Colonial Politics of Digital Security Interfaces

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What do rats, corruption, the corona virus and security have in common? They are all made visible through digital interfaces. In recent years, there has been a spread of virtual interfaces combining data, territory and spatial profiling. In 2017, the mayor of the 17th district in Paris launched the website *Signaler un Rat*, where people passing by the neighborhood could report the sighting of rats. Once reported, the position and condition of the animals were then plotted on a digital map and made available on the internet for the general public. Behind this tool lies the idea that one rational and cost-efficient way of dealing with threats, risk or any other unwanted element is by signaling where this liability lies, facilitating the fight or neutralization of the unease. However, spatializing threats is a practice that exists all over the world. Initiatives like the Corruption Perceptions Index by Transparency International, The New York Times' map on Corona virus, the crime maps on Rio de Janeiro, New York, Buenos Aires, and Cape Town, The Global Terrorism Database and the Crisis Watch by the International Crisis Group all follow the same rationale.

In an effort of making information more easily accessible, those interfaces transform what was initially invisible or fluid into something visible, palpable and static. In this process of organizing the world, actors, practices and nuances have to be civilized and domesticated to fit a screen (Lynch, 1985, p.37 and 38). This work explores the global circulation of these tools and the political practices of organization and/or digitization and connections embedded in these interfaces. By drawing on recent literature on security studies, science and technology studies and post-colonial theory, this work proposes a way of assessing the politics of digital interfaces. In doing so, it pays attention to the bits, pieces and global circuits bringing these tools to the fore and to the ways in which these platforms enact, imagine and calculate security and risk. By these means, I hope to highlight these interfaces current ubiquity in International Politics and how they might unintentionally stigmatize peripheral places as territories of risk and insecurity, underpinning colonial dynamics. In this piece, I will treat security, risk, danger and threat as interchangeably in order to stress how the conceptual borders between these terms is blurred by these interfaces.

Data, Time and Space

One of the primary key features of these tools is the intersection of data, time and space. First, there is the presence of quantified data capturing distinct phenomena happening on earth. In the process of formulating, calculating and shaping data or datasets, one frames what can be asked, how to ask, how to answer, how to deploy the answers, and who has the authority to ask (Lauriault 2012; Ruppert 2012 in Iliads and Russo, p.5 and 6, 2016). As argued by Kitchin and Lauriault (2014) "data are constitutive of the ideas, techniques, technologies, people, systems and contexts that conceive, produce, process, manage, and analyze them" (Kitchin and Lauriault, 2018; Bowker and Star 1999; Lauriault 2012; Ribes and Jackson 2013; Kitchin 2014)". In this sense, the translation of social phenomena into quantified data happens at the expense of complexities, textures and nuances that do not just belong to the numerical format. If we take for example a homicide figure, many things taking part in an act of murder are left out of a homicides statistic, like the act of killing, the weapon used, the degree of suffering and pain inflicted on the victim, feelings of anxiety and fear and blood. In this sense, bodily and sensorial ways of experiencing security through memory, pain, suffering, and blood are glossed over when the messiness and fuzziness of violent practices are translated into sanitized and standardized spreadsheets. In this actuarial assessment of the unease, people determine what constitutes risk and, via a quantified assessment, prioritize which threats should be handled first. Therefore, imaginary risks become real dangers through the authority of statistics and probability.

The second element is time. Based on past occurrences of either conflict, violence or crime, the interfaces try to visualize future possibilities of risk and, in this movement, they create imaginaries of uncertainty and imminent danger. However, the threat has not yet emerged and it may not even emerge, since it is something located in the future, an untamable dimension. What exists is only a specific potential for danger to come to the fore, a speculative fiction. Nevertheless, this possible alarming danger, defined by Massumi (2015) as a conditional statement, creates a situation where the interfaces will be never wrong. If the perceived danger does not materialize, it is fine. They only work with possibilities. But, if the interfaces correctly predict any kind of violent practice, they are instantly legitimized. This creates a self-perpetuating movement of taking potential threats as constitutive elements of such platforms: A threat-o-genenic continuum with very material impact on daily-lives.

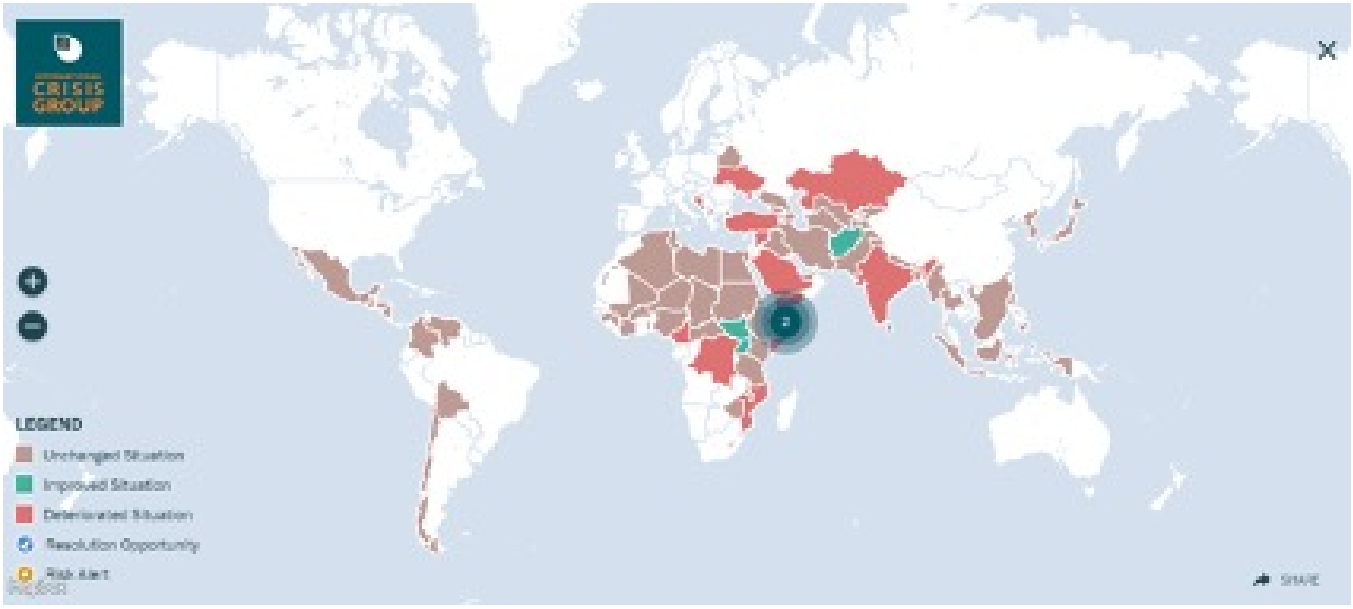
The third element of these interfaces relates to space. First, I would like to agree with Loughlan, Olsson and Schouten (2015) when they argue about a renewed fascination with mapping developed in the last decade both in security studies and among practitioners (p.23). This renewal relates to an attempt of dealing with maps and International Relations and Security Studies in a critical way, reassessing the role played by space in the scholarship. This re-appraisal of was accelerated after 9/11 and specially through the idea that the best way of dealing with risk and insecurities in the XXI century is by tracking and locating liabilities in space (Loughlan, Olsson and Schouten, 2015, p.25). In this sense, maps work showing us a world which becomes "knowable" given that we, map readers, are willing to learn and accept – read 'buy into' – this system of symbols and icons. Maps take part in a distinct type or argumentation, since if one does not believe in a given information regarding space, this person can simply `look at it` in map and visualizing data makes it look more reliable and more `real`. Therefore, maps code the world in a particular manner presenting meaning and information in a geocoded way, transferring information from one surface to the other, projecting historical identities, future ambitions and economic design into visualscapes, reifying certain geopolitical constructions by burying space under layers of "tabularized, [apparently] precise and seemingly unimpeachable data (Schilling, p.59, 2015).

In this sense, these interfaces create assemblages of quantified data, time and space. They give life to new cartographies and topographies of violence, and other ways of perceiving the world and territory. They project possibilities of risk and endangered futures into a territory carved out the rigidity of data. Moreover, it is precisely at this point that the idea of critically assessing the interfaces comes into play, especially because it paves the way for us to understand how scientific visuals do not represent knowledge and problem solving, but are a part of such processes (Alač, p. 162, 2011). That is how digital interfaces interfere with our way of understanding the world, they work as an externalized retina, by determining the edges, lines and colors comprising the world (Lynch, 1985). In this sense, "the digital organizes the social in predetermined ways, mediating social life through standardized data forms which lends to specific ways of analysis" (Marrens and Gerlitz, 2016, p.22). These inscriptions sum up groups, interests, and trends, rendering nature as fiction and fiction as nature.

So What? The Coloniality of Digital Interfaces

Now that I have laid out how I intend to tackle digital interfaces, there is still one question that remains. So what? What is the relevance of this approach and why should people actually care about it? To answer these questions, I would like to discuss one specific interface considering the previous section. In doing so, I hope to highlight how political these interfaces are. By taking the Crisis Watch by The International Crisis Group as an example, I wish to explore how it interferes with our way of approaching security, risk, threat and danger in our current times.

So, first, what is the Crisis Watch? As stated on its website, "CrisisWatch is our [International Crisis Group] global conflict tracker, a tool designed to help decision-makers prevent deadly violence by keeping them up-to-date with developments in over 80 conflicts and crises, identifying trends and alerting them to risks of escalation and opportunities to advance peace". According to their website, the tool describes countries' security situation, if it has deteriorated, improved or neither deteriorated or neither improved. Depending on the country's situation, it may fall into two categories: conflict risk alert or a conflict resolution opportunity. All this information is available on an interactive map, a "unique source of information on the world's conflicts and crises", dividing the planet into brown, green and red territories, as we can see below:



As we begin to dissect and analyze this tool, an element that automatically catches our attention is how all the potentially risky places in the world are all located in the global south. Territories in Latin America, Africa, Asia and the Middle East are framed by this interface as crisis-o-genic and unstable. Disregard the current security situation of certain territories, if it is unchanged, if it has deteriorated or improved, the world`s dangerous lands are all located on the social and historical peripheries of the planet. By framing particular territories as risky or as places of uncertainty, the tool ends up reducing these territories to nothing more than a part of the "dangerous south", rendering these areas as intervenable. In this process, the historical, social and political processes and actors assembling local violence are rendered invisible and depolitized by the interface.

As we further unpack the political aspects of Crisis Watch, we notice a process of othering. Just as during colonial and imperial times, where colonies were portrayed as places to be tamed, intervened and controlled, the red and brown territories displayed on Crisis Watch are also places in need of intervention. Treated as the "other", they end up being depicted as unable to help themselves and in need of interference, only this time their depiction as such is bound to interfaces and technology continuing colonial imaginaries and practices. Thereby, the practice of attaching data to space may end up reinforcing old but still continuous colonial imaginaries, now operating through quantified data, and geolocation tools. However, this does not mean that the International Crisis Group is intentionally colonial. I am sure that the tool was developed with the best of intentions; however, it is embedded in a global circuit of technological practices that eventually reinforce colonial practices and keep old prejudices alive. That is the coloniality of this kind of technology. It perpetuates through geosecurity imaginaries "the transhistoric expansion of colonial domination and perpetuation of its effects in contemporary times". As a possible consequence, this kind of tool may encourage the transfer of blame and fault for crisis taking place in the world to places already disadvantaged, "entrenching social borders and spatial segregation" (Krupar and Ehlers, p.16, 2013).

In addition, this problem-solving mentality may end up stigmatizing the global south as a place of risk, insecurity and instability for global politics, rather than a place of complexities and nuances that a much more fruitful and fair reading of the (in)security practices taking place here would reveal it to be. Much of this murky and layered version of security ends up hidden behind so-called cost-efficient and data-driven decisions here represented by interfaces like Crisis Watch. Inspired by Krupar and Ehlers (2013), I argue that this kind of hot-spot technique mobilizes the global south as a space for containment, reinscribing a colonial imaginary of risk and danger framed by a temporality of uncertainty.

Therefore, to answer the question posed on the beginning of this section, it is important to discuss this kind of technology for two main reasons. First, because it is becoming ubiquitous in several stances of International Politics –

ranging from peace operations and policing to the mapping of diseases – and this diffusion is hardly problematized or put under scrutiny by voices coming from within the discipline. Second, due to the insertion of these tools in international circuits and dynamics that might unintentionally stigmatize peripheral places as *locus* of risk and insecurity, underpinning still-existing colonial dynamics. In this sense, it is important to tackle this kind of tool because it is spreading fast and, while doing so, it rearticulates colonial practices with and alongside social-techno assemblages of security, risk and danger, which in turn has consequences for both policy and polity.

(Un)mapping

Digital security interfaces can be treated as a case of unwanted bias. When juxtaposing quantified data, digital territories, data visualization and security they end up reifying and perpetuating colonial practices and imaginaries. This process take place when data, time and territory mingle and become one thing. At that moment, peripheric places end up being treated – like in times of colonization and imperialism -, as intervenable territories, since they are rendered as enclaves of risk, danger and (in)security. However, this practice has consequences. If we take the Crisis Watch as an example and how the interface is designed to "help decision-makers prevent deadly violence", we can argue that this collateral bias and reductionist approach to violence may concretely impact on policies or other security-related practices underpinned by this interface. It is not about having better data or improved visualizations, but rather about critically assessing these tools and their consequences.

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