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How the Pandemic Made Sensory Power Visible

ENGIN ISIN

There are many power relations: between and among states, corporations, organizations, institutions, and, of course, between and among peoples themselves. But power relations between states and their citizens are probably the most pervasive, given that the contemporary world is structured around some 200 states. Of the almost 8 billion humans who inhabit the world, a vast majority live under the government of states, whether as citizens or noncitizens.

Our lives begin with the throw of the birthright dice, and our fortunes and misfortunes, power and powerlessness play out that throw for the rest of our lives. Dangerous consequences come with being noncitizens, or even worse, nonstate persons; being citizens in occupied or colonized states has tragic consequences; whereas there are privileges of being citizens of powerful states. Moving between these states also brings consequences.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made many forms of power visible and articulable. Throughout the pandemic, states have made life-and-death decisions, especially for their citizens, but also for noncitizens. It will be debated for some time how certain deaths could have been avoided, whether peoples could have been better protected, and if a balance between health and economy could have been maintained. We will also debate how powerful states, by protecting “their” citizens, may not only have exacerbated or even entrenched global inequality, but also postponed the end of the pandemic—a tragedy to be named in the future.

Throughout the pandemic, states awarded, cajoled, cared, charged, confined, counted, cured, detained, encouraged, entertained, deceived, dissuaded, fined, furloughed, imprisoned, informed, killed, misinformed, notified, ordered, pleaded, punished, quarantined, persuaded, searched, stopped, traced, tracked, and vaccinated people. The list includes only a fraction of the ways of exercising power, but it is still quite a range of government actions, and their intensity may have been unprecedented in scope and scale.

Yet most people are not pushovers. During the pandemic, they have resisted differently in different times and places and exercised power in collective ways. There was always a degree of dissent about restrictions on movement, face-coverings, and vaccination. The initial obedience about confinement gave way to increasing dissent. Conversely, the initial dissent about vaccination gave way to submission once some European countries introduced health passes for access to public spaces. It would be difficult to list all the ways in which power has been exercised by states during the pandemic, and how people have obeyed or disobeyed them.

Is there a way to make sense of the power relations between states and peoples (citizens and noncitizens) that the pandemic made visible and articulable without creating an exhaustive (and exhausting) list? We can group all these ways of exercising power into forms, reflect on their historical development, and then ask whether a lesson can be drawn from this exercise. This may help us better understand the birth of a new form of power.

EVOLUTIONS OF POWER

With the help of a twentieth-century philosopher, Michel Foucault, who took his inspiration from the earlier thinkers Friedrich Nietzsche and

ENGIN ISIN is a professor of international politics at Queen Mary University of London and the University of London Institute in Paris. Parts of this essay are adapted from an article he coauthored with Evelyn Ruppert, “The Birth of Sensory Power: How a Pandemic Made It Visible?” published by the journal *Big Data & Society* in November 2020.

Max Weber, we can name three older forms of power by virtue of their distinct logics and historical development. These are the sovereign, disciplinary, and regulatory forms of power. They developed from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries in Europe, but can also be found beyond Europe.

The logic of sovereign power is that it demands obedience. It is an asymmetrical form of power with often deadly consequences. Although the birth of sovereign power occurred in the seventeenth century, it has a deeper history. But it still performs its interdictions in modern institutions.

The logic of disciplinary power, whose origins could be witnessed in the eighteenth century, involves governing people by compelling submission to public health rules. When it becomes imperative to the state that its people be healthy, the exercise of disciplinary power will involve pressure, persuasion, and, if necessary, punishment.

The logic of regulatory power, born in the nineteenth century, made things a bit more complicated. Its logic functions by developing performance indicators to measure the health of a people as a whole. It invents technologies for governing each person in order to enhance these indicators.

There are two important things to bear in mind about these three forms of power. First, we speak of the “birth” of a form of power in the sense of its technologies coming together in an effective manner at a certain time and place. The technologies that constitute a form of power may take a long time (and many places) to develop. The “birth” refers to the time and place of their effective assemblage so that we can see, observe, name, and speak about it.

Second, the birth of one form of power does not mean the death of another. What complicates modern life is that all three forms became overlapping ways of governing people. And now the same has occurred with the fourth form of power, which the pandemic made visible and articulable—though its technologies have been developing since the 1980s, if not longer.

Since all forms of power govern people through technologies, some historical examples may help to elucidate them. Sovereign power governs through colonies, dominions, empires, and states, and it invents armies, borders, cadastres,

cartography, and partitions. Disciplinary power governs through camps, cities, hospitals, factories, prisons, schools, and workhouses; it designs buildings, policing, walls, fences, guards, and gates. Regulatory power governs through counting, recording, enumeration, metrics, tabulation, and attributes such as class, gender, and race.

Such long lists of government actions can only be accomplished by technologies of power. Consider how these three forms of power have required specific technologies during the pandemic: sovereign power demands obedience (lockdown, curfew, confinement); disciplinary power exacts submission by rewarding behavioral change (sacrifice, distancing, isolation, quarantine, hygiene); and regulatory power tracks the relation between individual conduct and collective health (infection, transmission, mortality, recovery, and immunity, all expressed in rates). Before turning to the birth of sensory power, let us examine each of these three prior forms of power more closely, with further examples of how they have operated in the pandemic.

RETURN OF SOVEREIGN POWER?

Sovereign power has a deep history that goes back to the development of the first states in history, five or six thousand years ago. But

its birth was marked by the development of early modern states through the consolidation of wealth, territory, and people in novel ways. Straddling the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the emergence of sovereign power was associated with the rise of modern empires and the state apparatuses with which they were governed.

In this period, European empires were built by accumulating peoples through slavery, colonizing indigenous peoples, and settling colonies. If each of these apparatuses required extracting obedience from subject peoples, they also precipitated searching for more effective and efficient ways of governing them. While the key objects of government were territories governed through technologies of settlement, deportation, and dispossession, key forms of knowledge, called political arithmetic, also developed to assess the wealth and health of subject peoples.

The accumulation of mercantile capital would have been inconceivable without the transatlantic slave trade that brought African peoples to

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colonial settlements, the subjugation of indigenous peoples, and the deportations of convicts and other people deemed dangerous by the state and forced to become settler colonists. Whereas governing metropolises meant subjugating “dangerous” populations with cruelty, governing colonies involved mass occupation, displacement, and dispossession.

With the effective closing of state borders and the imposition of mobility restrictions during the pandemic, some imagined that sovereign power had returned. Yet it has always been present. Lockdown, curfew, confinement, regulation of movement, border controls, and overall restrictions on the mobility of subject peoples are the most common technologies of rule that sovereign power developed over a long period. But its exercise now involves a different assemblage of technologies.

Some states were praised for acting swiftly in shutting borders, others for introducing internal borders by enclosing entire neighborhoods, cities, and regions. Both external and internal borders were subjected to immediate controls on all continents, though with varying intensities across different states. That many reacted with surprise to these measures reveals how technologies of sovereign power have become entrenched in our lives over time. It also illustrates how the privileged citizens of powerful states normally do not experience the brutal and cruel effects of sovereign power, unlike noncitizens and nonstate persons such as refugees or indigenous peoples.

We thus ought not to conflate power’s invisibility with its inexistence. Nor should we be surprised by the widespread obedience that sovereign power has exacted, despite occasional and scattered protests in both the United States and Europe against restrictions on movement. A key lesson from the pandemic is that sovereign power is entangled with other forms of power from which it draws strength, but from which it must be analytically separated. Unlike the seventeenth-, eighteenth-, or nineteenth-century variants, sovereign power in the twenty-first century could not function without relying on disciplinary and regulatory forms of power.

DISCIPLINING THE BODY

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries witnessed the emergence of a new form of power: the discipline of capacities and desires. Its key object is the human body. It is true that sovereign power is also exercised on the human body: widespread

technologies included cruelties that ranged from branding black bodies to spectacles of torture and fatal deportations. It was thought that governing people required exercising sovereign power as the right to decide over the life and death of bodies.

By contrast, the logic of disciplinary power is submission that makes the body useful and healthy. It may have started with soldiers in barracks and slaves on ships, but it invented technologies of power and forms of knowledge that combined to create optimized bodies. Over the next three centuries, disciplinary power produced clinics, prisons, hospitals, schools, workhouses, camps, and eventually gyms, malls, studios, and other assemblages where this knowledge was brought to bear on people governing their bodies themselves.

How have we experienced disciplinary power during the pandemic? Just consider how we have collectively become experts in protecting our bodies and the bodies of others. We not only have followed daily what sciences have discovered about the virus and its modes of infection, but also have internalized injunctions and admonishments about how to conduct ourselves safely for the sake of others. We have been advised to sacrifice everyday activities and go into isolation to save ourselves, others, and public health care systems. We have developed, in an astonishingly short period, new forms of conduct to protect ourselves and others—physical distancing, covering our faces, and regulating our contacts. We have developed ritualized hygiene practices of disinfecting ourselves.

If we followed the rules of confinement imposed by sovereign power obediently, we followed the rules of safety called for by disciplinary power submissively. What the pandemic has rendered visible and articulable is that we experience these two forms of power simultaneously. We, namely our bodies, recognized how sovereign and disciplinary power depend on each other and work together. Without a hint of irony, for those who needed help, practical guidance was offered on how to relearn socializing after the confinement.

The confinement of people by partial or total lockdown was governed by punishment: fines, charges, attestations, permissions, and identity cards were mobilized to separate those who successfully responded to sovereign power by exercising self-discipline from those who did not. The logic behind this obedience is that submission to discipline is good not only for us and others, but

also for a collective yet invisible body whose health depended on us all. But what is this collective body that we have been protecting, and that has been presented to us via strange metrics that we had heard so little about before, such as herd immunity and infection rates?

REGULATING COLLECTIVE HEALTH

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries witnessed the emergence of a form of power that is at once collectivizing and individualizing. This is regulatory power, which is exercised on a people, a collective body whose health is measured by fertility, mortality, and longevity. Such power functions by simultaneously individualizing and specifying—it is directed toward the performances of individual bodies, with attention to the processes of life.

Regulatory power bridged sovereign and disciplinary power by effectively linking individual behavior to the behavior of people as a whole. Each form of power depends on the other, but now regulatory power functions most effectively as a positive rather than a negative force. It mobilizes the prescription of appropriate forms of conduct for bodies that are necessary for, or conducive to, the functioning of a people's health and wealth.

More importantly, regulatory power regulates a people not by admonishing or punishing noncompliance, but by persuading, guiding, nudging, and cajoling. Bodies conduct themselves as responsible subjects for their own good and for the common good—for the health of a people.

There is no better illustration of regulatory power during the pandemic than a singular metric that has become a symbol: the reproduction or R number. As explained by authorities, R is the rate by which each body infects other bodies, thus reproducing the virus. If a given body infects three bodies, the reproduction rate is three times higher than if it infects only one. According to the logic of regulatory power, if the body in question is identified, sequestered, and isolated, its harm to the people is neutralized.

One British government advertisement showed the R number with a speedometer-like graphic indicating the current rate of infection and admonishing people to “stay alert to keep R down.” Much was made of the concept of herd immunity,

which would be attained by large numbers of people contracting and then recovering from the coronavirus. What is herd immunity if not the exercise of the sovereign right to decide the life and death of peoples—especially when it eventually became clear that the elderly, the vulnerable, the poor, and black and brown people disproportionately lost their lives? Yet sovereign power is rendered invisible when it is exercised through regulatory power, as when reducing R becomes a nudge, or through disciplinary power, as when vaccine or health passports regulate “freedom of movement.”

Above all, the pandemic made us recognize that playing with power requires engaging all three of these forms, with their entanglements. And the pandemic has also unveiled a fourth form of power, which makes things really challenging.

APPETITE FOR DATA

We are now aware that we are living on a planet where surveillance (of children, citizens, clients, consumers, criminals, customers, friends, inmates, lovers, noncitizens, patients, spouses, students, terrorists, workers) has become ubiquitous and pervasive. Devices from wearables to appliances and from computers to cars are being traced, and everybody's activities are tracked

with them. The insatiable appetite of states, corporations, and organizations for data collected from tracking and tracing activities constitutes a planetary ecosystem for governing people.

Whether this results in digital dictatorships or digital democracies arguably depends on the form of power that now joins the others. Three technologies of power in particular have brought sensory power to the fore during the pandemic: clusters, dashboards, and tracking.

Clusters

The pandemic has prompted numerous references to entities such as hotspots, epicenters, and bubbles. They are meant to indicate how bodies, either infected or healthy, relate to each other. What makes them bubbles, hotspots, or epicenters is that the condition of these bodies is of interest to governments. This interest is not about capturing, punishing, disciplining, or even regulating these bodies, but about cajoling them to achieve desirable outcomes.

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Governments introduced the “live” tracking of these clusters to facilitate rapid-response interventions. Gatherings such as raves, parties, and protests elicited new policing concerns about discipline and punishment. But this is different from governing clusters, which do not exist as physical gatherings of bodies—they are relations among “infectious” or “healthy” bodies.

The devices that identify clusters may not be entirely digital (yet)—contact-tracing programs involve public health personnel and analog practices. But tracking, testing, and tracing bodies requires frequent gathering, storage, and transmission of data by various agents and authorities. Along with lockdown, distancing, and isolation, tracking subjects who have been infected, tracing other subjects who may have had physical contact with them, and alerting both clusters to isolate themselves requires exercising technologies of power appropriate to these objectives.

Where did all this knowledge come from? Throughout the twenty-first century, both states and corporations have been developing technologies of power to cajole people as users of apps, devices, and platforms. The collection, storage, and analysis of data from the movement and activities of people as digital technology users resulted in competitive struggles between and among states, international organizations, and multinational corporations. But competition for control also developed among various professions, such as epidemiologists, statisticians, data scientists, programmers, app developers, security experts, methodologists, and so on, who are transnational and whose expertise traverses national borders.

Although sensory assemblages may not be entirely digital yet, they nonetheless involve various combinations of digital technologies such as satellites, data centers, transmitters, receivers, and mobile devices. They also include analytics such as algorithms, machine learning, and cloud computing. Consider, for example, the mobility reports produced by Apple, Google, and Facebook during the pandemic. Through global relations between human actors such as technicians and programmers and nonhuman devices, these corporations accumulated data about infections and deaths, which in turn came to inform their development of a tracking and tracing app toolkit.

The monitoring performed by these corporations predates the pandemic: for more than a decade they enabled tracking and tracing people’s online behavior, such as communicating,

listening, reading, and watching, for diverse purposes. The development of coronavirus apps has made visible a form of power whose object is governing people through clusters, though maintaining the health and wealth of a people through this type of governance has proved an elusive objective.

Dashboards

Each form of power has produced its regime of visualization, from cartography to anatomical diagrams and statistical charts. The visualizations of sensory power have precipitated entirely novel imaginaries and techniques of representation. Intended to identify unseen patterns, these visualizations include interactive elements in “dashboards” that enable users to see the effects of combining different data on features of a cluster.

The dashboard has become a primary technology of government, like cartography, anatomy, and charts. Initially, all the seemingly accurate representations that dominated publicly available visualizations of the pandemic, such as those showcased on the Johns Hopkins University dashboard, offered basic data and statistics mapped onto national borders. Later we began seeing much more sophisticated dashboards, resembling those used for financial systems, transportation systems, military operations, and managing football games. There are also rapidly developing dashboards in fields such as migration or policing.

Pandemic dashboards were initially basic, but they rapidly became technologies of power funded by governments and developed by corporations and universities, evolving into more sophisticated forms. This brings us to the most important aspect of clusters: they are not merely real-time, but live. What is the difference?

Tracking and Tracing

Whereas real-time data may be presented in dashboards, sensory power organizes algorithms so that measurement, identification, action, and intervention can occur live. In other words, forms of data are mobilized with immediacy and with varying intensities and temporalities. Rather than the periodic “stocktaking” of conventional statistics, people are divided into live clusters with pulses, flows, and patterns. Sensory power involves modulating the performance of bodies and people through interventions that rely on such technologies.

The data serves three functions: identifying features that characterize clusters (such as the infected, contacted, protected, vaccinated); monitoring and evaluating those features live (daily changes in R-metric hotspots, epicenters, bubbles); and provoking changes in conduct (cajoling), or, if that fails, resorting to sovereign or disciplinary interventions (easing or tightening lockdowns). Identifying features produces data in much the same way as classical data regimes: people are periodically measured with indices, rates, metrics, and indicators. Governing clusters, however, means live-governing their pulses and signals.

This logic can be illustrated both by the development of apps to track and trace the reproduction of the virus and by the designing of interventions such as immunity or vaccine passports to govern clusters. Although so far these apps have failed spectacularly, it is worth briefly dwelling on their logic, which will remain and resurface in other fields.

The apps aim to track the locations of bodies infected with the virus and to notify, test, and isolate them (if necessary); to trace all bodies that have encountered infected bodies and to notify, test, and isolate them as well, all in order to slow the reproduction (R-value) of the virus. Essentially this creates live clusters of bodies infected or potentially infected by the coronavirus.

Governing people in clusters requires interventions at the stages of notifying, testing, and isolating to be effective. This involves a relation between regulatory power and disciplinary power: to achieve the desired infection rate R requires individuals to consent to be notified and to act in accordance with the results, whether that involves getting tested or (if necessary) self-isolating.

This is a costly and inefficient exercise of power. Yet there is still palpable enthusiasm about a potential app with the promise to deliver a game-changer: to minimize disciplinary power in order to instead maximize sensory power. In other words, to reformulate the problem of government as a relation between regulatory power and sensory power. For if solutions were found to automate the testing and isolating stages of the cycle, essentially clusters could be *governing themselves*.

There are, of course, technological limits to such a scenario. There are also severe legal,

political, and cultural limits. But they may become surmountable, if not during the coronavirus pandemic then soon enough. Tracking and tracing technologies could be adapted to other fields of application where such limits seem less respected, as in finance or migration.

Indeed, we could not imagine such scenarios if technologies of power for tracking and tracing were not already being used in fields other than epidemiology. The accumulation of capital in finance, manufacturing, retail, transportation, hospitality, entertainment, and other industries has been accompanied by the accumulation of peoples through tracking and tracing their movements and the modulation of sentiments, needs, and desires. Similarly, fields of government such as policing, migration and border control, and education already utilize technologies of sensory power.

The live data produced from sensory assemblages pervades these sectors and fields. What we are observing through the coronavirus pandemic is the accelerated evolution of technologies of sensory power that have been developed and deployed in these fields over the past four decades.

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PLAYING WITH POWER?

Each form of power almost always betrays its governing intentions. With sensory power, code errs, algorithms misfire, data is lacking, apps fail. Yet each form of power engenders effects on people and elicits and provokes types of resistance: sovereign power elicits and provokes revolt (protest, uprising, occupation), disciplinary power elicits and provokes subversion (strike, refusal, slowdown, anonymity), and regulatory power elicits and provokes evasion (escape, deception). The performance of such types of resistance is what makes all forms of power visible and articulable. Each form of power draws forth a latent or potential resistance, thus outlining the contours of otherwise invisible power.

Yet the resistance against lockdowns, distancing, face-covering, isolation, or vaccination misunderstood the relationship between sovereign power and regulatory power. These technologies of regulatory power had proved effective in protecting public health in past epidemics and pandemics. Ostensibly resisting sovereign power without understanding its relation to regulatory

power is a misguided and dangerous way of playing with power.

What, then, are the forms of resistance that sensory power elicits and provokes? If sensory power governs people through clusters, this raises the problem not only of how to perform acts of revolt, subversion, and evasion, but also of how to perform acts of resistance appropriate to sensory power in relation to other forms of power. We have so far witnessed concealment (encryption, anonymization, aliases), opacity (spoofing, cloaking), and sentiments (irony) as forms of resistance to this new form of power.

The remains of the pandemic demonstrate that the relations between states and citizens entered into new arrangements in the twenty-first century

with the birth of sensory power. And the relations between and among the three prior forms of power have been transformed significantly with the emergence of a fourth.

Relations between states and citizens are now mediated by a form of power whose logic and technologies permeate and penetrate territories, peoples, and the wealth of states from both within and without. This changes not only the relations among the three older forms of power, but also their own logics and technologies. We do not yet understand how resistance to sensory power relates to sovereign, disciplinary, and regulatory forms of power. How we can play with sensory power in relation to other forms of power is a key question we face now. ■