

Crowds and COVID-19

An Introduction

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We write this introduction in February 2022 just as the Canadian truckers' protest, demanding an end to all government pandemic measures, has been brought to an end at the behest of the executive by powers enabled through the Emergencies Act of 1988. Beginning in Ottawa in late January as demonstrations challenging vaccine requirements for cross-border truckers, and then spreading to a blockade of Detroit's Ambassador Bridge, the mobilising sentiment had been COVID-related restrictions that are imposed and taken away in ways that do not always make sense to the public for whom they are intended (Alden 2022). The protest had become a form of economic blockade, which hit auto industry supply chains in Canada, and appeared in both France and New Zealand (BBC News 2022). By now it is well known that the Canadian Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, had threatened to arrest the truckers; have their licences cancelled; suspend vehicle insurance; seize bank accounts of anyone donating to the protestors; and crack down on crowdfunding and cryptocurrency sites that had enabled the protestors to raise more than CAD\$10 million in three weeks in order to protect the 'sovereignty, security and territorial integrity' of Canada. The analysis of the protests has only just begun, and the political frames being deployed, including: amorphous, siege, and a carnival of chaos (Coletta et al. 2022); nonviolent civil disobedience (Thiessen 2022); right-wing extremism and violence (Bresge 2022); illegal occupation (Washington Post 2022); and a lucky fringe movement (Kitroeff and Austen 2022)—suggest that we are at some distance from understanding the political momentum that the protest has generated in the world's tenth largest democracy, which has seen one of the strictest restriction regimes since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, and repeated cycles of lockdowns and lifting of lockdowns have generated fatigue. The above vignette shows the enduring concern with how the contagion that is associated with a pathogen attaches to the crowd, which already has a history of being metaphorised as affective, viral, and contagious (Canetti [1960] 1984; Chowdhury 2019; Sampson 2012). By the middle of 2020, it was becoming obvious that as states across the world scrambled to contain the virus, complete lockdowns emerged entirely because of an inability to comprehend the momentum of the virus in terms of its relationship with crowds and crowdedness. The inability to control and limit crowds required knowing what a crowd—in the context of the unfolding pandemic—actually is. And since it conceptually defies borders, it was also necessary to determine where a border might be put, and what name to give the crowd: group; assembly; gathering; mass; congregation, to name but a few. The wider, contrasting and changing field of surveillance, backed mostly by legal orders, struggled to quantify public gatherings. When we were writing the abstract of this Special Section that year, for instance, President Trump had announced that gatherings needed to be limited to ten people even as there was inconsistency with respect to what different places and states in the US themselves deemed a ‘safe size’: this number ranged from 1,000 in St. Louis, Missouri to six in New Haven, Connecticut.

The question of what gets recognised as a crowd, and consequently what exactly *is* a crowd, offers an innovative set of lenses for a critical assessment of the pandemic. Given that social distancing is not possible for large populations across the world and that crowding is a feature of many living conditions, for example in refugee camps, then does the differential distribution of risk and prevention challenge the globality of COVID-19? Sadaf Noor E. Islam, Nayanika Mookherjee, and Naveeda Khan’s article in this Special Section studies the health-seeking behaviour of the crowds of Rohingya refugees in Bangladeshi camps. Mired in mistrust, both because of the history of violence against them in Myanmar and their precarious position as refugees in Bangladesh, their rejection of COVID-related health services may, nonetheless, be understood as a decision they take about their lives. The authors delineate how Bangladesh continues to disproportionately bear the burden of extending care services to Rohingya refugees. In this skewed political economy of the Rohingya refugees, decisions about chronic conditions, COVID-19 infections and more urgent care are made via calculations that are less attuned to the needs of the ailing body, and more to the register of whether the assistance provided can be trusted. For instance, despite the availability of isolation facilities, which are equipped with necessities like bed, food, and sanitary facilities, many Rohingyas continue to choose not to get tested and isolate because detachment from the family is inevitably laden with fears emerging from having endured and survived a genocidal regime. The authors

show how other political decisions taken by the Bangladeshi government, like an internet blackout and mobile phone restriction—ostensibly security measures—worked toward fuelling further mistrust among the Rohingyas towards its COVID-19 containment measures. In contexts in which camp crowding is weaponised against refugees, rather than seen as a condition that needs to be corrected, the Rohingyas offer a provocation as to what pandemic control would need to look like if considered from the bottom up. Hence their lack of compliance with preventive measures is less about illiteracy than it is about resistance against the state.

The twinning of urgencies—one of COVID-19 and the other of political protest—that crowds have entailed during this pandemic will perhaps mark its difference from the ones that have come before. In other words, the endangered future of political crowds with all its radical potential (Canetti [1960] 1984) and the arbitrary state responses using the excuse of containment to break up protests makes the biology of the pathogen inextricable from the political moment. The Black Lives Matter movement (which organised demonstrations worldwide in 2020 following the death of George Floyd) demonstrated that the possibility of viral contagion was but one among many kinds of continuing risk that political minorities face in a pandemic. This political risk entwines with the long-documented public health emergency of various African American health indicators that resulted in a disproportionate number of cases among New York’s African American population. The BLM movement gave a reassurance that there was a political future in which we could continue to aspire to a transformative politics, and give it shape. Perhaps this politics continues to look like a crowd—or perhaps it is a multiplicity, to take inspiration from Andrea Brighenti’s rendition of a ‘radical epistemological pluralism’ (2010, 292). Pandemic-related interventions to contain the virus continue to be both arbitrary and generative of crowdedness, as seen in India, in the Delhi government’s show of ‘preparedness’ for the third wave: in early January 2022 it was indicated that while schools would be shut, metros and buses would run at full seating capacity to avoid crowding outside bus stops and metro stations (Dutta 2022). This was different from the late December 2021 yellow alert directive that allowed metros and buses to run only at 50% seating capacity to avoid crowding inside metros and buses (Press Trust of India 2022).

These examples of scaling up and down proliferate: pandemic policies, as Catherine Earl argues in her article in this Special Section, attempt to control crowds that are in any case already ‘relational and oriented to local practices, dependent on location, and situated in a specific socio-historical context’. Earl takes her own long-term ethnographic work on the mass transit system, the Saigon Bus, in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, to understand the heightened awareness (rather than civil inattention) with which travellers now make use of the system. She delineates a biosocial paradigm, dedicated to protecting citizens’

constitutional rights and safety, as being the core responsibility of the Vietnamese government in the management of the pandemic. This is fundamentally different from the control that the single-party communist state used to exercise over mass gatherings before the redrafting of Vietnam's constitution in 2013. In Vietnam, the pandemic is articulated as temporary and seasonal, but this has not meant that attempts to control the contagion have been sporadic. Earl describes how what was considered a befitting amount of inattention earlier now stands radically altered, paving the way for what she calls 'participatory surveillance'—the monitoring and evaluation of stranger behaviour. What might then be the limits of this acute sensitivity with which a stranger is encountered in a city, when the state has moved away from a focus on security and control, but its citizens seem to rather be moving in the opposite direction?

Writing in the present continuous—in the sense of both tense and time—the need for studying crowds stemmed from not knowing what proximity and distance would even mean during and after the pandemic. In an edited volume, *Crowds: Ethnographic Encounters*, that was published just before the pandemic in 2019, Megan Steffen ponders the 'changing political significance of crowds' (18) to suggest that political protests like the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, and the Black Lives Matter movement are as likely as far-right marches and mass demonstrations to shift the 'meaning of crowding in public', were such protests allowed greater political presence. This has already been seen in the Capitol Hill riot of 6 January 2021, on the one hand, and the Farmers' Protest in India that lasted from late 2020 to November 2021, on the other. We bring up these examples to think about not just the pandemic and the social formations it shapes—mobs versus protestors—but to think by way of those formations about the political populism that they amplify, which then has a bearing on how we think about multiplicity. Bhргenti delineates multiplicities in the following manner:

Rather than subjects and objects, in multiplicities we have encounters, and encounters occur in series; they are chains of interlinkages, each of which can be settled or unsettled. Because of their existence in series, multiplicities are not 'at the present' time. Rather they arrive in the dimension of becoming. (2010, 300).

Multiplicities, then, always already exist and might even be thought of as enveloping and jostling with crowdedness in order to emerge. The global south and crowds are intrinsically linked; take, for example, Chowdhury's compelling articulation about Bangladesh:

[W]hen it comes to crowds, few places are as overdetermined as Bangladesh [amid already existing congestion] any event of political value in Bangladesh must take place in the street and gather a huge crowd to have any significance

[rendering it] both a remedy and a scapegoat. This duality remains fundamental to the idea of the crowd in modern *mass* democracies. (2019, 149–150; emphasis ours).

The virus's contagiousness in the global south became legible by becoming linked to the population question, leading to a series of *what if* propositions, the assumption being that the global north might be more secure because of its lack of masses; the global south, because of its chaotic, spectacular, crowding masses, is considered itself to be formally undemocratic. The linking of multiplicity of crowds, the radical epistemological pluralism crowds require in order to be analysed, and the questions asked about democracy is seen in Mary K. Bloodsworth-Lugo and Carmen R. Lugo-Lugo's article in this Special Section. The authors explore the working conditions of people labelled 'essential workers', including those working in food processing plants and canneries, agricultural fields, warehouses, and grocery stores. Do their working conditions constitute crowding, the authors ask? If not, they wonder, then how is the COVID-19 pandemic implicated in further extending a racialised biopolitical regime within democracies such as the United States.

Focusing on the early part of the pandemic when vaccines did not yet exist, these workers, Bloodsworth-Lugo and Lugo-Lugo argue, were required to work during lockdowns, often under egregious circumstances, because their work supported the rest of the social/economic system. The economic necessity they found themselves bound to meant that they performed their work without organisational power to demand adequate protection. Working with the concept of social death, the authors capture the tense and anxiety-ridden time at the beginning of the pandemic, which often worked to the advantage of employers, who used the category of 'essential work' to compel employees to continue working, but without delivering appropriate protections to the workers. The public celebration of essential workers, the authors find, eclipsed inequities and the crowding they endured; the U.S. Department of Labor's statement on workers' protection remaining legally unenforceable in the early part of the pandemic.

The pandemic did not shake or disrupt neoliberal governmentality, which remains uncommitted to egalitarianism through redistribution of income and instead focuses only on targeting absolute poverty through grading populations. In the context of the global south, Partha Chatterjee contends, there has been an acceleration in primitive accumulation since the beginning of the century. This has led to an accelerated 'dislocation of workers from the agricultural sector to urban areas, where they are crowded into the burgeoning informal sector', but in a context where they will become 'redundant surplus population' (2020, 80). The state steps in here only to ensure 'survival of this population', which is ultimately

tied to ensuring the ‘legitimacy of capitalist domination’ (Ibid.). Glimpses of this state, which Chatterjee calls the tactically extended state, are also seen in the global north in the techniques of governing immigrant and refugee populations, who inhabit zones of exception (idem, 81; see also Fassin 2011, 192–93).

When we first articulated the crowd question, we might have been led by the assumption that the pandemic *could* cause a disruption to populist politics. An unintentional effect of these disruptions would be to allow for recognisable forms of alternative political spectrums to become visible, and we, like many of our colleagues, took comfort in this. What purchase might be left for the crowd question then in the pandemic? The virus might build a capability to ‘differentiate human bodies and lives into biochemically differentiated populations. Until then, the differentiating power of the virus is at the level of the social and political rather than biological’ (Arif 2022, 10). The creation of a co-morbid body is one such site of differentiation, on whose back has ridden the explanation about who or which persons are likely to suffer more, or to die of the virus (see also Larsen 2011; Solomon 2016, 2021). Comorbidities were offered more as a pitiable excuse for deaths due to COVID-19 than a medical reality, given, for instance, the risks that breathing entails in India at the best of times. In North India, where the air quality index is dangerously high between October and March, it might be worthwhile considering an entire population to be co-morbid—a spectacular culmination point of populist agrarian politics initiated by Indira Gandhi, through the introduction of Green Revolution in the country in the 1970s (Singh 2018). Similarly, in the Canadian protests, vaccination becomes the point around which we see a splintering of ‘political-ideological collectives, produced in and by the social articulated’ across disparate sites (Arif 2022, 10). Therefore, there is constant movement between thinking about what *kind* of protest the truckers’ ‘freedom convoy’ was and considering why the pandemic did not disrupt the crowds of protestors.

In the unfreedom of spaces such as slums and/or in the absence of a ‘social’ identity (such as crowds of migrant labourers in India and essential delivery persons the world over), Arif (2022) contends, we might see the failure of governmentality because the state finds those without a ‘social collectivity’ to be irrelevant. This lack of social collectivity can be seen most clearly in online avatars—in other words, individuals gathering in cyberspace. This virtual crowd has intersected with the pandemic, but also had a life preceding it. In many ways, tech affordance is quintessentially a pandemic question, for never have we lived by the digital in quite this way. How crowdsourcing, crowdfunding, and various others forms of digital crowds inflect the pandemic is an area of further research we hope this Special Section will inspire. The articles in this special section offer a fertile ground by showing through crowds that the COVID-19 pandemic is not a

failure but an inversion, perhaps even a perversion of governmentality, in the way that life itself has retained ambiguous articulations in the contemporary. This, however, is not new, as Fassin has already shown in his critique of ‘humanitarian reason’, specifically in arguing that a meaning of life ought to involve an ‘interrogation on biolegitimacy’; that is, ‘what sort of life is implicitly taken for granted?’ (Fassin 2011, 197). The pandemic, as a continuing global emergency, might be thought of as amplifying the meaninglessness of some lives, where numbers, statistics, and targets, nonetheless, proliferate.

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