



Coup amidst covid: charting an early-career urban geographer's epistemic journey through crisis – a north–south perspective

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Abstract. In this reflective essay, I discuss the epistemic challenges encountered through my research journey, which was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and the coup back home in Myanmar. As a PhD student from the Global South but residing in Europe during these crises, I highlight the conditions of precarity I faced and how they were reinforced by the uneven structural rules, accentuating the need for collective action and effective change. Despite these challenges, I maintain that crises offer a crucial opportunity to innovate in research practices and move toward more inclusive approaches. This would include accounting for the constraints of crises and supporting researchers who need to flexibly respond to conditions of crises.

1 Introduction

In recent decades, challenges posed by global emergencies have intensified. These emergencies have introduced spatial and temporal shifts into research practices, brought about by various structural and regulatory amendments including travel restrictions, limiting research funding, and so on. In geography and its adjoining disciplines, these changes put researchers and their practices under pressure and challenge attempts to respond to ongoing calls to make knowledge production practices more inclusive and just (Hilbrandt and Ren, 2022; Lawhon and Truelove, 2020; Ren, 2022). The situated experiences of researchers from different backgrounds provide important insights into understanding various epistemic challenges in crisis times.

The recent COVID-19 pandemic is an obvious example of a global crisis that had uneven impacts across different social and geographical scales (McCann et al., 2020). In academia, the impact of the pandemic on individual researchers varied depending on their career stage and position (Shin et al., 2022). Early-career researchers on short-term contracts or scholarships faced increased uncertainties when COVID-19 forced us to alter research plans, schedules, sites, and themes. Funding status is often key for researchers' rights to stay and work in host countries, thus creating addi-

tional administrative challenges for researchers residing outside of their homelands. Some researchers encounter greater restrictions on research opportunities than others due to postcolonial immigration privileges differing between northern and southern countries. Some researchers may experience compounded crises; for instance, I confronted both pandemic and war in my home country simultaneously.

On the other hand, crisis arguably provides turning points to test innovative research approaches. When COVID-19 and the coup forced me to shift my research plans and destination, I was able to apply the reversing-the-gaze (Osanami Törngren and Ngeh, 2018) approach by conducting my fieldwork in Geneva, Switzerland, as a researcher from the Global South. In postcolonial urban study practices, southern countries have mostly been the field sites for researchers from the north or those affiliated with northern institutions. The reverse practices are still partially limited, perhaps due to obvious economic and immigration constraints. As we push forward engaging with the current debate in geographical studies on decentering knowledge production as advocated by scholars (Menon, 2023; Ren, 2022), understanding hindrances in such practices is paramount. Additionally, I argue that the hegemonic academic institutional regulations and structures that exist are not flexible or adapted to support us during crisis and thus need to be highlighted.

Therefore, this essay aims to share my epistemic experiences conducting research during a time of crisis. In this reflective essay, I critically examine my experience facing compounded crises of COVID-19 and the coup in Myanmar throughout my PhD research journey and discuss some challenges in taking up the “reversing-the-gaze approach”, which involves shifting my fieldwork site from Myanmar to Switzerland. I also reflect on my position as a researcher who is from Myanmar but who was residing and doing my PhD in Europe during the time of crisis. The overarching goal of this essay is to communicate my situated experiences in tackling uncertainties during a time of crisis and to shed light on how individual researchers might experience the crisis differently. I also bring up the emotional challenges involved in going through crisis situations and how these impact on research production or vice versa. Ultimately, I hope this essay can provide some discussion points to be considered in moving forward with more inclusive research practices.

2 Researching in a time of crisis: my research agenda shift when covid met coup

I started my PhD in late 2019 at the University of Lausanne in Switzerland, just a few months before the pandemic lockdowns began in Europe. My research was funded by a Swiss Government Excellence Scholarship. My initial research plan was to conduct fieldwork in Myanmar. The choice of study place for me was a straightforward decision made by following our mainstream research practices or the dominant trends in geography studies, whereby southern researchers based at northern institutions predominantly conduct their fieldwork in their own countries or regions (Abasli and Ellassal, 2023; Amarante et al., 2022).

My PhD research journey has been profoundly affected by crises; initially COVID-19 and followed by the coup d'état in Myanmar. I spent the first 2 years of my PhD mostly under pandemic lockdowns. The adverse impacts of the pandemic were immense, causing mental stress and delays in our research plans, as experienced by many colleagues (see, for example, Yip, 2021). While I was figuring out how to manage the effects of the COVID-19 crisis on my research plans, another emergency arose: the coup d'état in Myanmar announced on 1 February 2021. Overnight, the coup placed Myanmar into a state of emergency, halting all urban development projects and thus rendering interviews for my smart urban studies impossible as many key government and development actors were imprisoned and/or disappeared. Additionally, it became emotionally impossible for me to focus on urban development studies of Myanmar in the given context while my family, friends, and fellow citizens struggled daily for their survival and basic needs. Therefore, this event deepened the adverse impacts on my research journey by ruining remaining hope and possibilities of accessing my field-

work in Myanmar after COVID-19 lockdowns. My year-and-a-half-old research project could not continue as planned, although the funding for my PhD was for a maximum of only 3-year renewal.¹

Conducting research during times of crisis is indeed an embodied process involving uncertainties and deep emotional experiences. This process unfolds in several distinct phases. Initially, when the crisis hits, there is a period of shock followed by a phase of realization. As the crisis extends over a longer period, adaptation becomes necessary. For instance, when the coup was announced in Myanmar, I experienced a state of emotional numbness for several days or weeks. Subsequently, I began to feel a turmoil of emotions including hopelessness, frustration, anxiety, worry, and fear. Concurrently, I was overwhelmed by stress as I contemplated how to meet the demanding requirements of my PhD research career and maintain my livelihood during this challenging period. Processing all these aspects simultaneously is indeed extremely difficult.

The effects of crisis steadily caused my mental and physical health to deteriorate, requiring some emergency hospital visits due to severe emotional stress. The role of “emotions in academia matter” (Askins and Blazek, 2017) because it significantly influences our capabilities and research output. Yet, there is still a need for deeper reflection on how researchers' feelings and emotions critically shape their works. My PhD journey taught me that research is produced not only through admiration, dedication, and effort but also through tears and grief.

Adapting to the crisis involved handling administrative hurdles and exploring ways to adjust to circumstances. For me, this meant extending my immigration status and securing additional funding. The administrative tasks were lengthy and bureaucratic, demanding substantial time and energy. Eventually, my scholarship was exceptionally extended by 6 months, from the planned 3 years to 3.5 years. During the time of writing this essay, I am continuing my PhD research. It is currently supported by an assistantship job at my university, which requires proficiency in French. Reflecting on these processes now is easier than experiencing them, as I was only navigating through uncertainties at the time. My new research topic became smart urbanism in Geneva, which evolved after months of discussions with my supervisor, scholars, and colleagues. Fieldwork in Geneva presented its own challenges as a southern researcher adapting to a new language and culture.

¹ In Switzerland, a normal PhD is usually funded for more than a 3-year period. The Swiss Government Excellence Scholarship program funds PhD programs for a maximum of 3 years. It is often insufficient to complete a PhD properly. Some universities need to provide additional funding to make the program functional and to facilitate the process. Additionally, PhDs funded by scholarships are categorized differently, which can often create exclusions and difficulties for the researchers working under the terms of these scholarship funds.

In summary, researching during a crisis involves navigating uncertainties, requiring significant support, care, and solidarity from the academic community. While I do not wish to understate my struggles, I feel privileged to share my experiences, knowing that many other early-career researchers may be facing similar or more severe crises and need support but have not yet had the chance to share their stories.

3 Fieldwork in Switzerland: institutional double standards

Crises offer a chance to critically reflect on our experiences with institutional structures and systems. Our experiences with the crisis often reveal how certain structural settings of academia can exacerbate or ease difficulties. My intention is to remind readers that levels of vulnerability to the conditions of the global crisis are not distributed equally for all researchers of different social backgrounds and identities. The recognition of such differences has not yet been accommodated enough in the structure of northern institutions (Albayrak-Aydemir, 2020), thus resulting in double standards.

Below, I explore my own personal experiences navigating the academic institutional structures in Switzerland, reflecting on how they adapt to the unique conditions faced by southern researchers like me.

Relocating my fieldwork from Myanmar to Switzerland presents a variety of challenges. Among other things, I would like to focus on two experiences that are related to interacting with institutional structures that are rather less accommodating to my situation. The first problem is the requirement to seek funding prolongation so that I can continue to undertake research in crisis-adapted conditions. Due to the strict regulations of the Swiss Government Excellence Scholarship, a 6-month extension was offered for my situation. This extension unfortunately could not sufficiently facilitate the comprehensive development and execution of my new research. This emphasizes how new emergency conditions are difficult for existing funding regulations to align with and support.

During this event, another critical point that became obvious to me was that the scholarship students are categorized differently at the university, operating under a different set of administrative guidelines compared to our “normal” PhD peers. When my scholarship funding ended, I needed to reregister as a completely new student, requiring all documents to be posted by home universities again. I completed this required document submission for enrollment of the same PhD program that I had been enrolled in since late 2019. The school registration, residence permit, and funding are often interconnected issues, where funding status often facilitates residency. The conclusion of scholarship funding midway through a PhD project places a researcher in a complex and stressful situation that necessitates handling multiple administrative procedures while not knowing whether

they will get through them with positive results. As mentioned above, I had obtained the opportunity to continue my PhD funded with the support of an assistantship position, which facilitated the transition time. Nevertheless, the transition was not straightforward as there were times that my position was not able to be validated (meaning no salary could be paid) due to my immigration status. The key point that I want to highlight is the double standard, making funding more complicated for researchers like me in times of crisis.

Another challenge related to funding during the transition of my fieldwork to Switzerland was that my proposal to hire a research assistant did not receive funding. Our department generously supports fieldwork funds for PhD students. In my case, I requested a research assistant with the reasons that I wrote in the communication: “I would need to work with someone (student assistant) to help me to translate the conversations in French to English and the cultural aspects so that I could manage to follow the conversations profoundly.” This proposal to work with an assistant was not able to be funded, due to it being very expensive to pay for the remuneration costs of a research assistant in Switzerland. I relate this to my experience working as research assistant to my former Swiss colleague during his PhD fieldwork in Myanmar. My colleague was able to secure the funding to hire me as a research assistant in the field in Myanmar through the same funding scheme. It makes me reflect that my case presented a new aspect to the institutional settings in that perhaps no previous claim had ever been made for a similar situation in which a researcher from the Global South (whose is not of Francophone origin) conducts fieldwork in the French-speaking part of Switzerland and whose field expenses to hire a research assistant (a.k.a. translator) are more expensive than perhaps the funding amount that is often set for research assistants elsewhere. I would like to make it very clear that people at the department were and would always be willing to find solutions but cannot help with broader institutional standards and logic. It prompts a necessary reflection on how funding guidelines of academic institutions in the north could be better structured to support diverse research needs, rather than favoring economically convenient locations, in the light of the decolonial turn in geography.

This experience is also problematic in another way as it relates to language being a colonial legacy (Ngugi, 1986). This hints at the underlying expectation of northern academic institutions for southern researchers to assimilate the dominant linguistic culture to conduct research in the north. It made me feel uncomfortable to think about the institutional double standard, and it seems to me that this case highlights an imbalanced privileging of certain forms of fieldwork by certain scholars in some places over others.

4 Conclusion: toward a more inclusive research practice

In this essay, I share my own epistemic encounters through my PhD research journey in times of crisis. I discuss my experiences from the perspective of a scholar from the Global South at a northern institution. My experiences illuminate that the impacts of crises are deeply influenced by factors such as individual background, geographical origin, and academic standing, which profoundly shape each person's experience of these effects. Institutional double standards often intensify these challenges during crises, particularly for researchers from the Global South based at northern institutions. As outlined in the discussion, it is imperative to foster awareness of the distinct needs of researchers from varied backgrounds. Such awareness should inform a critical reassessment of institutional standards at northern institutions, thereby facilitating a more inclusive approach in decentering the hegemonic nature of northern academic structures.

As highlighted earlier, crises allow for testing innovative research methods. In my reversing-the-gaze approach, I read the urban governance in Geneva through a southern perspective and apply the southern theory such as the anthropology of state, developed and applied in Africa and Asia. This poststructuralist reading suggests that the urban governance complexities involving negotiation, power relations, and informalities which are synonymous with a southern context also exist in the north.

To conclude, crises highlight difficulties and inequalities, as well as opportunities. Based on crisis experiences, scholars (Shin et al., 2022) have urged for more “caring and responsible” academic practices that should encourage a more global research approach (Ren, 2022). Sharing situated experiences and highlighting a north–south perspective like I have in this essay help to identify structural injustices of northern and southern academic systems. In the context of the decolonial turn and these times of crisis, this provides a critical starting point for building more just academic communities.

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