

“Migrants” lecture for SciencesPo course: THE COVID-19 EXPERIMENT

Sociological Analyses of the Pandemic

Compulsory online Lecture course

3rd Year Undergraduate (Collège Universitaire)

Economies & Societies major

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Mondays from 2.45 to 4.45pm, Paris time

### **Cheap Labor**

Employers in Singapore find low-wage workers to be easily obtainable, disposable and replaceable, and so require less investment and maintenance than heavy machinery or other labour-saving methods. And you can see that here from how people are using weed-wackers instead of lawnmowers.

Most workers are heavily indebted due to recruitment costs. And this constant need to pay off loans prevents them from refusing bosses’ demands, and they are willing to put up with reduced salaries, fines and deductions, excessive overtime, and poor living conditions.

The employer is incentivized to mitigate the high cost of levies, which they have to pay to hire a worker, by having one man do the work of 1.5 or two men. And this also reduces the cost of housing and insurance for the employer, while the real cost is borne by the overburdened worker.

### **Moral threats, Medical threats**

So now you have sense of their low status as workers in Singapore, I want to talk about the discourses around migrant construction workers. They have been usually thought of as moral threats, especially after a few protests in Little India in 2013. So typically for Indians the stereotype is that they have a penchant for violence and sexual predation.

In Singapore, this coincides with a lack of understanding of their precarity

1. So people will say things like: They should be grateful for the job here, it's better than what they could find in their home country.
2. If they have problems, they should take it up with MOM.
3. It's their own fault for paying money to illegal agents and trusting scoundrels.

But now, with the pandemic they have turned from moral threats into medical threats. As you can see from these Facebook comments that have been circulating, which is oriented around their supposed filth. And this is a very powerful trope, the myth of the filthy migrant.

### **Surveillant Assemblages**

So how does surveillance then intersect with migrant workers?

I know I was brought here to talk about wastewater surveillance in the dormitories, but I want to talk about surveillance a bit more broadly. In a recent piece of public scholarship Hallam and I wrote for Singaporean audiences, we talked about the need to evaluate these surveillance assemblages that are rapidly coalescing, instead of doing piecemeal analysis.

Surveillance technologies are being rolled out in a dizzying speed, with facial recognition, the TraceTogether tokens which are now mandatory and tied with Safe Entry, and wastewater surveillance. And of course all of this is done in the name of speed and efficiency and convenience.

But all of these technologies can't just be evaluated individually, but rather as an assemblage to understand what social and material effects they have together.

### **Dormitories as Sites of Experimental Exuberance**

So to understand how these assemblages together, there is no better place than the dormitories. And here I have adopted Michelle Murphy's term to say that dorms are sites of experimental exuberance for the testing of pandemic management technologies.

Many of the technologies that have reverberated throughout the Singaporean community have been tested here, with differential effects.

So here, what has been tested out: certainly medical drugs, hydroxychloroquine drugs, HIV drugs like resveratrol for covid.

But also, surveillance technologies: Pooled surveillance testing; Wastewater surveillance; CCTV; Temperature checks; Apps; mandatory TraceTogether.

Let me just go through some of them.

### **SGDormBot**

- A multilingual artificial intelligence powered bot developed for clinicians to enable real-time monitoring and undertake in telehealth intervention of COVID-19 patients residing in migrant worker dormitories.
- Over 90% of migrant workers diagnosed with Covid-19 have reported their daily health vitals through this chatbot thereby allowing clinicians to monitor them and intervene in real-time.
- bot reminds infected residents in the dorms to monitor their **temperature**, **heart rate** and **oxygen levels**, using their **native language** (Tamil, Hindi, Bengali, English & Mandarin)

### **SGDormBot: Chatbot monitors migrant workers' health**

Facilitates three-way video calls between a translator, doctor and the patient. And you can see here even in the middle picture how the translator and doctors are in a private room where they don't have to wear masks, and the patient is hidden, muffled.

### **Gamechanger**

The SGDormBot is talked of as a gamechanger. A doctor says that it enables him to “keep a close watch over COVID-19 positive dormitory residents” and “empowered residents to take on an active role in monitoring their own conditions.” This is very much indicative of Deleuze's society of modulated and distanced control that is merged with the discourse of individual empowerment.

## **2. SGWorkPass App**

SGWorkPass is a free mobile app to check the validity of Singapore work passes or long-term passes issued by MOM.

Workers can use SGWorkPass to check if they can leave for work based on their AccessCode status.

SGWorkPass has been updated to incorporate TraceTogether

## **3. TraceTogether App**

And of course, as we talked about earlier, TraceTogether was first made mandatory in the dorms. And TraceTogether being tied with the Work pass app means that to get the “green” clearance, they not only have to pass the Ministry of Manpower security, they also have to maintain the latest version of TraceTogether.

### **Issues highlighted by workers**

But there are many issues highlighted by workers.

- Apps are not available on Huawei’s app gallery
- Bugs (unable to input emails, birthdays, addresses, not receiving OTPs)
- The constant need to update these apps is wasting worker’s data

This bundling of TraceTogether with the work pass then has important ramifications for the worker because it impacts his ability to work.

## **4. Wastewater Surveillance**

Wastewater surveillance is a project I am collaborating on with environmental scientists and engineers. And what this technology does is test at the aggregate level in the sewers is if there is any instance of viral RNA. So our bodies shed bacteria with our waste, it ends up in the sewers, and there it gets monitored. This can then trace this back to the source, based on where they sampled.

So wastewater surveillance was first tested in the dormitories. Now, mind you, and I want to emphasize this. The dorms were turned into a high risk population after the lockdown, not before. Before, the infection rates were growing but low, but they really spiked after the lockdown. They could not socially distance themselves there.

And this really was a place of biopolitical experimentation. I want to draw your attention to this quote which was said only in half-jest about its possible uses.

“Sounds as if it may detect neighborhoods which are constipated (i.e. cannot produce enough sewage). We can then direct dietary education to that area. Value added.” And diet of course directly relates to cultural and socioeconomic factors.

### **Knowledge politics**

Now that we have seen some of the experiments with surveillance, I want to tie it into how migrant workers are being talked about. It is hard to see the knowledge politics within the development of each technology. The only thing I have been really able to see is how regulators are thinking of who is recovered based on what they see in the wastewater, as people continue to shed the virus even after they are recovered.

But you see other public indicators of knowledge politics in the kinds of categories they have. Who is a vulnerable population, high risk, essential worker?

### **Knowledge politics**

More overtly, there has been an adjudication by the government of true and factual knowledge.

### **Grassroots**

This arbitration of truth and falsity that aims to maintain state power is even seen in the kinds of grassroots mobilizations.

### **Gradual disciplining**

And this strategy seems to be working

### **A preliminary conclusion**

So I have thrown a lot at you. So what is a way to make sense of some of this? To really understand what is going on, it is not enough to just focus on the migrant workers. Again, we have to try to see the assemblage coming into being. One of the things I want to argue is how the surveillance regime seems to reproduce the hierarchies of the racialized and gendered immigration regime.

So, in addition to migrant construction workers from India and Bangladesh, you also have foreign domestic workers in Singapore from the Philippines, Indonesia, Myanmar and some from India. And because they live in our houses, as opposed to within dormitories, they have been subject to different forms of surveillance.

This lower picture of Lucky Plaza where domestic workers go remit money—to send it back to their homes. This is never any more crowded than other malls, but this is the one that is heavily surveilled.

In the upper picture, you see a group of primarily white expats. This is a notorious picture as several of the people here had their employment passes revoked because they were congregating during the circuit breaker.

For these groups surveillance is not so technologically driven, and more down through cell phone pictures, and interpersonal encounters. That is, employers, other Singaporeans, like security guards and cleaners keep an eye on domestic workers. This is quite different from the kind of surveillance of migrant construction workers.

### **Last**

And ultimately it seems like Singapore through the Smart Nation is trying to create a knowledge economy of light and liquid labor, and perhaps the goal is to make different bodies invisible in different ways.