics which are tailored to the purposes and needs of different users. These may be mundane (such as a financial investment) or revolutionary (such as gathering with the aim of overthrowing a government). Digital tools in local or place-dependent action can serve mundane, everyday participation without a revolutionary aim, however. Public spaces involving embodied and networked co-presence form a contact zone in the more-than-human world, and such spaces are exemplified on Saigon Bus.

The central public bus terminal or a busy stop near a hospital or shopping mall are places where physical crowds are present. However, the crowd involves more than mere presence in the street. To become a crowd implies an assembly with a shared purpose for gathering, such as waiting for a bus or demonstrating against a land seizure. In a second article on crowds in Hanoi, Thomas (2002) suggested that bustling urban street life provides a public space for destabilising state control. Thomas located dissent in the lifeworld of the streets, and suggested that public discourse embodied in the form of a crowd of people physically present in the street has the potential to exert a powerful influence on the state's activities. Returning to McQuire (2016), I note that digital tools have disrupted the focus on people gathered in public. This has occurred by enabling the distributed organisation with far greater reach. Users have a means for simultaneous archiving and self-reporting accounts. McQuire argues that 'feedback networks' that characterise networked participation play a multi-faceted role in disseminating forms of information and accounts of action that not only record events but potentially influence media coverage. Posting about why people have gathered is a form of self-reporting. Citizens' self-reporting and creative contributions to reinforcing state messages have become features of the new conceptualisation of the crowd.

Encouraging digital participatory citizenship

Among Saigon Bus passengers and HCMC residents more generally, social media messaging and online information sharing have been crucial aspects of managing

the pandemic. This has been through disseminating awareness of crowding limits and transmission-reducing behaviours, as well as by promoting measures for living with microbes as part of the social fabric in a more-than-human world. Engagement with digital participation as a normal part of the social world shows not an assertion of policy but a codification of persistent practice that has established itself over the past decade. For example, by January 2021 there were 72 million social media users in Vietnam, representing almost three quarters of the population, and almost all were using Facebook and YouTube on a mobile device (Simon Kemp 2021). The approach of the Vietnamese state to managing an increasing volume of online participation has been flexible and uneven, yet responsive to public opinion (Mai Duong 2017).

Like other policies and practices in a more-than-human world, legislation about assembly and digital activism is made and remade as responses that address specific contexts where action is being taken. While online participatory forums, such as Facebook, have provided Vietnamese and others with a space to voice their opinions and responses, it should not be assumed that online participation is homogenising nor that it gives voice and visibility (Miller and Horst 2020). Rather than there being an attempt to control citizens' access to global apps, as elsewhere in the world, the internet in Vietnam has become both a political resource and a political arena. Bui (2016) analyses the influence of social media in elite politics as having provided forms of information sharing that sees the public better informed; to have created visibility among political factions; and to have increased exposure and public scrutiny that greatly impact on the way the political apparatus operates. In sum, the influence of social media is balanced with constraints on its use for the public. Similarly, Mai Duong (2017) notes the use of social media as increasing visibility and accessibility, including the emergence of blogging as a source of independent news and information; as an arena for competing political ideologies; as an alternative channel that challenges state-run media; and as a method for voicing opinions that maximise freedom of speech.

Digital participation has become an important practice for enacting citizenship in Vietnam. While Saigon Bus riders are active in posting comments about the system failing to meet sustainability targets, its poor service provision, and the poor behaviour of drivers, conductors, or passengers, drawing on documented examples beyond the public transport system further illustrates the point that the reach of online participation among a networked crowd potentially has influence on governance structures. Analysing a case of widespread public criticism of bauxite mining in Vietnam in the late 2000s, Morris-Jung (2017) points out that the socialist state historically crafted categories of expertise and activism into government spaces. This activism enabled the management, control, and mobilisation of expertise for state purposes while monitoring and controlling

potential threats to state authority. Public protest in the new form of an online petition challenged state attempts to manage public debate through control of the media and the mobilising of its own expertise. Using the state's experts, Kurfürst (2015) argues, reproduces existing power differentials that privilege urban elites who have personal connections to state and civil society networks, and excludes citizens who lack the prerequisite access to technology and relevant communication networks to engage in this manner.

Moreover, Kurfürst (2015) notes that urban elites and Vietnamese living abroad may set the protest agenda rather than represent workers or citizens. An example of participatory citizenship among urban elites emerged during the process of redrafting Vietnam's constitution in 2013. A group of 72 pro-state experts (intellectuals and retired officials) submitted a petition of new ideas that challenged the state to promote universal human rights aligned with an international (Western) agenda. Wang and Truong (2021) comment on this example—alongside a number of others, including the policy deadlock for legislating an assembly law to curb demonstrations—as highlighting an observable shift in focus of legislative debates: from regulation for social control to emphasising protection of an individual's constitutional rights, including the right to protest. They interpret the driver not as the aim of improving domestic and international legitimacy but as preserving the stability of the regime.

The participatory approaches to constitutional reform in 2013 may have been a turning point in digital activism that diversified the voices engaging in pro-state commentary and criticism. Citizen-led social movements have flourished on Facebook and other platforms. Yet, McQuire (2016) reminds us, online participation may or may not involve dialogue and may or may not link with deeper social or political changes. Users may become docile followers who are guided by received messages as much as active 'prosumers', who generate original content as well as consume it. However, it seems that the general aims of the Vietnamese public in using Facebook are not simply (or not even) revolutionary, since they do not appear to aim for or even to encourage the destabilization of the state. Rather, members of the public often engage in Facebook commentary on state policy and (lack of) state action on important issues, such as achieving sustainability goals. Vietnamese audiences are 'never docile' and inactive, asserts Nguyen-Thu (2020). She identifies that, while the state tolerates some criticism and venting on online forums, the interaction between the state and the public, while remaining hierarchical, is dynamic and responsive to contested issues in particular contexts. It is important to note that active citizenship, including in an authoritarian context, involves agency—such as voluntarily choosing to participate in a forum, sharing personal opinions, monitoring others nearby, or stepping up to act upon

instructions given. Furthermore, examples from Vietnam show that the public expects the state to listen and respond.

Homing in on another case of environmental activism and protests against a widely unpopular policy to fell street trees in Hanoi, Vu (2017) notes that Facebook provided a citizen-led space for grassroots environmental activism that contrasts with previous expert activism led by non-governmental organisations. Nguyen and Nguyen (2018) argue that public participation on Facebook—‘activist PR’—mobilised citizens who aimed to overturn policy and save the trees. Gillespie and Nguyen (2019) found that social media became a space where urban citizenship could eventually influence the state. Online public participation among citizens claiming their rights to participate in governance pushed back against policy decisions made by city officials and disrupted officials’ expectations about how citizens should behave.

While Vietnam has not yet passed a proposed law to control assembly and demonstrations in public space, cybersecurity law was tightened in 2014 and again in 2018 in order to increase monitoring and control of content (Kurfürst 2015; Wang and Truong 2021). Nguyen-Thu (2018) notes that the state was prompted by an awareness of the growing use of Facebook-based social movements that make the public aware of issues to pass new laws to restrict freedom of expression and grant more power to authorities to survey and punish online citizens. In 2020, among the pandemic policy measures enacted were further restrictions on online content to control the spread of misinformation about the pandemic. Communication, along with collaboration and cooperation, remain crucial dimensions of the new normal condition.

Tethering citizens, distributing participatory surveillance

Riding the Saigon Bus in the new normal condition highlights that one of the social impacts of increased microbe monitoring is the heightened awareness of others and the conscious self-management of stranger relations in (un)crowded places of the more-than-human world. Viruses as relational entities depend on living in a host (Porter 2019). Pandemic prevention policies aim to identify contacts that expose actual or potential more-than-human relations. Disease surveillance gives rise to new expectations about appropriate levels of people surveillance. Increased monitoring of interactions between humans becomes a by-product of attempting to monitor the transmission of microbes between living human hosts. Watching for evidence of illness in social settings involves monitoring human behaviour to ensure transmission-reducing practices and safe distancing are being followed. Technologies of surveillance, such as the safety cameras installed on Saigon Bus services, provide a means for the state to trace disease transmission and offer an

invitation to urban people to self-monitor their behaviours and personal territory as well as to monitor those of others. With the mobilisation of the digital world, DeNicola (2020) points out that forms of online participation do ‘tether’ citizens in networks that normalise constant surveillance at the same time as destabilising and reconfiguring dominant (media) institutions. Taking up DeNicola’s term, tethering residents to pandemic surveillance of the biosocial paradigm in Vietnam’s new normal condition involves three interlinked aspects: communication, collaboration, and cooperation.

Early in the pandemic, Vietnam’s Prime Minister Nguyễn Xuân Phúc issued a call for the nation as a whole to fight COVID-19. Pandemic communications illustrate how the single-party state exercises a sufficient degree of its authority when required. COVID-19 policy documents were issued by all levels of government, including the central level, all 18 national ministries, and all 63 provincial people’s committees (Le et al. 2021). Traditional methods of public awareness raising—street banners and billboards (such as the one reproduced on a paper taped to the bus window); national television broadcasts; and the public address system in some residential areas—were mobilised to disseminate accurate pandemic management information and to warn against the spread of misinformation. National and provincial government ministries as well as telecommunications companies issued instructions for transmission-reducing behaviours, particularly handwashing and mask wearing, as well as summaries of current policies about social distancing and other measures. None of these messaging alerts services required consent or individuals to actively sign up (Earl 2020a).

On social media, key government messages were disseminated by Deputy Prime Minister Vũ Đức Đam and other trustworthy and known political leaders almost hourly and re-reported in the mass media with up to 50–60 reports each day (La et al. 2020). The state also called upon trustworthy experts as part of its public information campaign. Doctors and medical professionals used their own private social media, such as Facebook and Zalo (a local version of WhatsApp), as well as mass media appearances to communicate key messages. Besides experts, individuals from diverse social backgrounds used YouTube to share their experiences of quarantine, isolation, and testing (Ibid.). Social media offered individuals a form of self-presentation that enabled the self-reporting of their own behaviour—and themselves to be monitored by others. In the context of social distancing policies, the expectation of the crowd to self-report and self-monitor on social media has become a feature of the state response (Nguyen 2020). Accuracy of information was ensured by state measures to censor misinformation, including removing Facebook posts that spread information deemed to be unreliable or to incite non-compliance with recommended public health practices. In participating in pandemic communication online, users voluntarily tether themselves to a

network of everyday surveillance, which transforms the crowd from an amorphous collective into a countable group of networked individuals.

Pandemic prevention policies, such as mask wearing, call for the collaboration of citizens. In Vietnam's case, the whole of government was committed to jointly collaborating with the public to achieve the shared goal of fighting the pandemic enemy and adjusting to living in a normalised more-than-human world. While La et al. (2020, 17–18) consider there to be a contrast between 'central planning secrecy' of past policy implementation and 'transparency in the digital age', joint collaboration between the state and citizens has long been a norm in Vietnam. For example, parents are routinely called upon to provide co-funding for healthcare and schooling in order to access basic services. Moreover, philanthropy and donations to charitable causes are publicly acknowledged, as exemplified by listing the names of local and international donors (and the amount of their donations) to support orphanages or victims of natural disasters, on-site or in the media. In the recent era of pandemic prevention, public co-funding and donations of goods by companies and individuals have been an important factor in generating funds for facilities, equipment, healthcare and food staples (La et al. 2020; Nguyen 2020; Pham 2020). Such co-funding and donations can be considerable: in 2021, for instance, public philanthropy built a national vaccine fund to the value of over 8.6 trillion VND (approx. US\$ 375 million).

Celebrities and online influencers have contributed to financing the state, and their gifts to government are documented on their own social channels or reported in interviews with mass media channels. They have also disseminated their creative contributions that aim to maximise communication about pandemic cooperation. This is evident in the catchy 'Handwashing Song' (*Ghen Cô Vy*), with accompanying dance moves, that went viral on social media in early 2020 (Min x Erik 2020). Ordinary citizens use social media to show their participation in society by posting images of donation bank transfers (La et al. 2020) or by recording their volunteering at a neighbourhood 'Zero Dong' supermarket that distributes free food to the needy (Pham 2020), for example. Making gifts to government of cash, goods, and equipment, or volunteering work hours, are forms of crowdfunding that enable state service provision. Crowdfunding for costly medical treatments, medical anthropologists Neuwelt-Kearns et al. (2021) report, acts as a social mechanism for donors to exhibit their care for people and to affirm the deservingness of the patient. In the context of pandemic prevention, co-funding also offers donors opportunities to show pro-state support and patriotism by contributing to the public health needs of fellow citizens, although without knowing the potential recipients of treatment personally. Collaboration in pandemic prevention transforms the crowd by realigning relations with strangers, either co-present or unknowable, into relations of shared identity, belonging, and mutuality.

Concurrently, the crowd is transformed as its diverse members are called upon to cooperate in achieving the state's goal of pandemic management. Citizens are expected to behave cooperatively by doing what is asked of them by policies. Rather than being inactive, docile, and obedient bio-political subjects, they are also expected to actively and voluntarily monitor their own compliance and, ideally, the behaviour of others. Coupled with voluntary self-reporting, the state's powers have extended to contact tracing (*truy vết*) and swiftly and efficiently 'going to every laneway and knocking on every door' (*đi từng ngõ, gõ từng nhà, rà từng đối tượng*) in order to locate the contacts of suspected COVID-19 cases who are ranked as F1, F2, F3, or F4 according to the degree of exposure to infection. Potential virus hosts are asked to cooperate by participating in an enforced period of quarantine, either in a purpose-built dormitory or at their home in isolation. Outsiders arriving in the city and residents moving around it are required to lodge online health declarations (Pham 2020). City residents can also expect GPS tracking through tracing apps, such as Hanoi's Smart City app (La et al. 2020). Contact tracing extends beyond the physical world to monitoring Facebook, as noted above, and phone contacts. The government-sponsored Bluezone app attempted to go further by placing some responsibility on citizens to cooperate in contact tracing by locating and informing on strangers to whose presence users are alerted if the stranger's phone number is registered as being in breach of quarantine or self-isolation requirements. While curiosity may have prompted many individuals to download this app, it was not widely used and has since been abandoned. This shows that Vietnamese citizens chose not to actively participate in centralised peer surveillance. However, some individuals did request verbal confirmation from others of their having avoided of high-risk zones in the city before meeting them face-to-face (Tough 2021). Besides individual cooperation with the state, ongoing cooperation of medical staff, scientists, and various other professions—such as bus conductors, security guards, retailers, and other service providers—is also expected as pandemic policies and practices are in turn implemented and relaxed. More broadly, cooperation is not just expected within countries but internationally as well (Hale 2021).

Conclusion

Vietnam's horizons effort to live well in a more-than-human world draws attention to how an idea of the crowd has been reconceptualised beyond the crisis policies that redefine social proximity. Inspired by social interactions among passengers on a Saigon Bus service, this article tracks three transformations in the framing of mass gatherings in the context of policy and practice. Beginning with the view of a crowd as an assembly or demonstration that threatens to undermine state security, based on various examples my analysis shows that crowds in Vietnam have moved from anti-state gatherings that require social control into a form of pro-state

participatory citizenship exemplified by public engagement with networked activist communities. Focused on social distancing on the Saigon Bus, I explain the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on social interaction in terms of a new biosocial paradigm involving a new normal condition of living with viruses in more-than-human relations. This focus highlights that an idea of the crowd aligns not with security and control, but with the protection of citizens' constitutional rights, such as a right to health and a right to be informed, and ensuring individual safety. However, I am not suggesting a consideration for public safety is new. Public safety has long been a factor in legislation, for example regarding anti-terrorism measures for supervising and patrolling transport hubs, border gates, and other public places of mass gathering. Other laws have also included public safety protocols concerning transportation of dangerous goods; fire; radiation; high voltage power; weapons; explosive objects; medical waste; bio-hazardous pesticides; and tobacco smoking in public areas. What is new is the whole-of-society participation in and surveillance of more-than-human relations within a biosocial paradigm that has been designed as an exercise in horizoning that aims to implement practical action to manage a yet-unknown future.

The crowd of this emerging biosocial paradigm is changeable and alters depending on the social practices that are being used in that place at that time. This indicates the idea of a crowd as being place-dependent, practice-oriented, and socio-historically situated. New restrictions on existing social practices, such as sitting side-by-side on a public bus, limit the ways that friends and strangers can interact in public places. Existing intersubjective social relations of closeness and connection continue to shape interactions between people with pre-existing relationships and these may displace new practices and restrictions, for example by dropping a face mask to talk to a friend in public. Other practices, such as transmission-reducing behaviours, that used to be carried out in private are now located in public. Not only are they carried out in public places but they are closely self-monitored and supervised by others. Such practices reconfigure crowd relations by replacing appropriate 'civil inattention' with heightened awareness of others' proximities and behaviours. Monitoring of interactions via street or vehicle cameras on the one hand, and self-reporting via Facebook and other social media on the other, are two dimensions of participatory surveillance enabled by digital tools and fostered among crowd members in the new normal biosocial paradigm.

The interlinked responses of communication, collaboration, and cooperation highlight three additional features of the crowd. Firstly, the crowd is transformed from an amorphous collective into a countable group of networked individuals when citizens voluntarily tether themselves to forms of everyday surveillance by engaging in pandemic communication online. Secondly, through collaborating to co-fund pandemic prevention services, the crowd is transformed from a group of

co-present strangers who share little biographical information into a group of citizens connected by relations of shared identity, belonging, and mutuality. Thirdly, the crowd is transformed by an expectation that, on the whole, it will cooperate to achieve the goals set by the state and/or in accordance with an international agenda. Rather than politely ignoring others, members of the crowd may voluntarily monitor their own and others' compliance with those goals. These are among the ways in which my analysis has found an idea of the crowd to have been reconceptualised in the biosocial paradigm emerging through the policy and practice responses to the 2020–21 pandemic season in Vietnam. When I was drafting this paper in early 2021, my preliminary conclusion was that it was not yet possible to know to what extent these are temporary or 'seasonal' ways of being and it is unknown for how long they will persist after the pandemic season passes. By mid-2021, it was becoming clearer that knowing what the future will bring is not such a relevant concern. Typically, in Vietnam policies seek to codify the persistent practices that emerged when people responded to a situation. The horizoning effort of planning despite not knowing recognises that policies are being made on the ground in a place and in response to the practices and the socio-historical situation of the biosocial paradigm of living well in a more-than-human world.

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