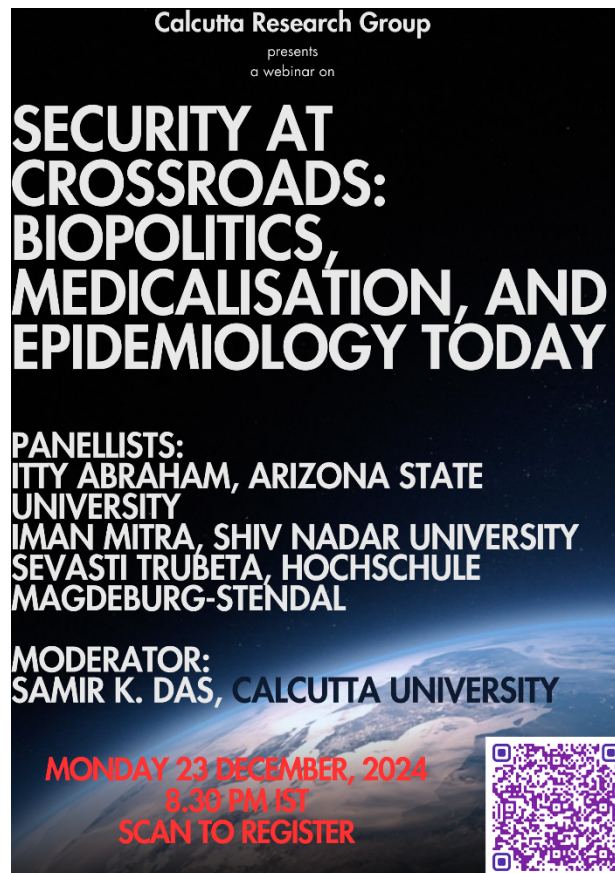Security at Crossroads: Biopolitics, Medicalisation, and Epidemiology Today

A report

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On 23rd December 2024, Calcutta Research Group organised the third webinar in its series "Security at Crossroads". Titled "Biopolitics, Medicalisation, and Epidemiology Today", this lecture discussed how biosecurity emerges as one of the greatest concerns for life on this planet in the contemporary moment. Through three interconnected approaches: medicalisation of borders in colonial and postcolonial times, the socialisation of medical risk management and the necessary shift from analog to quantum understandings of biosecurity panellists Sevasti Trubeta, Iman Mitra and Itty Abraham respectively problematised mainstream notions of security in keeping with recent technological and biomedical developments.

From the proposed prevention and potential eradication of infectious diseases in the late 19th and early 20th century--to virtual stoppage of human life as we know it, in the twenty first, the concept and concerns of biosecurity have travelled through a gamut of changes that indicate rapidly shifting and emerging critical, political and biopolitical negotiations in the world. From the deliberate circulation/ use of pathogens for purposes to warfare (we are acutely aware how such narratives are mobilized for the purposes of imperialism and geopolitics) to the much-publicized wars on pathogens (think #waroncorona)--biological security for populations and species, (increasingly tied to control over movement and

mobility across national and international boundaries), epidemiological security and securitization of epidemics merit critical attention and consideration. Article 8 of the Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights recognizes special vulnerability of individuals and groups. The COP 29 recognizes the interconnectedness of climate vulnerability and conflict induced displacement. The Covid 19 pandemic showed us how socially marginalized populations were also at increased risk from the pandemic. Biochemical engineering and big pharma change life as we know it, concerns of security govern populations.

Sevasti Trubeta: Key Points

  - Borders are social relations beyond geographical demarcations.

  - Medicalization involves using biomedical means to control human mobility.

  - Historical and interdisciplinary approaches to understanding medicalized borders.

  - The role of health certification in migration and its implications for vulnerable populations.

People living in conditions of precarity are considered as threats

Sevasti Trubeta, Professor of Childhood and Migration at the University of Applied Sciences Magdeburg-Stendal, focussed on the way medicine is integrated into border control technologies and how health and disease are interconnected with the logic of biosecurity in bordering processes. Trubeta discussed the colonial and continues medicalisation of borders in the light of her co-edited volume, *Medicalising Borders: Selection, Containment and Quarantine since 1800*. Trubeta argued that borders are not thought as demarcating lines, they refer to social relations that go beyond a bipolar logic of exclusion-inclusion. Medicalization of borders involves the implementation of biomedical means to control the mobility of humans, animals, plants, and commerce. Three types of technologies were for controlling human mobility to prevent the spread of disease on the European continent: quarantine, internment in camps and selection of border crossers through biomedical means. Covid 19 showed that the last measure ensured that the border infrastructure spread far beyond the actual border, in as much as medical documents from the countries of origin were used to stop mobility of individuals considered risky. At the same time, led by the United States, warfare through biological means and the use of pathogenic germs as weapons became a dominant discourse, directed against migrants and refugees.

Iman Mitra: Key Points

  - Digital epidemiology uses big data and AI for real-time epidemic surveillance.

  - The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated logistical networks and digital literacy.

  - The neoliberal market as an autonomous information processor.

  - The convergence of epidemiological and financial logics in response to COVID-19.

  - The role of the state in managing data infrastructure and digital literacy.

Through access to big data exhaust, one has to fashion the self as one willing to take certain risks, constantly separating ourselves from people who are perennially at risk.

The second speaker, Iman Mitra also followed up on his recently published work in *The Long 2020: Reflections of Epidemiological Times,* to argue that the response to COVID-19 assumed a rhetoric of war and a narrative of preparedness to envision and sustain an idea of biopower based on logistical governance. Digital epidemiology focuses on near real time surveillance of the epidemic, leading to the enmeshing of the hitherto separate fields of big data analysis and epidemiology. This leads to a socialisation of risk, in which we, the neoliberal consumers, define ourselves as potential risk takers, vis a vis populations which are permanently at risk. This puts the domain of finance capital in conversation with the domain of epidemiology, creating the state which both decodes the data exhaust and advises people to behave in certain ways to mitigate risk. The recent history of warring and imperial nations starting to invest more heavily on data infrastructure adds a new dimension to digital epidemiology and the socialisation of risk.

Itty Abraham: Key Points:

  - Securitization creates insecurities and marginal subjects.

  - The database society and its role in shaping social order.

  - The need for a quantum understanding of social dynamics.

  - The duality of order and disorder in the quantum Anthropocene.

  - The implications of AI and big data on societal perceptions of threat.

Quantum Anthropocene: The potential for a more inclusive understanding of risk and vulnerability in a post-humanist society.

Itty Abraham, from the University of Arizona argued that securitization creates insecurities, being primarily concerned with the imposition of boundaries on the social body. The biopolitical project, in a similar vein, creates boundaries, measures risks with the avowed intent of reproducing the population, converting information to state knowledge. Inaugurating the database society which orders data hierarchically, the database society seeks to weed out the irregular, the deviant, the unorthodox and the criminal. Inseparable from erstwhile colonial projects, the database society prohibits thinking of the social in purely analog terms, necessitating, instead, a quantum understanding of the world in which order cannot be separated from disorder, the normal from the abnormal and the security from insecurity. Any attempt to problematise security will need to consider possibilities in which the margin is foregrounded over the centre (think recent popular upheavals in South Asia), when the human world will no longer be privileged over other animate and inanimate worlds, will forge the biopolitics which is not merely an organ of governmentality but a biopolitics created out of social thermodynamics.

The moderator to the sessions, Samir K Das of Calcutta University posed a series of questions to the speakers which framed the ensuing discussions. These included the role of the state and of governmentality in the biopolitics of the future, as well as in quantum biopolitics, the fault in the database which might engender different kinds of database societies, the role of chronological time in the socialisation of risk and securitisation, and the role of medicalisation in the creation of borders.

Each of the three presentations could be connected through (as could be witnessed in the previous two webinars of the series as well) the cohabitation of security and insecurity, and the creation of insecurity of the marginal/ disenfranchised/ poor in the name of security. In this context, while Iman Mitra painted a grim picture of the nexus between states, financial capital and big data, playing out on the human body, Itty Abraham's quantum leap into a more inclusive biopolitics showed a conceptual ray of hope.

The three webinars in the series traversed diverse routes and spaces. Methodologically they travelled with data science, history, environmentalism, posthumanism, sociology and anthropology, as well as various interdisciplinary fields such as cultural and critical borders studies. They identified certain historical continuities between current border regimes and securitisation measures with their colonial forebearers, they also indicated the near total governmental obsession with data that in turn lead to a promotion of securitisation measures while disenfranchising already vulnerable populations. They also merited the reconceptualization of certain key categories, borders and borderlands, food, land and water security, biosecurity, to name a few.

Since the webinars were a part of the network building exercise, it may be concluded that the first step in networking, that is, connecting key threads across regions and spaces, have already been achieved. The webinars have been uploaded on youtube for continuing reference, and also as a contribution to the emergent discussions that seek to decolonise security studies.

Itty Abraham