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COVID-19 and competitive markets of securitisation

Markets of defence, security and civil emergency overlap like a Venn diagram. In trade expos I have been attending, hazmat suits and face masks are in nearby aisles to monitoring and containment systems, and all-terrain armoured vehicles. Many instruments, infrastructures and narratives mobilised towards COVID-19 emerge from this sector, which delivers products and services for the securitisation of people.

Most traders at these expos tell me about violent threat. The disaster planning of train crashes and earthquakes plays second fiddle to theatres of war (at the defence shows) and terrorist spectacles (at security and civil contingency shows). Hobbesian stories, of potential threats and the violence of Others, are deployed to justify corresponding measures mediated through markets of violent, threatening and protective security.

The logics and markets for governing the invisible enemy of, so-called, 'terror' are being mobilised towards public health. Although the virus is probably unaware of its injurious relationships with humans, many scientists, politicians and traders narrate the virus as a violent threat. Similarly, governance and self-discipline perform a war-like mimesis. In the accelerated chaos of emergency governance, immediate solutions come from adapting existing instruments.

The public narrative of COVID-19 reflects the detection, tracking and containment products coming out of recent trade shows. Companies with out-of-sight body temperature sensors that uncover concealed weapons, or fencing that contains migrants in camps, currently promote similar products to detect COVID-19 symptoms and construct field hospitals. Tracking technologies that can monitor doctors and patients in disaster sites can also turn people into data points so that they cannot be lost in the crowd (promoted using live satellite images of pilgrims going round the Grand Mosque, Mecca). Data visualisers translate mass data into narrative, whereby thousands of sensors recording the changing water levels along rivers become past, present and predictive flood management maps. '5D tracking' provides 3D geographic topography, times and histories to identify a shipping container, two years of ocean travel and the different cargoes it held. Mass digital surveillance of (infectious) populations is a small extension. Software developers told me they believed these technologies were beneficial but in time would be used for malevolent purposes with little space for someone to escape.

The securitisation of COVID-19 is mostly performed by proxy. Human-viral relations transform human bodies into threatening and threatened. Measures are enacted on people to disrupt the organism's 'embodied practices of interactive travel' (Clifford

1997: 186). Security, however, is a competitive game. Such measures are competitively applied whether in people's access to ventilators, facemasks, water and soap, or architectures of social-distancing space. Security, in an unequal world, secures inequality through the protection of some people by abandoning, rejecting or threatening others.

Inequality of security also suggests that access to bio-surveillance technologies will be unequal too. It thus presents a conundrum of morality, privilege and desire whereby bio-digital surveillance futures attack freedoms but protect population longevity (and productivity) and, by contrast, freedom from that technology becomes a further symptom, and cause, of a more precarious life.

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