



Humanity, Identity and Biopolitics in Post-Globalization

India Development Fund | Biopolitics of Science Research Network



Friday 1st November 2019 RD Watt Building

We witness in the 21st century a backlash against global cosmopolitanism, cynicism about the efficacy of human rights, and a heightened interest in the project of national identities. How to understand these developments in a global and comparative perspective? What kind of conceptual tools are needed to understand the complexities and stakes involved?



The symposium starts from the premise that these uncertain times were precipitated by a crisis of citizenship and that a biopolitical analysis of identity and humanity is necessary to fully understand the extent of this citizenship crisis. Rather than focusing on “negative biopolitics,” which emphasizes the death producing capacities of governmental strategies, the symposium engages the work of Roberto Esposito to address the problem of identity, community, and citizenship as ways of “making live.” Sustained life, and the politics it might need in this era, could entail a recalibration of how we might understand humanity with identity in a world of migrants, refugees, and diminishing possibilities of global mobility and hospitality.



Through a wide array of contexts, from mass displacement at the US/Mexico border and Palestinian death in the Israel/Palestine struggle, to the Indian Government’s *Aadhaar* identification program and mobilisations of identity politics in contemporary India, our speakers will examine the ways in which “humanity” and “identity” are newly translated into the citizenship crisis of present-day globalization.



Symposium Overview

Venue: Board Room, RD Watt Building, New Social Sciences Building A04

Friday 1 st November 2019	
10.00am	Welcome & coffee/tea
10.30-11.30am	<p>Michael Humphrey (University of Sydney) <i>The Wall and the Biopolitics of Displacement in the Americas</i></p> <p>Discussant – Marc de Leeuw (University of New South Wales)</p>
11.30-12.00pm	Morning Tea
12.00-1.00pm	<p>Srijan Butola (University of Delhi) <i>Immunity and Life: Biopolitics and the Paradoxical Practice of Aadhar in India</i></p> <p>Discussant – Arpita Das (University of Sydney)</p>
1.00-2.00pm	Lunch
2.00-3.00pm	<p>Yasmeen Arif (University of Delhi) <i>Life Per Se: Biopolitics and the Search for Sustainable Citizenship</i></p> <p>Discussant – Miguel Vatter (Flinders University)</p>
3.00-3.30pm	Afternoon Tea
3.30-4.30pm	<p>Ihab Shalbak (University of Sydney) <i>How Does a Palestinian Die? How Should a Palestinian Live?</i></p> <p>Discussant – Charlotte Epstein (University of Sydney)</p>
4.30pm	Closing & Drinks in Courtyard cafe

Abstracts

The Wall and the Biopolitics of Displacement in the Americas

Michael Humphrey (University of Sydney)

This paper explores the contemporary politics of mass displacement in the Americas. The scale of regional displacement has become visible at the US-Mexico border with the arrival of the Central American caravans – migrants/asylum seekers travelling together to provide safety in numbers – which Trump has characterized as an invasion. Trump's fetishized Wall as a security response obscures the biopolitics both producing the population flows in the region and preventing their entry into the US. For Trump the 'caravan' signifies a category of people he wants to immunize his (white) America from by deepening racialized governance through policies stripping away individual rights and made subject to biopolitical management as a stigmatized and criminalized category. Trump's frontier violence refounds white America on the basis a racialized policy romanticised in the nineteenth century as the conquest of the Wild West which concealed then, and still conceals now, the historical memory of the violent governance of the racialized other through lynching, massacre, concentration and/or displacement – especially indigenous people, African-Americans and Mexicans. The Central American caravans are the displaced from another frontier of conquest in Latin America through US political, military and corporate interventions to secure access to land and resources on their terms.

Displacement occurs as a result of 1) criminal organizations/cartels seizing territory to produce and distribute drugs, 2) criminal organizations/cartels wanting to monopolize human trafficking routes, 3) local criminal gangs controlling neighbourhoods to extort urban populations, 4) agribusiness/mining wanting to guarantee their investments by forming security partnerships against the interests of (often indigenous) landowners. In addition, the massive transformation of land use by agribusiness in Central America and the region has displaced workers from employment – e.g. palm oil plantations. At the US border human rights activists are trying to recover the displaced as 'individuals' through humanitarian witnessing and legal defence of their rights but with not much success. These populations are caught in a double biopolitics of displacement. First by their own countries who have already abandoned them as citizens whose wellbeing they are responsible for and second, at the border by Trump's frontier society as a stigmatised and criminalised category already under siege in the US through largescale deportation. Displacement signifies a biopolitics of governance by the withdrawal of sovereignty as protection on both sides of the Wall.

Immunity and Life: Biopolitics and the Paradoxical Practices of Aadhaar in India

Srijan Butola (University of Delhi)

Contemporary fields of Big Data and Data Analytics attempt to replace the paradigm of theoretical scientific fields with a one characterised by the dominance of inductive approaches on the basis of a tendency which would result in the sample size of statistical analyses becoming $n = all$, i.e. the entire *population*. This new colonial venture is certainly grounded in and contributes towards the deterritorialising tendencies of post-modernity and indulges in the practical rationale of the multiplicative nature of power within the biopolitical régime. However, one must note that these tendencies, which may be termed as life-affirming, have been made possible (especially at the scale at which they are practiced today) by the indulgence of the *immunity dispositifs* of modern and post-modern societies.

The current crisis in citizenship thus cannot be understood unless one regards the notions of a politics on *life* and a politics of *life* as being immanent to each other. The particular situation of *Aadhaar* in India, which is thoroughly embedded within the paradigm of Big Data, enables us to view critically precisely this dimension of biopolitics – distinctions such as those between *negative* and *affirmative* biopolitics only lead us into confusions, or, at best, "alternatives" which are constitutive of and constituted by the biopolitical régime. Viewed through the concrete practices of *Aadhaar*, I thus wish to make a

contribution towards the existing literature on biopolitics that places *immunity* as a tendency that is inextricably linked to the *life-affirming* practices of the biopolitical regime.

Life Per Se: Biopolitics, Identity and the Search for Sustainable Citizenship

Yasmeen Arif (University of Delhi)

The summoning of identity into the political appears to be a mark of the contemporary, or at least, it is a mark now etched in unexpected colors. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy describes erstwhile “identity politics” as that which has “come to signify a wide range of political activity and theorizing founded in the shared experiences of injustice of members of certain social groups”. My presentation poses ‘identity politics’ as a query on difference rather than a fait accompli of representative politics, especially as it has figured in recently passed political violence and the potential it carries in present /future volatile, abrasive publics. In order to reach that position, this presentation speculates a potential (rather than display evidence, ethnographic or otherwise) read counter intuitively, from a range of empirical contexts that combine identity, difference and representation in the Indian contemporary. I will attempt to show how identities played out in the struggle for recognition or redistribution and claims for citizenship (following Nancy Fraser) enter a space of malevolence and destruction that undermines a sustainable social.

Without forgetting that socio-cultural anthropology has built its foundation on the celebration of difference, I will argue against that grain to suggest that difference played out in identity politics becomes co-opted into governmental technique and biopolitical citizenship that serves a malignant force in the contemporary. However, I cannot wish away identity in politics given its brilliant career in the history of self-assertion or resentment, whether as individuals or as collectives. Rather, I will think of representation as the problem that asks for another notion of the public political. To this end, I will try and propose what position Life per se might have in a coming cosmopolitics - and what purchase might the question of humanity and citizenship have in this proposal?

How Does a Palestinian Die? How Should a Palestinian Live?

Ihab Shalbak (University of Sydney)

In a recent book, in Arabic, titled *Images of a Palestinian's Death*, Ismail Nashef suggests that for more than seventy years the question of ‘how a Palestinian dies’ is inseparable from the political question of ‘how a Palestinian should live.’ Those who answered the former invariably answered the latter. Last June, in a New York Times’ opinion piece titled, “What’s Wrong with Palestinian Surrender?” Israel’s UN Ambassador Danny Danon provided an answer to these intertwined questions. According to Danon ‘a national suicide of the Palestinians’ current political and cultural ethos is precisely what is needed for peace.’ Danon’s answer, as extreme and vulgar as it sounds, confirms Nashef’s contention that managing the death of the Palestinians and the forms it takes is the central issue in the Israel/Palestine struggle. Danon offers the Palestinians the choice of administering this death themselves. Yet, contesting, assisting and managing the forms of death meted to the Palestinians as a political collectivity informs the imaginary, the practices and the discourses of all those involved in the conflict including humanitarian actors. To assuage the effects of the Israeli subjugation of the Palestinians, humanitarian language increasingly answers the first question (how does a Palestinian die?) by asserting that the Palestinian dies as a victim. In the process, this language inadvertently calls on the Palestinians to live as victims. In effect, the humanitarian language at once consigns and incites the Palestinians to occupy this category. This paper looks at the recent manifestations of the persistent quest to manage the death of the Palestinians. In particular it examines the effects of the humanitarian language during the second Intifada and the recent decision of the American administration to cut the funding of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) as instances of managing/administering the political death of the Palestinians.

Speaker and Discussant Bios

Michael Humphrey

Michael Humphrey is Professor Emeritus at the Department of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Sydney. He has previously held academic appointments at the University of Sydney, University of New South Wales, Macquarie University and the University of Western Sydney. He works in comparative sociology has published widely on the themes of Islam in the West; the Lebanese diaspora; social relations of globalisation; war, political violence and terrorism; human rights, reconciliation and transitional justice; violence, displacement and urban securitisation; neoliberal urbanisation, corruption and the corporate state. His main book publications in the field are *The Politics of Atrocity and Reconciliation: from terror to trauma*, Routledge (2002) and the forthcoming book with Estela Valverde, *Transitional Justice and Impunity: the judicialisation of politics* for (Intersentia 2020).

Marc de Leeuw

Marc de Leeuw is Senior Lecturer at the Law School of the University of New South Wales, convener of the UNSW Law “Initiative for Biolegalities” (IBL), and Stream Leader of “Hybrid Life and Legal Personhood” with the UNSW Allens Hub for Technology, Law and Innovation. His work engages with questions of human agency, epistemological practices and ethics as they happen in the intersection between law and the social-political & biological-philosophical. His book *Homo Capax. Paul Ricoeur’s Renewal of Philosophical Anthropology* is forthcoming with Rowman & Littlefield.

Srijan Butola

I finished my Master’s degree in Sociology at the Department of Sociology, Delhi School of Economics, in 2018, and am currently pursuing an M. Phil at the same institution, under the supervision of Dr. Yasmeen Arif. The proposed title of my dissertation is ‘The Ontology of Big Data’. I was also the awardee of the Veena Dua Scholarship in the first year of my Master’s degree (2016-2017), and in the summer of 2017 granted the Krishna Raj Fellowship to conduct fieldwork amongst the formal sector garbage collection workers in Shimla, Himachal Pradesh, India. I maintain a key interest in studies and research materials based in political economy and science & technological studies, with a special multi-disciplinary focus on Big Data and Data Analytics.

Arpita Das

Arpita Das is currently a PhD candidate at the Department of Gender and Cultural Studies at the University of Sydney. In her current research she is interested in gender assignment of intersex people in India. She holds an MA in Social Work and an MA in Women's and Gender Studies. Her research interests include gender and sexuality, gender based-violence, intersex rights, disability and sexuality and biopolitics. In the past she has works with several non-profit organizations in South and Southeast Asia.

Yasmeen Arif

Yasmeen Arif is Associate Professor in Sociology, Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi. Her doctoral work has been about post-war recovery in Beirut, Lebanon. Her recent book *Life, Emergent: The Social in the Afterlives of Violence* (2016, University of Minnesota Press) explores a politics of life across multiple global conditions of mass violence. She also has co-edited a volume *Critical Themes in Indian Sociology*, a collection of over 30 essays covering contemporary and classical areas. A second forthcoming edited volume, *Event-Everyday: Epistemologies and Empiricisms* compiles work on crises-events and the everyday, and their place in sociological knowledge production. Other research areas include international law and humanitarianisms, science and technology studies, money, visual and material cultures, theory, philosophy and epistemology in social anthropology/sociology. She has held positions at the University of Minnesota (Twin Cities); The Graduate Institute, Geneva; CSDS, Delhi and the American University of Beirut; Lebanon. The Mellon Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the Fulbright-Nehru Fellowship, among others, have supported her work. She has published her work in several international journals and other volumes.

Miguel Vatter

Miguel Vatter is Professor of Political Science in the College of Business, Government and Law at Flinders University. His areas of research and publication are: Machiavelli and history of republicanism, biopolitics, neoliberalism, and political theology. His most recent books are *The Republic of the Living*, *Biopolitics and the Critique of Civil Society*, and *The Government of Life*. *Foucault, Biopolitics and Neoliberalism* (co-edited with Vanessa Lemm), both published with Fordham University Press in 2014.

Ihab Shalbak

Ihab Shalbak is a lecturer at the Department of Sociology and Social Policy- the University of Sydney. His research examines the relation between dominant forms of knowledge and politics, and interrogates the politics of institutional knowledge production. Along these lines, he has written on think tanks, human rights NGOs, and on the development of American Pragmatism. Ihab's latest publications include 'The Birth of the Think Tank: RAND and the Development of a Technocratic Worldview' in *The Triumph of Managerialism: New Technologies of Government and their Implications for Value*, Rowman and Littlefield (2018), and 'Hegemony Thinking: Detour Through Gramsci' *Thesis Eleven Journal* (2018). In addition, Ihab published a number of public articles and presented papers on the Palestine question. He is currently working on a book project that traces the emergence of the think tank.

Charlotte Epstein

I am Associate Professor in the department of Government and International Relations, who works at the intersection of political theory, philosophy and international relations theory, and with interests in the role of language in politics, the role of postcolonial theory and surveillance. In addition to articles in a range of journals, My books include *The Power of Words in International Relations: Birth of An Anti-Whaling Discourse* (2008, MIT press), *Against International Relations Norms: Postcolonial Perspectives* (2017) Routledge, and *Birth of the State: The Place of the Body in Crafting Modern Politics* (forthcoming, OUP).