

# HIGHLIGHTS 2020-2022



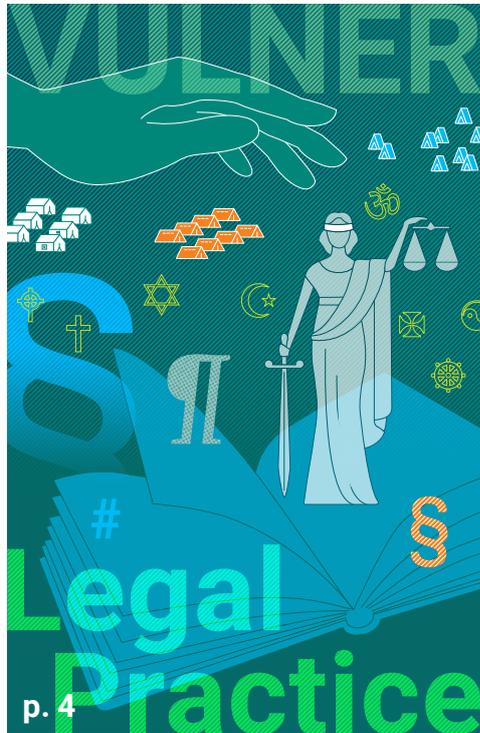
# Preface

The following “highlights” present a selection of the MPI’s major achievements in research, collaboration, publishing, and promotion of junior scientists over the period 2020–2022. In this volume, the three Departments, ‘Anthropology & Law’, ‘Anthropology of Politics and Governance’, and ‘Anthropology of Economic Experimentation’, and two selected research groups, the Max Planck Research Group ‘How “Terrorists” Learn’ and the Max Planck Fellow Group ‘Environmental Rights in Cultural Context’, report on their thematic research foci, major publications, innovative collaborative work, and public engagement activities. These highlights not only demonstrate common concerns in our research on current global challenges but also hint at new ways of engaging with the public and colleagues, including media appearances and creative forms of transdisciplinary and transcontinental cooperation.

We hope you enjoy this overview of some of the most prominent outputs the Institute has produced over the last three years.

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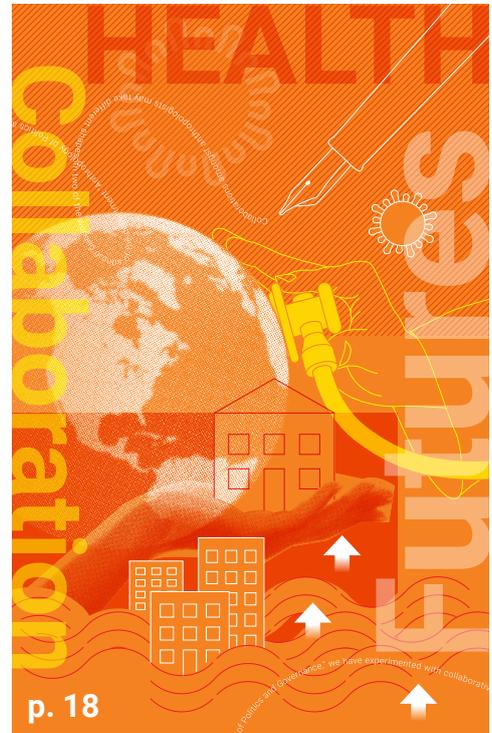


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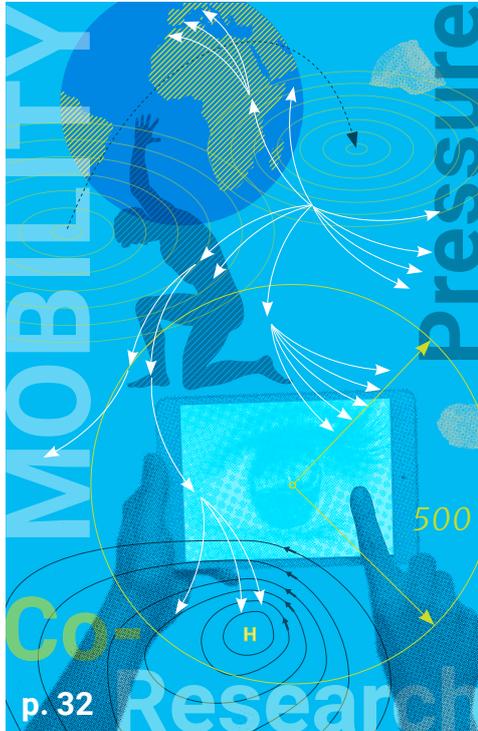


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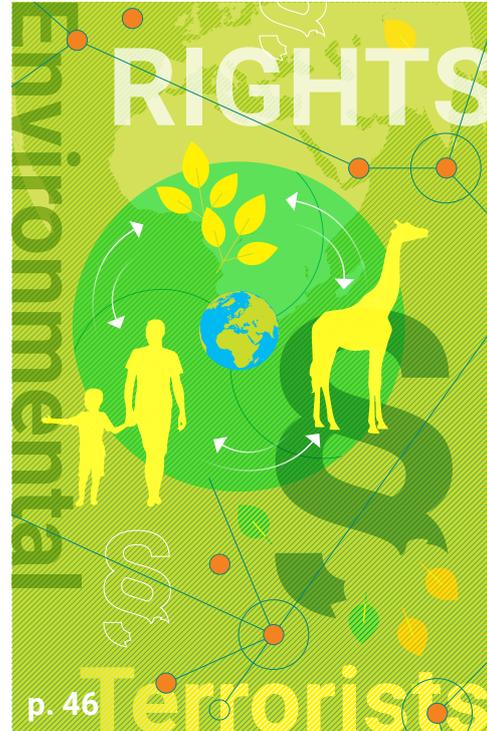


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# VULNER



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Legal

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## Bringing Anthropology into Law

Since its inception in 2013, the ‘Law & Anthropology’ Department’s mandate has been to explore how two clearly distinct disciplines – anthropology and legal science – can collaborate more intensively not only to better understand the complexity of certain realities, but also to see how such an apprehension can be translated into law. It is mainly through this latter ambition, namely the “return to law”, that the Department seeks to distinguish itself. The goal is to realize the potential contribution of anthropology to the legal formulation of concrete responses to situations that are more familiar to anthropologists than to jurists. There is no shortage of work in anthropology that addresses law and legal issues in general. More exceptional, however, are works that seek to effectively contribute to the legal approach itself in a way that meets the requirements of legal thinking without losing the richness of anthropological knowledge.

In this report we highlight three types of activities that, in different but complementary ways, give substance to the Department’s inherently interdisciplinary efforts: 1) development of an extensive web-based resource on the accommodation of cultural and religious diversity within the domestic jurisdictions of the 27 EU Member States, in combination with specialized training courses for magistrates across Europe; 2) targeted publications; and 3) active support of young researchers who seek to develop their interdisciplinary skills through third-party-funded research projects.

The first involves close collaboration with the European Network of Councils for the Judiciary (ENCJ) and the European Judicial Training Network

(EJTN). The Department provides training courses related to the accommodation of religious and cultural diversity across Europe. During the reporting period the scope of these courses expanded considerably, and they have been recognized as among the most successful offered by the EJTN. The Department is also developing an unprecedented case-law database offering the most comprehensive documentation available of diversity-related court decisions in the EU.

Second are two major publications that exemplify the Department’s commitment to advancing the dialogue between law and anthropology. The first, *The Oxford Handbook of Law and Anthropology* (2021), was initiated and supported both intellectually and financially by the Department. The second is a special issue of the *German Law Journal* that is entirely devoted to work undertaken by some of the Department’s legal scholars, who discuss how they bring an anthropological approach to bear on their legal work and some of the difficulties they have encountered in the process.

Finally, the Department actively supports young researchers in their efforts to obtain external funding for major research projects that straddle the two disciplines. We have had great success, with no fewer than five projects receiving funding in the 2020–2022 period. One of these, the VULNER project, is coming to an end soon; we therefore include it as an exemplar of the type of third-party-funded projects we support.

# 1 Connecting to Legal Practice

**MARIE-CLAIRE  
FOBLETS**

*Department 'Law &  
Anthropology'*

The Department 'Law & Anthropology' is committed to maintaining the connection between the research conducted at the Department and the day-to-day work of legal practitioners involved in issues of cultural and religious diversity across Europe. Two central pillars of these efforts are presented here: the training of judges and the database project known as CURED.I.

**A** defining feature of the research programme of the Department 'Law & Anthropology' is the commitment to bringing legal scholars and anthropologists together on one team to explore how the two disciplines can join forces to provide richer, more sophisticated analyses of the pressing issues we study.

One central component of the Department's activities in this regard is the connection to legal practice. The aim is twofold: first, to ensure that the research supported by the Department is not disconnected from questions that occupy legal practitioners as they go about elaborating solutions and dispensing justice; second, to explore the extent to which a truly interdisciplinary collaboration between law, both in its doctrinal and applied dimensions, and expertise acquired in social and cultural anthropology can offer insights into questions of shared interest.

Below we highlight the two main pillars of our efforts in this direction: our collaboration with the European Judicial Training Network (EJTN) and the CURED.I project.

## **Collaboration with the EJTN**

Collaborative engagement with the judiciary began in 2013 with a survey conducted under the aegis of the European Network of Councils of the Judiciary (ENCJ). Some 100 judges from 14 European

countries responded, providing information on their experiences with adjudicating multicultural conflicts. In January 2015, the ENCJ convened a meeting, "Cultural Diversity and the Judiciary in Europe", which brought together 35 judges, lawyers, and legal scholars from 11 European countries to discuss the survey results. One of the themes emerging from these discussions, namely, the need for targeted training on issues of cultural, religious, and social diversity, was subsequently taken up by the EJTN. At their request, the Department developed a one-and-a-half-day training module in which teams of trainers consisting of a legal expert, an anthropologist, and a facilitator guided a group of 40–45 judges from various EU Member States through a discussion of sample cases in areas such as family law, asylum law, criminal law, and labour law. This module was offered for the first time in November 2018 in Wiesbaden and is now offered on an annual basis as part of the EJTN's training programme. The first training session in the 2020–2022 reporting period was held in November 2020 (online due to COVID-19). On 18–19 November 2021, a second training session was held in Barcelona and received such overwhelmingly positive evaluations from participating judges that the 2022 training course was again held in Barcelona (15–16 September 2022). On the anonymous evaluation form, one judge wrote of the 2021 training course, "I was absolutely delighted to take part in this seminar! ... The professionalism and sincerity of the MPI



*Participants of the 2022 CURED1 conference in the back yard of the Harnack Haus, Berlin.*

team were very impressive, the content and methods were highly beneficial not only for practitioners, but also for me working in the field of judicial training.” Another simply wrote, “It was the best EJTN seminar I have ever attended!” The 2023 training will take place in Vienna, with the EJTN staff in Brussels working to expand the training programme.

Two related initiatives have developed out of these training modules: a study visit by judges to our institute in Halle, and plans to publish, under the aegis of the European Commission, a casebook with judgments from across EU jurisdictions addressing cultural and religious diversity. Both initiatives have met with strong financial and logistic support from the EJTN.

On 22–26 March 2021, the first one-week study visit was held (online due to COVID-19). The topic was “Family Law and Cultural/Religious Diversity in Contemporary Europe”, with the programme

coordinated by Alice Margaria. The five participating judges were nominated by the Member States’ ministries of justice and underwent a rigorous selection process to ensure that their interests and profiles fit with the topic. On 25–29 April 2022, the Department hosted the second study visit, a face-to-face meeting in Halle with 11 judges (the maximum number allowed by the EJTN) from 9 EU Member States. These study visits offer a unique forum for in-depth exchange and collaboration between members of the Department (legal scholars and anthropologists) and legal practitioners. The visits received rave reviews. As one anonymous reviewer noted, “I now have so many tools, ideas, and materials to turn to whenever I have any issues regarding cultural differences.” According to another, “The exchange between the anthropological view and the legal view will certainly humanize the application of justice.”

In a similar vein, the Department is coordinating a casebook that will contain a selection of judgments from EU Member States involving issues of cultural and religious diversity. Each judgment is accompanied by two commentaries, one from a legal scholar or practitioner and one from an anthropologist with expertise on the topic. While the casebook is intended primarily for legal practitioners and will be distributed through the EJTN, commentators are also encouraged to speak to a wider academic audience; the aim is for the casebook to foster further debate on the role of judiciaries in the governance of multicultural societies in Europe.

To date, no fewer than 23 Department members and associates have been involved in these various

**The exchange between the anthropological view and the legal view will certainly humanize the application of justice.**

forms of collaboration with the EJTN, including (in alphabetical order): Imad Alsoos, Beate Anam, Sophie Andreetta, Jonathan Bernaerts, Katia Bianchini, Ana Chiritoiu, Jeanise Dalli, Harika Dauth, Michelle Flynn, Imen Gallala-Arndt, Alice Margaria, Mariana Monteiro de Matos, Waseem Naser, Faris Nasrallah, Maria Nikolova, Frederike Nun, Stefano Osella, Eugenia Relaño Pastor, Clara Rigoni, Abdelghafar Salim, Federica Sona, Larissa Vettters, and Markus Vollert. They have helped set up working groups on a particular case or field of law for the training sessions, drawn on their knowledge of current jurisprudence, provided insights from their fieldwork, developed the programme for the study visits, or chosen topics and proposed judgments for the casebook. This engagement has been productive in terms of generating new insights for their individual research projects and enriching as a professional experience beyond a strictly academic environment.

### **CUREDl: Cultural and Religious Diversity Database**

The second collaborative engagement of the Department with legal practice and the judiciary is the project Cultural and Religious Diversity under State Law across the European Union (CUREDl), a web-based repository of data having to do with how cultural and religious diversity is granted recognition within the framework of the domestic legal orders of EU Member States. CUREDl is built on a network of scientific research teams with established interest and expertise in the relevant issues and jurisdictions.

CUREDl compiles in a standardized and searchable format data drawn from legislation, case law, and various types of regulations and administrative



practices in EU Member States, with a view to documenting the legal reasoning and showing how domestic legal orders are gradually adapting to the reality of increasing cultural and religious diversity and the demands for recognition that come with it. The information focuses on the arguments used – in a court decision, a bill, an administrative decision, etc. – to justify granting or, on the contrary, rejecting a claim of recognition of minority rights. To the extent possible, reference is also made to the empirical evidence that was drawn upon by the legislators or judges (e.g., recourse to expert witnesses) to reach the given outcome. By thoroughly documenting, updating, and analysing relevant legal materials, CUREDl seeks to:

1. examine disparities across EU Member States in addressing cases that directly or indirectly touch on cultural and religious diversity;
2. identify the legal solutions inherited from the past that have historically regulated forms of diversity;
3. document and assess more recent forms of regulation of diversity (such as public policy guidelines), as well as ancillary documents and practices that acknowledge the need for accommodating diversity and illustrate the balancing of interests at stake;
4. link to existing databases that have a similar aim and cover relevant topics.

In the long run CUREDl aims to offer an interactive, searchable, and fully indexed compendium of case law, legislation, administrative policies, international instruments and other materials on cultural and religious diversity as it is addressed within European jurisdictions. CUREDl focuses on how culture and religion are (re)defined, on a case-to-case basis, in and through their relationship to law. This relationship is at times submitted to fairly radical reappraisal in the context of highly sensitive and much debated societal and institutional conflicts of interests. CUREDl explores how different jurisdictions deal with similar or comparable conflicts, without prioritizing any existing conception of culture or religion over another.

Another distinctive feature is that CUREDl incorporates input from anthropology to clarify the (legal) issues at stake. It does so with reference to ethnographies that can offer more in-depth knowledge on specific topics. The CUREDl project defines “culture” broadly as a way of life in general that includes the values, premises, practices, frames of meaning, and moral orders through which members of any given community organize their interactions. Rather than adhering to predefined understandings

**CUREDl documents the legal reasoning and shows how domestic legal orders are gradually adapting to the reality of increasing cultural and religious diversity and the demands for recognition that come with it.**



comprehensive data. At this stage the target group is academics and researchers specifically interested in the accommodation of cultural and religious diversity under state law. Once the repository is sufficiently well developed, it will be made publicly accessible to both legal and non-legal actors, at which time it will no doubt prove useful for decision makers in both the public and private sectors, including public administrations at various levels, legal practitioners, universities, health services, and research centres. ●



## Marie-Claire Foblets

Marie-Claire Foblets is Founding Director of the Department 'Law & Anthropology'. She is Honorary Professor at the Catholic University of Leuven (Belgium), Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg (Germany), and the University of Leipzig (Germany). She holds two doctorates *honoris causa*, one from the Facultés universitaires Saint-Louis (Belgium) and the other from the University of Uppsala (Sweden).

of culture and religion, CURED I adopts a functional approach (using topics, keywords, branches of law, jurisdictions). As such, the database can be seen as an intrinsically interdisciplinary project that is open to input from academic disciplines that are profoundly familiar with the study of cultures and religions, particularly anthropology.

Ultimately, the aim is that the CURED I database will enable researchers, legal experts, judges, and other professionals charged with ruling on diversity across the EU to easily locate accurate and relevant information to help them bring nuance into their legal reasoning about diversity issues and support their arguments with better, more accessible, more

# 2 Publishing a Fraught Relationship

**BRIAN DONAHOE**

*Department 'Law & Anthropology'*

The 'Law & Anthropology' Department's collective publications focus on the most promising areas of innovation and provide a solid foundation for the Department's various outreach activities and applied work. Here we look at two recent efforts: *The Oxford Handbook of Law and Anthropology* and a special issue of the *German Law Journal*.

While the 'Law & Anthropology' Department's more applied efforts as detailed in the previous section highlight the importance of the practical application of anthropological research in terms of policy, legislation, and legal reasoning, such efforts can only be effective if they are undergirded by solid, basic research. And the lifeblood of any institution conducting basic research is publications.

Of the many publications that have come out of the Department in the 2020–2022 reporting period, we would like to draw attention to two that we feel best reflect not only the Department's efforts to integrate law and anthropology, but also its work towards theorizing the relationship between the two disciplines.

## The Oxford Handbook of Law and Anthropology

2021 saw the publication of *The Oxford Handbook of Law and Anthropology*, a project that is closely associated with the innovative research programme of the Department, yet goes beyond it to provide a crucial service to the discipline more generally.

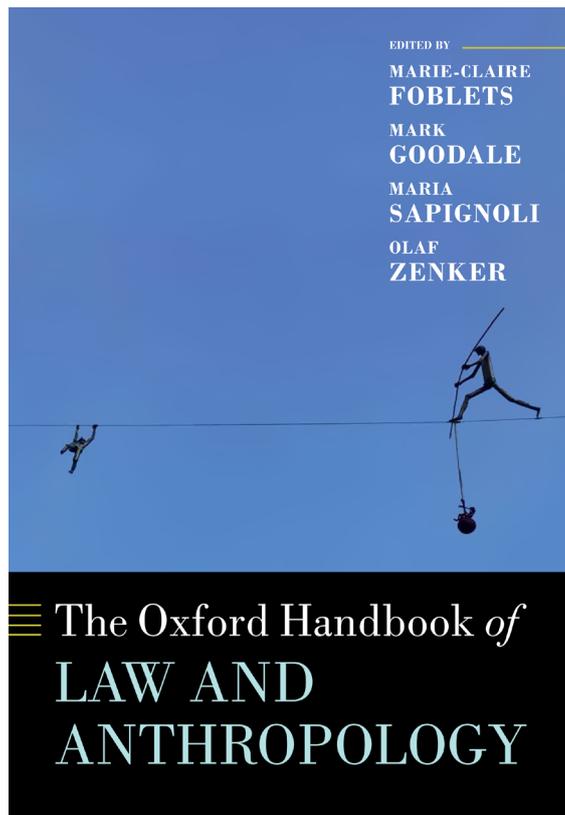
The *Handbook* was initiated and supported financially and organizationally by the Department, and counts no fewer than 20 members and close

associates of the Department among its 60 authors, including the four editors: Marie-Claire Foblets (Director of the Department), Maria Sapignoli (co-operation partner and former postdoctoral researcher), and Mark Goodale and Olaf Zenker (both members of the Department's Consultative Committee; see [https://www.eth.mpg.de/3220891/consultative\\_committee](https://www.eth.mpg.de/3220891/consultative_committee)).

The seeds for this publication were planted in 2014 on the occasion of the annual meeting of the Department's Consultative Committee, where it was suggested that the Department could make a signal contribution to the discipline by publishing a reference work that would build on our interdisciplinary vision.

The idea germinated for some time, and finally took root in 2017, when the editorial collective held a series of meetings to sketch out the structure of the volume and draw up lists of potential contributors. The search for authors was guided by the quest to achieve a balance between highly qualified scholars from both the global South and the global North, from different backgrounds and academic traditions, and, of course, between scholars in law and in anthropology. In the end, a diverse spectrum of 60 scholars representing 24 countries, all recognized experts in their specific topics at the intersection of law and anthropology, agreed to contribute.

To strengthen the interdisciplinary nature of the endeavour, authors were encouraged to work in



**The *Handbook* lays out a new framework for the field of law and anthropology that identifies and conceptualizes its most promising areas of innovation and sociolegal relevance, while also acknowledging its points of tension, open questions, and areas of future development.**



tandem: legal scholars with anthropologists. Several contributions thus count two authors active in one or both of the disciplines. The close collaboration between law and anthropology was further reinforced by the review process, with legal scholars reading the contributions by anthropologists and vice versa.

Once the chapters were drafted, the Department convened a meeting in Berlin to present and discuss them. The three-day meeting served as a sort of peer review of the contributions and fostered a very productive cross-fertilization of views and approaches between law and anthropology.

The result is a groundbreaking collection of 50 essays that provides an original and forward-looking overview of the field, distributed over 5 parts:

- Part I: Global Perspectives on Law and Anthropology
- Part II: Recurring Themes in Law and Anthropology
- Part III: Anthropology in Law and Legal Practice
- Part IV: Anthropology at the Limits of Law
- Part V: Current Directions in Law and Anthropology

As the editors note in their introduction, the *Handbook* serves as a scholarly benchmark at a time when legal anthropological research is growing rapidly and finding ever broader applications. It organizes this diverse and expansive set of research interests into a coherent collective narrative about how law and anthropology relate to each other as intersecting domains of inquiry concerning fundamental questions of dispute resolution, normative ordering, social organization, and legal, political, and social identity. This overview showcases the knowledge that can be gained when legal scholars and anthropologists join forces to address issues in such key spheres as immigration and asylum processes, international justice forums, debates over cultural heritage, and the writing of new national constitutions, among many others. The *Handbook* takes critical stock of these points of intersection to document the wide range of collaborative work that can be done and deserves to be encouraged. Just as importantly, the *Handbook* lays out a new framework for the field of law and anthropology that identifies and conceptualizes its most promising areas of innovation and sociolegal relevance, while also acknowledging its points of tension, open questions, and areas of future development.

**... taking recourse to anthropology is not something to be taken lightly for legal scholars and practitioners; it is inevitably accompanied by challenges, risks, and considerable investment, both intellectual and methodological.**



### German Law Journal

The second publication that deserves special mention is smaller in scale and followed a very different trajectory, yet has the same underlying inspiration and motivation. It is a special issue of the highly acclaimed *German Law Journal* titled “Breaching the Boundaries of Law and Anthropology: New Pathways for Legal Research”, and was guest edited by Marie-Claire Foblets and two members of the Department’s Consultative Committee, Jean-François Gaudreault-DesBiens and Michele Graziadei. It contains an introduction by the guest editors, followed by seven original articles, all written by legal scholars who are either members of the Department or otherwise closely associated with it, that showcase how these legal scholars make use of the conceptual and methodological toolbox that anthropology has to offer to enhance their legal thinking, argumentation, and practice.

However, taking recourse to anthropology is not something to be taken lightly for legal scholars and practitioners; it is inevitably accompanied by challenges, risks, and considerable investment, both intellectual and methodological. Moreover, this is an investment for which they often have to justify themselves to the outside world, as the profoundly interdisciplinary exercise of combining two intellectual approaches as different as law and anthropology

for the study of legal themes is often seen, from the point of view of law, as not sufficiently doctrinal.

Each contributor explains what he or she gains from studying how legal texts and systems are experienced by people on the ground. They offer specific illustrations of how they incorporate insights from anthropology into the study of the law – what is referred to in the introduction to these highlights as the “return to law”. The authors also address – very candidly – the challenges they have faced in the process of integrating their intellectual encounter with anthropology into their reflections on law.



GERMAN LAW JOURNAL

Open Access to Comparative, European, and International Law

GLJ

Breaching the Boundaries  
of Law and Anthropology:  
New Pathways  
for Legal Research

Guest Editors: Marie-Claire Foblets, Jean-François  
Gaudreault-DesBiens and Michele Graziadei

CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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The Special Issue kicks off with an introduction by the guest editors that emphasizes the trials, tribulations, and rewards of this interdisciplinary venture. The contributions that follow touch on a wide variety of highly topical issues that are at the heart of the human condition, including recognition of “third-gender” legal rights in Europe (Stefano Osella); witchcraft-related asylum cases in the UK (Katia Bianchini); non-majoritarian language use in administrative interactions in Belgium (Jonathan Bernaerts); migrants’ experiences of “vulnerability” (Luc Leboeuf); the potential of mobility as an adaptive strategy in the face of climate change (Marie Courtoy); the failure of “environmental rights” to translate into real protections for communities suffering from environmental degradation (Dirk Hanschel, Mario G. Aguilera Bravo, Bayar Dashpurev, and Abduletif Idris); and the value of the *extended case method* to show how the European Court of Human Rights gradually shunted religion out of the picture in a famous child custody case (Alice Margaria).

The ultimate goal of this Special Issue is to demonstrate that the methods, tools, and data drawn from anthropology can enhance legal thinking and help jurists trained in state law to develop a more refined understanding of today’s societal complexity and challenges and, ultimately, to reach more nuanced, sensitive, and just decisions. ●

# 3 Vulnerabilities under the Global Protection Regime (VULNER)



**LUC LEBOEUF**

Department 'Law & Anthropology'

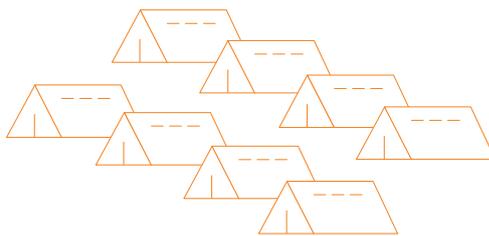
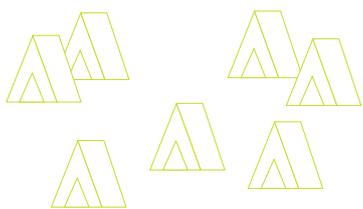
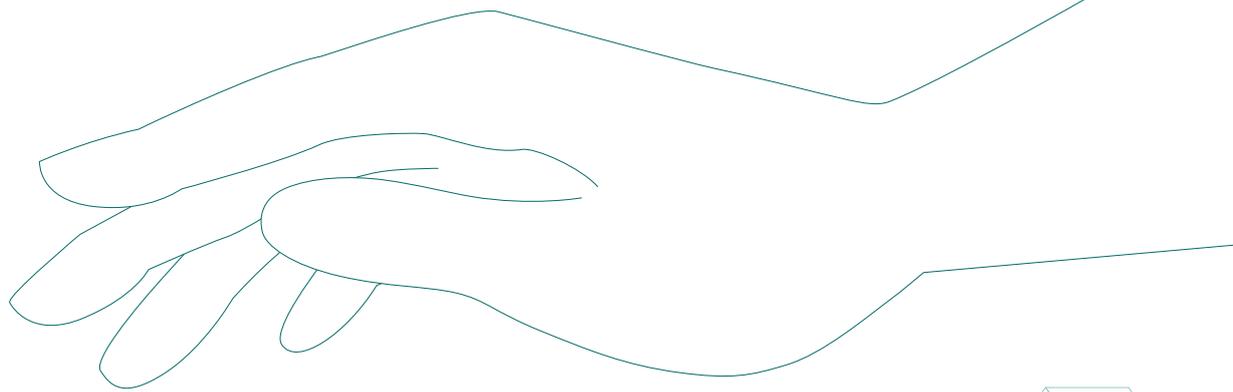
Legal and policy instruments at the global and European levels increasingly emphasize the importance of addressing the specific needs of vulnerable migrants. But what does it mean to be “vulnerable”? VULNER aims to investigate this question through field studies in selected refugee settlements in Europe (Belgium, Germany, Italy, and Norway), Africa (Uganda), the Middle East (Lebanon), and North America (Canada).

**V**ULNER is a collaborative research project that was funded by the EU under the Horizon 2020 framework programme (€ 3,000,000 GA No. 870845) from February 2020 to June 2023. It involves an international consortium of nine research institutions across Europe, Canada, and the Middle East, and is coordinated from the Department 'Law & Anthropology'. The project's overall aim is to reach a better understanding of the state regulations and practices that aim to address the vulnerabilities of refugees and other migrants seeking protection, and how these people experience their vulnerabilities.

To achieve this goal, all project partners have adopted a two-fold methodology that confronts the study of legal norms and their operationalization by state actors on the ground with the analysis of migrants' experiences of their main life challenges – including how these experiences are shaped, and sometimes even produced, through interactions with state actors and as a result of the architecture of legal mobility regimes. Such a field-level approach, which analyses migration law in its operational dimensions and then confronts it with migrants' experiences, allows the researchers to develop grounded, critical thinking on the promises, challenges, and pitfalls of mobilizing “vulnerability” as a tool for asylum and migration governance.

## Coordinating an International Research Consortium to Produce Policy-Relevant Research Findings

The Horizon 2020 programme aims to fund research consortia that produce policy-relevant research, the findings of which can inform policymakers and assist them in developing evidence-based policies. VULNER has, therefore, been structured as a *collaborative* project. The common research tools and instruments that guide the data collection and analysis, as well as templates for project publications and other tools aimed at guaranteeing the coherence of the project's outputs, were developed by the project coordinator, Luc Leboeuf, in close collaboration with the leading partners involved: Cathrine Brun (Center for Lebanese Studies), Winfried Kluth (Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg), Hilde Liden (Norwegian Institute for Social Research), Delphine Nakache (University of Ottawa), Sophie Nakueira (Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology), and Sylvie Sarolea (Catholic University of Louvain). The VULNER research teams also involve lawyers, sociologists, and social anthropologists (for a complete list of members of the VULNER research teams, see <https://vulner.eu/>).



The objective of the common research tools is to guarantee methodological and theoretical rigour and coherence, while still granting the partners enough leeway to develop their own conceptual analyses within the project's overall theoretical framework in ways that ultimately allow them to better reflect the specificities of their field. They also create the conditions for vivid conceptual debates and exchanges within the VULNER consortium, as the researchers address a wide range of very different legal and policy contexts (from asylum processes in the Western countries to access to humanitarian aid and resettlement in first countries of asylum in the Middle East and Africa).

### Studying Fuzzy Legal Concepts and their Operationalization by Street-Level Bureaucracy

The development of human rights law goes hand in hand with the proliferation of “fuzzy” legal concepts that leave a (relatively) wide margin of appreciation to state actors, including the judges and street-level bureaucrats who ultimately implement them in concrete, individual cases. “Vulnerability” has not escaped that trend. It is increasingly mobilized in UN and EU legal and policy discourses on asylum and migration, which often call for specific protection measures for the most vulnerable refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants. But the legal definition of “vulnerability” and its consequences are still unclear. On the one hand, there is an obligation under EU law to address the “specific needs” of the most vulnerable asylum seekers, such as children, when granting them access to reception services and organizing

# VULNER

asylum processes. This obligation is implemented in varying ways by the national administrations of the EU Member States. On the other hand, “vulnerability” is increasingly mobilized by national and international courts, such as the European Court of Human Rights, to underpin and justify their decisions. However, without a generally accepted definition and consistent use of the concept, the precise consequences of “vulnerability” and its role in the legal reasoning remain underdetermined.

The VULNER project seeks to enhance knowledge of the concrete, on-the-ground consequences of these policies and legal developments at the EU and global levels. It therefore combines analysis of the laws and regulations that have been adopted to implement EU and international commitments in each of the countries under study with empirical documentation through ethnographic fieldwork of the practices state actors engage in to operationalize these norms – including how and to what extent they adapt their practices to cater for the specific needs of those who are in the most vulnerable positions, and the practical obstacles they identify when doing so.

**One objective is to reach a better understanding of the determinants of migrants' positions of vulnerability, how they intersect and interact, and how they evolve over time – while duly considering and recognizing migrants' agency.**

### **Understanding Migrants' Experiences and How They are Shaped by State Norms and Practices**

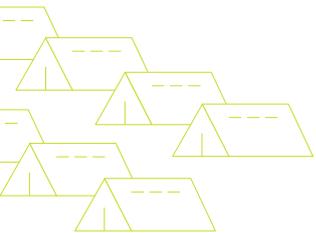
In addition to documenting – and questioning – the operationalization of “vulnerability” through state practices on the ground, VULNER researchers conduct ethnographic fieldwork to observe and analyse migrants' own experiences of their vulnerabilities: what are the main life challenges they identify when seeking access to a protection status (such as refugee status)? One objective is to reach a better understanding of the determinants of migrants' positions of vulnerability, how they intersect and interact, and how they evolve over time – while duly considering and recognizing migrants' agency, including their ability to mobilize and navigate the vulnerability categories as established in laws and in more or less formalized bureaucratic practices. Another objective is to identify mismatches between legal and bureaucratic understandings of migrants' vulnerabilities and their actual experiences.

For this reason, the analytical focus lies on how experiences of vulnerabilities may vary depending on migrants' personal characteristics (such as age, health, or gender) and life circumstances (such as the events and persecutions experienced before and during the flight); interactions with state actors as part of the relevant processes of obtaining protection and access to protection services (including as part of the implementation of norms and regulations that are aimed at addressing migrants' vulnerabilities); and broader structural factors that relate to how states regulate migration and refugee movements.

### **Reflecting Critically on Current Trends in Migration and Asylum Governance at the EU and Global Levels**

The VULNER outputs are, not surprisingly, highly diverse, given the great variety of fields involved in the research. They nonetheless reveal some common trends that highlight the promises, challenges, and pitfalls of relying on “vulnerability” as a tool of asylum and migration governance. First, they show how “vulnerability” is transforming as it gets juridified. “Vulnerability” has a long history as a conceptual tool used to advocate in favour of the ethics of care, that is, states' moral obligations to set up welfare provisions for the weakest members of society. It is now evolving from an analytical concept that serves to reach a better understanding of situated human experience into a legal and bureaucratic label with exclusionary effects.

Overall, the VULNER findings show that the exclusionary effects of the “vulnerability” label often rest on stereotyped understandings of migrants' experiences that fail to account for how migrants exercise agency in their attempts to overcome obstacles to their mobility. This ultimately fuels a “vulnerability competition”, as migrants are required to “perform” their vulnerabilities with a view to obtaining access to protection. Moreover, vulnerabilities beyond those that arise from personal characteristics (such as age, gender, or health status) often remain overlooked. Little attention is paid to those experiences of vulnerability resulting from complex intersecting factors





*Graffiti on the wall of a reception centre for asylum seekers in Italy.*

that are intrinsically linked to legal processes (such as the prolonged uncertainty associated with pending decisions on applications to obtain protection) and broader mobility constraints.

The “vulnerability” label thus needs to be questioned from a critical perspective, one that also considers how it reflects the current paradoxes and tensions in asylum and migration governance. These include increased reliance on humanitarian concepts such as “vulnerability” to legitimize the excluding effects that are inherent in asylum and migration policy, despite the fact that such concepts have been shown to fuel condescending attitudes towards the behaviour of migrants, whose experiences are then framed in terms of pity and deservingness. Such a framing blurs legal and societal debates by diverting the focus away from identifying *legal rights* (who should be entitled to what?) and towards patronizing and victimizing discourses (who is enough of a victim to deserve protection?), thereby ultimately obscuring migrants’ coping strategies and abilities to navigate obstacles to their mobility. ●



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## Luc Leboeuf

Luc Leboeuf coordinates the VULNER project. He is also a guest professor in the Law Faculty at the Catholic University of Louvain. Before joining the Department in 2017, he taught migration law at the Universities of Louvain and Antwerp, and practised at the Bar of the Walloon Brabant in Belgium.

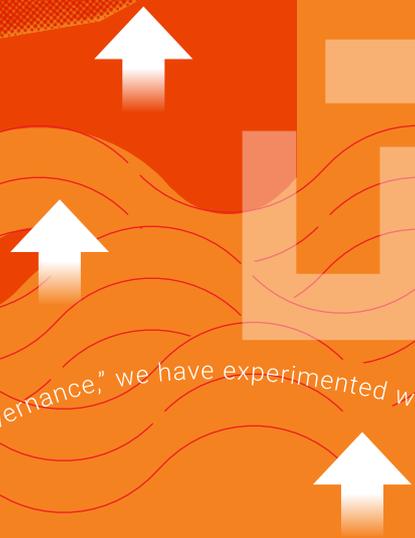
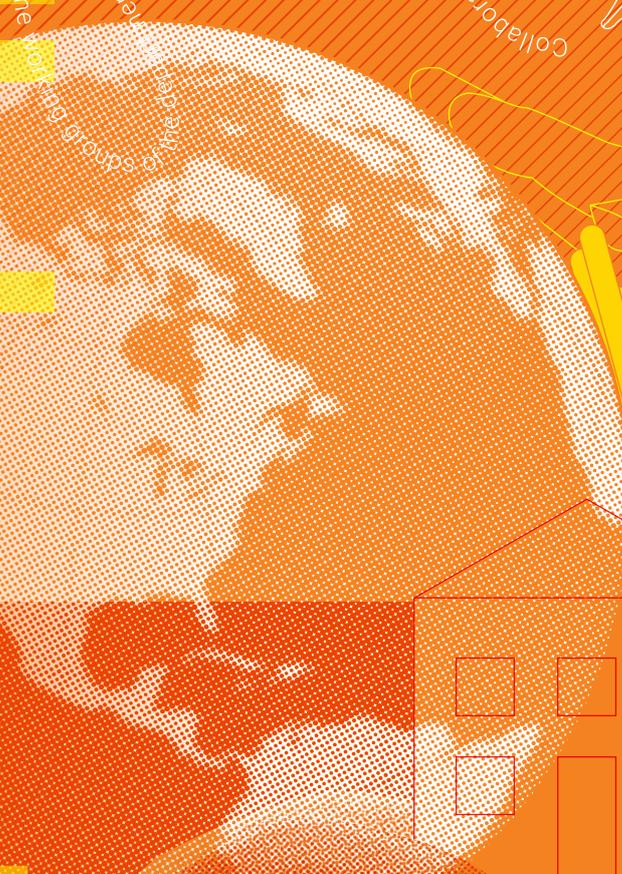


# HEALTH

# Cooperation

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Collaborations amongst anthropologists may take different shapes on two of the Working Groups



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# DEPARTMENT ANTHROPOLOGY OF POLITICS AND GOVERNANCE

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## ENVIRONMENTAL TRANSFORMATIONS: TOWARDS LATENCY AND MINOR FUTURES

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## ANTHROPOLOGY IN COLLABORATION

In the three years since its establishment, the Department 'Anthropology of Politics and Governance' has produced its first results in form of prestigious publications, innovative outreach activities, and transcontinental and transdisciplinary collaborations. The three highlights that follow introduce the reader to selected members of the Department and their individual and collective outputs.

"Environmental Transformations: Towards Latency and Minor Futures" summarizes the conceptual work of a group of scholars that studies the activities of people who seek to build a different future or make habitable environments while enduring life on a damaged planet. This section emphasizes the cooperation between the Department and Lukas Ley, who is leading an independent Emmy Noether Research Group. Ley joined the MPI in 2021, and because he has a deep interest in the topics addressed by the Department and is appreciative of what it offers in terms of transversal thinking, training, and mentoring, he and his group work closely with the Department's researchers. The outputs described in this highlight section have received prizes and generated broad interest, including among the public here in Halle due to a collaboration with a local high school in which team members produced materials that would help teachers to meaningfully engage pupils in debates about the Anthropocene.

The section "Anthropology in Collaboration" reports on two projects that build bridges between

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## HEALTH GOVERNANCE IN TRANSITION

distinct collectives. In the first, Ursula Rao and Kavita Dasgupta are establishing a multimedia journal in collaboration with research practitioners from Delhi who live in marginalized neighbourhoods and disadvantaged communities. These practitioners are being trained by social workers and writers from the research partner Ankur, a Delhi-based NGO offering alternatives in education. Joining forces with Ankur and members of the Department, youth in the marginalized neighbourhoods learn to reflect critically on their life worlds and share their insights by authoring engaging texts. In the second part of this section, we report on Hanna Nieber's efforts to bridge the usual disciplinary rifts between the "natural" and "social" sciences. To this end, she is working with Africa-based astronomers to develop a shared language for understanding the position of planet Earth within the larger order of the universe.

The final section, "Health Governance in Transition", reports on work situated at the intersection of research on bodies and technologies. This section highlights contributions the team has made to debates on global mental health and the role of technology in repositioning bodies in projects of governance. Finally, we report on research that deals with new forms of bio-social becoming produced by techno-optimist engagements with genomic research, and with the anywhere-anytime imaginary that accompanies the introduction of digital technologies.

# 4 Environmental Transformations: Towards Latency and Minor Futures

**ARNE HARMS,  
LUKAS LEY**

*Department 'Anthropology of  
Politics and Governance'*

We live in a time of profound environmental uncertainty. Engaging with this fact, members of the Department 'Anthropology of Politics and Governance' are investigating how people construct lifeworlds under conditions of environmental transformation. Across projects in Europe and Asia, they have developed the working concepts of "minor futures" and "latency" to help conceptualize practices of future-making on a wounded planet.

**T**he global climatic and ecological crisis is becoming more apparent with every passing year. Anthropologists have contributed to a better understanding of the challenges that individuals, communities, decision-makers, and humanity at large face in the face of climate change. But they have also pointed to the limits of climate change discourse by highlighting the equally devastating effects of colonial interventions on livelihoods and environments, the ongoing violence of corporate extractivism, and the highly unequal distribution of environmental suffering.

Whether enduring toxic seawaters or trying to combat the climate crisis despite a growing sense of inevitability, people continue to build lifeworlds. Because these achievements and relations with time often exist in the shadows of dominant future narratives – whether utopian or apocalyptic – we have developed the concept of "minor futures". As a heuristic, this notion helps us conceive of aspirations and practices that attempt to shape the future despite a profound sense of doom. It reveals how people navigate environments that have been disrupted by transformations such as mining, toxins or international shipping, and it draws attention to the ways

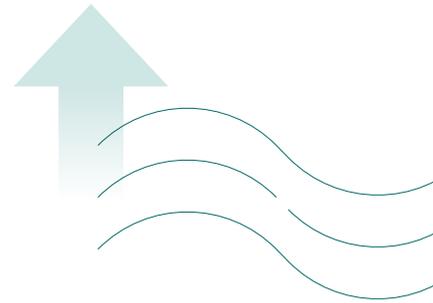
in which people mobilize materials, energies, and capacities to attain less bad futures. As such, the concept allows us to foreground provisional, experimental, and precarious arrangements that fall short of grand aspirations yet move beyond mere survival. Our work describes how coastal residents, activists, or fishing communities continue to invest in small-scale, if ephemeral, situations while staying alert to the destructive potentialities of political ecologies. As a lens, the notion of minor futures helps us come to terms with the injustices, varying articulations, and subjectivities of the Anthropocene.

The notion of "latency" captures a world in the making, something that is emerging, or a possibility that is, for example, inherent in prefigurative politics, aspirational thinking, or hope for a better tomorrow. The latent holds within itself something that seems vaguely perceivable but has not yet fully manifested and may never emerge, but that nevertheless mobilizes action towards a more desired future. These worlds manifest in the interstices of the dominant system and in the short run might not challenge its hegemony, but they are the seed from which alternative logics grow. In this sense they are minor futures, since they show a pathway towards transformation.

As Ley shows in his work, the material foundation of *kampungs* in coastal Indonesia is a multi-layered geological record. Building on gravel, sand, or garbage offers diverging levels of stability and plannability in the face of accelerating land subsidence. These complex infrastructures of everyday flood prevention grow on the margins of dominant technological systems. The messy temporalities of inhabiting sinking deltas, however, are eclipsed by modernization projects informed by climate change discourse, which privileges short-term investments to mitigate rising sea levels. Similarly, Harms' work on silent activism reveals an intimate politics concerned with carving out a space to relate differently to human and non-human others. Mundane practices of collectively grieving destruction, for instance, are a way to bring alternative modalities into being.

In the period covered by this report, members of the Department pursued unique research projects on questions of environmental transformation. This work generated intellectual debate about the nature of subjectivity, governance, and temporality, both within the Department and beyond.

## As a lens, the notion of minor futures helps us come to terms with the injustices, varying articulations, and subjectivities of the Anthropocene.



### Publications

Between 2020–22, members of the Department published ground-breaking work describing and conceptualizing socioecological transformation.

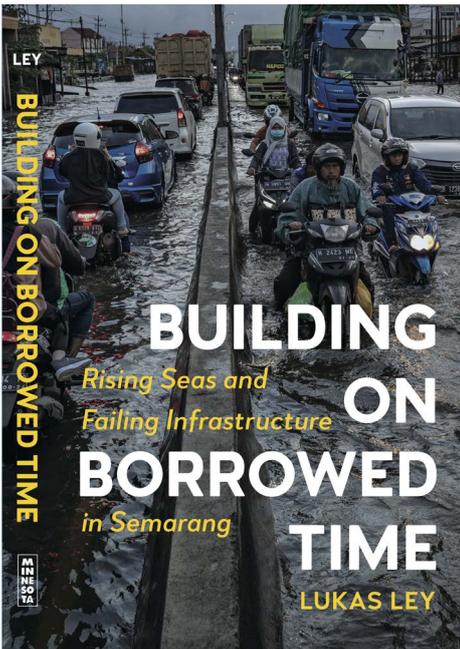
**Lukas Ley's** award-winning book, *Building on Borrowed Time: Failing Infrastructure and Rising Seas in Semarang* (University of Minnesota Press, 2021), ethnographically investigates the slow-motion disaster of climate change in an Indonesian port city. Ley shows that riverside residents, who endure in the margins of hydrological systems, devise idiosyncratic "infrastructures of time" to anticipate and prevent flooding and preserve their dwellings. In a race to outpace rising seas caused by land subsidence and climate change, house and road maintenance work aims at adapting to an opaque drainage system that unevenly distributes flooding risk. While providing at best temporary respite, this Sisyphean work nonetheless takes the edge off daily suffering. The book was awarded the EuroSEAS Social Science Book Prize and received an Honourable Mention for the Harry J. Benda Prize of the Association for Asian Studies.

**Arne Harms** addresses self-formation in the era of climate change in his important article "Beyond Dystopia: Regenerative Cultures and Ethics among European Climate Activists" (*American Anthropologist*, 2022). Drawing on ethnographic research with Europe-based climate activists, Harms develops the concept of regenerative cultures to capture a more silent and intimate form of activism that seeks to open up a space to relate differently, replacing prefigurative politics with a capacity to care.

The research projects of postdoctoral researchers **Rishabh Raghavan** and **Desirée Kumpf** also engage with ecological transformation. Kumpf's previous research focused on how Indian organic tea planters respond to changing ecological conditions. In 2020, she published the article "Organic Taste and Labour on Indian Tea Plantations" (*Social Anthropology*). Taking a multispecies approach, she shows how planters taste "with" tea plants and adjust taste to changing ecological conditions. The paper on which this article was based won the EASA Award for a Postgraduate Student Paper in the Anthropology



## Lukas Ley's award-winning book, ethnographically investigates the slow-motion disaster of climate change in an Indonesian port city.



### Public Outreach

The theme of salvaging futures in a climate of environmental uncertainty has informed our engagements with communities outside of academia. In 2022, Department members **Arne Harms** and **Julia Vorhöf** began developing teaching materials that would allow senior secondary school students to understand the predicaments of climate change from the perspective of South Asia. The project has led to the following outputs:

1. A workshop was organized at the MPI with students and two teachers from Halle's Elisabeth Gymnasium. The aim of the workshop was to test a role-playing scenario centred on a newly built coal-fired power plant located near the Sundarbans forest reserve in Bangladesh, a designated UNESCO World Heritage Site. Exploring contestations around this controversial project, the workshop introduced students to the complexities of negotiating climate change, poverty, and injustice while simultaneously providing insights into modalities of anthropological research.
2. Based on the success of the workshop, Harms, Vorhöf, and the two teachers co-authored an article for publication in Germany's major geography didactics journal, *Geographie Heute*, which presents the research-based teaching materials.

of Food. Kumpf's forthcoming article, "The Organic Monocrop: Experimenting with Green Growth on Indian Tea Plantations", will be published in *Environmental Humanities* in 2023.

Kumpf's current project centres on attempts to "rewild" endangered environments. Focusing on the Italian Apennines, Kumpf captures the managerial treatment of forest landscapes to understand how the knowledge of planetary environmental decline relates to local desires to preserve nature.

Raghavan's work focuses on the everyday lives and livelihoods of those who live near a conglomerate of state-owned coal-fired power plants in southern India, and conceptualizes their bodily engagement, labour, and protest in the context of the multiple toxic substances suffusing the landscape. He is currently working on a multimedia publication that uses photographs and audio recordings to vividly describe economic life in the highly contaminated littoral of Chennai, where fishermen refuse to stop working despite regular exposure to chemical pollutants.



3. As part of the larger project of developing teaching materials, Arne Harms has worked with a journalist to develop his research on the megacity Kolkata into a booklet in the Geomax series. GeoMax publications aim at feeding Max Planck Society research achievements into Germany's secondary school education system. Designed to be included in a range of curricula, including geography and ethics, the booklet will allow teachers and students to explore the future of Asian megacities in the Anthropocene based on the results of social scientific research.
4. In addition, the Max Planck Society is producing a podcast that disseminates insights from Harms' research. Combining expert interviews with field recordings, the podcast will enliven the learning experience in secondary school classes and sensitize students both to the multivocal nature of ethnographic research as well as minor practices of futuring in relationship to questions of power and justice.

## Academic Workshops

In 2021, **Lukas Ley** and **Arne Harms** co-hosted the "Coastal Futures" workshop. Funded by the Thyssen Foundation, the workshop brought together environmental scholars and artists from across the world. Over the course of the two-day meeting, participants explored coasts as sites of vibrant encounters between geological forces, biological lifeforms, and politics. The workshop explored the global, or rather planetary, processes that intensify these frictions, such as urbanism, climate change, and development, as they fuel long-standing tensions and instigate new conflicts.

Ley and Harms are co-editing a volume which assembles workshop papers to develop a coastal anthropology that attends to minor interventions in zones churned by geological, marine, and social transformations. The volume is currently under review by University of Toronto Press.

In 2022, **Arne Harms** organized the "Environmental Futures" workshop. It brought together researchers working in or on the Halle region.

In 2022, the Department's editor, **Jovan Maud**, together with Saskia Abrahms-Kavunenko (University of Copenhagen), organized an international workshop on "Buddhism in the Anthropocene". Participants discussed how Buddhist communities around the globe are responding to the unprecedented impact of human activities on the planet. Papers from this workshop are being prepared for a special issue of the *Journal of Global Buddhism* in 2023. ●



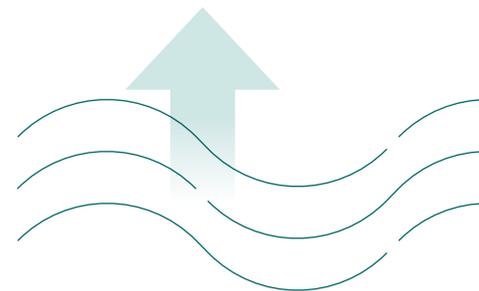
## Arne Harms

Arne Harms is an environmental anthropologist working on slow disasters, everyday activism, and ethics. His first monograph, *Life in Shrinkage: Environmental Displacement and Relocation on India's Sinking Coasts* explores coastal displacement in South Asia and will soon be published with University of Hawai'i Press. He is currently working on a book on intimate politics among Europe-based climate activists.



## Lukas Ley

Lukas Ley is an environmental anthropologist whose research is concerned with marginalization, temporality, and the material environment within urban landscapes. At the MPI, he leads the DFG Emmy Noether Research Group "SAND: The Future of Coastal Cities in the Indian Ocean" and cooperates closely with the Department 'Anthropology of Politics and Governance'.



# 5 Anthropology in Collaboration

**URSULA RAO,  
KAVITA DASGUPTA,  
HANNA NIEBER**

*Department 'Anthropology of  
Politics and Governance'*

Collaboration is an essential, though often unacknowledged, part of anthropological research. Far from seeing this as a limitation, we at the Department 'Anthropology of Politics and Governance' regard collaboration as an asset to be creatively explored. Working with our interlocutors, in interdisciplinary networks, and at our own desks, we experiment with the possibilities of collaboration and how to live up to its ethical challenges.

**A**nthropological knowledge emerges from encounters with people. Despite the still-pervasive image of the lone fieldworker, anthropologists have always depended on collaborations with their interlocutors, research assistants, and fellow scholars to generate their understandings of social life. In the Department, we actively embrace this condition of anthropological research and seek to explore its possibilities.

Collaboration allows us to attend to the ethics and politics of knowledge production, not only as a reflexive move but also as a mode of engaging with lived relations. Collaboration helps us to contemplate who research matters to, and how it might spark interest beyond the confines of academia. Furthermore, it confronts us with questions of how global inequalities map onto research practice and how we might better navigate structural differences between participating partners. Being open to collaboration means allowing common ground to emerge and projects to be shaped from within the encounter, possibly with unexpected consequences.

We have experimented with different kinds of collaborative practices: with our interlocutors, across

disciplinary boundaries, and within the Department itself. Together, they have taught us that collaborations are always specific. They raise their own questions – ethical, methodological, epistemological – and demand individual solutions. However, all collaborations reveal the value of being curious, not only *about* a research topic but also *with* the people who are implicated in our projects.

## **Ticketless Travellers**

"Ticketless Travellers" is a web-based journal that has arisen out of cooperation between the Department 'Anthropology of Politics and Governance' and Ankur, a Delhi-based NGO committed to promoting alternatives in education (<https://ankureducation.net>).

The collaboration began in 2010, when **Ursula Rao** began a dialogue with Ankur and agreed to finance several projects to train youth from low-income neighbourhoods to write about their lives. Over the years, these young people have enriched anthropological understandings with their narratives, while anthropologists have helped them sharpen their



Meenakshi, Nandini,  
Roshni and Sanjana  
filming at JJ Colony  
Dakshinpuri, New Delhi.

## This collaboration does not seek to erase the divide between research practitioners and scholars, but rather acknowledges the desire of both partners to understand the circumstances of the world.

critical reflections. In the process, the writers have learnt not only to describe the conditions of their existence but to contribute to knowledge production and articulate their aspirations for change.

The name “Ticketless Travellers” derives from how the writers often contrast themselves with the anthropologist scholar. As one of the participants said: *You and I, we both write or document our reflections about the world we inhabit. We are co-passengers on a train with a common destination. The difference between us is that we are ticketless, with no formal scholarly training.*

The journal is but one strategy to address this divide. Coordinated by Multimedia Editor **Kavita Dasgupta**, the journal features texts by both the Delhi writers and their anthropologist collaborators. These texts incorporate other forms of media – photographs, videos, soundscapes, and in-depth interviews – which the writers and other community

members are being trained to create. Embellishing texts with other media allows the writers, or as we now call them, research practitioners, to express their worlds through sensorial connection with the faces and voices of the characters in their stories, and the spaces and soundscapes they inhabit. The multimedia format also aims to make narratives available to the working-class community itself, as well as to a wider, non-academic audience.

This collaboration does not seek to erase the divide between research practitioners and scholars, but rather acknowledges the desire of both partners to understand the circumstances of the world. At the end of the day, each is as ticketless as the other on the journey to comprehend human thought and action.

### Africa Off-Earth Network

When astronomers from Africa meet social scientists from Europe, they might not appear to share much ground for scholarly exchange. Their research interests and methods seem to be far removed from each other, and it is hard work to explain their disciplines to outsiders. Despite these hurdles, the Africa Off-Earth Network (AOEN), co-founded by **Hanna Nieber**, a Postdoctoral Researcher in the Department, is striving to generate exchange about its members’ research and explore new constellations for collaboration, including between the natural and social sciences.

## Seeking ways to collaborate – producing knowledge not only about people but *with them* – is one particularly fruitful way to meet the challenges of anthropological practice in today’s unequal world.

Grounded in a common interest in the Square Kilometre Array (SKA), an emerging large-scale astrophysical telescope infrastructure in Africa, the network was founded in the wake of two workshops involving both astronomers and social scientists. Attuning to each other’s interests, network members have successfully engaged in meaningful exchange and started to understand collaboration as a “friendship” that assembles through a common concern. Over the past two years, AOEN members have shared experiences in conference panels and co-authored publications and grant applications. A key achievement has been establishing a collectively authored website and blog (<https://africa-off-earth.net>). Equally important have been collective efforts to work through the ethical problems that arise from this collaboration. How do we arrive at topics that are meaningful to all those involved? How does geopolitical positioning feed into our collaborative efforts? Whose disciplines appreciate and acknowledge such collaborations, and who can make the collaboration count for their academic career? How do our different answers to these questions feed back into our collaborative work?

AOEN demonstrates the sometimes long and winding process needed to make collaboration meaningful across continental and disciplinary boundaries.

### Writing Together

Writing is not only a method of transmitting findings but also a mode of thinking. With its requirement to negotiate this process, collaborative writing has great potential to stimulate thought and deepen scholarship. To this end, members of two of the Department’s working groups, “Science and Universality” and “Lived Utopias”, have experimented with multi-authored texts in which the process of writing itself has become an object of reflection.

In contrast to the more traditional, sequential method in which the text travels from one author to

the next, we have explored writing on platforms that allowed many authors to compose simultaneously. We have discussed our stances on the emerging text – for example, whether each of us feels responsible for only the section that we worked on or for the entire piece. In the process, we have faced challenges regarding how to solve disagreements about structure or formulations, and yet we have discovered great value in writing together.

Most importantly, collaborative writing has allowed us to think beyond our individual research projects and to refine both our shared areas of concern and points of difference. Writing together has been one tool that has allowed us to make theoretical interventions on concepts of broader interest for the discipline. Here, the “Lived Utopias” group has submitted an article entitled “On Those Who Break



Logo of the Africa  
Off-Earth Network  
(AOEN)

ropology of Politics and Governance, we have ex

th collaborative writing. How do we organize a writing task when multiple authors

Collaborations amongst anthropologists may take different shapes. In two of the working groups of the department "Anthropology of Politics and Governance," we have experimented with

Grounds: Pioneering in the Minor Sense" to *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, and the "Science and Universality" group is publishing a special issue on the "Boundaries of Universality" with *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie/Journal of Social and Cultural Anthropology*.

Seeking to understand the world we live in, anthropology engages with and represents the perspectives of ordinary people living in diverse contexts. Seeking ways to collaborate – producing knowledge not only about people but with them – is one particularly fruitful way to meet the challenges of anthropological practice in today's unequal world. Our experiments and experiences with collaboration are different kinds of laboratories in which we explore modes of doing anthropology now and into the future. ●



## Ursula Rao

Ursula Rao is Director of the Department 'Anthropology of Politics and Governance' at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle (Saale), Germany. Her research explores questions of politics and governance in India, with a specific focus on urban dynamics.

## Kavita Dasgupta

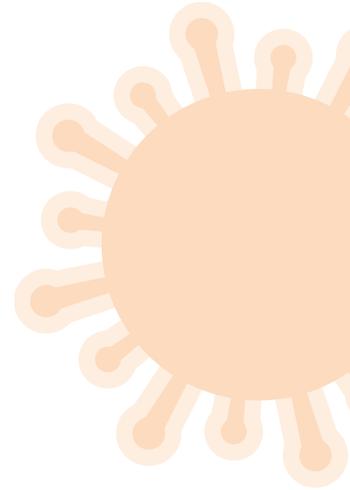
Kavita Dasgupta is a filmmaker, a visual artist, and an anthropologist in training. Her interest lies in the cross sections of anthropology, media, and art.

## Hanna Nieber

Hanna Nieber is a postdoctoral researcher whose project focuses on astronomy in Madagascar. She is interested in how the "universal" scientific discipline of astrophysics relates to the particularities of Madagascar as a specific place from which astronomy enthusiasts gaze into outer space.

are included in the process? How many authors can we incorporate; what is the upper limit?

# 6 Health Governance in Transition



**JULIA VORHÖLTER,  
SAMIKSHA BHAN**

*Department 'Anthropology of  
Politics and Governance'*

Health is a key site through which all sorts of public concerns and inequalities are made visible and contested. As such, health is a vantage point for studying political dynamics and forms of governance. Researchers in the Department 'Anthropology of Politics and Governance' explore how new medical trends and technologies challenge, shift or perpetuate existing inequalities in health and healthcare, and how different actors make sense of such trends.

## Mental Health

Perhaps nowhere else is the current sense of world crisis as palpable as in the field of mental health. Mental illness has been identified as a key contributor to the global burden of disease, and mental health interventions are "mushrooming" as people across the globe increasingly express suffering in terms of depression, anxiety, and stress. What political, economic, and ethical concerns drive these mental health interventions? What kind of visions of the self, health, and well-being do they contain and popularize? How do differently positioned individuals and communities mobilize or resist idioms of mental health? Such questions are at the heart of critical analyses of Global Mental Health within the Department.

**OUTPUT:** Julia Vorhölder completed her habilitation at Leipzig University in July 2022, based on a cumulative thesis entitled "Pioneering Psychotherapy: Knowledge-, Class-, and Meaning-Making in Uganda". The thesis analyses the recent emergence and popularization of psychotherapy and related discourses and practices in Uganda. Vorhölder shows how the emergence of "psy", while reflecting a global trend, is

also related to broader transformations of Ugandan society, especially growing class disparities and new forms of knowledge and meaning making.

In a related article, "Family Trouble: Changing (Dis)Orders and Psychotherapeutic Interventions in Uganda" (*Ethos*, 2022), Vorhölder analyses how psychotherapists in Kampala are experimenting with new techniques to support upper middle-class Ugandans struggling with lifestyle-related suffering and family conflicts. By helping individuals adapt to capitalist modernity, psychotherapists help to reproduce the very system whose ills they are treating. However, they also believe that psychotherapy represents a new form of care that challenges conventional hierarchies, ideologies, and norms.

Also focusing on mental health practitioners, Department associate **Claudia Lang** is publishing a co-authored article with Murphy Halliburton entitled "Curiosity and Creative Experimentation among Psychiatrists in India" (*Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry*). The article describes how some psychiatrists in India critically navigate the cultural hegemony of biomedical psychiatry by supplementing their practices with local and alternative healing modalities derived from South Asian knowledge systems and ritual practices.

## Global Health

The thrust towards global health has invited reflections on how to broaden understandings of health and highlighted the many ways in which biomedical and non-biomedical approaches complement rather than oppose each other. These alternative systems of knowledge and practice, as research at the Department demonstrates, are becoming increasingly sought out not just by sceptics of biomedicine, but also by activists and scholars who are looking for new ways of inhabiting a wounded planet.

While alternative knowledge systems that go beyond physical well-being and universal ideas of healthy bodies have entered medical discourses around the world, ongoing inequalities in access to health infrastructures, the design of health policies, and the distribution of expertise, training and technologies continue to shape experiences of ill-health, disease, and disabilities.

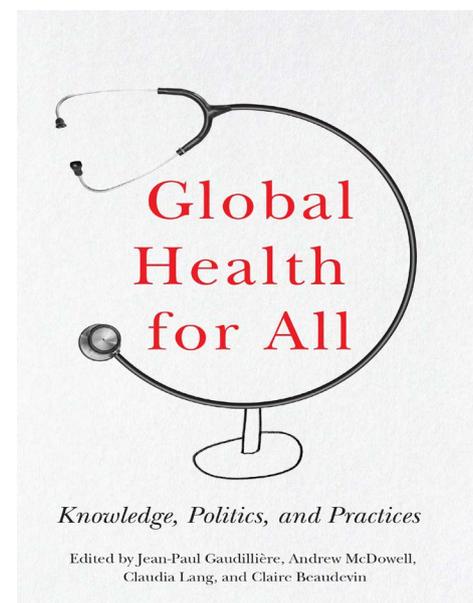
**OUTPUT:** Claudia Lang's co-authored book, *Global Health for All: Knowledge, Politics, and Practices* (with Jean-Paul Gaudillière, Andrew McDowell, and Claire Beaudévin; Rutgers University Press, 2022), critically analyses global health to show what its practices

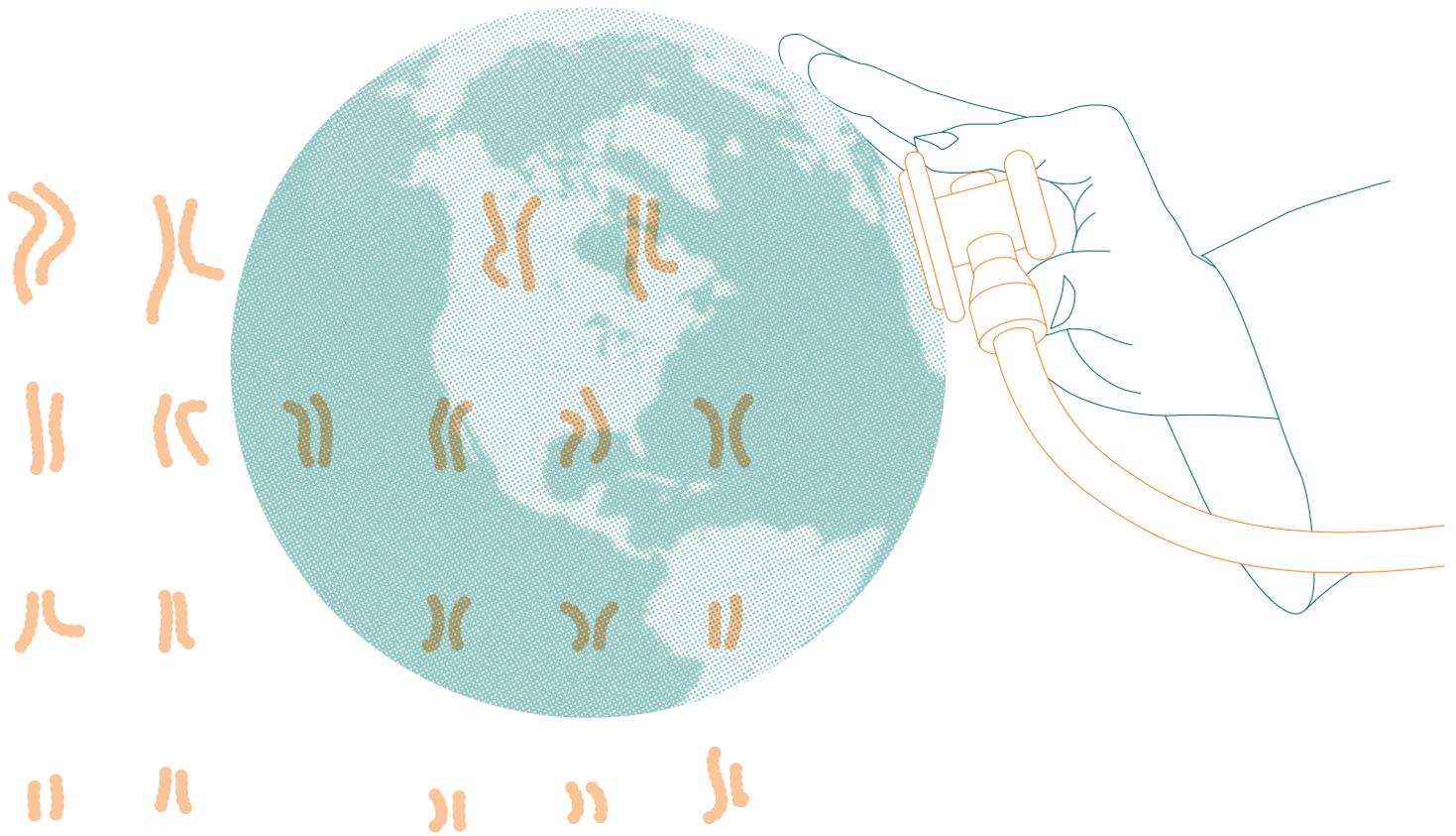
and logics reveal about 20th- and 21st-century configurations of science and power.

**Tyler Zoanni** has published several articles on disability politics and care in Uganda. "The Ecology of Disabled Minds in Urban Uganda" (*Medical Anthropology*, 2021) analyses how an interactive web of people, cultural expectations, historical changes, official discourses, and institutional resources collectively contribute to the manifestation of certain forms of human difference as unusual, and as disabilities. "Prosthetics of the soul: Christianity, Disability, and Transitional Experience in Uganda" (*Ethos*, 2021) focuses on individual experiences of disability in Uganda by analysing the religious narratives and psychological processes of transformation in the life of a disabled man. Finally, "Disability Rights and Wrongs in Uganda" (*Current History*, 2022) reflects on why Uganda's internationally celebrated disability laws, progressive policies, and vocal activist movement have not significantly changed the lives of most disabled Ugandans. In 2022, Zoanni was awarded the Young Author Prize of the European Society for Disability Research.

In 2022, **Hynek Bečka** completed his MA thesis entitled "Chronic Healers: Healing Self and Society in Pandemic Times". Based in Prague, this thesis examines how long-term engagement with alternative medicine shaped the lives and identities of healers and health-seekers in pandemic times, as their never-ending, chronic healing became entangled with the language of conspiracy and suspicion. The thesis argues that resistance to governmental measures can be seen as an act of biocitizenship, as people actively manage their health and bodies based on their own research and understandings.

**In the broad field of health governance, the Department's research has contributed to debates on mental health, global health, and the impact of new techno-social arrangements in health care.**





## Health Technologies and Digital Governance

Transitions in governance and technologies of health occur alongside ongoing inequalities and phenomena that resist change, and the sick body remains a site where techniques of power and scientific innovations are tested and shaped. While nation-states seize on frontier technologies and participate in global knowledge production, for instance by making population health data shareable, they also expand the jurisdiction of health governance practices by outsourcing them to non-state actors such as medical tech-companies, research institutes or patient groups. These configurations of actors, technologies, and ethical concerns have manifested differently in different parts of the world and continue to provide a rich site for anthropological health research.

**OUTPUT:** Ursula Rao's 2022 article, "Policy as Experimentation: Failing 'Forward' Towards Universal Health Coverage in India" (*Social Anthropology*, 2022) studies the ambitious transformation of health finance in India via national health insurance projects.

Using fine-grained ethnography, Rao illustrates that hope for transformation emerges less from successful implementation than from the determination to keep trying – seeking improvement through tweaking the system and reforming policy.

**Julia Vorhölder's** piece "Sleeping with Strangers – Techno-Intimacy and Side-Affects in a German Sleep Lab" (*Historical Social Research*, 2023) investigates nightly life at a German sleep lab. Vorhölder shows how patients' entanglements with sleep-related technologies evoke intense affects and emotions which incessantly interfere with medical procedures, and how the production of knowledge about sleep disorders and therapeutic outcomes depends on the careful co-management of technologies, environments, bodies, and personalities.

The limitations of supposedly progressive governmental health policies is the focus of MPI-affiliate **Sreya Dutta Chowdhury's** 2021 article "The Testing Database as Pandemic Technology: Reflections on the COVID-19 Response in India" (*Medical Anthropology Theory*, co-authored with Riona Basu). The article examines the COVID-19 response in India, viewing it as deeply enmeshed in the dynamics of the "database" as an emerging technology of governmentality.

# Alternative systems of knowledge and practice are becoming increasingly sought out not just by sceptics of biomedicine, but also by activists and scholars who are looking for new ways of inhabiting a wounded planet.

## Building Networks

A core aim of the Department is to expand networks, curate conversations, and produce co-authored outputs in the field of anthropological health research. Internally, researchers regularly meet to discuss their work in colloquia, reading groups, or informal workshops. Externally, they cooperate with affiliated researchers from nearby institutions (esp. Halle and Leipzig Universities), organize international workshops, and collaborate with partners outside the academy.

Since 2021, as part of the DFG funded project "Infrastructure and the Re-making of Asia through Adopting, Orchestrating and Cooperating" (Grant No. RA 1003/4-1), a team of researchers from the Department (Ursula Rao, Samiksha Bhan), Leipzig University (Sreya Dutta, Srividya Balasubramanian), and International Institute of Information Technology Bangalore (Bidisha Chaudhuri) has held a series of workshops focused on Indian state-making in the time of big data. The team is working towards a co-authored book on the role of digitization in remaking the welfare state, using examples from healthcare institutions and the public distribution system in India.

In 2021, the digital workshop "Innovative Approaches in Healthcare. India and Beyond" brought together health researchers from the MPI, Leipzig University, CEMS Paris, and the University of Lucerne. Focusing on data-driven health governance, participants discussed recent trends in digital health and broader transformations of medical landscapes through new technologies.

Another 2021 workshop, "Boundaries of Universality in Medicine and Other Fields of Science", brought together members of the Department's "Science and Universality" working group and visiting medical anthropologists Sandra Bärnreuther (University of Lucerne) and Andrew McDowell (Tulane University, New Orleans). The workshop offered an opportunity for participants to discuss their current research and potential future collaborations. ●



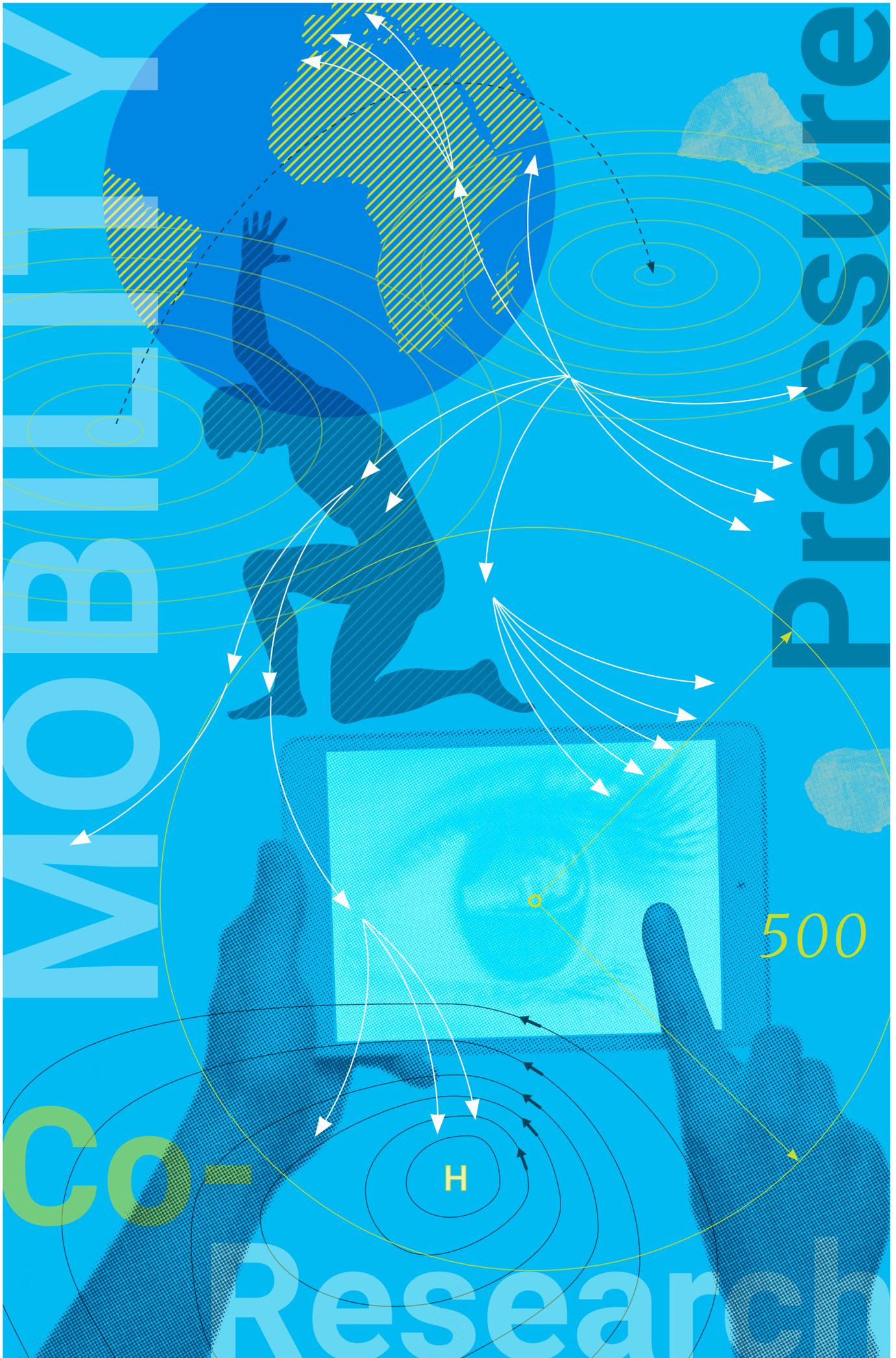
### Julia Vorhölter

Julia Vorhölter specializes in medical and psychological anthropology. She has conducted extensive fieldwork in Uganda on topics including perceptions of socio-cultural change, humanitarian interventions, and emerging forms of psychotherapy. Her current research focuses on sleep medicine in Germany.



### Samiksha Bhan

Samiksha Bhan is a PhD candidate completing her dissertation, "Population in Fragments: Genetics and Care in Postcolonial India". Her research examines how genetic diagnostic technologies, global health programmes, and national health policies for the care of genetic diseases are giving way to new forms of population-making and health politics.



MOBILITY

Pressure

Co-

Research

500

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# DEPARTMENT ANTHROPOLOGY OF ECONOMIC EXPERIMENTATION

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**PRESSURE:  
A COMMON CONCERN**

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**MOBILITY LAB:  
PROBING HOW MOBILITY  
CHANGES SOCIETY**

In the department, 'Anthropology of Economic Experimentation', we aim to re-imagine how our work can meaningfully articulate with people's own reflective and creative experiments in making a living together. We envisage our work not simply as conducting research that attempts academically to understand people in conversation with other scholars, but to provide people with intellectual tools they seek to reflect on – and change – their lives. Anthropology can no longer only be academically *about* people: it must also be intellectually *for* people.

In the early days of our department, our highlights have been learning together how to begin to realize these aspirations.

- *How might focusing on common concerns help intellectually re-orient work on economic life?*  
**Pressure: A Common Concern.** In his fieldwork in Nairobi, Mario Schmidt discovered that people frequently talk about "pressure" – rather than more easily recognized problems such as "poverty", "marginalization", or "inequality" – as a major worry. In addressing their concerns about "pressure", Schmidt and his collaborators have found themselves intellectually pressed in surprising directions to make sense of multiple socio-economic changes that are unfolding in East Africa and beyond.

- *How can we make research accessible that learns from and speaks to people's larger intellectual endeavours?*

**Thinking Together in the Nearby** represents our initial experimentation with co-research on the topic of "the nearby". In Biao Xiang's notion of co-research, the researcher constantly redefines research questions and reanalyses data based on back-and-forth communication with the subject group and larger publics.

- *What kinds of global collaboration among researchers may be useful in articulating with people's own reflective and creative experiments in making a living together?*

**Mobility Lab: Probing How Mobility Changes Society.** The Mobility Lab is an open- research platform that brings together researchers across the world to document how people are changing society through mobility and to discover techniques for analysing these emerging changes across a wide range of contexts in real time.

# 7 Pressure: A Common Concern

**MARIO SCHMIDT**

*Department 'Anthropology of Economic Experimentation'*

What does a “common concerns” approach do? Mario Schmidt’s work with male rural-urban migrants in Nairobi explores ways “pressure” is emerging as a concern across East Africa and beyond and shows how research can speak to young men’s own anxious questions about how to “depressurize”.

**M**embers of the new Department ‘Anthropology of Economic Experimentation’ are committed to developing a collective approach that empirically grounds our work in the everyday uncertainties and quandaries that most concern the people we study – concerns that reflect their subjective experience of objective social contradictions and tensions.

All our research begins practically with one question. What are the people we work with really worried about? What are the questions we find people anxiously asking each other, or indeed asking us?

In developing the “common concerns” approach, gender studies provides a major inspiration. Gender studies was one of the most socially impactful and intellectually exciting fields in social research in the 20th century. This was not because gender studies discovered a new empirical field of research. Conventional kinship studies and family studies researched similar phenomena to gender studies. What distinguished gender studies from the others was its style of inquiry. While conventional kinship studies classified gender relations into different types and slotted experiences into patterns, gender studies started

with (overwhelmingly female) scholars’ personal frustration about gender inequality as they experienced it. Earlier research described how men and women were different as a matter of cultural pattern or social system; gender studies foregrounded how men and especially women experience difference in specific situations and explains why difference becomes a concern for people. This approach resonated with the public immediately. Theoretical research, public debates, social movements became organically interlinked. Can we do something like gender studies scholars did half a century ago?

So, what are some of the common concerns the people we work with are encouraging us to think about today?

- feeling under pressure
- must a vibrant society encourage ambition and competition
- reckoning with uncertainty and facing powerlessness
- brutalizing and being brutalized in daily interactions
- must independence be so lonely



What specific concerns we choose to work on depends on the specific populations whom we work with. After all, the concerns are their concerns. As such, the Department is not about any particular concerns. Rather, the Department aims to develop methods and theories that will analyse social changes that our subject groups are worried about, in a way that the subject groups will benefit by gaining clarity about their life and more importantly by having intellectual tools that they can use themselves to think through social contradictions that they face.

Mario Schmidt's research on feeling under pressure offers an example of the potential of a "common concerns" approach to re-orient research on economic life. During his fieldwork with male rural-to-urban migrants from western Kenya in Nairobi, Schmidt discovered that these men increasingly give voice to their frustrations and make sense of the challenges they face today explicitly in terms of pressure. These male migrants, Schmidt soon realized, were not alone. Gig workers, university graduates without jobs, domestic helpers, affluent white-collar workers, politicians trying to secure votes, it seemed that virtually everyone Schmidt encountered in Nairobi talked about feeling stressed or cornered in some way – in their words, being "under pressure".

Beginning methodologically from what is worrying people day-to-day – in this case, pressure – a "common concerns" approach does not try to make sense of people's everyday anxieties by attempting to slot their fraught experiences into scholarly

categories of socioeconomic explanation. Indeed, for Schmidt, one of the most striking characteristics of the way residents of Nairobi talk about pressure today is how it defies many familiar analytic frames in academic writing that seek to make sense of urban economic livelihoods through a lens of concepts such as poverty, marginalization, precarity, or subalternity. Unlike poverty, for example, pressure crisscrosses many of the socioeconomic lines that demarcate class in contemporary Nairobi. In contrast to marginalization, pressure often appears to affect people who are perceived by others to have considerable control over their lives, such as male heads of households.

To approach pressure as a “common concern” – as people’s subjective experiences of objective social tensions – is rather to attend closely to how people reach for words to fathom emerging contradictions in global political economy that scholars themselves may yet lack suitable categories to name, let alone have frameworks to theorize. Feeling stressed or cornered, for instance, are experiences that a researcher might be tempted to conflate with an overall sense of being “stuck”. But what does it mean, Schmidt asks, that residents of Nairobi do not perceive experiences of feeling stressed or cornered as being “stuck” so much as being “under pressure”? While pressure certainly denotes an inability to move because of a weight that pins one down, pressure also points towards an almost instinctual reflex to push that weight off one’s chest, thereby alluding to almost frantic attempts of male migrants to evade pressure by working harder, getting drunk, or inflicting violence on others. Indeed – Schmidt contends – a concern with “pressure” attends closely to the interconnection between feelings of being stressed or cornered as stores of force that could explode.

Schmidt’s work reveals a topography of social tensions in a city like Nairobi that follows neither familiar fault-lines of class analysis nor vernacular contours of stratification theory. In particular, residents’ own synoptic charts of where pressure matters in the

city forecast new areas they believe are urgently in need of social scientific attention – “high pressure” zones such as extremely densely populated high-rise estates marked by mental and health problems, gender-based violence, and social mistrust. Compared to much engaged anthropology, Schmidt’s “common concerns” approach does not tack on public outreach after the fact, but methodologically proceeds by engaging with his research subjects in Nairobi from the get-go as “co-researchers”. In his research, he strives constantly to (re)define and (re)analyse his data about how pressure works in the city in light of how his interlocutors themselves seek to address such concerns. Indeed, in his current research, Schmidt is investigating social spaces of “depressurizing” in his interlocutors’ lives, afforded by a motley of relationships with prostitutes, psychologists, religious counsellors, and self-help authors, as migrant men seek more or less self-consciously to “evade pressure”.

Rather than seeking objectively to describe the condition of the world today as if from some scholarly view-from-nowhere, Schmidt’s work on pressure offers a potent example of the promise of a “common concerns” approach that begins from how our research subjects themselves see the world – observing where their own worries come from, looking for why they are doing what they do, and discerning how their activities are related to others’. Speaking directly to people’s “common concerns”, it is an approach to social research that seeks to centre the people we work with as creators of their

## Can we do something like gender studies scholars did half a century ago?



*Pressure is widespread across the world: Xiang is cited in the comic book, *Bullshit Jobs*, analyzing why pressure is becoming ever heavier.*



Street scene in Pipeline, a high-rise tenement in Nairobi.

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## Mario Schmidt

Mario Schmidt is a Senior Research Fellow in the Department 'Anthropology of Economic Experimentation'. His research focuses on economic practices, narratives, and discourses in rural Western Kenya and Nairobi.

own history. Indeed, as editor of the blog "Pressure in the City", Schmidt is working to create a digital platform that can facilitate debates among researchers, research subjects, and larger publics. Already the platform has enabled the emergence of an informal interdisciplinary research group – including Catherine Dolan (SOAS, London), Wangui Kimari (University of Cape Town), Jörg Wiegratz (University of Leeds), Mwangi Mwaura (Centre for Human Rights and Policy Studies, Nairobi), and Elizabeth Dessie (University of Manchester) – and the hope is that it will develop further into a global research hub, where people can explore in real time the interconnections between their diverse experiences of pressure and tensions they reflect across East Africa and beyond. ●

# 8 Thinking Together in the Nearby: Co-Research Experimentation

**BIAO XIANG**

Department 'Anthropology of  
Economic Experimentation'

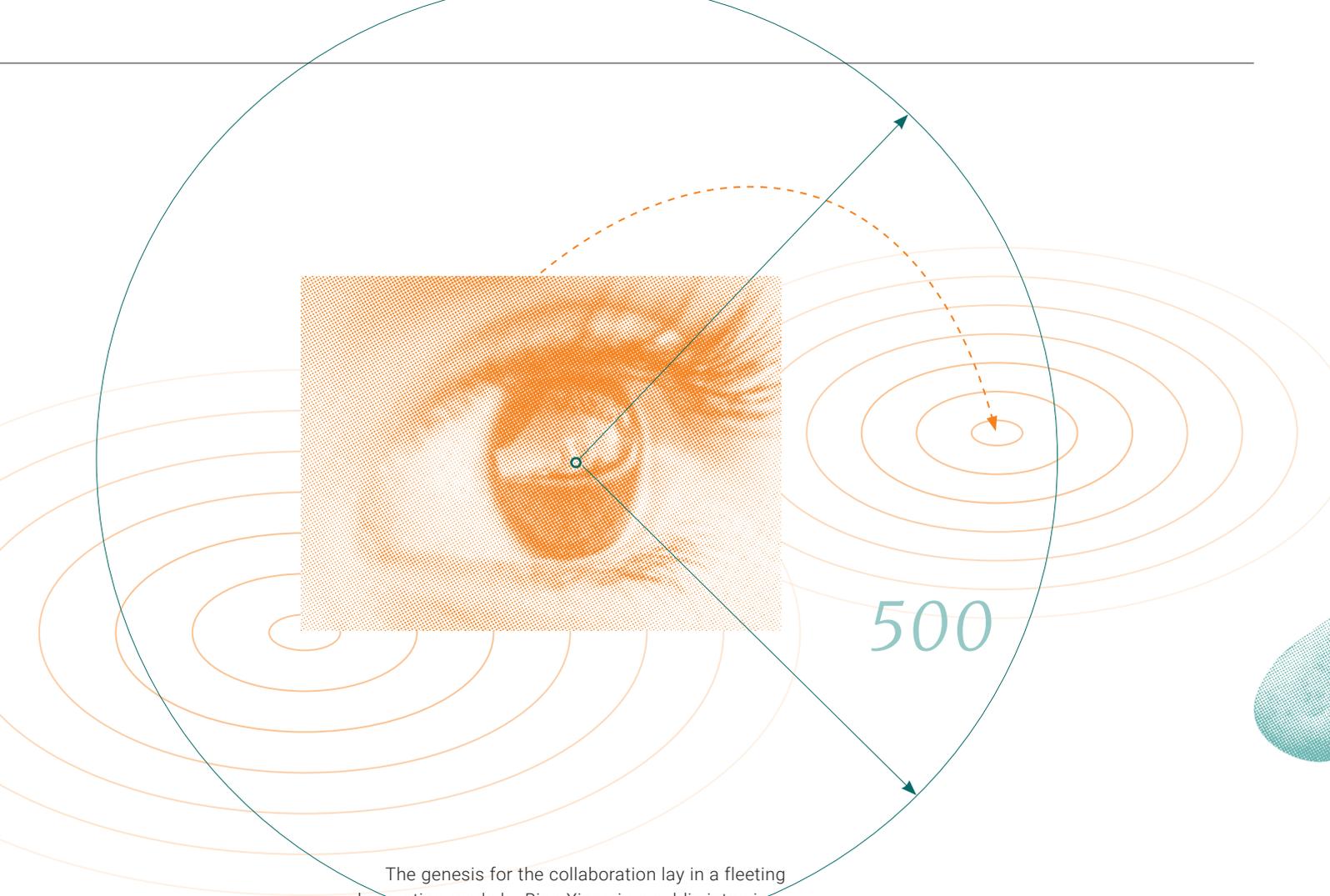
How can academic researchers engage with research subjects and larger publics as co-researchers? Biao Xiang's collaboration in the social art workshop, *Seeing the First 500 Metres*, shows how "thinking together in the nearby" affords an opening to a new research praxis.

**T**hanks to a rapid increase in educational levels and advances in communications technology, a public of unprecedented size is now ready to engage in critical reflection together with scholars. In particular, a young, highly knowledgeable, digitally savvy generation is posing challenging questions, making sharp observations, eager to explore ways to make changes in the world around them. What they most demand from academics are analytical tools that they can use to deepen their thinking. In return, their thinking will be a major driving force for the development of academic research.

A public is ready, here and now, to engage with us in research, but are we as academics up to the challenge? Our intellectual commitment to a "common concerns" approach – finding questions in need of research not by identifying gaps in some-or-other academic literature but responding directly to what is worrying people – is a response to this question. In order to make headway on such research, the Department 'Anthropology of Economic Experimentation' seeks to galvanize a change in research praxis, drawing together academics, research subjects, and larger publics more closely than before.

In doing so we face multiple challenges: redefining research "output" beyond the production of yet more empirical studies for other scholars; discovering ways of working with research subjects that better address what intellectually matters to them; and experimenting with new methods of data collection and publishing that draw research into productive conversation, not only with our research subjects but also larger publics. As our department seeks to face up to these challenges, we are committed to a vision of research praxis that we call "co-research experimentation". Social research for us is a way of thinking together between academics, research subjects, and larger publics as "co-researchers".

To date, our department's main experiment with co-research has been the social art workshop, *Seeing the First 500 Metres*. Held between August and November 2022 in Guangzhou, China, the workshop was followed by online and breakout discussions that still continue into 2023, and the artworks that resulted from the workshop were exhibited at the Hong Kong-Shenzhen Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism/Architecture 2022 (December 2022 – February 2023).

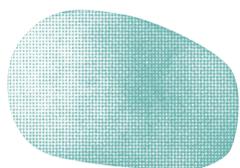


The genesis for the collaboration lay in a fleeting observation made by Biao Xiang in a public interview in 2019, where he remarked on a “disappearance of the nearby” in urban China. In cities increasingly dominated by high-rises, there is nowhere residents can meaningfully socialize “nearby”. Many residents simply cease to pay much attention to what is happening around them. Young people, in particular, are often pre-occupied with the very near (the self) and the very far (the nation, the planet), but do not even know who lives next door, let alone what their lives are like. The nearby, Xiang observed, risks emptying away.

Although only a passing observation, during 2020 at least four art exhibitions were curated in China on “the nearby”, each explicitly referencing Xiang’s interview. Indeed in 2021, college students and social activists set up a book club in a migrant settlement of Shenzhen, just across the water from Hong Kong, which they collectively named “The Nearby”. This surprised Xiang himself. Why does this apparently banal observation resonate with the public so strongly? He started by clarifying what the nearby means in light of the ways artists, grassroots activists, and rural-urban migrants were

experimenting with it in their own collaborations. The initial output was an English-language academic article, ‘The nearby: A scope of seeing’ (Xiang 2021).

As Xiang now re-analysed his earlier observations, “the nearby” is a lived space where one encounters people with diverse backgrounds on a regular basis. A loss of attentiveness to the nearby dissipates one’s capacity for appreciating difference and negotiating complexity; indeed, empties out the very space of a “here and now” where people are best placed to make concrete change. Moreover, without a nearby, people become prone to simplified and divisive opinions, liable to swings of emotion, and Xiang came to contrast “the nearby” with “the community”. The nearby is actor-centred, fluid, without clear boundaries: wherever you go, your nearby always follows you, so long as you pay enough attention. Communities in Chinese cities, by contrast, are often gated spaces, organized by government in the form of grids to be managed. The disappearance of the nearby, Xiang now theorized, is directly propelled by government- and corporate-led projects of “community building”. Indeed, government and corporations are currently investing considerable effort into overcoming what they call “the last 500 metres” – the final frontier of integrating individuals





*The thirty-six artworks that resulted from the workshop, 'Seeing the first 500 metres', are exhibited in a smart-locker – a now ubiquitous device through which e-commerce reaches the last 500 metres. Hong Kong-Shenzhen Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism/Architecture, 2022–23.*

into a commercial system susceptible to governmental control. The nearby is the exact opposite of this: it is precisely “the first 500 metres” between a person and the world.

This academic article, though quickly translated and published in Chinese in 2022, attracted little public attention. However, when Xiang was invited to curate a section of the Hong Kong-Shenzhen Bi-City Biennale, he proposed as an idea “the first 500 metres”. In partnership with Jason Ho (an architect and art activist) and Zhipeng Duan (a design researcher and MPI associate), a three-month workshop was organized to create artworks for the exhibition. Based on an open call, 65 participants from different parts of China and overseas were selected, including students, teachers, filmmakers, company employees, the unemployed, and junior civil servants. During the three months, all workshop participants carried out brief field research – exploring their own nearby – as a basis for creating artworks, engaging together in over 300 hours of group discussion and 100 hours of online discussion.

Ultimately 36 artworks were exhibited, and while all the art projects started off from an initial concept of “seeing the first 500 metres”, very few artworks ended up focusing on that. In fact over the course of the workshop, rather than talking about what “the nearby” might mean, participants spent most of their time discussing with each other – and clarifying to themselves – what they were most concerned about in their lives.

- When Lin started to care about his first 500 metres, he found himself attending to an estranged relationship with his mother. His artwork became a work of repair, as in the process of developing his project he began to understand her better and also himself
- Zhu and Xu came out to Zhu’s parents about their lesbian relationship through the artwork of a joint diary
- Qu disclosed what she had wanted to share with her parents and relatives, but never felt she could, by presenting them with a set of notes and inviting their comments, an artwork she called “Comments on the Margin”

It was not that the concept of “the nearby” became irrelevant, rather the concept took on a new life. Talking about their “nearby” afforded participants an opportunity to start reflecting on what concerned them most directly in their experience of their most immediate circumstances. The “first 500 metres”, in Xiang’s academic writing, afforded a critique of the penetrating power of the state and corporations and an aspirational vision of an alternative social space. For workshop participants, however, resisting state and corporate power proved not to be a priority. Xiang’s vision of an alternative social space is too abstract an ideal for anyone to lay their hands on. Instead, what participants found in their “first 500 metres” was a tangible space to think together about what mattered most that it was missing in their lives.

Among the lessons to be drawn from this experiment is that concepts must aim at a distinctive kind of intellectual affordance to be productive in co-research. A concept in co-research should be a handle – attractive and accessible enough that members of the public can reach out their hand to start turning without knowing what is behind the door. Indeed, in the use to which they turned the concept of “the nearby”, what workshop participants seemed to find most valuable was a certain analytic purchase – a facility to problematize yet not judgmentalize – creating an opening to explore what is troubling them without pre-judging. It is this public-facing intellectual affordance that distinguishes such concepts from those tailored to conventional academic research.

Thinking together in co-research is an open-ended process and the outcomes unpredictable. But it is this openness – the feeling that academics, research subjects, and larger publics are exploring shared questions on an equal footing – that so excited workshop participants in 2022 and animates the work of our department today. More than one participant described the workshop as like throwing a stone into water. Once waves are created in one’s mind, the world is no longer the same. Experimenting together to create a new mode of research praxis, academics and co-researchers throw stones into each other’s ponds. As waves rippling across the ponds amplify each other, so we hope to create research that changes minds, meaningfully to re-make our world. ●



## Biao Xiang

Biao Xiang is the Director of the Department ‘Anthropology of Economic Experimentation’. His research focuses on migration and mobility in China, India, and other parts of Asia.

**A public is ready to engage with us in research, but are we as academics up to the challenge?**

# 9 Mobility Lab: Probing How Mobility Changes Society

## MOLAB TEAM

*Department 'Anthropology of  
Economic Experimentation'*

The Mobility Lab is a model of a digital research platform that draws together researchers around the world – both within the academy and beyond – to document how mobility is changing society in a wide range of contexts as a way to raise larger research questions.

The Mobility,  
Technology and  
Wellbeing Lab **MoLab**

**B**ased in Halle, Germany, our aspiration in the Department 'Anthropology of Economic Experimentation' is to become a global hub for researchers, particularly across the Global South, who are interested in developing a "common concerns" approach and exploring the intellectual possibilities of "co-research experimentation". Our first institutional venture in creating an enduring infrastructure for co-research is the Mobility Lab (MoLab), a digital platform which aims to facilitate collaboration among anyone around the world, whether in the academy or beyond, keen to probe how mobility is changing society.

The initiative emerged initially in the midst of the COVID19 pandemic, as the ramifications of this unprecedented shock – not only to the movement of people, but to the mobility of non-human animals, things, and data – urged upon mobility researchers the need for a research space where such changes could be observed in real time. As it became clear that this model of observation was productive for

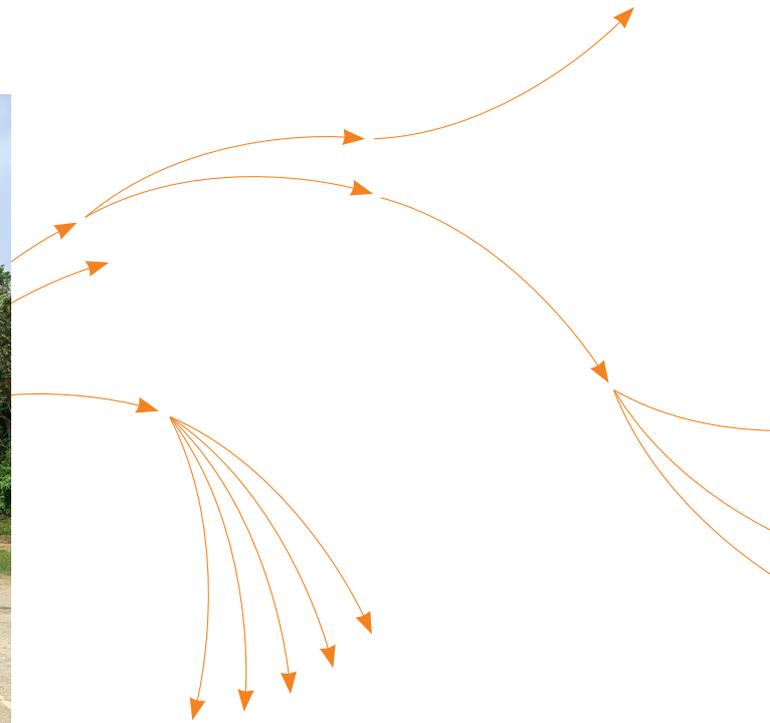
researching intersections between mobility and other processes of socioeconomic change, MoLab has expanded its scope beyond COVID mobility.

Core to MoLab at this stage is its Inventory: a collection of real-time observations and rapid analyses of the latest developments in mobility that reflect changes in global political economy. The typical format of the contributions are short texts below 2000 words. By the end of 2022, MoLab had accumulated around 100 entries, in both text and multimedia format. As the number of contributions has grown, entries have come to be organized in terms of five themes – Shock (Im)mobilities, Reproduction Migration, Mobility Infrastructure, Mobile Work, and the Securitisation of Mobility. For instance:

The theme of **Shock (Im)mobilities** tracks sudden dramatic changes to mobility and immobility caused by incidents of acute disruption and uncertainty. The COVID19 pandemic, for instance, led to immediate lockdowns of unprecedented scale which simultaneously triggered panicked flights. As



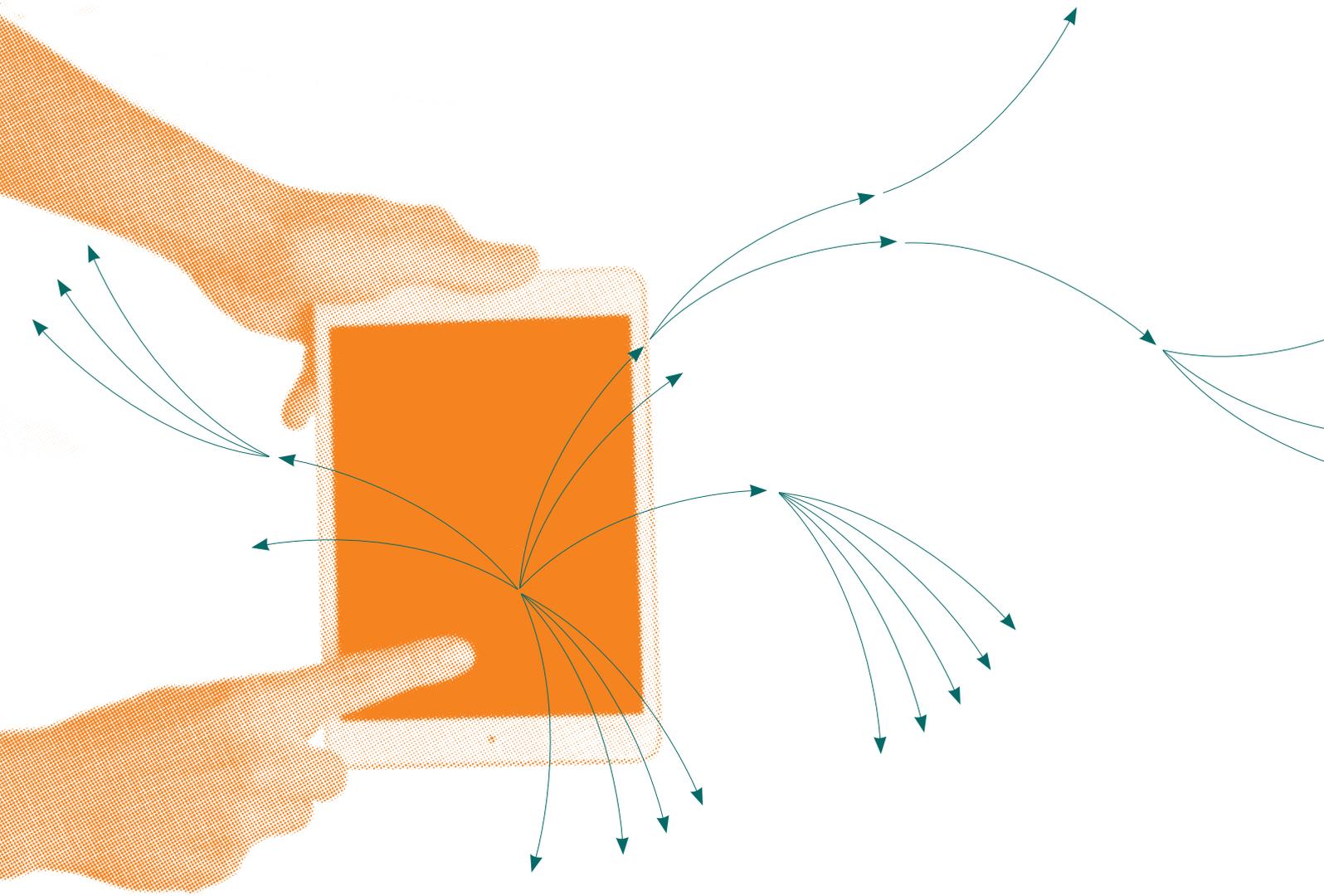
*MoLab contributor and Departmental Visiting Fellow, Julia Morris, investigates how animal migration and human mobility intersect on Christmas Island, Australia.*



consequential as shock (im)mobilities are to social life around the world, their patterns, duration, density, demographic composition, and temporal dynamics remain, in many cases, a black box. Based on COVID19-related entries in the Inventory, a collection of short essays was published in the journal *Geopolitics* during 2022, representing an initial effort at conceptualizing how exactly the global pandemic constituted a shock to mobility. Among the key findings of the collection were that shocks during the pandemic appear to be linked to the exercise of state power in two very different ways: while in many cases shocks to mobility were caused by states' sudden ability to intensify routine exercises of sovereign power, in other cases shocks resulted from states' abrupt inability to co-ordinate routine procedures of governance. More recent contributions to the Inventory are



*A book club set up by college students and activists in 2021 in a migrant community in Shenzhen, which named itself 'The Nearby' drawing on Xiang's work.*



calling attention to interconnections between locality, affect, and race, including entries on the mobility of humanitarian workers and emergency aid in the case of Cyclone Harold and Super-cyclone Aphan (Will Jernigan), the flights of African residents and Indian students from the war zone in Ukraine (Mengnio Tardenzuy Thomas; Sanam Roohi), and responses to the refugee crisis along the Ukraine-Slovakian border (Kathrin Fischer).

**Reproduction Migration** follows the movements of people maintaining, reproducing, and enhancing life, and so far, entries to the Inventory trace the paths of reproduction migrants ranging from migrant care givers and care seekers, students and retirees, to marriage partners and would-be parents. The need for this theme emerged from the recognition by many contributors that transnational reproduction migration is increasing significantly faster than productive labour migration in many parts of the world. Two recent entries on outmigration since 2020 among young people in China (“the run philosophy”) and in Nigeria (“*japa*”), when published through MoLab’s Twitter account generated some discussion on social media; in particular, the observation that this urge to migrate is animated by

the desire for a decent – rather than a richer – life. Contributors’ repeated linkage of shifting trajectories of reproduction migration with changing visions of what constitutes a good life has inspired a new direction of theorization on the interrelation of “migration and values” (Xiang and Nyiri 2022, *Intersections*).

A key aim of the Inventory is for authors and other researchers to develop their entries into larger arguments across the themes. One example is the idea that mobility regulation is always “redistribution of mobility” (Xiang 2022, *Current History*), which links three themes together: **Mobility Infrastructure** (which maps the overlapping sociotechnical systems – such as transport and communication networks, the logistics industry, and governmental regulations – that facilitate as well as constrain the movement of people, things, information, and energy), **Mobile Work** (mobility as a form of work and thanks to digital technologies, a precisely measured task and tradeable commodity), and the **Securitization of Mobilities** (efforts to make mobilities safe through such measures as contact tracing and traveller screening). As another example, the intersection between these three themes has also come together

as a powerful prism for starting to conceptualize how emerging patterns of remote work are operating to redistribute mobility (Xiang 2022, *International Migration*), helping to unpack the implications of remote work on social inequality through the lens of mobility.

Our Department's first institutional venture in creating a collaborative research platform, MoLab addresses a common challenge facing many social scientists well beyond mobility studies – how can researchers be attentive to constant changes in the world while also maintaining a cumulative and coherent research agenda? Moreover, at the same time as building global network of academic researchers, MoLab is developing ways to engage research subjects and larger publics beyond the academy. MoLab opened its Twitter handle (@MaxMolab) and Youtube channel in April 2021 – with MoLab Conversations in video format addressing broader questions than the text entries. During 2022, the most-watched videos included conversations on the Ukraine war, shock (im)mobility during COVID in India, houselessness (as opposed to homelessness) in Berlin, and seafarers' mobility and strandedness. ●

**MoLab addresses a challenge facing many social scientists – how to be attentive to constant changes while maintaining a cumulative research agenda?**



## MoLab team

In addition to Biao Xiang, the MoLab team consists of Jennifer Holdaway (Senior Consultant of the Department), Iain Walker (Senior Researcher), Carlo Diesterbeck (MPI Multimedia Officer) and Magda Rodríguez Dehli (freelance Social Media Assistant).

# RIGHTS

Environmental

Terrorists



# MAX PLANCK FELLOW AND RESEARCH GROUPS

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**MAX PLANCK FELLOW GROUP**  
ENVIRONMENTAL RIGHTS IN  
CULTURAL CONTEXT (ERCC)

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**MAX PLANCK RESEARCH GROUP**  
HOW 'TERRORISTS' LEARN

# 10

## Environmental Rights in Cultural Context (ERCC)

**DIRK HANSCHER**  
Max Planck Fellow Group  
'Environmental Rights  
in Cultural Context'

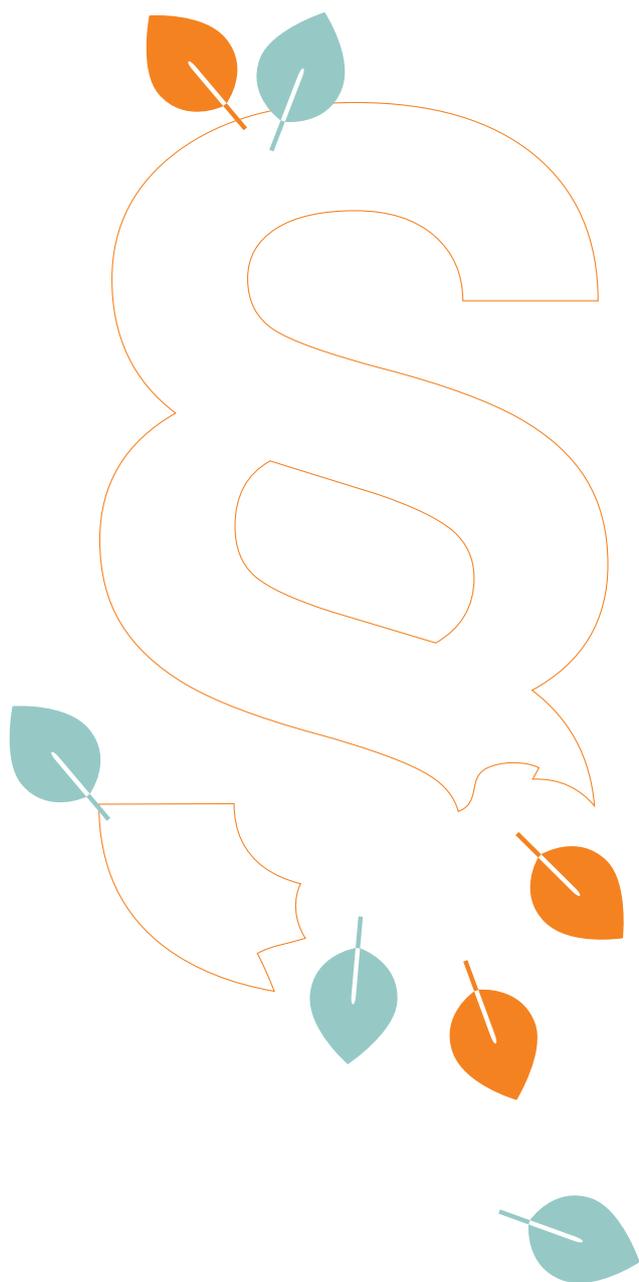
Constitutions, laws and court decisions around the world increasingly express and interpret rights to a healthy environment and rights of nature. The fellowship group has set out to examine to what extent such rights actually resonate with local articulations of injustice by those who are most affected by environmental degradation.

In light of environmental crises that we are facing around the world, from climate change to more localized ecological destruction, the topic of environmental rights such as the right to a healthy environment or rights of nature has come to play an increasingly important role. With its focus on the intersection of environmental protection and human rights from the perspective of law and anthropology, the Max Planck Fellow Group 'Environmental Rights in Cultural Context' (ERCC) placed the topic of environmental justice on the MPI's research agenda in 2019. The collaboration within the ERCC group has proven invaluable for understanding how and to what degree environmental rights guaranteed in many constitutions and laws and interpreted by highest courts correspond to local notions of environmental justice and can offer protection to those most affected by environmental degradation. Key publications serve to illustrate the findings of the group, while successfully secured new funding promises to enable the research to continue and be enlarged in the future.

As the ethnographic research by ERCC group members in various countries has revealed, environmental rights frequently do not correspond to local

articulations of fundamental experiences of injustice by communities particularly affected by serious environmental degradation caused by, for example, extractive activities or major infrastructure projects. A collaborative article on "Environmental Rights Between Constitutional Law and Local Context: Reflections on a Moving Target" in a special issue of the *German Law Journal* (2022) presents some of these key findings – in particular the insight that "vulnerable local communities take recourse to constitutional environmental rights far less often than expected."

There is no single reason for this. In Mongolia, for example, local herding communities usually do not take recourse to the judiciary to assert their rights, due to lack of knowledge about how the legal framework operates, lack of clarity about how to demonstrate a violation of rights on pastures subject to customary use rights, lack of political power to make themselves heard, and incompatibility of legal procedural rules with their nomadic way of life. However, they invoke the constitutional right to a healthy environment when asserting their interests vis-à-vis local authorities or mining companies. In Ethiopia, conflicts surrounding the construction of

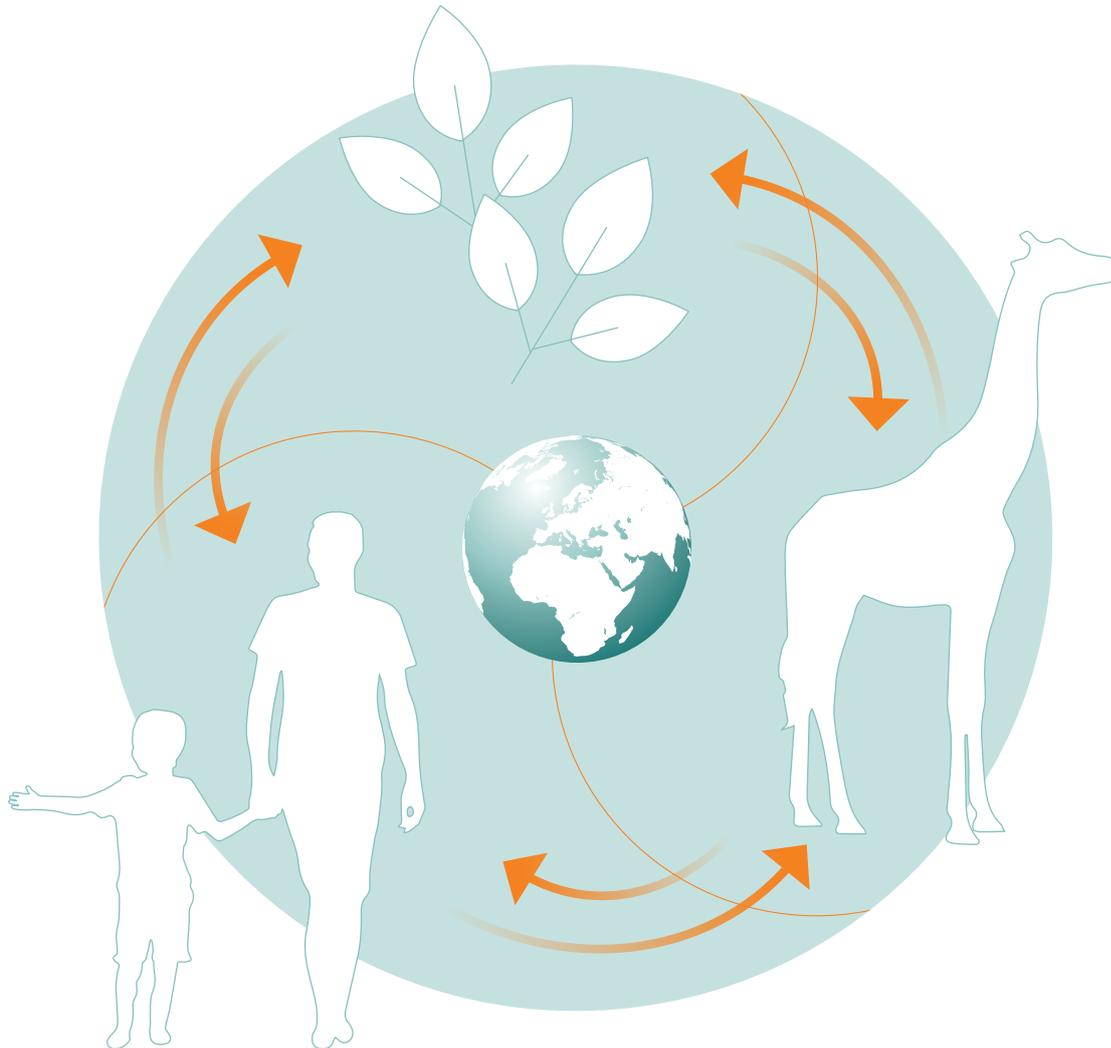


a hydroelectric dam include ethnic components – the language of environmental rights may be used, but does not represent the key issues at stake. In addition, enforcement bodies are often reluctant to take action when it means going up against powerful government actors.

Conversely, where environmental rights are demanded or claimed at the local level, they are often not translated adequately into the law of the state. The case study on Ecuador, where rights of nature as a specific type of environmental rights have been included in the constitution, shows that transfers from local indigenous practice, while potentially having a transformative effect, may lead to conceptual selectivity, ambiguity, lack of clarity, overlaps with existing state norms and, hence, even redundancies. One very practical problem regarding the rights of nature is to establish precisely what these rights entail, who can claim them, and how courts will deal with them when they clash with other established rights. Whilst norms about the human–nature relationship are abundant and may include complex cosmovisions, it seems that rights of nature are often a cipher for human rights to a healthy environment or even just for other previously established rights such as rights to food, water, health, life, etc. Sometimes they may serve to enhance the political impact of claims for indigenous territorial sovereignty and effective environmental protection.

The ERCC group found that environmental rights are, indeed, a moving target and difficult to understand or capture with a purely doctrinal approach to law. In practice, constitutionalizing environmental rights does not necessarily strengthen the overall legal framework of environmental protection and provide positive outcomes. In some places, claims are not enforced, whether due to conflicts of interest

**The collaboration within the ERCC group has proven invaluable for understanding how and to what degree environmental rights guaranteed in many constitutions and laws and interpreted by highest courts correspond to local notions of environmental justice and can offer protection to those most affected by environmental degradation.**



or inability of enforcing bodies to challenge politically powerful entities. In other cases, it is not clear how legal provisions translate into local practice and notions of environmental justice. Sometimes, local norms are picked up in a selective fashion or are misrepresented. Occasionally, environmental rights may even appear as mere exercises of window dressing.

This is not to say that environmental rights are ineffective per se, or that there is no major value in the efforts of bodies such as the United Nations or international NGOs to promote them. Such rights may well be part of a more encompassing global answer to the environmental problems that we are facing. However, the ERCC group's research shows that we need to distinguish between global environmental governance and local custom and notions of environmental justice which may or may not correspond with state or international law. As the group concludes in its joint publication "[u]nless we consider human rights as a mere political battle cry, we cannot simply assume that environmental stress is aptly articulated through a new human right – or

even the rights of nature – or that environmental rights aptly encapsulate fundamental experiences of injustice in the best possible way."

One particularly interesting development in the area of environmental rights is the idea that nature itself has rights. This right has been formalized in several jurisdictions, including Ecuador and Columbia. A €350,000 grant from the Volkswagen Foundation within the programme "NEXT – Law between Normativity and Reality" will allow the group to dig deeper into this topic. The project will unite researchers from law and other disciplines and promote legal as well as ethnographic research on specific cases decided by the courts. Dirk Hanschel and Annette Mehlhorn, who won this grant together with the ERCC group's research partner Mario Aguilera Bravo, will examine to what extent rights of nature, biocultural rights, and related notions play a role in these judgments, and how this compares to the local realities. The leading hypothesis is that basic concepts of eco-centric legal regimes – e.g., the rights of nature – may not fully reflect the local realities from which they (claim to

have) emerged. Whether the concept of bio-cultural rights as recently employed by courts and discussed in academia or other notions are better suited remains to be seen. This raises the more fundamental question about the extent to which the law can actually influence local living conditions and what its limits are in practice.

Looking at the future, a key task for the ERCC group will be to provide a matrix of the great variety of notions of environmental justice that the group found during their research, hoping to capture in a more accurate and encompassing way the complexity of views and perceptions, amongst which subjective rights are only one concept. At the same time, research aims to engage even more heavily with court decisions on rights of nature. The aim will be to analyse how judges establish the facts of the case, what local norms and practices they perceive and integrate into their decisions and how this compares to ethnographic findings within the respective local communities. The research will particularly focus on courts that produce innovative decisions aiming to provide strong protection whilst sometimes stretching the limits of what the normative framework provides.

Through its findings and its established network, the group furthermore hopes to contribute to the new International Max Planck Research School (IMPRS) 'Global Multiplicity: A Social Anthropology for the Now' at the MPI, which flags up many of the topics that the ERCC project has been addressing from its own perspective. As member of the IMPRS faculty, Dirk Hanschel will be directly involved in the programme. Finally, there is a continued cross-fertilization of the ERCC topic with the DFG-funded project "Water Indicators in Domestic Politics and Law" (WIDPAL) for which he is principal investigator together with political scientist Petra Dobner. An extension request is currently underway, shifting the focus from India to Australia. ●



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## Dirk Hanschel

Dirk Hanschel is Max Planck Fellow at the MPI in Halle and Head of the ERCC group. He holds the Chair in German, European, and International Public Law at MLU Halle-Wittenberg and has been a visiting Global Law Professor at the University of Connecticut since 2021.



# 11

## How ‘Terrorists’ Learn

**CAROLIN GÖRZIG**

*Max Planck Research Group  
‘How “Terrorists” Learn’*

With its funding extended for two additional years at the beginning of 2021, the Research Group ‘How “Terrorists” Learn’ used this time to disseminate the insights from their research in various venues. The thematic and regional breath of the individual members allowed for productive comparisons. The relevance of the work of the Research Group was reflected in two prizes – to Regine Schwab for her outstanding dissertation and to Florian Köhler for his outstanding monograph – as well as multiple publications, presentations, and media appearances – such as Carolin Görzig’s article in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* on why generations are relevant for understanding terrorism.

### **Regine Schwab receives 2022 Christiane Rajewsky Award for her dissertation**

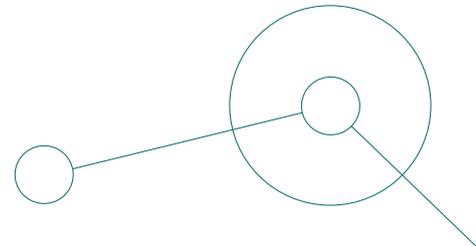
The German Association for Peace and Conflict Studies named Regine Schwab as winner of the 2022 Christiane Rajewsky Award for her dissertation “Let’s Fight Each Other Another Day: How Armed Opposition Groups Managed Challenges to Cooperation and Postponed Conflict in Syria’s Multiparty Civil War (2012–2019)”. Schwab was a doctoral candidate in the Research Group from 2016 to 2020.

In her dissertation Regine Schwab examined the complex power relations and interests of the different armed opposition groups (AOGs) involved in the Syrian civil war. Based on interviews conducted with members and commanders and an in-depth analysis of three case studies, she shows how, in

spite of far-reaching differences in their ideologies, military strength, and strategic goals, the AOGs actively worked to overcome obstacles that impede cooperation. In order to achieve their joint goals under the uncertainty of war, they formed cooperative institutions. In order to contain violence, they relied on preexisting local conflict management practices and institutions that were adapted to their new purpose in the context of large-scale violence. Through inductive iteration – that is, in a recurring dialogue between data and theory – Schwab developed a typology of cooperation in multiparty civil wars that distinguishes among three distinct types of AOG relationships: alignment, alliance, and partnership. They are based on different starting conditions, implying a path dependence in terms of internal stabilization and the context and consequences of their transformation and potential breakdown. Despite the difficult context, Schwab managed to gain access to actors



Regine Schwab (right), recipient of the 2022 Christiane Rajewsky Award, with the chair of the jury, Gabi Schlag.



that were or are active in the insurgency; together with thousands of primary documents that she collected and analysed, these Arabic-language interviews provided unique data that offered new insights into the inner workings of AOG relationships.

The award committee praises Schwab's study for its contribution to understanding the relations between armed groups and its valuable insights for international peace-making efforts. The Christiane Rajewsky Award is an annual prize awarded by the German Association for Peace and Conflict Studies to young researchers for outstanding contributions to peace and conflict research.

After the completion of her doctorate, Regine Schwab accepted a postdoctoral position at the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt in the research department Transnational Politics.

### Carolyn Görzig publishes feature article in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung

On 27 July 2020 a feature-length article by Carolyn Görzig titled "Generation Z and Terrorism" appeared in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. In the article Görzig argues that many approaches to terrorism capture only part of the picture: they consider individuals alone without their greater framework, or focus only on organizations without their members. For this reason, she turns her interest to the connections between individuals and organizations – specifically, how does terrorism persist and change across

generations, and what is the role of intergenerational communication and learning? Building on the theories of David Rapoport, she looks at leftist, ethno-separatist, religious, and rightwing terrorism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. According to Rapoport, non-state terrorism has evolved in four overlapping historical waves since the 1880s, with each wave lasting about forty years. The last one – the religious wave – emerged in 1979, which should mean that we are at the threshold of a new wave right now. Are we in fact seeing the emergence of a fifth wave? Görzig identifies a pattern in which ideologies and ideas are repeated every second generation, with the grandchildren's wave resembling that of their grandparents and predicts a fifth wave of right-wing extremism from the generational patterns across the last four waves.

Görzig exemplifies the influence of the generational context with a reference to the September 11 attacks: "Each generation is influenced by certain events and actors, be it "Hot Wars" or Cold Wars (or their endings), the Arab Spring and Arab Winter, or gentle seasonal changes that bring about changes of no less importance, introduced by actors such as Amazon, Google or YouTube. When I was studying in Brussels my fellow American students always talked about the September 11 attacks and how this day – and everything that happened afterwards – had become a dramatic, major experience for them. Generation Z, also called Generation YouTube or Generation Digital Native, is a generation of people born in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Very often Generation Z has no memories of September 11, 2011, in contrast to their parents who usually belong to the Generation X

9/11 Memorial  
at Ground Zero,  
New York.



## The Research Group ‘How “Terrorists” Learn’ takes a nuanced and holistic perspective to terrorist learning that also recognizes cognitive learning processes and transformations of political goals.

*(people born between 1960 and 1980). For me and my fellow students – who belong to the Generation X – 9/11 was a milestone in our lives.”*

In a certain sense, the Max Planck Research Group was also influenced by this momentous event. After the attacks, Görzig dedicated her career to researching ways out of violence and embarked on a dissertation project on the topic of “Talking to Terrorists”. The Research Group ‘How “Terrorists” Learn’ takes a nuanced and holistic perspective to terrorist learning that also recognizes cognitive learning processes and transformations of political goals. The fact that violent groups are not static or unchanging opens up perspectives for a range of approaches beyond force, from informal talks to negotiations and even reintegration into society.

### Florian Köhler receives Amaury Talbot Prize for Space, Place and Identity

Florian Köhler, a post-doc in the research group, won the 2020 Amaury Talbot Prize for African Anthropology with his book *Space, Place and Identity: Wodaabe of Niger in the 21st Century* (New York: Berghahn 2020). The prize is awarded annually by the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland to the author or authors of the work judged to be the most valuable of anthropological study relating to Africa. The book is based on Köhler’s doctoral research as a member of the former Department ‘Integration and Conflict’.

## The fact that violent groups are not static or unchanging opens up perspectives for a range of approaches beyond force, from informal talks to negotiations and even reintegration into society.

The study examines recent changes in mobility and spatial patterns in a group of Wodaabe in Niger. Once following highly mobile lives as cattle nomads, today they are increasingly engaged in a transformation process towards a more diversified livelihood, based primarily on urban work migration and agro-pastoralism. The book shows how these different economic activities are tied together to form a larger system.

Köhler starts out with the seemingly paradoxical observation that the sedentarization processes that go along with economic diversification do not necessarily lead to quantitatively less mobility. Rather, mobility takes on new forms and new dimensions. The adoption of a sedentary lifestyle in rural proto-villages does not extend to entire social groups, and urban migrants typically remain closely attached to their pastoral home communities. Thus, important human and material flows across rural and urban spaces develop, which have a significant transformation potential for the pastoral sector. The city and the pastoral realm are complementary spaces for living, and they are linked by a complex network of translocal social relations.

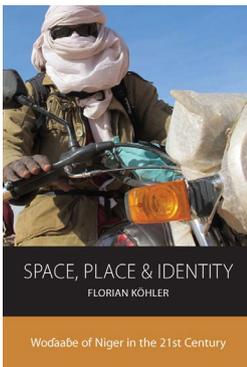
Hence, economic diversification affects not only spatial practices, but social configurations as well. This, in turn, has consequences for social group formation and collective identification, and

for questions of social and cultural reproduction. Although kin and ethnicity continue to play a fundamental role in the formation of new social communities even in the urban context, locally defined communities are overall becoming increasingly important, and the book describes the impact this has on questions of integration into wider society amid the structures of the modern nation-state.

Köhler's book contributes to debates on migration and mobility in the Sahel region, arguing that the contemporary forms of mobility and translocality build on, and have to be understood in a line of continuity with, well-established patterns of mobility aimed at levelling out ecological uncertainties.

Amaury Talbot Prize jury praised the study as "a richly socio-cultural exploration of multi-sited space, trans-local place, inter-ethnic relations, and human mobility". They called the book "a substantial addition to the body of literature that examines ongoing transformations in the lifestyles of contemporary nomadic Fulbe societies. Its central thesis, which stresses the translocal networking ability of nomadic peoples, sheds valuable light on the adaptive strategies required to cope with increasing global resource scarcity." At the same time, the adaptability of these pastoralists, as the study also shows, is today often strained to its limits in the context of increasing pressure on limited resources.

In his current project in the Research Group, Köhler builds on the regional expertise and on the networks established during his research for *Space, Place and Identity* to look at how mobile pastoralists and other rural populations in Eastern Niger must engage in a balancing act between armed non-state groups and repressive state measures that, although designed to counter the threat of these groups, often end up penalizing rural and mobile minority populations. ●



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