



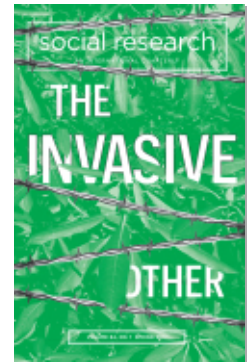
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New Vectors of Infection

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Invasion of the Mind Snatchers: Ideas, Otherness, and the New Vectors of Infection

CAN AN IDEA BE INVASIVE? PRESUMING THAT NO IDEA CAN BE 100 PERCENT native to our blank brains upon birth, how might we sort invasive ideas with subversive or hostile intent from those designed to help us flourish, when both come to us from “beyond,” smuggled inside language and cultural discourse? Such questions have often been posed, perhaps more implicitly than explicitly, in the history of Western moral philosophy (“What is the good?” “What is the truth?” And so on). These meditations then inform an ethical praxis at the crossroads of history: “What is to be done?”

Our concept of what an idea *is* is a very vague entity indeed. We still lack the scientific instruments to capture ideas in either a fixed wave or particle state. What seems like an autonomous idea from one angle is merely the expression of a much larger set of inter-related ideas from another. Something like “security” or “gender” is not so much an idea as the name we give to a vast cluster of (often incoherent) ideas. The idea of “fun” or “lunch” is likewise a network of notions, to the extent that if we isolate an idea for the sake of investigation, it is likely to die on the spot, like the bees that frustrate the entomologist who cannot examine the drone apart from the context of the hive. The instinct of someone who seeks to spot an idea “in the wild,” as it were, is to move down the scale, from large to small,

beginning with the sum of human knowledge and moving down into epistemological orientations, languages, principles, discourses, concepts, philosophemes, disciplines, fields, subfields, hypotheses, hunches, epiphanies, intuitions, etc. Had we the tools up to this task, we might be left with a single luminous idea, glimmering in front of us like a gold nugget, unshucked from the discursive mudflow in which it is usually buried. But of course, this is the kind of fantasy that Nietzsche and Foucault spent many decades deriding, even as their targets rarely confessed to attempting such a thing explicitly.

Nevertheless, what we might call “the idea of the idea” is ever present in our debates and discussions pertaining to this ongoing human endeavor (now in search of a more appropriate name than civilization). Even if we cannot point to “it” in its naked form, we have a swarming multitude of examples of ideas, collectively deemed good or not. Of course, the idea of “invasion” is itself an idea, or at least a concept. The words we employ to discuss an object or subject already reflect a bias toward the phenomena they describe. A great movement of peoples, for instance, could be described as an exodus (suggesting rightful escape), Manifest Destiny (suggesting white supremacy), brain drain (suggesting economic privilege), or immigration (suggesting “necessary” global mobility if legal, or “undesirable” global mobility if not authorized by the right rubber stamp). Anything described as an *invasion* is clearly an unwanted form of intrusion. The idea here speaks of an unwanted presence or threat-of-being-present. The very word wears this fear or loathing on its sleeve. (Then again, one *can* be “invaded” by family—but I don’t have space to unpack that apparent paradox here.)

Another powerful idea—one of the most primal and foundational—is that of the Other. We may even consider this the ur-idea of anthropological or political life. As the complement to the self or community, the Other remains the avatar or embodiment of alterity itself, along with the threat alterity poses (at least until the Other can be seduced, married, killed, banished, bought off, assimilated, kept at bay, or otherwise neutralized). The mobile boundary line separat-

ing Us from Them has been with “us” for as long as “they” have been around to allow the magic spell of inclusion and belonging to be cast (“Abracommunity!”).

So once again: can an idea be invasive? Or, alternatively, what might a *noninvasive* idea look like? Can such a thing exist? Do new ideas come in peace, hoping to live harmoniously alongside our pre-conceived notions or assumptions about the world? Or do they have to sneak in, across the border of the mind, with fake passports or clinging to the hull of a tin-pot boat? (As someone who teaches for a living, the latter scenario often seems the most accurate.)

Today, ideas can zip around the globe much faster than at any other time in history. An idea like “the ice bucket challenge,” or “planking,” or “Obama is a Muslim” can be hatched in one person’s brain in the morning and introduced to millions of other minds by lunchtime. Ideas can now be tracked for traction and reach, through associated keywords and other, deeper forms of data analysis. An idea that becomes particularly popular is said to have “gone viral,” implying a conceptual connection between ideas and pathogens, since both infect—or at least affect—the social body.

In the early eighteenth century, the Earl of Shaftesbury (1773) wrote an essay concerning “enthusiasm,” especially the religious kind, what today we might call “moral panics.” He argued that this phenomenon has a pronounced “social and communicative aspect” (14–15). Since long before Facebook and Twitter, human beings have been swept up into generalized enthusiasms, afforded by the technologies of the time (in the Earl of Shaftesbury’s era, the printing press—still influential today, of course). The interesting question this raises applies to form versus content. Is a specific social panic an idea? Is a particular enthusiasm an idea? Or is it primarily a mode (or even mood) of transmission (bringing very different, perhaps even incompatible, ideas nestled within)? For someone versed in Marshall McLuhan, for whom “the medium is the message,” the very existence of the internet is the essence of the situation. Whether we are using our modems to download cat videos, pornography, or bomb-assembly

manuals is the secondary question. We are digitally connected now, and that particular form of virtual and material entanglement is the primary concern and the premise for any subsequent investigations. Understanding technically and literally how ideas move from one place to another is the focus of such a perspective, and only later would we worry about what those ideas might be encouraging others to do or not do.

This is why a philosopher like Giorgio Agamben (2009) wants to ban cell phones (16). No matter whether the user is involved in something noble, like fighting for the rights of refugees, or trying to overthrow capitalism, this user is still buried—“antisocially”—in her phone. And for Agamben, at least, this relationship with the apparatus forecloses all sorts of essential modes of sociality, and thus limits its own political possibilities. (Thankfully there are more sophisticated approaches to technology out there, which manage to still acknowledge the dystopian realities of digital arrangements. I’m thinking especially of Bernard Stiegler’s rapidly growing oeuvre; see, for example, Stiegler 1998.) In any case, standing on the streets and subway platforms of our great cities, it is hard to avoid the creeping feeling that our smartphones have captured us completely, to the extent that we are now living in a scenario anticipated by *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* or *The Matrix*. If we were willing to lift our eyes from the screen long enough, we might begin to suspect the vectors of technology as *themselves* constituting forms of invasion: into our mental space, into our social lives, into our domestic places and routines, etc.

Social media has become *the* paradigmatic form of communication in our age. And as such, it is primary when considering a topic like “the invasive other” in the guise of ideas. The pieces that follow, based on presentations at the conference on which this issue is based, are as a consequence intimately engaged with our technological networks and arrangements.

Agnes Callamard asks how the digital world has transformed, expanded, or restricted the ways invasive ideas are policed or con-

trolled. As director of the Columbia University Global Freedom of Expression initiative, she has firsthand knowledge of the ways in which governments are responding formally to terroristic threats, both real and perceived. After noting that ideas have *always* been controlled and policed (and thus part of the nature of governance itself), Callamard details contemporary developments and shifts in debates about balancing freedom of expression with the historical imperative to be vigilant against “toxic ideas” (usually assumed to be coming from “outside” the social group seeking to regulate them).

The ideas garnering the most attention from governments at present are those promoting violent extremism (most visibly represented by ISIS, which is very active online). Callamard notes how recent state responses include attempts to: (1) disrupt such messages (via technical means, DOS attacks, etc.); (2) provide examples of “counterspeech” (by spreading alternative messages); and (3) mount legal responses (via the multiplication of legal instruments around cybersecurity, new policies, etc.). For Callamard, this is a “broad and confusing legal area,” attracting “poorly argued jurisprudence.” Most importantly, perhaps, recent international legal efforts are placing a new focus on the idea itself rather than any potential act associated with it.

In other words, governments are cooperating in order to eradicate ideas they simply don’t like, whether the ideas pose a threat or not (for instance, Turkish activists being jailed for questioning the use of violence by the state). The global War Against Terror is thus becoming less about protecting actual lives—if it ever was about that—and more about conducting a campaign against specific ideas and ideologies that trouble or complicate the business-as-usual of our political economy (or economic polity, if you prefer). Romantic descriptions of the internet as “post-Westphalian,” Callamard reminds us, don’t adequately account for the ways in which the state has been quite central to its regulation (the Chinese Firewall being only the most obvious example). Geography and sovereignty have not disappeared, she insists, but have been transformed, in the digital era. And along-

side state actors, we have witnessed the rapid emergence of “postgeographical communities of ideas.” These are very hard to counter, if that is indeed your aim. And they will only multiply, given the technical capacity to curate one’s own “feed” and thus limit exposure to ideas that challenge already held beliefs. For Callamard, the digital revolution means that today we have not only the choice, but also the *technical means*, to close our minds.

The final author in this set of papers, the journalist and book critic Jacob Silverman, also discusses privacy issues—this time in the context of the internet. Silverman is concerned with the breakdown (or blurring) of the public/private distinction, as governments and corporations join forces to follow our every move, both online and in the real world (now that our phones are essentially double agents in our pockets). Silverman considers surveillance to be the business model for the new economy; he describes data analytics as the perfect neoliberal technology, one that allows the market to extend into new, previously sacrosanct areas, like the home. (Amazon Echo, for instance, is an object designed to sit patiently in the domestic sphere, awaiting questions and instructions. It is also a very good listener, recording and logging all sounds and conversations within its vicinity.) Silverman believes that we are giving up far too much in the name of convenience or cool points, since we are rapidly losing control over our own information as well as the ability to determine whether and when it is disclosed, and in what fashion. Protective strategies, like “digital hygiene” or various hacker tricks for “securitizing the self,” are not enough, according to Silverman, since they are enacted within the overarching logic and structure of the digital panopticon, and thus can be little more than a reactionary symptom. The “granular tracking” of monitoring systems links everything from Fitbit corporate wellness programs to “predictive policing” based on “threat scores” attributed to specific addresses, provided by private companies.

Silverman’s question is this: how can one reject surveillance capitalism without being simply a neo-Luddite who rejects technology in toto? He urges us to work for radical restructuring of the cur-

rent situation, calling for social networks without metrics, communication without surveillance, and business models that don't depend on personal data. While he acknowledges this is not going to happen overnight, Silverman is adding his voice to a growing global movement acknowledging the invasive aspect of our personal gadgets.

Though his paper unfortunately was not available for publication in this issue, it is worth noting that Marc Rotenberg introduced us at the conference to his work as president and executive director of the Electronic Privacy Information Center (EPIC), which works to focus public attention on emerging privacy issues while looking for solutions to the same (often in the courts). Rotenberg discussed the nonmilitary use of drones, detailing the public-policy implications of this new phenomenon, and the complex litigation strategies EPIC has employed to encourage oversight, regulation, and accountability. Indeed, he noted an “accountability asymmetry” between people and drones, since the latter can identify the former within seconds, thanks to facial recognition databases, but humans currently have no access to markers that would identify to whom a drone belongs and thus figure out why this machine is following them around. As drones automate surveillance in the public sphere (and also peek into the private), it is important to fight against their current anonymity. Rotenberg has thus been pushing to add two new laws to Asimov's famous three laws of robotics (originally designed to prevent autonomous weapons systems from harming humans): first, a robot must always reveal its actual identity; and second, a robot must always reveal the basis of its decision. Rotenberg seeks to hold machines accountable, partly through what he calls “algorithmic transparency.”

When it comes to drones, I would note, the “invasive” idea has evolved into an actual object. The virtual reality of the concept has morphed into the tangible reality of the semiautonomous flying spying machine. Anyone who has had a picnic ruined by one of these noisy robo-peeping-Toms (admittedly a “first world problem” on the scale of possible drone encounters) understands how invasive they can be. This reminds us that ideas are not just vague and vaporous

things, influencing us in subliminal ways, but they also *become* our literal environment. Drones, like all cultural artifacts (some more than others), are crystallized ideology. They don't just fall out of the sky; they also embody and enact various imperatives in a technical form. (Indeed, we may consider the drone an update of Althusser's policeman, hailing us into an interpellated identity, in new and sinister ways.) Currently, drones enjoy the power of anonymity, while in marked contrast we are constantly tagged and tracked. (Rotenberg noted that airports are on the front line of profiling, policing, and probing "the invasive other," a template that can be used all over the world, and not only at border points.)

Returning to the wider theme of this panel, we might note, in ending this introduction, that the very notion of invasion is highly dependent on an "interested" understanding of the space-time continuum. For any kind of movement—whether of people, insects, or pop songs—an invasion must be measured in terms of *time*, since different communities make collective decisions about at what point in history something is henceforth to be considered indigenous or not. For instance, the Australian government is especially hostile toward asylum seekers, jailing and torturing them in offshore detention centers for simply trying to flee the conditions that made them so desperate to leave their home country in the first place. This is an astonishing case of historical amnesia, and a dark irony, considering that Europeans invaded that continent, already inhabited for many thousands of years, a little over 200 years ago.

In the case of invasive ideas, the question revolves around which notions are said to be native to a person or nation, and what criteria (if any) are used to designate some as "newcomers" and thus suspect. Invasions are also determined by *space*, of course. Most borders are mobile and rather arbitrarily defined when observed from the long view. Once again, in the case of ideas, a question arises about where or what the border might be. The coastline? The perimeter of the household? The brain itself? In this scenario, the mind—or public imaginary—plays the role of the polis: a centralized form of cohesion to be protected from destabilizing elements coming from the outside.

Today's digital technologies, as Callamard suggested during the question-and-answer period following the panel (available online at <https://youtu.be/iTnNataHx2s>), are a tool to define who the so-called invaders are. Such tech is thus a new instrument in the ancient art of identifying ominous otherness for sociopolitical purposes. And as Miriam Ticktin noted during the discussion, these tools are flexible, when it comes to who is using them and for what reasons. Drones, for instance, may be our enemy when they hover next to our bedroom window. But they are also "our" friend—at least according to those deploying them—when they help patrol the border between the United States and Mexico, for instance. Biometrics can help bring families together. But they can also be used by the State Department to tear families apart through deportation. So it is necessary, as Ticktin suggests, to think further and deeper on the ways that these relatively new technologies relate to each other, determine one another, and frame or determine the discourses around different types of invasion.

Finally, at the very end of the panel, a conference attendee reminded us that so-called invasive elements need not originate from "the outside." This woman used her own experience in Uganda as an example: the citizens suddenly "became the Other" when they began collectively opposing the state. (The internet was swiftly controlled from within, but the Ugandan people used different social platforms and technical tricks to work around these strictures and vote against the sitting government.) This was a timely reminder, as another attendee noted, that in the twenty-first century, we are just as likely to be dealing with a *pervasive* other as an invasive one. And it is this very uncanny proximity that no doubt motivates the agents of demonization to manufacture distances and external spaces where there may in fact be none.

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