

EDITORIAL



# Territories, politics and governance of the Covid-19 pandemic

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## ABSTRACT

As a major public health and socio-ecological crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic has raised significant challenges, arguably affecting the everyday life of most individuals on the planet. The pandemic has transformed social relationships within families, communities and nations, awakening a spirit of care and reciprocity as well as engendering new mechanisms of control and surveillance to confront the dialectic of life and death. This editorial introduces the special issue composed of nine articles that engage with themes related to the responses to the pandemic and reflects on the implications of Covid-19 for scholarly questions on the politics and governance of territorial processes.

## KEYWORDS

Covid-19; pandemic; territory; politics; governance

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The unfolding of a global pandemic such as the one we have born witness to since the outbreak of Covid-19 has been much anticipated, with Mike Davis, the prophet of viral apocalypse, acknowledging that his ‘monster’ has now entered ‘our’ doors (Davis, 2005, 2021). Although the viral origins of Davis’s monster are not necessarily the ones that he, global health security experts, governments and policymakers were expecting – Davis, like other commentators, targeted the trans-species crossing of highly pathogenic avian influenza (Hinchliffe et al., 2016) – its pathways of transmission, if remaining a little murky, most certainly were. This is the third epidemic to be caused by a member of the Coronaviridae family since the beginning of the 21st century (following SARS-CoV in 2002 and MERS-CoV in 2012), and coronaviruses, like many other emerging and endemic infectious diseases, involve spillover from animals to humans (Gibbs, 2022). As Braun notes, this transspecies interface has become a matter of ‘urgent concern’ since at least the SARS pandemic in 2002 (Lunstrum et al., 2021), if not much earlier (Morse, 1993), and increasingly the site of significant scientific enquiry and global public health monitoring and surveillance.

In the period before the identification of pneumonia of unknown aetiology in Wuhan city, China, in December 2019, geographical and other interdisciplinary scholarship focused critical attention on the epistemic and ontological contours of an evolving biosecurity complex (Hinchliffe et al., 2016; Lakoff & Collier, 2008). Outbreaks of infectious diseases, ranging from

Ebola to Zika, had to this point provided example upon example of the ways in which national, regional and global public health systems were challenged by, and responded to, the threat posed to wealth, health and life by highly mobile pathogenic microorganisms. At issue, as Michel Foucault famously identified in his lectures on Security, Territory, Population, was the problem of 'sifting the good and the bad [circulation]' (Foucault, 2007, p. 65; Barker, 2015). This tension has been apparent since at least the mid-19th century when international health diplomacy sought to contain flows associated with epidemic cholera whilst maintaining those that were vital to European trade and imperial ambitions (Budd et al., 2009). While transmission pathways have subsequently become more stretched as the frontiers of human–wildlife encounter have expanded (Sultana, 2021), as well as being sped up and diversified, the issue remains one of anticipating, preparing, sorting and containing transspecies circulations (Adey & Anderson, 2012).

It is within this context that Covid-19 manifested as a major political and territorial fact (Dodds et al., 2020), which has subsequently mobilized unparalleled dimensions of governance for the control and surveillance of populations. The response from states has translated into peculiar governmentalities and reglementary mechanisms that, at different scales, have reoriented the everyday life of people (Rose-Redwood et al., 2020), their mobilities (Cresswell, 2021) and livelihoods (Islam, 2022). All of which has been highly uneven with the experiences of Spanish citizens being quite different to Chinese let alone those living in the 50 'states' of America. The pandemic has also manifested as a considerable limitation of freedom in liberal and anti-liberal states alike. Public health regulations, accepted quietly in the name of safety in some places but contested noisily by populist politicians and publics in others (Cole & Dodds, 2021), have profoundly transformed the relationship between states and citizens (Agamben, 2021). However, as the pandemic's pathways have unfolded its story is not one that is confined to a retelling of the 'new' geopolitics of disease and debates concerning anticipation and preparedness, borders and securitization, circulation, containment and control, governance and regulation, and so on (Cole & Dodds, 2021). Indeed, few would dispute that the pandemic not only has brought these issues back into the purview of critical scholars but also has questioned the very social and security architectures of contemporary societies.

The pandemic has virtually affected everyone everywhere, from the public space of cities (Florida et al., 2021) to the private place of the home (Islam, 2022). Healthcare systems in countries identified as being well prepared for a global health emergency such as Covid-19 have emerged as fragile and requiring protection (Bryce et al., 2020; Dalglish, 2020), education has been transformed with long-term effects on generations of students (Burns, 2020), while enormous implications for the world of work have threatened millions of livelihoods (International Labour Organization (ILO), 2020). At moments during the past few years it has felt as though the pandemic challenged the very social and cultural foundations upon which communities are built, from the experiences of childbirth to its disruption of the rituals surrounding death and dying (Gray & Barnett, 2022; Simpson et al., 2021). In response, the Covid-19 pandemic awakened a spirit of care and reciprocity as fundamental social relations between people (Springer, 2020), as well as the reimagining of 'reparative possibilities' in a post-pandemic world (Sultana, 2021). Yet, few would also not question the naivety of pronouncements declaring that 'we are all in this together' (Loftus & Sultana, 2020). Covid-19 revealed the uneven geographies of race, gender and class, while frontline workers in health and social care as well as transport and food sectors have been disproportionately exposed to risk and vulnerability (Bambra et al., 2020, 2021; Sultana, 2021).

Beyond this the pandemic appears as a fundamental spatial phenomenon with significant political economic implications (Rose-Redwood et al., 2020) that have disrupted the 'normal' functioning of the economy in its materiality of organizationally fragmented and geographically dispersed production networks (Yeung, 2021). Disarticulations of value chains have caused

destructive effects for labour; workers have been laid off overnight as orders of brand firms were suddenly cancelled (Lawreniuk, 2020), with the differential effects of the crisis placing the most vulnerable and marginal groups in society unequally (Ho & Maddrell, 2021; Sparke & Williams, 2022). While export bans on vital medical supplies and other types of trade restrictions have been widely adopted during the peaks of the crisis, discussions about de-globalization and de-integration of supply chains, together with ideas on re-shoring, have grown to mitigate future disruptions (Dallas et al., 2021). At the same time, an enhanced role of governments, coupled with the resurgence of protectionist economic recipes, took the central stage (Gereffi, 2020), a new posture to respond to the crisis, reduce risk and increase resilience from the side of nation-states (Bair et al., 2021).

Within this context, peculiar geographies of production and social reproduction have exposed a *necropolitics* of labour (Howard, 2022), with responsibility and productivity as key categories for the valuation of life itself (Tyner, 2019). Corporate and state responses to the pandemic have configured mechanisms of ‘live or be left to die’ (Alamgir et al., 2022, p. 478), devices to decide which lives are expendable – the essential work – for the reproduction of society in the exceptional time of the crisis. These regulatory regimes have transformed the opportunities for many to make a living. Informal workers in many parts of the world have experienced the impossibility of gaining a livelihood due to ‘social distancing’ policies and mobility restrictions, as public spaces and national borders were shut (Carenbauer, 2021). Additionally, the pandemic has indirectly contributed to the growth of exploitation and precarity in formal industries, tacitly accepted as an unavoidable fallout of the pandemic (Hughes et al., 2022). As such, as much as the Covid-19 pandemic may appear as a moment of disruption with far-reaching implications on the planetary scale (Gibson et al., 2021), critical voices have highlighted that it does not represent a moment of substantial rethinking of contemporary socio-economic institutions (Suwandi & Foster, 2022).

## 2. TERRITORIES, POLITICS AND GOVERNANCE OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

*Territory, Politics, Governance* enters its second decade when the Covid-19 pandemic has raised critical questions that are central to the aims of the journal. The pandemic has materialized as a major health crisis and socio-ecological process with significant implications for the politics and governance of territories across geographies. Within this context this special issue interrogates some of these themes and is composed of nine articles that differently engage with the topics presented herein. A common thread is the pandemic’s role in reorienting human activities in their territorial dimension and how this phenomenon relates to political decision-making. Several articles focus on centre–periphery dynamics to examine the governance of the pandemic and its socio-economic fallouts across space.

Gulbrandsen (2022, in this issue) shows that Covid-19 became a regional concern in Norway, where different localities engaged in a ‘race to the top’ regarding restrictions that superseded national regulations. Similarly, Broschek (2022, in this issue) suggests that agency, understood as political leadership, played a critical role in responding to the pandemic in federal states. In the first wave of the pandemic, local governments in Canada reacted quite similarly and successfully. However, this was not the case for the second and third waves, when four Atlantic provinces maintained a proactive containment strategy while the other six moved to a reactive mitigation approach with far higher Covid cases and death rates, an outcome that raises questions about efficiency, intervention, and decision-making in different political systems and across scales (Dodds et al., 2020).

Coletti and Filippetti (2022, in this issue) also explore processes of unity and fragmentation within countries, analysing how nationalist sentiments were both reinforced and challenged by

regional politics in Italy. Italy was, of course, at the forefront of the European dimension of the pandemic. The first death from Covid-19 was recorded on 21 February 2020, and by March mortality from the virus was growing so rapidly that it resulted in 50% excess deaths from any causes. In response, Italy set the standard for the imposition of strict lockdown measures and, as Beria and Lunkar (2021, p. 1) report, such containment measures froze ‘almost every social and economic aspect of the nation’. While national governments have emerged as the key actors in managing the crisis globally, the uneven distribution and progression of the virus has fostered inter-state competition and nurtured nationalist sentiments. This process has, however, translated into complex dynamics at the subnational scale in a country where regional inequalities in exposure to, and mortality from, Covid-19 persisted throughout the first wave of the pandemic. Regional governments in Italy embraced narratives of emotional attachment to the homeland and provided crucial support to citizens through local institutions and operationalized forms of ‘regional nationalism’ that may have complex, long-term implications (Coletti & Filippetti, 2022, p. 13).

Similarly, Fuentenebro (2022, in this issue) highlights the contradictions and challenges in the national–regional relationship during the pandemic in Spain. He shows that multiscale governance processes hinder and can eventually fail processes of power devolution in a state of exception. Nevertheless, the pandemic also demonstrated that it is possible to mobilize political action for what we value in society (Tyner & Rice, 2020). Axinte and Lang (2021, p. 1, in this issue) point out that even countries with a ‘long tradition of state retrenchment’ have intervened in social affairs to an extent that was previously considered impossible. As such, these questions entail an analysis of whether the post-pandemic era will be characterized by a paradigm shift in global governance. Vladoš and Chatzinikolaou (2021, in this issue) take up this task, suggesting that changes in the post-Covid phase of globalization might be characterized by even more chaos and insecurity with significant consequences for democracy and human rights.

Indeed, human rights are also the focus of the contribution of Anazonwu et al. (2021, in this issue), who examine the relationship between Covid-19 restrictions and the livelihoods of informal workers in Nigeria. They suggest that the implementation of social distancing measures and lockdown rules resulted in considerable human rights violations, taking a toll on the lives of informal workers in the country. Similar territorial dimensions have also affected the livelihoods of workers at different scales, transforming everyday routines for individuals and communities (Lara-Valencia & Laine, 2022). Opióła and Böhm (2022, in this issue), in their article on Euro-regions, show that the existence of these political actors has been significantly challenged, while transnational communities have been severely impacted by measures of control implemented at the national level. Cross-border workers negotiated their livelihoods with affective relationships, being forced to choose between making a living or being with their families. Similarly, Represa Pérez and Vina (2021, in this issue), on their study of fishing communities in Ecuador, suggest that the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated pre-existing power relations, resulting in increasing conditions of precarity. Their article provides a welcome reflection on how Covid-19 played out in an often-neglected geographical arena of South America, Ecuador reporting 35,000 Covid-related deaths and over 1 million reported infections in a country of 17 million people.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

While national governments have strived to get countries out of the pandemic and ‘back to normal’ (Tayag, 2021), new social, economic, ecological and military threats are already emerging, raising questions about how we may immunize against these new crises that are not born out of pathogenic risks. Answers to Covid-19 were at once biomedical and social, mostly articulating mechanisms animated by a negative character. Initial attempts to slow viral spread involved

enhanced hygiene and social distancing measures, with public health messaging nudging citizens to adopt cough and sneezing etiquettes, prolong handwashing regimens, and even avoid touching our own and others' skin. Beyond personal responsibility to effect a 'sanitary border' against the virus, social distancing targeted people's social lives through imposing limits on everyday encounters with friends, family as well as society writ large. Harsher quarantine measures from travel bans, border controls and ultimately lockdowns followed in most countries when the cost of widespread transmission outweighed the economic and political benefits of continued circulation and as the illusion of herd immunity faded (Aschwanden, 2020). Running in parallel with these crisis-containment measures was what Sparke and Anguelov (2020, p. 502) referred to as that 'vision of developing a universal vaccine for SARS-CoV-2'.

In protecting society from external threats, immunization has revealed a dialectic in which life and death are related in 'subterranean ways' (Esposito, 2011, p. 5). Immunity operates as a force of reaction, a device that presupposes the existence of the risk it aims to counter since, for prolonging life in the quest for salvation, a 'taste of death' is needed (Esposito, 2011, p. 9). Indeed, microorganisms sustain and threaten life at one and the same time, human and more-than-human entanglements appearing as co-productive of the fabric of social communities (Haraway, 2015). What does life look like, then, when the forces that threaten it are the same required to sustain it? The transformations that the world of work has witnessed during the pandemic has revealed the same facets of this question (Zulficar, 2022). As a critical condition of socio-ecological metabolisms, labour has materialized for individuals exposed to risk and vulnerability as the cause of their premature death. Similarly, social relations within families, communities and nations during the Covid-19 pandemic have been sustained and reconfigured by their constitutive outsides. Mechanisms of control and surveillance have negated life, temporarily and spatially, to protect society from the threat of the virus. In this moment of suspension, the structures upon which our communities are built have appeared most clearly.

The pandemic has indeed been a moment of revelation, exposing the inbuilt contradictions of neoliberal capitalism (Sparke & Williams, 2022), in terms of both production and social reproduction (Mezzadri, 2022; Stevano et al., 2021), and raising critical questions about their relationship to the politics and governance of territorial processes.

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