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Borders in Times of Pandemic

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A pandemic is never just a pandemic. Over the past few weeks, it has become evident how the spread and impact of the novel Coronavirus is profoundly shaped by social and political practices – such as tourism and travel – institutions – such as governments and their advisors – and structures – such as inequalities along the lines of class, race and gender. All of these are part of systems that are historically variable and subject to human agency. The international border regime is one such system. While it is an obvious truth that the virus’s spread does not respect any borders, governments across the world have resorted to closing their borders, more or less explicitly likening the threat of the virus to the “threat” of “uncontrolled” migration.

This kind of disaster nationalism – the nationalist impulse to circle the wagons in the face of a transnational challenge – could be countered by insisting that we are witnessing a pandemic in the literal sense, i.e., a health crisis that affects not just a part of the population, but all (*pan*) people (*demos*), thus highlighting the inefficiency of the border regime. But this insistence that humanity itself is the subject of the pandemic only tells half the

truth as the precarity and vulnerability the pandemic imposes on people is distributed in a radically unequal fashion (<https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4603-capitalism-has-its-limits>). The virus hits workers in underpaid jobs, in supermarkets, hospitals, delivery services, and informal care, as well as the homeless and the imprisoned in an intensified form. This is even more true for refugees and irregularized migrants. The catastrophic effects of the pandemic are thus especially harsh at the border, in a form that is intensified by the border.

Refugee camps – hosting millions of Palestinians, Sudanese, Rohingya, Syrians, and many more in a camp archipelago that barely touches Europe and North America – are the crucible of this crisis just as much as they condense the structural violence of the border regime more generally. Take the camps at the borders of the European Union in Greece, where over 40,000 people – mostly from Syria and Afghanistan – are confined under unimaginable hygienic conditions, without the ability to wash their hands, let alone practice social distancing or access any reliable medical help. This is neither a natural condition nor an accidental byproduct of an otherwise well-functioning border regime. It is the direct effect of political decisions taken by the EU and its member states (and in a similar way, the EU, together with the US, has played a crucial role in producing the conditions that these refugees are seeking to flee).

Instead of evacuating the camps in which the first Covid-19 cases were reported, the Greek government – deserted by its fellow EU member states – has now placed them under lockdown. Germany, the largest and richest EU member, has made it clear that it will take in no more than 400 children, but even that will only

happen once others do their “fair share” – a “fair share” that stands in a grotesque relation to the number of refugees currently hosted in countries such as Turkey (3.7m) and Pakistan (1.4m). Unfortunately, this declaration of complete moral bankruptcy does not come as a surprise, but continues an EU record that has been especially dismal since the “summer of migration” in 2015, when the mass political agency of refugees – and especially their march from the Budapest train station (<https://bordermonitoring.eu/ungarn/2015/09/of-hope-en/>) to the Austrian and then on to the German border – forced politicians to open the borders. This opening lasted only very briefly, and the subsequent strategy of closure has been aimed at preventing a renewed opening at all costs, thus paving the way for the current resurgence of disaster nationalism. (It is precisely for this reason that European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has referred to Greece as the “shield” of Europe (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/03/migration-eu-praises-greece-as-shield-after-turkey-opens-border>) – suggesting the urgent need to repel an imminent threat.)

The indifference toward the suffering of refugees at the EU’s borders, or rather the EU’s exercise of its “power to make live and let die (<http://blogs.law.columbia.edu/foucault1313/2015/11/17/intro6-13/>),” fits well with the logic of disaster nationalism that the hollow rhetoric of solidarity barely manages to disguise: every state is on its own, the virus is “othered” as a foreign threat (<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/covid-19-epistemic-condition/>) or “invasion,” and the closing of borders intensifies the “border spectacle” (<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/beyond-trafficking-and-slavery/border-spectacle-of-migrant-victimisation/>) that is supposed to assure citizens that their government

has everything under control.

Of course, the illegitimacy of the border regime, especially in its catastrophic effects on refugees in camps in Greece and elsewhere, needs to be publicly exposed. Indeed, this illegitimacy is overdetermined and goes beyond the incontrovertible fact that in its current form it violates international law and creates a permanent humanitarian catastrophe. From a normative perspective, the injustice-generating and injustice-preserving, freedom-restricting, and undemocratic character of the existing border regime has also been rigorously demonstrated – both in philosophical argument (<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/beyond-trafficking-and-slavery/case-for-open-borders/>) and in daily political contestations by refugee and migrant movements themselves.

Nevertheless, insisting on this illegitimacy is insufficient as it underestimates the complexity of the border as a social institution, as well as the powerful forces of naturalization that make borders seem like part of the natural make-up of our world, especially for those who are exempt from borders' daily terror. The normative case against borders, at least in the form in which they currently exist, thus needs to be supplanted by a critical theory of the border. Because critical theory, still grappling with its legacy of methodological nationalism, at least in the Frankfurt School tradition, has had little to say on these issues in the past, we need to turn to critical migration studies, which build on the knowledge generated in practices of migration themselves. Three lessons in particular (distilled from the work of Etienne Balibar, Sandro Mezzadra, Nicholas de Genova and others (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09502386.2014.891630?journalCode=rcus20>)) stand out:

1) Borders do not simply have a derived or secondary status – as if they were just drawing the line between preexisting entities and categories of people – but are essentially productive, generative, and constitutive, e.g., of the differences between citizens and migrants, and between different categories of migrants (refugees, economic migrants, expats, etc.) and their corresponding forms of mobility and immobility.

2) Borders are no longer exclusively or primarily “at the border,” at the “limits” of the state’s territory, but have proliferated in the interior as well as the exterior of the political community and been diffused into “borderscapes” in which particular categories of people, such as irregularized migrants, never really cross the border or manage to leave it behind.

3) Borders do not simply enable the exclusion of non-citizens and migrants and the inclusion of citizens and guests. Instead their porosity and imperfection is part of their functionality and design, enabling a form of differential inclusion and selection that does not just block irregular migration but filters it, including in ways that are in keeping with the demands of contemporary labor markets (especially in areas deemed essential in times of crisis such as care and agriculture).

One implication of these lessons is that a border is never just a border – a gate to be opened or closed at will, although such gates do of course exist and can remain closed with fatal consequences. This becomes especially apparent in times of a pandemic in which governments race to close their borders as if this would stop a virus that has already exposed this way of thinking about borders as naïve and fetishistic. The reality of the border regime, and the way in which it contributes to making the pandemic into a catastrophe for the most vulnerable

on our planet, confront us with what in the end amounts to a simple choice (<https://www.medico.de/en/refugees-welcome-dont-shoot-17677/>): we can either affirm this regime and continue to naturalize it, thus sliding down the slippery slope toward a struggle of all against all, or we can contribute to the manifold struggles by refugees and migrants alike to denaturalize and politicize the border regime, to expose its violence, and to make it less catastrophic.

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