

The Baldy Center for Law & Social Policy
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Podcast transcript begins

[Azalia]: Hi everyone this is the podcast of the Baldy Center for Law and Social Policy, produced at the University at Buffalo. I am your host and producer Azalia Muchransyah. This episode I have Irus Braverman on the phone with me. Irus is a law professor at UB and she is one of the organizing committee members of Medical Post-Humanities: Governing Health Beyond the Human which is awarded the Baldy Center 2020-2021 Conference Grant. So, can you tell us what one health is and what you aim to achieve from this upcoming online workshop?

[Irus]: The essence of it is that when thinking about health one cannot just focus on humans number one; nor on individuals...individual organisms, number two. Now when thinking about health one must take a more holistic approach now what that holistic approach includes that really depends on the speakers. Some people focus on the relationship between human and non-human animals meaning basically focusing on animal human interactions and that's kind of been traditionally the disposition of the one medicine slash one health approach. However, since the 1990s in particular, conservation has really and ecology have really infiltrated much more strongly into this discourse and that meant also including the environment in which these organisms live. Understanding that one cannot pull organisms out of context that in fact organisms are living within this context if it's the microbiome, if it's the broader ecosystem, and that to understand health one must take into consideration those three aspects: animal, human animal, because humans are animals right, so I'm just going to say humans and animals from now on okay, with all of us understanding that humans are animals too. So human, animal, and environment and looking at every situation from that kind of triadic perspective so it's not enough to look at COVID from the pathogenic epidemiological perspective, from the perspective of oh how does the virus move from body to body but also in the broader context of ecosystem, collapses of environmental degradation, etc. So, this way of thinking about the world makes connections between crises that sometimes seem to be separate from each other such as climate change and COVID-19 and so that's kind of why it has been very appealing to me. I think that the devil is in the details how exactly to make that connection is the question. Right? And then another question, this is what I think the humanities and social scientists can contribute, is we understand that we're talking about health in these multiple levels but how can we also think about social justice and the underlying social injustices that have manifested in

these various, let's call them, diseases of the planet, of different organisms, etc. So, what I wanted to add and a few of us would like to add to this picture is that this is not just a kind of scientific, natural science discussion between ecologists and virologists. This should be a discussion that also takes into consideration social and cultural understandings and also legal norms because law is also very much embedded and embodied in these various situations that call for a deeper understanding.

[Azalia]: How do you see this holistic approach influences the law and social justice issues?

[Irus]: Us legal geographers like to say it's not only that the approach will affect the law but also that the law will create this approach in a way. I mean law creates and impacts a lot of these discussions in ways of understanding the world because the legal provides a tool for a lot of us embedded in our own framing of the world around us though these kind of legal classifications and norms, whether something is an endangered species or not is a kind of legal scientific discussion that emerges in the interface between law and science sometimes with clashes sometimes you know with commonalities between different, these modes of thinking these legal and scientific ways of knowing the world. So already declaring say an animal as being on the list of what you're allowed to move in between countries and what you're not allowed to move in between countries is very much creates some of these situations, right? I guess I will say even this differentiation between silos of knowledge such as between the animal people and the human people is very much something that is reinforced by legal categories, by legal ways of thinking. While I was doing some ethnographic observations in an animal hospital I fainted during the surgery and I fell on my face and I was bleeding all over the place but the vet did not approach me I had to wait as a human. Basically, I was explained that it was illegal for her to even approach me or take care of me. She cares for animals and I had to have the human physician come for me and all that is something that already is embedded in our ways of thinking, right? In liability laws and insurance laws and all these ways that we have come to think oh okay, we take it almost for granted that there's a division that you can't just bring a cow and park it out on your street in Buffalo. And so those things that seem maybe perhaps taken for granted to us, these separations are actually very much legal separations. They are created in first and sanctioned by law, they're expressions of particular ways of seeing the world right? But they are sometimes reinforced in ways that then give them a life of their own even when reality has moved in different directions. So reality being okay we need to now create tools that allow us to talk about the world in a more holistic way, whereas our language and our laws are very much fragmented in this way. And so how do we even rethink our modes of speaking and our modes of regulating our actions. And so I think in this way when you're asking these broader questions about systems of governance of laws then it does bring up a lot of really interesting you know deep questions about how we'd like our future to be.

Could we create a language and a mode of governance that does not include some of the anthropocentric, so human-centric, some of these species-centric and also racist and colonialist you know background that many of our current legal systems are already very much embedded in. So to move away to a more just way of living on our planet that will include not just human justice but also but justice for all.

[Azalia]: Moving forward as you mentioned one health's approach will eventually affect law and vice versa. How do you see the possibility of it expanding outside of the developed countries especially considering the variety of legal systems in the world?

[Irus]: I don't want this to be yet another elitist, white imposition from developed to developing countries and I don't want it to seem like that and maybe that's also touching the heart of your question, right? We want this to be different so we had this movement within the environmental movement how initially it was really perceived as a white imposition of privileged people who already took advantage of their resources and now want to limit the developing countries while they take...and the same was said about the climate change movement: now you're all good, you're all developed and now you're coming and telling us how we should not develop because you want to save yourselves. And then came the environmental justice movement as a response but so again I don't want us to create even more bifurcations even more fragmentations here. We want to still take the entire picture into account which means taking into account colonial backgrounds, racial backgrounds, ethnic backgrounds, you know all of these and understanding a complexity of the situation so one of the issues I think that's going to come up hopefully in the conference that the Baldy Center has very generously funded, hopefully in April, to bring these various experts together. This time not just the traditional one health experts who are again you know the scientists working on these various dimensions if it's the vets, if it's the ecologists, if it's the human physician but actually bringing also the humanities and the social scientists and the legal scholars into the room to say here look you've been blind to these aspects you can't just say close wet markets and be done with it. No this is not the way we should approach this there are underlying conditions that have created this wet market maybe there's been injustice there that needs to be taken care of. Maybe in the relationship between human animal we are imposing our own views of how this ought to be done and maybe that's not you know say separation of spaces between human and animal spaces. Some of this might not be valid for some communities and we have to take that into account. Right now I'm just kind of contemplating aloud because I don't really know yet this is exactly why we're having the workshop and I don't know that there has been much by way of a conversation of how one health can actually be expanded to take the colonial, the racial, all these complex historical and social backgrounds of the situations and of course the capitalist, how could I neglect that because the neo liberal aspects you know the critique of capitalism, take all these into account um while thinking about one health. And I will

say that when I brought these things up in my conversations with some of these vets they kind of cringed because they didn't want to touch what they say is a political thing. They want this to be accepted across the board so they cringe but that's exactly why what we're going to be really good with right? So these things will have to be made explicit you can't ignore them because they're some of the underlying causes of these situations and conditions and if we want to take care and move things forward in terms of one health those things need to be spoken explicitly and dealt with explicitly and this is I think what we need to force the existing one health community to do, to surface these underlying injustices to be able to discuss them in a more fluid and interrelated way to understand the interconnection not just between the physical science side but also to bring the social science side into the picture.

[Azalia]: What do you want to say to people who are interested in joining this workshop?

[Irus]: Maybe I'll just say that to anybody who has interest in the climate, in human health, in animal health, and anything in between is warmly invited to this session and it's going to probably be done remotely so it would actually allow us to have a larger audience and so I look forward to kind of getting input from a variety of disciplines, departments, you know, ways of thinking and I'm sure that each one of those can contribute to moving forward, each one of them is relevant.

[Azalia]: Once again, congratulations and I look forward to joining the workshop virtually in April 2021.

[Irus]: Thank you.

[Azalia]: That was Irus Braverman and this has been the Baldy Center for Law and Social Policy podcast, produced at the University at Buffalo. Please visit our website buffalo.edu/baldycenter for more episodes and more info about Medical Post Humanities: Governing Health Beyond the Human online workshop that will be held on April 14-16, 2021. Also, follow our social media on Facebook and Twitter @BaldyCenter. Until next time, I am your host and producer Azalia Muchransyah.