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SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

Metamorphoses of the Political
Merian Tagore International Centre of Advanced Studies

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CfP: Collective Action, AI Infrastructures, and the Self

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Shiv Nadar University Campus (16th March) and India Habitat Center (17th March)

Within a new technologized environment, collective action undergoes a significant shift. The collectives that now emerge through collective action are digitally and computationally produced; they manifest new socio-political imaginaries which, again, can be co-produced by AI and computational technologies. Because collective action now increasingly relies on social media and on the AI infrastructures on which they are based, it also builds new kinds of relations between selves and collectives and can transform the selves of its participants in new ways. This could involve a spatial dimension: Digital technologies create communication links between individuals who could not have cooperated in an interaction-based setting, and who may owe their 'encounters' to a sorting algorithm. It also implies a temporal dimension: Those who, within such a collective, can become visible to each other do not have to be active at the same point in time. For instance, the MeToo movement may have functioned like a Durkheimian punishment ritual that affirmed the reality of a shared norm; but its specific process of mutual confirmation – the way in which its participants signalled to each other that they, too, shared this norm – did not happen within a temporally and spatially bounded interaction setting.

Our workshop is meant to investigate how these new collectives' function and what effects they produce:

- How does the idea of the political change within digital collectives?
- How do we consider critical judgment in these computational environments? And which possibilities of critical judgment endure under such conditions? Certainly, AI technologies do not necessarily produce conformist communication (like the ChatGPT-generated academic paper that creates plausibility through familiarity, by strictly limiting itself to saying 'what one says' while rigorously avoiding 'what one doesn't say'); the confirmation processes performed by chatbots can also initiate specific dynamics of radicalization. Still, what about reflexivity? What is the kind of knowledge on which critical judgment relies – including our knowledge of "the human" – and how is it being transformed by such infrastructures?

- Which of these consequences can be attributed to digital technologies as such (be it to errors that these technologies produce autonomously)? Which of these consequences should rather be attributed to a specific "malicious" use of these technologies, e.g., 'fake news', disinformation and/or surveillance – which would make AI infrastructures simply a new instrument deployed within familiar social-political processes?
- How do we re-envision extant theory to understand these phenomena? This also concerns the specific mechanisms that sustain collective action (since available theories of collective action often focus, at least implicitly, on interaction phenomena built on physical co-presence).
- What, in this peculiar context of machine-human contact, is the collective in collective action? For instance, does it make sense to treat AI technologies simply as infrastructures that contribute to sustaining a given collective that can be clearly distinguished from these infrastructures? Or is it more helpful to see them as proper elements of these collectives? After all, communication with chatbots can apparently be experienced, at least by some users, as an interaction process, and can also affect these users in ways that might seem typical of human-to-human interaction.

We are interested in contributions focusing on collectives ranging from 'international' institutionalized entities to 'national' collectives or other spontaneous collectives and to entities representing more particularized issues and interests. One type of case we would be interested in consists of risky forms of political action; because of their particularly precarious mode of cooperation, the effects of the new AI infrastructures could be more easily to observe here. Another could be specific virtual collectives and their 'political action'.