

Key Challenges in Geography
EUROGEO Book Series

Jan Selmer Methi
Basia Nikiforova *Editors*

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Key Challenges in Geography

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Jan Selmer Methi · Basia Nikiforova
Editors

Borderology

Spatial Perspective, Theoretical and Practical

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Editors

Jan Selmer Methi
Center for Practical Knowledge
Nord University
Bodø, Norway

Basia Nikiforova
Department of Contemporary Philosophy
Lithuanian Culture Research Institute
Vilnius, Lithuania

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Public Realm, Privacy and the Scholars' Lifeworld—Reloaded: An Unintentional Voyeur in a Russian Kitchen



Béla Mester

Abstract In the second year of the pandemic, a lot of experiences accumulated in the field of the online academic life. They are not restricted to the technological skills and to a new wave of the sensibility towards the questions of safety, digital privacy and politics of the usage of big data and personal data. However, these new experiences seriously touch new-type problems of the scholars' lifeworld; this aspect is usually hidden in the theoretical reflections. The publications in the discourse about the new digital environment of the academic life usually focus on technological problems and safety questions linked with them, the aspects of our right for privacy appear in another meaning, as well. In the online conferences and meetings, a whale of private visual information was published what was never available in this uncontrolled form before. The last word of the title refers to the kitchens of the Russian colleagues in Moscow and Murmansk what were not visible by me before the pandemic circumstances. In the time of the pandemic, we were witnesses and participants of a virtual *border-crossing*, in the same time, being on a new *border-line* between the *private* and *public* spheres. The aim of this chapter is to offer a description of this *border-line* situation from a special, but symptomatic aspect of the academic life that is the experience of the online conferences.

Keywords Academic life · Lifeworld · Pandemic · Privacy · Public realm

Introduction

The approach of this chapter has a strange and ambiguous connotation under circumstances of my online participation in a hybrid conference. Actually, it is a part of a bilateral Russian–Hungarian research project what was developed in a synchrony

B. Mester (✉)

Institute of Philosophy, Research Center for the Humanities, Budapest, Hungary

e-mail: mester.bela@abtk.hu

with the pandemic, via an enforced teleconnection.¹ I will discuss here the limits of the capacity of the online conferences and all the teleconnections in the academic life in an online presentation, again, similarly to the previous events of the same project. (Actually, the Russian and Hungarian participants of the research group did not meet each other since the beginning of the project.) In the second year of the pandemic and of our project, as well, a lot of personal experiences accumulated in the field of the online academic life. They are not restricted to the technological skills and to a new wave of the sensibility towards the questions of safety, digital privacy and policies of the usage of big data, especially personal data; they seriously touch new-type problems of the scholars' lifeworld. However, discourses about the new digital environment of the academic life usually focus on technological problems and safety questions linked with them, the aspects of our right for privacy appear in another meaning, as well. In the online conferences and meetings, many private visual information was published what was never available before in an uncontrolled form. The last word of the title of my paper refers to the kitchens of the Russian colleagues in Moscow and Murmansk what were not visible by me before the pandemic circumstances.

In the following, at first, I will offer an overview of the result of the theoretical reflections of the development of the communication, separately in the beginning of the Internet epoch, circa twenty years ago, and today, focussed on the recent publications of two members of our project group, in connection with the pandemic. Later, in the next section, I will show the impacts of the online way of work for the academic sphere; with a separate analysis of the situation of the network of scholar conferences in the last period of the online communication enforced by the pandemic. In the very end of my presentation, I will formulate several aims about the future of the conferences. The experiences of the online conferences in the period of the pandemic can be described as a continuous virtual *border-crossing* between the public and private spheres; by other words, it is a new-type *border-line* situation what can be analysed by the methods of *borderology*.

¹ My present writing is based on my lecture held in the *IX International Kant/Bakhtin Scientific Seminar* entitled *Human Rights, Legal Constraints, Redefined Borders in the Pandemic Era*, organized by the Murmansk Arctic State University (MASU, Russia) and the Nord University (Bodø, Norway), in Murmansk, 20–21 October 2021. The seminar was organized in a hybrid form, because of the pandemic, what was a main topic of the event, as well. My article was developed within the framework of the Russian–Hungarian bilateral research project entitled *The migration of ideas and the formation of national philosophical traditions: dialogues across the borders* (*Миграция идей и формирование национальных философских традиций: диалоги поверх границ*), supported by the Russian Foundation for Basic Research (No. 20–511-23002).

An Overview of the Experiences of the Philosophy of Communication Before the Pandemic

In the last two years of the pandemic, numerous theoretical reflections appeared concerning the new situation of the societal communication. At first, I thought I should not involve in it, because I cannot realize any novelty in these analyses in comparison with the reflections published circa twenty years ago, well-known by me, because our institute was a centre of the philosophy of communication in Hungary, in this time. (For the details of the results of these researches, see the volumes of the series entitled *Communications in the 21st Century*: Nyíri 2003a; 2003b; 2003c; 2004; 2005a; and 2005b.) A central concept of this discourse was the *computer mediated communication (CMC)*. (This term has a mere technical meaning and refers to the human factors, in the same time; works published with this keyword focussed more on the technological issues or, more on the social aspects. It seems to me that the usage of this term in human context was more widespread twenty years ago, and the technical meaning became stronger nowadays; however, one can find opposite examples. For a more human approach, see, e.g. Thurlow–Lengel–Tomic 2004; for the more technical one see, e.g. Kelly 2019.) In this time, the online communication was not as multitudinous as today. The technological background can be described as two symptomatic phenomena of these years. First of them is a pilot project for the online education in the form of a PhD course, in the late 1990s. What was called ‘online course’ in this time; it was just an Internet platform where the written lectures of the professor and the needed readings were available with a chat forum for the discussions. It was not possible to see each other or, meet in real time, and what is more, it was recommended to save the texts and formulate the remarks for the chat forum offline, because of the insecure, but expensive Internet access. My second example is a demonstration of the video conference as the technology of the future, in the framework of the same PhD course. The biggest Hungarian university and our research institute could not ensure the technical background for this demonstration, it needed the help of the biggest mobile phone company.

Under circumstances of this embryonic form of the computer mediated communication, theoretical researches were focussed more on the psychic impacts than on the social or political ones; for the later one, the critical mass of the data was not available, yet. The economical dimension was restricted to the micro-level; how to save time and money by the assistance of video conferences, instead of long and expensive business trips. At least, as an additional point of view has appeared the ecology in the hope of the saved fuel in accordance with the restricted number of the needed business trips and how to save printing papers with the email correspondence, instead of the so-called snail-post. Today we know that the majority of these forecasts were not eventuated, but the empirical psychical result of the researches of the teleconnections remained valid. The first practical question was: What is the maximal lifetime of a communicational community, if it linked by teleconnection, solely? The answer based on practical experiments was that it is not longer than three

months; consequently, the total substitution of the personal contacts by online meetings is impossible; however, they have important auxiliary functions in maintaining the cohesion of a group. It seems that a sufficient number of social experiences for a new level of a social and theoretical analysis are assumed in the eve of the pandemic. It means that a lot of their statements seem to be an effect of the pandemic, but they were actually formulated before and without the context of the pandemic, as well.

Cultural Criticism of the New Forms of Communication with the Pandemic Situation in the Background

The transformation of the new forms of communication, particularly the social media and its new model usage *in* and *by* the politics, offered a whale of theoretical reflections. My present paper's aim cannot be a complete overview of this literature, because my end here is to focus on the experiences of the enforced transition of the academic sphere into the online space, and a special phenomenon within it, the case of the international network of the conferences, seminars and workshops; the broader theoretical horizon of this issue is needed just as the intellectual background of this special topic. Based on these special experiences, I changed my previous opinion that there is not any novelty in this discourse. (See my first essay in this topic entitled *A Russian Kitchen* in Hungarian: Mester 2021.)² In the following, this broader discourse will be exemplified by two authors of the intellectual circle of a Hungarian cultural and ecological periodical entitled *Liget* (*Grove*). However, the *Liget* is engaged to the green thinking and cultural criticism of the technology, it is not linked with any actual movement or, organization. Both the authors referred below are the members of the abovementioned Russian–Hungarian research group, their writings represent a segment of the researches in this project.

A book of Lajos András Kiss, entitled *The Power of Conception*, was published in the present year (Kiss 2021), under conditions of the pandemic, but it clearly was formulated before the first information of the epidemic situation of the world; consequently, the book's today reading and reception offer an opportunity to see how the previous theories are interpreted in the shadow of the pandemic situation. The root of the essays of political philosophy in this volume is the concept of *fear* as the basis both of the political rule and the theoretical analysis of the same rule. The difference between the concept of the authors of the early modernity, such as Machiavelli or, Hobbes and the *fear* in the politics nowadays is that the former one is an actual *mortal fear* caused by actual persons, outlaws or, 'normal' and civil war warriors; the latter one is an unfocussed *angst* as a basis of new-type political hysterias. There are three main sources of this *angst*, *the fear of immigration*, fear of the *ecological crisis* and the fear of *technology*, with a special subtype of the fear of the *communication technology*. The latter one is able to support new self-impulsive

² In the following, I will offer the English equivalents of the Hungarian titles in the main text, for the original version see the list of references.

forms of the *fear*. *Filter bubbles* supported by the modern communicational network make the society an aggregation of the fragmented and isolated identity groups. These groups are as more homogenous and having as more developed narratives of their identity, as more acceptant for an *existential angst* and for the political hysteria rooted in it. They are not afraid of that someone kills them; their fear is angst of the destruction of their identity, in a way; they cannot be the one whom they think and feel themselves.

In this point, we can make a comparison with the analysis of a Hungarian–Australian philosopher, George Márkus, in the late 1990s, about the epistemological requirements of the modern fundamentalisms, formulated in his lecture held in the Collegium Budapest entitled *The Unsystematicity of (Our) Beliefs* (for the written version in Hungarian translation see Márkus 1999). Márkus here met a problem of the late modernity. The promise of the vision of the social modernization was that the social, cultural and religious antagonisms with the irrational taboos of food and everyday behaviour would be eliminated in the modern lifestyle. A good marker of this process is the maintenance or disappears of the religious and other taboos of food. By Márkus's interpretation, modern technology can support not only the elimination, but the maintenance of these taboos, as well. Simply speaking, in the modern world, one can maintain any extreme rule of eating based on religious or unreligious principles, without the danger of starvation, in the first time of the human history. Márkus's description well mirrors the ambivalent relationship of the modern technology and the formation and survive of the identity groups, but the role of the communication technology in the intellectual reproduction of the same groups was not clear for him, it is a novelty of our epoch, thirty years later.

Belief in and Fear of Technology Under Conditions of the Pandemic

The idea of the communication technology as the source of the fear and the fragmentation of the society into small and isolated identity groups appeared suddenly in extreme forms under conditions of the pandemic. The strongest symbol of the fear of communication technology is the pictures of the burning 5G towers in England. Probably, the slogan '*Burn it!*' appeared in the social media before the pandemic, as well, but no one took it seriously. The idea of the fragmentation of the society is worthy for a more detailed discussion. An essay written by Gábor Kovács, entitled *The Angst of the Cyborg in the Time of Pandemic* (Kovács 2021), is a reflection to the above-discussed book of Lajos András Kiss; it is actually a new reading of this book from the point of view of the pandemic what was not known by the author in the time when he wrote these essays, but offers a special and sorrowful confirmation of his historical analysis. Kovács offers a systematic experiment; how the social-philosophical analysis of the book works in the new situation of the pandemic. Kovács's opinions are in accordance with his previous essay written in the first wave of the pandemic

in Hungary, entitled *Facebook and Dance of Death* (Kovács 2020). It is important that Kovács's essay was written in the period of the first wave of the pandemic in Hungary what was characterized by an unfocussed angst; there were relatively strait restrictions, and there was palpable a general existential fear in the daily life, but the majority of the residents did not meet personally the disease. (Later it changed; coronavirus became the part of the daily life, but the people felt in an inert passivity, because we humans biologically cannot tolerate permanent fear in long duration.) By the analysis of Kovács, deprivation from the relationships of physical contact extremely enforced the people into the filter bubbles what existed before, as well. In this communicational situation, ambivalence towards technology was expressed in characteristic forms. On the one hand, the idea of the omnipotence of the science and technology appeared in believe of the advent of vaccine and, on the other, the experience of the end of the unlimited abundance; it will be not enough from everything for everyone in the needed time what was necessary for the survival.

In the last two years, a whale of the theoretical reflections was published about the social consequences of the pandemic in the form of special issues of periodicals, volumes of essays and monographs. It is not a surprise that these theoretical analyses use several well-known concepts for the analysis of a phenomenon what is a radical novelty in their interpretation. Two concepts have a central role in the frames of the interpretation of the current analyses, Carl Schmitt's term of 'state of exception' and Michel Foucault's twin-term of *biopower* and *biopolitics*. (For a characteristic collection of newly published essays on the pandemic together with the relevant classics see, e.g. Foucault–Agamben–Benvenuto 2020.) A central topic described by these concepts is the continuity of the methods of the rule in the periods before and after the pandemic, with often references to the Chinese form of the total digital control of the society, expressed in an extreme form in the state of exception of the pandemic in the *biopower in action*. The solely novelty in this description of the present situation is that it is the first moment in the world history when all the humanity, in the same time, is in *the state of exception*, under the rule of a physically palpable *biopower*. Theoretically, it is more interesting to read the forecasts about the maintenance of the enlarged teleconnection in the time of pandemic after the 'state of exception', as well. It seems that just the more multitudinous usage of the before existing practices was the novelty of the pandemic and not any really new form of the communication. Nevertheless, the endeavour for the maintenance of a kind of 'state of exception' in the social communication is a really interesting phenomenon for the analysis of political philosophy. A contradiction of the communication in the time of pandemic is deeply connected with the root of the modern societies. It is the contradiction of the nature and main message of the global telecommunication about the thick network of communication and the social relationship via the instruments of the modern global communication and the isolation under the pandemic rules of the biopower in the state of exception. Paraphrasing the well-known slogan of an IT corporation, people met the following message in the time of closing, when they connected their home computers with the net:

Welcome in the new world—stay home!

This close link of the global communication and the physically closed public realms inspired several scholars to describe a special ethics of the pandemic. In this interpretation, physical distance is equal in this period with the moral consciousness and sociability. We are as far as physically from each other, we are as close as morally, by this opinion. This idea is often linked with the vision based on the dichotomy of the closed body in the physical realms of the closed cities and the free intellect who is wandering in the endless digital spaces. By the overview of Kovács, this symbolic liberty and this dichotomy are not sustainable for a long period; a virtually free mind cannot substitute perfectly the freedom of the body. By his words, it is an illusion “to substitute the physical closeness by the unlimited freedom of the wandering in the endless digital space”, because “our virtual self is not separable from our physical existence; however, we wish divide them” (Kovács 2020: 17).

This dichotomy is not restricted to the situation of the pandemic; it mirrors the roots of the modern idea of the societies and the political rule. From this point of view, it is a surprise that a well-known formulation of Immanuel Kant does not appear more often in the theoretical reflections to the social consequences of the pandemic. I mean the concept of *unsocial sociability* (*ungesellige Geselligkeit*) in the *Fourth Proposition* of his *Idea for Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose*. In here, Kant refers to a dichotomy or, in his term, *antagonism* in a more general meaning than the free global online communication of the intellects linked with physically closed bodies. He talks about the general dichotomy of every society, by his words:

By antagonism I mean in this context the *unsocial sociability* of men, that is, their tendency to come together in society coupled, however, with a continual resistance which constantly threatens to break this society (Kant 1970: 44).³

In spite of the historical distance and the different environment of the technology of the communication, we can realize that Kant's dilemma appears in a concrete, actual and extreme form, in the situation of the online communication in the time of the pandemic. It offers an opportunity for rethinking of the meaning of the modern society on a Kantian basis; what is an almost missing colour on the spectrum of the contemporary analyses of the social aspects of the pandemic world situation.

Using the patterns of the general social aspects discussed above, in the following I will offer an applied analysis, for the specialities of the academic life.

The Discomfort of the Academic Sphere in the Enforced Online Space of the Pandemic Situation

In the academic sphere, we can observe a rationalized form of the average public discourse. In the beginning, there were highly rare theoretical reflections to the mental

³ The original German text of Kant's *Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht*: “Ich verstehen hier unter dem Antagonismus die *ungesellige Geselligkeit* des Menschen, d.i. den Hang derselben in Gesellschaft zu treten, der doch mit einem durch gängigen Widerstande, welche diese Gesellschaft beständig zu trennen droht, verbunden ist”.

conditions of the academic people in comparison with the reports about other social spheres. It had moral roots in the discourse of the intellectuals; it was regarded unethical to talking about the special mental conditions of the new enforced online environment of the academic work from a relatively comfortable situation when other people worked in a concrete health danger of the pandemic or, lost their jobs and incomes. The first topics of the academic domestic discourse were the classical problems of the data safety and the challenges of the management of the big data. When several academic communities had enthusiastic debates about the optimal platform of the online communication—I can refer just the opinions of the fellows of my institute, only—one could realize that it was a more important question for our communities than a practical, technical issue. It can be regarded as a special academic form of the ambivalent relationship between society and technology. We are depended on the technology, we need it, especially in the state of exception of the time of pandemic, but we are vulnerable by it, in the same time.

The discussion was continued with the problem of the records made in the online events and the questions of the personal rights and copyrights concerning them. The practice of rationalization was detectable in here, again. The most common argument was against the unlimited records that in these seminars, several unpublished scientific results were mentioned; and their 'grey publicity' before their official publication is against the interests of the institute what the author is affiliated to. This problem made clear that the online workshop or seminar does not just *substitute* the previous physical form, but represents new-type publicity. By an example from the practice of our Research Centre, a talk about unpublished archaeological findings, what was usual in a domestic seminar of a research group, became suddenly a highly sensitive question in the case of the *online* seminar of the *same* research group, because of the possibility that the talk and the shown pictures will be recorded. However, the problem is real, in this case, as well, the enthusiastic, sometimes hysteric emotional background of the discourse offers a hidden reference; we should take seriously these emotions as the signs of the general mental condition of the academic people; signed by a solely expression, it is a social discomfort feeling.

At last, but not least, in the end of the present writing, I should discuss a special subsystem of the academic life what is the network of the scholar conferences. At the beginning of the pandemic, it remained in the background, because at first, we were focussed on our primer tasks, to organize our university lectures, exams and official meetings in the online space. Later, when the industry of production of the series of the online conferences begun, we had ambiguous emotions towards them. At first, it was a pleasure to see the known colleagues, again, and it was the same emotion to see again the familiar lecture rooms of our partner institutions, as well. But in the case of the purely online, and not hybrid events, when everybody was at home, the usage of the web camera was connected with an ambiguous feeling of an *unintentional voyeur who see others and others' home, amongst other unintentional voyeurs who see me, and my home*. This ambiguous feeling can be formulated by the hypothetical question that 'what I am doing in the kitchen of a colleague in a strange city, where I have never been'. I do not mean a formal indiscretion, or unveiled personal secrets,

just a discomfort because of the enforced and unintentional confusion of the private and public realms.

Of course, this discomfort emotion can appear in any meetings of the online space, but it is the strongest in the case of the conference network, because this network is characterized in the terminology of the *theory of systems* as a network of the so-called weak links. The significance of the weak links is more and more recognized in the humanities, in opposition of the well-structured institutions. Using a musical metaphor, if a university lecture is a *recital* based on *sheet music*, a good meeting of the scholars is a *jam session*. (It is not occasional that we can call both of them with the same word 'workshop'.) This network of the scholar meetings can offer an inspiration for the further researches, but it is highly vulnerable because it is based just on the network of the 'weak links'. However, the exposure to any discomfort circumstances of these systems of weak links is constantly bigger than the well-established institutions with a stabilized number and fixed task of the contributors, and these networks have their special functions in the researches, especially in the philosophical thinking. We will not have exact, precise data about the necessary amount of the personal, physical connections for the philosophical thinking, in any time, but it must be more than zero. By my personal opinion, based partly on the experiences of the last two years, there is a part, may be, the core of the philosophical thinking connected to the concept of *personal knowledge* and *nonverbal communication* what is not transferable to the online space. To fulfil this function is, amongst others, an important task of the conferences with personal participation; we cannot save their costs because of rational and financial reasons. We should not forget Plato's description of the birth of the philosophical knowledge in his *Seventh Letter*:

For it does not at all admit of verbal expression like other studies, but, as a result of continued application to the subject itself and communion therewith, it is brought to birth in the soul on a sudden, as light that is kindled by a leaping spark, and thereafter it nourishes itself. (Plato's *Seventh Letter* 341c–d; Plato 1966)

It is true that the metaphor of the 'light within one's soul' can be interpreted in many varieties, and in different forms, and we cannot construct a contra-factual statement about Plato's supposed opinion about the forms of the 'communion of philosophers' under conditions of the infrastructural, institutional and communicational circumstances of the late modernity. It is our task to apply Plato's words for the present situation. In this thinking, a single element should be constant: 'communion of philosophers' refers here to *living* persons in a common *physical* space and not to a *ghost in the machine*.

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