Call for Papers: Crowds and COVID-19

The vocabulary of and tasks associated with COVID-19—social isolation, lockdown, quarantine, hand washing and sanitizing, using face masks and shields—are all too familiar to us now. These are at once individuated and collective efforts to contain the spread of virus. The collective as being spatially collected, or crowds, however, are an anathema for now. Amid varying stages of lockdowns and their unlocking, states across the world both desire resumption of economic activities, but in a way that allows for a control on movement of people, lest there be crowding.

Any anxiety about whether the world will see crowds with all their radical and equalizing potential now stands at rest. The fear of contagion has not stopped the convening and reconvening of political crowds, as may be seen in the anti-racism protests following George Floyd’s death and from the protesting migrant population in India, who suddenly found themselves without work, food, shelter and means to get back home in the lockdown period. The possibility of contagion is but one risk that political minorities face in a pandemic; racism and dispossession are continuing public health emergencies as we already know from the disproportionate number of infections among the African American population in New York. Protestors carrying placards with George Floyd’s last words, “I can’t breathe”, paradoxically also bring attention to their own masked faces in completely unprecedented ways. States, on their part, are anchoring their responses to these political crowds through the legal space generated by the pandemic itself.

The inability of states to control and limit crowds, whether those protesting police violence or migrants in India protesting arbitrarily imposed lockdown, sits in some contrast to the wider field of surveillance laid out in the pandemic where technological innovations are supposed to improve response time and optimize deployment of personnel. Backed by legal orders, this field of surveillance, also re-defines what a crowd could be. Although President Trump had said that gatherings had to be limited to 10 people, within the United States itself there has been no consistency with respect to safe size limits for group gatherings. This number has ranged from 1000 in St. Louis, Missouri to 6 in New Haven, Connecticut.

What needs to be urgently studied is also how state responses to contain the pandemic have led to crowding both in public and some forms of private spaces and their efforts to manage crowding have accentuated existing problems. Imposition of a sudden lockdown in India in March 2020, without taking state governments into confidence, created crowds of migrant labourers in many pockets of the country, that were then policed in many areas. In New Haven, Connecticut, efforts to de-populate shelters resulted in re-locating the homeless into hotels, but this move heightened their vulnerability which, among other things, took the form of not being to get medication for existing conditions. This move itself made the homeless people more defenseless against the virus. The creation of an emergency shelter at another place in New Haven increased the surveillance of the police in the neighbourhood that had a long history of police violence.

If we move a bit towards management of crowd flows, what remains abundantly clear is that crowds fetch profits and make revenue possible. Crowd management technologies are used to regulate the movement of people in all spaces we navigate—theme parks, stadia, museums, malls, concerts, monuments, none of which are make sense if they are empty! As part of these crowds, we have been managed by software solutions like Oasys MassMotion that work with micro and macro scales of crowd control. With respect to Covid-19, the company is now
invested in developing the software that would attempt to bring down the total duration of time that people spend within two meters. On the other hand, Outsight, a French start-up promises to use its signature 3D Semantic camera technology, that can distinguish between material makeup of different objects, for preventing the spread of coronavirus infections. The technology is capable of identifying and tracking persons based on risk characteristics, like not wearing a mask, body temperature, non-maintenance of physical distance and is able to track an individual autonomously even in dense crowds and/or large spaces, without using video capture. The contention here is that this technology can optimize the use of personnel by enabling targeted response that would not disrupt the flow of crowd and maintain norms of social distancing.

With this background in mind, the special issue on Crowds and Coronavirus, would make a timely intervention in thinking through Canetti’s contention that that crowds allow for collective joy to be experienced as transcendental and being part of one submerges our individual failings. The anti-racism protests, at the time of coronavirus, reminds us of the collective potential of a crowd, but with more and more invested in individual identification, we ask, what might be the future of crowds? What would a combination of policing and management of crowds and flows look like? Policing of crowds has, for the most part, been the way in which crowds have been managed; what might management of policing to control crowd look like? Is there a distinction between some crowds that are policed and some that are only managed since they are so important for generation of profit and revenue? What are the histories of crowds during an epidemic? In sum, this special issue on Crowds and COVID-19 hopes to inaugurate an urgently needed debate how we might stake claims on public spaces again and think crowds in relationship to a public.

Themes addressed may include, but are not limited to:

- Policing Crowds during the pandemic
- Visuality of Crowds during Covid-19
- Law and crowding in the pandemic
- Histories of crowds during an epidemic
- Revenue and Crowds
- Depopulation measures and the resultant crowding during the pandemic
- New technologies of crowd management and the pandemic
- Architecture, crowd management and policing the flow of people
- Individuation of control in crowds through surveillance technologies

Contributions can take the form of research articles, position pieces, reviews, photo-essays, and/or field notes. Contributors are requested to kindly email abstracts of no more than 500 words with their institutional or organizational affiliation and contact information no later than August 16, 2020 to Vaibhav Saria at vaibhav_saria@sfu.ca or Pooja Satyogi at psatyogi@aud.ac.in

Vaibhav Saria
Simon Fraser University

Pooja Satyogi
Ambedkar University Delhi