Scales of exception: Experiments with knowledge and sheer life in tropical Southeast Asia

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New political spaces, I suggest, are generated by varied strategies that govern populations in and through multiple scales of exception. I identify biopolitical assemblages as a space of inquiry into the situated play of exceptions that territorializes different kinds of value. Scales of exception are produced when a neoliberal logic of economic growth articulates biopolitical problems of population security. Neoliberal and biopolitical decisions not only focus on accumulating values in space, but also anticipate the value of currently devalued spaces. By invoking exceptions, states alternately favour neoliberal or biopolitical values, thus investing spaces with different kinds of value. The interplay of biopolitical and neoliberal logics and the resulting configuration of scales of exception are well illustrated in Southeast Asia in an age of pandemics. In Singapore, a technomedical hub assembles networks for capturing knowledge capital and property rights, configuring an ecology of expertise. This is a site of scientific prowess in a region increasingly viewed as a space of ‘third world’ exception to global health norms. In Indonesia, health crises have prompted a logic of ethical sensibility to basic human survival whereby political leaders invoke bio-sovereignty, configuring a national scale of ethical exception that challenges the global power of biocapital and the World Health Organization over the supply of vaccines. In contrast to approaches that foreground spaces of capital accumulation, I attend to diverse logics that differently valorize scales of exception, thus giving visibility to situated mechanisms that animate and mutate political cartography.

Keywords: experimental assemblages, neoliberal logic, scales of exception, bio-sovereignty, human security, Southeast Asia

Mutating political cartography

The late Allan Pred’s (n.d) departmental homepage notes, ‘I was always occupied with the complex and multi-scale processes through which visible and invisible geographies emerge out of one another’. Pred’s insights seem to endorse my own obsession – borne of a way of life in motion – with the stretching of relationships across space, the interlinking of discordant actors and things, and the unstable configurations that criss-cross markets and borders. For Pred, to whom this paper is dedicated, geography is never only about physical spaces (although these matter greatly) but, fundamentally, about the emerging contours of power shaped by human decision and institutional agency (Pred, 1985; 2000).

Like Pred, I focus on the situated play of politics that continually configure and reconfigure different scales of regulation and intervention. Instead of giving primacy to the function of capitalism in making new spaces, my approach centres on the practices of government that target different figures of the human in specific spaces. I seek to pry the ethnography of mutating spaces away from the grip of political economy. An
anthropology of mutating political cartography, I suggest, would address contingency in alignments of global and situated elements, the instability of constellated networks and experiments in governing populations in and through multiple spaces. My approach identifies biopolitical assemblages as sites where the dynamic play of strategies resolve challenges by constantly situating and resituating populations in particular scales of regulation.

Michel Foucault (2000) maintains that modern governing is about biopolitics, which as a mode of governing takes as its object the population, focusing on conditions of collective living and the individual life within specific territories. Governmentality refers to a mode of modern power that is concerned with the right disposition of people and things, the objectivity of promoting a common good. By giving primacy to the spatial powers of governing populations, Foucault frees us from a juridical model of politics and from a rigid state-population-territory framework, and allows us to explore how flexible strategies respond to turbulent environments. Foucault (1997) notes:

‘Biopolitics’ last domain is, finally . . . control over relations between the human race, or human beings in so far as they are a species, in so far as they are living beings, and the environment, the milieu in which they live. This includes the direct effects of the geographic, climatic, or hydrographic environment: the problem, for instance, of swamps, and of epidemics.

In other words, biopolitical experimentations make life and its environment the explicit centre of political calculation. Biopolitical calculations define an ethical approach to the basic needs of survival and living that I call sheer life (borrowing from Collier & Lakoff, 2005; see further below) – and these practices have become more visible and explicit in turbulent environments confronting problems of human security in the face of health crises.

My questions include: How do political-economic approaches to the production of space need to consider the spatializing practices of biopolitics? How does the interaction between biopolitical concerns and neoliberal reasoning destabilize prior geographies, thus generating reterritorializations? In the realm of tiger economies, how do different experimental assemblages favour a logic of optimization or a logic of ethicalization in shaping new spaces? How does the situated play of exceptions animate and destabilize the political landscape?

The outline of my paper is as follows. First, I propose an anthropology of mutating political cartography focused on the dynamic play of strategies that govern populations in and through multiple scales of exception. My approach identifies experimental assemblages as the space of inquiry into a situated play of exceptions that territorializes different kinds of value. Second, the paper investigates how scales of exception are produced when a neoliberal logic of economic growth articulates biopolitical problems of population security. Both neoliberal and biopolitical decisions not only focus on accumulating values in space, but also influence fluctuations in the value of disparate spaces. By invoking exceptions, political leaders alternately favour neoliberal or biopolitical calculations, thus investing spaces with different kinds of value. Third, the paper argues that the interplay of biopolitical and neoliberal logics and resulting configuration of scales of exception are well illustrated in Southeast Asia in an age of pandemics. In Singapore, a technomedical hub assembles networks for capturing knowledge, capital and property rights, configuring an ecology of expertise. This is a site of scientific prowess in a region increasingly viewed as a space of ‘third world’ exception to global health norms. In Indonesia, health crises have prompted a logic of ethical sensibility to

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basic human needs. Indonesian leaders invoke bio-sovereignty, configuring a national scale of ethical exception that challenges the global power of biocapital and the World Health Organization (WHO) over the supply of vaccines. In short, experimental assemblages confronting problems of growth and security crystallize situated conditions for varied territorializations of knowledge capital or life and the decisions to invest economic or ethical values in emerging spaces.

Before I turn to the situated interactions of neoliberalism and exception, and the alternate territorializations that ensue in Southeast Asia, let me distinguish my approach from that of political and economic geography.

Scaling political economy

For most critical geographers, the production of space is a technique for capital accumulation in an age of economic globalization (see especially Lefebvre, 1991). There are two influential political-economic moments to the production of contemporary spaces. On the one hand, geographers have examined how capitalist-driven forces create global market spaces (e.g. Harvey, 2006). On the other hand, geographers are re-examining the state as a producer of spaces and scales in relation to global market conditions. A new generation of geographers have moved beyond notions of neoliberalism as a total economic system to look carefully at the reterritorializations and rescalings of political-economic relations under contemporary capitalism. Critical geographers are turning their attention to the politics of regulation in making political spaces.

Arguing for a notion of ‘actually existing neoliberalism’, Neil Brenner and Nik Theodore (2002) stress the process of destroying older arrangements and creating institutions for implementing neoliberal policies. In New State Spaces, Brenner (2004) observes that the institutional geographies of capitalism emerge from struggles over the regulation of accumulation. He observes rescaling practices of statecraft: the creation of strategic subnational spaces of cities or city-regions brought under regulatory regimes that promote market activities. Drawing on the example of the EU, Brenner also identifies new supranational institutions that formalize neoliberal ideology and foster conditions for the expansion of trade and investment flows within and across trading blocs.

In a more situated approach, Henry Yeung and Kris Olds (1999) look at the locational advantages of states like Singapore that capitalize on their existing functional roles – as transportation hubs, high tech centres or business headquarters – by amending legislation to favour corporations and attract investments. State action and attendant rescaling, they maintain, are powerfully driven by the desire to create prime conditions for capital accumulation.

This attention to the specificity of scale making in given political contexts is an innovative shift in inquiry from capitalist processes to strategies of regulating spaces. Yet, the understanding of spatializing strategies seems to follow administrative units, so that the focus is on neoliberal reason enhancing state (sub)spaces rather than constructing new entities that destabilize prior geographies. Indeed, the very operation of neoliberalism as optimizing practice becomes freed from the tyranny of the administrative matrix to imagine and configure spatial relationships that criss-cross conventional political and market entities.

Moreover, the politics of space making and rescaling are never only about locking-in capital markets, but also about experiments in shaping a range of political desires.
through spatial reconfigurations that are not reducible to ‘spaces of global capitalism’ (Harvey, 2006) What indeed is the nature of these new spaces? Over a decade ago, Thongchai Winichakul (1994) proposed that the demarcation of national identity can be achieved through the carving and enclosure of contested territory. His concept of ‘geo-body’ describes the emerging space of ‘Thai-land’ produced through the operation of mapping techniques. Thongchai’s approach captures the irreducibly intertwined nature of governing and spatial powers.

Political cartography is always about the governing of subjects in and through spaces. Spaces become configured through strategies of governing and regulating people from near and afar. I use the term ‘graduated’ or ‘variegated sovereignty’ to describe this differential ordering of groups and zones across and beyond the national terrain (Ong, 2006: 7, 19, 25, 75–80, 98, 110–12). Space making is about solving biopolitical problems of wealth, wellbeing and security. Neoliberal decisions, and exceptions to them, interact in creating diverse, operationalizable spaces of governing that are linked to, but not totally constrained by, preexisting political cartography.

Such an approach to scale making in contemporary times builds upon, but also goes beyond, established political economy approaches in the following ways. First, political economy privileges macro-level frameworks that identify the coalescence of spaces into a planetary scale of capitalism and socialist struggles (see Hardt & Negri, 2000; Harvey, 2006). We need to view space as multiple and contingent, always shifting in response to flows and processes of situated articulation and disarticulation. New spaces overlap but do not always match up with given administrative units, nor are they building blocs for an ‘ultimate’ global space of capital. Second, we should be wary of claiming a direct cause and effect between the desire for capital and/or capital accumulation and space making. Rather, a constellation of interacting elements co-produces new spaces. Global assemblages of technologies, politics and actors are constitutive of new spaces of governing, without predetermined logic or outcome. And, third, neoliberal logic and political exception interact in experimental systems of ruling that always manipulate existing political space and operationalize new scales to be invested with economic or political value. The logic of valorizing space is always animated by an anticipatory action to secure new spaces of exception, in an endless game of spatializing strategies and mappings of power.

Experimental assemblages: neoliberal exceptions

Whereas macro-theorists have dealt with deterritorialized forms as the organization of social relationships across distantiated time spaces (Harvey, 1989; Giddens, 1991), as an anthropologist, I am concerned more about situated practices and constellated relationships through which global forms articulate particular environments. In contrast to totalizing theories that seem to give agency to information technologies, my approach puts human agency at the centre of analysis and situated interactions as the process that mediates global flows.

Stephen J. Collier and I introduced global assemblage as a concept that identifies contingent entanglements of global and situated elements, that is, particular assemblages of interrelationships that articulate older and increasingly obsolete domains called ‘culture’, ‘economy’ and ‘society’ (Collier & Ong, 2005). By ‘global’ we refer to forms such as neoliberal technology that are abstractable, mobile, dynamic and capable of articulating a variety of political institutions and regimes. Assemblage is an unstable interaction of diverse logics and practices, which become co-producers of new configu-
rations of control that become territorialized and of valuation that codes new spaces (for an earlier formulation and problematization of assemblage, see Rabinow, 2003). I am therefore interested in how assemblages of global and situated elements confront biopolitical problems, and the decisions or solutions that come to define what it means to be human within the space of the assemblage.

Assemblages are thus experimental systems, that is, open-ended and responsive to unfolding elements and events, so that solutions to particular challenges are not given in advance. Because assemblages are attuned to emergent processes, the network of interacting practices and decisions is an unstable constellation always poised to respond to unanticipated problems. In *Towards a Social Ecology*, F.E. Emery and E.L. Trist (1973: 24) maintain that emergent processes ‘are not recognized for what they are’ but can muster potency in the future. These unstable constellations, I maintain, form and re-form as they respond to turbulent conditions that put at stake human security and sheer survival. I suggest that in experimental assemblages, a neoliberal logic of anticipatory intervention is always poised to conjure up new spaces of value or the potential valorization of wealth or health.

I view neoliberalism not as a doctrine but as a technology of governing for optimal outcome at the level of individuals and populations. Neoliberal techniques have migrated beyond the market domain and been taken up in the realm of governing. This calculative maximizing logic in politics has been glossed as ‘political entrepreneurialism’ by the World Bank. But, whereas technocrats and scholars have highlighted the market goals of political entrepreneurialism, I want to further refine the understanding of neoliberal decisions and mechanisms. Neoliberal logic not only focuses on accumulating values in spaces within and beyond the national territory, but also anticipates the value of currently devalued spaces. The political exception can favour or thwart neoliberal valorization by creating spaces of ethical exception to market forces. The dynamic interactions between neoliberal logic and political exception shape different scales of value.

Neoliberal logic articulates diverse political regimes that are undergoing experimentation with governing and territorialization in the interest of optimizing wealth, health and security. In particular constellations, exceptions to prevailing biopolitical or spatial arrangements may promote or attenuate market forces. Elsewhere, I call this process ‘neoliberalism as exception’ and ‘exceptions to neoliberalism’ (Ong, 2006; see also Ong & Zhang, 2008), which involve the insertion of optimizing calculations or tactics in some domains but not in others. Specifically, I have discussed neoliberal exceptions that promote a self-enterprising ethos and entrepreneurialism in some situations in Southeast Asia, while these very same enterprising norms are discouraged in the political realm. The hinge between neoliberal exceptionalism and exceptions to neoliberalism is a scissor-like movement that cuts up populations and spaces into different orders of regulation that can exceed the boundaries of the state (Ong, 2006).

Here I want to stress how the play of exceptions defines alternate territorializations invested with different kinds of value foregrounding knowledge or ethics. Specifically, I am interested in how multiple scales of exception have emerged in response to ‘tropical’ challenges of growth, pandemics and biodiversity. I identify neoliberal exceptions that are focused on building knowledge-driven networks on the one hand, and on the other, exceptions to neoliberalism that valorize the space of sheer life, by which I mean the everyday living that is subject to ethics and politics. Different scales of value exceptionalism – such as ecologies of expertise or zones of sheer life – interact and co-produce each other.
Ecologies of expertise

Over the past two decades in Southeast Asia, the assembling and reassembling of disparate global and local relationships have responded to different challenges of growth and crises.

In the 1980s-90s, Southeast Asia was the birthplace of tiger economies, emerging as manufacturing zones serving global commodity chains. After the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s, there was a explicit shift to the norms of entrepreneurship and knowledge economy endorsed by the World Bank (1999). Neoliberal exceptions are increasingly invoked in order to shape or intervene in situations of knowledge production and accumulation. A series of exceptions that promotes knowledge actors and linkages but excludes low skill labour and enterprises has configured connections among far-flung sites, shaping what might be called an ecology of expertise (Ong, 2005).

In Malaysia, neoliberal interventions crystallized conditions for the building of a Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) where high-tech companies, mobile workers and ethnic politics intersect (Ong, 2005). A cascade of exceptions was invoked to differentiate among populations and spaces. The first exception is the suspension of the norm of ethnic governmentality whereby those categorized as the indigenous Muslim Malay majority are subjected to lower skills criteria than those of other ethnic categories (Chinese and Indians). The performance of the ‘Malays’ is now subjected to more global terms of economic competition. The digital corridor is cast as a showcase of Muslim IT modernity, that is, an exceptional space where Muslim Malays with capabilities and know-how are marked off from the many without. Furthermore, the zone has also attracted knowledge workers from Indian cyber companies exploring opportunities in Southeast Asia (Ong, 2005). In short, the series of optimizing interventions selectively differentiates among different categories of workers in Malaysia and beyond, allowing the high-tech zone to plug into a second-tier IT web spanning the global south.

In Singapore, a more ambitious game is being played with the shifting opportunities of knowledge production and management. The city-state has displayed flair in its experiments with an elastic sense of the scale of the nation and the possibilities for configuring an ‘effervescent ecosystem’, a far-flung informational network that links disparate sites of intellectual and creative production. Planners assembled foreign institutions, global companies, mobile experts and authoritarian politics to create a milieu of intellectual upgrading, accumulation and production. The tiny nation re-casts itself as an exceptional island of intelligence in an archipelago of low-tech development. A constellation of so-called ‘world class’ institutions – John Hopkins University, MIT, University of Chicago, INSEAD and Duke University – help transform Singapore into a ‘global schoolhouse’. The central institution in this knowledge network is a science complex called Biopolis.

The knowledge ecology enforces exceptions on the kinds of actors who can be mobilized. Thousands of expatriate scientists are leaders of multiple research institutions in biomedicine and stem cell research. They enjoy state funding for their projects, cutting-edge facilities and an official culture that lionizes scientists as heroes, and benefit from low taxes live in upscale villas and penthouses and are served by low waged foreign maids. At work, these elite scientists depend on more foreign-born Indian and Chinese PhDs to conduct research in what may be called micro research factories. The effort to encourage home-grown scientists is paying off and more Singaporean Chinese and Indians are working alongside foreign-born co-ethnics in the health industry.
The influx of ‘foreign talent’ is putting strong pressure on an already well-trained population worried about losing middle class jobs to foreigners. Citizens are urged to be continually self-improving, to become the kind of educated and flexible subjects primed for a future in the enterprise system. Such self-enterprising subjects are morally marked off from run of the mill subjects who cannot meet the ideals of so-called technopreneurial citizenship (Ong, 2005; 2006). Meanwhile, the foreign maids engaged in the social reproduction of affluent living conditions are physically included but legally excluded from citizenship or permanent residence. Thus, exception has been wielded repeatedly to draw ever-shifting lines of inclusion and exclusion, as well as inclusionary exclusions that play with the multiple scales of regulation that shape the ecology of expertise.

This network of actors, institutions and sites was crystallized by specific conditions converging in Singapore, notably, the regional offices of multinationals, the state as venture capitalist and a culture of meritocracy. The calculated shift toward a knowledge hub linking universities, media and corporations from far and near enforces a productionist symbiosis between producers of intellectual capital and knowledge-driven markets. Disparate actors are brought into interactions and collaborations in different regimes of commercial and symbolic values (see Ong, 2007, for analysis of mobile experts and value creation in Asian hubs). Exceptions for and against knowledge capital define various modes of inclusion and exclusion that shape the space of the knowledge ecology.

But the interplay of global and situated elements is in constant motion. Since the 1990s, the threat of health crises has threatened market arrangements and developmental goals. The threat from potential pandemics have reminded technocrats that biopolitical challenges cannot completely escape the physical environment. Increasingly, ‘tropical maladies’ are prompting the articulation of neoliberal logic with a politics of human security. The play of neoliberal exception is shifting beyond manipulating populations and spaces for capitalist gain to engage questions of human security and /or sheer life in the tropics.

Re-imagining sheer life in the tropics

Southeast Asia has a quintessential ‘tropical geography’ – a region of economic tigers and endemic diseases amidst volcanic landscapes. During the years of economic growth, the outbreaks of infectious diseases – HIV/AIDS, SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) and, more recently, avian influenza (bird flu) – have sparked a new imagination of sheer life (basic human security) in the tropics. Although not on the scale of a health threat such as SARS, by mid-2007 bird flu had killed at least 70 persons in Indonesia and 170 worldwide. This is a highly pathogenic strain that, it is feared, may mutate within humans and spiral into a global pandemic. Thus, the region is characterized by an outmigration of threatening pathogens. This ‘latitudinal biodiversity’ makes Southeast Asia a tropical region of uncanny surplus wealth and diseases. Biopolitics in this environment cannot avoid the imbrication of populations in the biological environment, that is, the human–animal symbiosis that is still at the core of livelihood for many in the tropics, a fact well recognized by modernizing Asian states.

Stephen Collier and Andrew Lakoff (2005) have recast Hannah Arendt’s (1958) argument that the central problem of the modern polity is the satisfaction of the basic wants of the population. They use ‘sheer life’ to mean the ordinary life of a population that is the central legitimation of modern states and ought to be the primary goal of
ethical reasoning. Borrowing their concept, by ‘sheer life’ I mean the basic physical needs of human survival and living that are differently valued and managed in diverse biopolitical milieus. By stressing the ethicalization of sheer life as a problem of modern ruling I differ from Giorgio Agamben’s (1998) conceptualization that makes a stark differentiation between ‘bare life’ devoid of ethics (zoe) and civilized life under the exercise of ethics and rationality (bios). Thus, instead of a spatial separation between politics and ethics, I argue that they coexist in a field of force shaped by the interplay of articulations and decisions. The political exception is invoked to variously favour neoliberal reasoning or the ethics of sheer life as situated strategic responses to unfolding events.

For a state like Indonesia, defending minimal standards of living cannot fully escape the tropical environment – a combination of bountiful resources for human life and threat/danger. In a populous archipelagic nation, there is the problem of access to medical treatments in the case of epidemics. Modern medical research has neglected diseases endemic in the tropics and most drug producers are located in advanced liberal economies, or sell expensive drugs beyond the reach of the majority in developing countries. Given recent outbreaks (the latest being dengue fever), there is widespread agreement that Southeast Asia is the battleground for combating infectious diseases; but this developing world is frequently cast as a zoonotic zone administered by ‘weak states’ lacking experience in controlling epidemic conditions (Das, 2006).

This imaginary geography of the tropics is a space of exception that threatens global health. As Katharyne Mitchell (2006) has noted, contemporary spaces of exception are coded by biological constructions of bodies of difference. Regions of Africa have become spaces of ‘essential health research’ on so-called tropical or ‘neglected’ diseases, an intervention led by philanthropic groups such as the Gates Foundation (WHO, 2006). This imaginary space of pestilence and backwardness influences the political positioning of Asian authoritarian states (despite the perception of their weakness) in relationship to global flows of capital and knowledge. The more affluent sites seek to combat deadly diseases and protect human security by developing connections to a system of ‘global public goods’ (Caballero-Anthony, 2006). The fight for human security, however, is carried out within a geopolitical system that favours rich countries and big pharmanas, professions of ‘health as a global good’ notwithstanding. As states seek room for manoeuvre in the global space shaped by corporate power, a game of exceptions for and to neoliberalism produce different territorializations of value.

In the next sections, I contrast two assemblages of politics, science and health ethics that have converged around bird flu and generated different scales of exception. In Singapore, the investment is in transnational networks of intellectual capacities and patents; in Indonesia, the investment is in the ethical value of sheer life and bio-sovereignty.

**Capacities and patent regimes**
Neoliberal urgency in Singapore’s network economy is not focused solely on capital accumulation through manufacturing and finance, but also on capacity building in the life sciences in order to secure the biological needs of populations within the tropics. Especially since the SARS outbreak in the 1990s and of a virulent strain (of the H5N1 subtype of the influenza A virus) of bird flu in 2003, the Biopolis hub is focused on research and development of cures for ‘neglected’ tropical diseases. Its emergence has relied on a series of exceptions promoting the growth of sciences and collaborations with drug companies. There is liberal use of state funds to attract biomedical investments.
Millions of US dollars have been spent on infrastructure (the ever expanding Biopolis complex, science parks, and so on), recruiting foreign scientists and giving tax breaks to companies that develop drugs from discovery to distribution. The state submits to TRIPS, the World Trade Organization’s agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights that explicitly recognizes intellectual property rights only when innovations generate financial profit in legitimate markets (Corea, 2002: 43-46). By funding research infrastructure and collaborating with drug firms, the state embeds its institutions in the global system that converts biomedical products into regimes of corporate property.

In addition to its insertion into the global pharma network, Singapore is also a player in the WHO global health initiative that stresses the collecting and sharing of disease samples at its headquarters in Geneva, so that elite scientists and corporations can track diseases and develop vaccines for the global community. As the leader in the collection of diseases samples from other Asian sites, Singapore is an important partner in this global apparatus that defines health as a ‘public good’. At the inaugural *Lancet* Asian Medical Forum hosted in Singapore in 2006, the health minister claimed that the city-state was well prepared in health supplies, care delivery, business and educational continuity plans to combat an avian flu pandemic (Khaw, 2006).

By participating in both commercial and non-commercial health networks, Singapore has become a centre in tissue banking that directly and indirectly benefits drug companies and the private property regime. To defend human security, then, the Singaporean biopolitical assemblage configures global scales of coordination, building an institutional matrix that inserts itself as an exceptional hub in the global system of ‘biocapital’ (Sunder Rajan, 2006).

I pause here to note that Niklas Luhmann (1998) would have observed that a systematic and permanent ‘ecology of ignorance’ surrounds an ecology of expertise, reminding us that the unknown is not opposed to knowledge but flourishes alongside it. Exceptional scales of public–private pharmaceutical networks are surrounded by dark continents of ignorance about diseases and their potential cures. Is plugging into the global knowledge network the only scale of possible engagement for securing human security, or can an exception be made for the political legitimacy of collective life and its ethical status in the tropics?

**Ethicalizing sheer life and bio-sovereignty**

In contrast to Singapore’s intimate collaborations in the global drug recovery project, the assemblage of elements in Indonesia – limited budget, large country, agrarian economy and limited technology – has sparked a tactical response that refuses the claim of globalized health emergency. At first glance this approach seems counter-rational as the difficulties in Indonesia are compounded by the country having had the largest number of victims of a lethal strain of bird flu, one of the most recent health hazards to appear on the radar. Since 2003, bird flu has spread via wild birds from Southeast Asia to 50 countries in Africa, Europe and beyond. Hong Kong, Vietnam and Thailand have slaughtered millions of birds. Despite these cases of a robust elimination of the health threat, in the eyes of global epidemiologists, Southeast Asia has become (once again) a space of virulence, contamination and weak governance. Indonesia has not subscribed to the view of a globalized health threat embraced by its more urbanized neighbours. Bird flu does not loom very large in the state’s perspective, given the large problems of survival in the populous nation of roughly 250 million. While the H5N1 virus subtype is deadly, bird to human transmission is not easy and
Southeast Asian fatalities attributed to bird flu have been in the low hundreds since the initial outbreak. Furthermore, poultry are an essential element in tens of millions of peasant farms and urban backyards. The director of Indonesia’s Agriculture Ministry’s Directorate of Animal Health notes:

Farmers say dying chickens are normal in life. And you must realize that 62 dead people in one and a half years? That’s not very much in Indonesia. Three hundred thousand die from TB, from dengue. People in the villages don’t grab what is a pandemic (New York Times, 2007).

It would be a practical impossibility to kill all poultry in the vast archipelago. If sustaining the biopolitical nexus between humans and domesticated birds is crucial to collective living regimes, then it seems politically unethical and hazardous to remove this staple of small-scale livelihood. In addition, the country is too poor to provide millions of farmers scattered across the archipelago with adequate compensations for culling their flocks.

From the WHO’s perspective, Indonesia’s failure to treat the bird flu as an emergency thwarts regulation at the global level. Dick Thompson, a WHO official, complained: ‘It is like trying to fix the roof while there is storm going on. Until the animal situation gets under control, there’s going to be this steady drip, drip, drip of human cases, and that’s a problem’ (New York Times, 2006). Indonesia is increasingly portrayed as recalcitrant, and unwilling or unable to follow established global norms of public health, that is, a ‘third world’ exception to the global good.

This perception of Indonesia as a global non-player was reinforced in January 2007 when local officials withdrew from sharing virus samples with the WHO, which elicited worldwide condemnation as fresh samples are desperately needed in the race to develop vaccines and drugs. A leading pharmacist in Hong Kong accused Indonesia of trying to ‘do business’ by patenting the virus, claiming that it is ‘not ethical’ to create this gap in disease data when it is urgently needed for saving lives in many countries (Reuters, 2007a).

But the refusal to share disease samples can be read differently, as a decision of ‘desecuritization’ or a biopolitical approach that takes the threat out of an emergency mode and puts it in the realm of calculation.1 The biopolitical approach focuses not on the threat of bird flu to the world at large but on the risk to ordinary people in Indonesia. The biopolitical calculation assesses the cost to ordinary Indonesians from sharing bio-resources with no guarantee of easy access to vaccines. By thus ethicizing the realm of sheer life, Indonesian leaders are asserting the nation as a scale of ethical exception to the global commodification of health. They have invoked the 1992 Health Law that requires an agreement for transferring virus samples and their limited use for diagnostic purposes. Through this claim of bio-sovereignty, they leverage national rights over intellectual property rights enjoyed by drug companies and, more broadly, challenge the global power of the TRIPs regime.

Furthermore, this biopolitical logic also challenges the WHO for collaborations with elite research institutions and liberal transfer of virus materials to private companies. Not surprisingly, Indonesia’s bold move to optimize sovereignty control over bio-resources has won the support of some other poor countries. A Thai health official observed that nations ‘at the epicentre of the pandemic’ should tie their transfer of samples to ‘assured access to potential pandemic flu vaccines’ (Reuters, 2007a). The logic of investment in sheer life at the national level is thus an ethical corrective of the WHO’s practice of unregulated sharing of bio-resources with profit-making institutions.
In early 2007, over a dozen countries met in Jakarta to work out new rules that require global companies to take on ethical obligations to countries that supply disease data. Led by Indonesia, allied countries requested the WHO to set up a mechanism to regulate sharing viral samples. Drug companies that seek the specimens to make drugs must obtain permission from the health minister of the donor country (Reuters, 2007b). This technique strengthens the state as a scale of ethical regulation, allowing them to regulate their relations with big pharmas. Indonesian officials have made a deal with Baxter International Inc. who will receive virus samples in return for helping the country to produce and market the bird flu vaccines domestically. This will allow Indonesia to help other poor countries gain greater access to vaccines during health crises. Exploiting the ecology of ignorance surrounding diseases, the anticipatory logic in withholding bio-resources secures sheer life as a space of exception that compels an ethicalization of global corporate practices.

Bio-sovereignty can thus be viewed not simply as a withdrawal from global health, but a tactical move to valorize the space of sheer life; a space lacking in knowledge capital and previously bypassed by global capital. Bio-sovereignty has also spun a regional scale of ethical exception, as poor countries gain leverage in negotiating their own deals with vaccine makers, a practice previously the privilege of rich countries. By giving sheer life political legitimacy, poor countries expose the cozy networks that favour rich corporations and richer countries (despite their rhetoric of global good) over poor ones. Sheer life in the tropics is becoming an ethical exception to the global cartography mapped and sustained by the biocapital regime.

**Conclusion**

I have proposed a theory of mutating political cartography shaped by multiple scales of governing that overlap with but are not limited by political and ecological environments. The field of inquiry, I suggested, transcends conventional geography via experimental assemblages centred on biopolitical problems of governing for the wellbeing and security of populations. The situated play of neoliberal logic and political exceptions produces alternate scales of valorization, whether of knowledge capital, or of ethical value. Neoliberalism, as an accumulative and anticipatory logic of valorization, is both enabled and disabled by exception, a political mechanism that configures spaces of capital accumulation or spaces of collective life.

I discussed two such milieus in Southeast Asia of confronting risks by exercising the logic of capital accumulation or the ethical logic of human security in an age of pandemics. The constellation centred on Singapore rests on neoliberal decisions to shape a global network of knowledge capital and expertise, whereas the Indonesia milieu engenders a logic of ethical risk to the logic of accumulation and appropriation. Instead of investing in spaces of corporate exceptionalism, Indonesia invests in the biopolitical ethics of basic human needs and ordinary life. By insisting on bio-sovereignty, the Indonesian exception challenges corporate biomedical knowledge and property regimes.

My attention to diverse logics that govern through valorizing different scales of exception challenges the political economic approach that focuses primarily on spaces of capital accumulation. I tracked the situated exercise of exceptions that invest different kinds of value in new political spaces. While neoliberal thinking and biopolitical reason are both informed by accumulative and anticipatory logics, their interplay generates different spaces of exception that can stretch beyond as well as return to the national
scale. The making and anticipation of new scales of exception are the effect of political
decisions in an endless play of exception in response to global mappings of power. By
attending to the diverse logics that differently valorize scales of exception, I seek to give
visibility to specific mechanisms that animate and mutate political cartography.

Endnote

1 For a conceptual distinction between securitization cast in the idiom of war, to a stress on
desecuritization as a mode of calculative practice, see Claudia Aradau (2001).

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