



CENTRAL EUROPEAN SERVICE
FOR CROSS-BORDER INITIATIVES

Editor-in-Chief

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Cross-Border Review

Yearbook 2020

ISSN 2064-6704

Budapest
2020

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Research Note on Covid and Bordering

Anna Casaglia and James W. Scott

Since the advent of SARS-CoV-2 in 2019 and its worldwide spread in 2020, the question of Covid-19 and its impacts has become a major concern (not only) for borders scholars. This will be increasingly visible as ongoing research becomes publicly available in the coming months. Definitive analyses of Covid's effects around the globe are still pending, however issues related to social and psychological well-being (Saladino, Algeri and Auriemma 2020), the unequal global distribution of social, economic and health-related burdens (Rohwerder 2020) and various forms of everyday 'bordering' that Covid-19 has either generated or exacerbated (Wille and Kenesu 2020) are among the many perspectives that have been elaborated.

Based on research reports and webinars targeting better understanding of Covid's societal implications, a number of observations can be made. One thing that is abundantly clear is that the Covid pandemic has reinforced how borders and border-making operate as manifestations of state power as well as processes embedded within and dispersed throughout society. In our estimation, the following issues stand out in the debate:

1. The pandemic is a border-making phenomenon that operates politically, socially, socio-economically and culturally at different levels

Obviously, the most visible manifestation of border impacts is their temporary closure and/or the introduction of sweeping restrictions on mobility as a means to control the spread of the virus. Unfortunately, border closures have usually come too late, after infections through specific spreading events have taken place. Once the virus is established locally, border closures have more limited epidemiological but considerable economic and social impacts. However, this is only one aspect. The Covid-19 epidemic also highlights how broader challenges to social cohesion, openness and solidarity need to be understood through the multilevel and multifaceted prism of borders. The pandemic has laid bare the vulnerabilities of nations and societies in social, economic, welfare terms. This is reflected in border-making patterns that have emerged with differential impacts within society: age, health, nature of employment, levels of employment flexibility, housing conditions, etc. divide the population in terms of exposure and vulnerability to the virus.

Furthermore, the challenges societies are facing will reverberate in the near future and raise questions regarding the achievement of transnational solidarity: as regards the European Union management of security measures to fight the pandemic, it has been noted how “[t]he pandemic can teach us many lessons on solidarity: it is a legal and moral value, it is crucial for integration, and it must be operationalized, providing for different forms of solidarity, such as financial solidarity, as *ultima ratio*” (Marin 2020: 15-16).

2. Vulnerable categories and global injustice

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has put to the fore the differential impact of threats and disasters on diverse population groups, rising fundamental concerns on forms of spatial and social injustice. In different areas of the world, the most affected by the virus are categories of people who already present some kinds of vulnerability and experience inequalities. Among those who appear to be more at risk with regard to the pandemic, migrants and refugees indeed present patterns of vulnerability that lie at the intersection of class, race and status (Guadagno 2020, Marin 2020), left aside gender and age (Eaves and Al-Hindi 2020). Various factors affect migrants in the different stages of their migratory path, starting from the dramatic health conditions in overcrowded camps, the lack of entitlement to health care, the exclusion from welfare programs, and the illegalized condition that often determines migrants’ invisibility. Border restriction affect irregular mobility, further complicating the already precarious travel conditions of people trying to reach countries where to ask for asylum or look for better life chances. In a situation of health emergency, it is easy to imagine the negative impact of sanitary conditions that are already fragile in a normal scenario.

UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi stated that “If health risks are identified, screening arrangements can be put in place, together with testing, quarantine, and other measures. These will enable authorities to manage the arrival of asylum seekers and refugees in a safe manner, while respecting international refugee protection standards designed to save lives.”¹ However, many countries already suspended asylum procedures, other declared themselves unsafe for welcoming refugees due to high numbers of contagion (Tondo 2020), and resettlement departures were temporarily suspended. Indeed, Covid-19 brings to the forefront the relationship of globalization, inequalities, security and global migration.

1 <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2020/3/5e7395f84/statement-filippo-grandi-un-high-commissioner-refugees-covid-19-crisis.html>

3. Covid-19 has a border-making impact in terms of ontological (in)security

Feelings of wellbeing and security are threatened by disruptive events and drastic changes to everyday routines. As Jussi Laine has argued in his essay in this volume, ontological security expresses a need to locate and orient oneself in the world but can also entail gross exaggerations of threat perception regarding perceived threats. Here, misinformation plays an insidious role. In many countries, misinformation has emerged as a major challenge in managing the pandemic; it is also a border-related issue. Resistance to lockdowns, wearing of masks and observing other guidelines and restrictions has to some extent divided public opinion and complicates the political framing of response measures. Covid-19 related events thus indicate that one important aspect of information is rather an old one: its use as ideological ammunition in geopolitical and domestic political contexts. Accusations of “fake news”, often heard in the media, are used to disqualify opponents and limit the possibility of open and measured debate over socially and health-relevant issues. In order to respond to security challenges of (mis)information, measures need to be taken that reduce everyday perceptions of threat. Transparent and inclusive communication is key. Moreover, communication should avoid creating new socio-political boundaries between individuals and groups. Ultimately, the impact of misleading and tendentious media appeals will often depend on how society works towards reducing potential for mutual mistrust.

Misinformation was also an essential component of racialized reactions to the spread of the pandemic, still defined as the “Chinese disease” in countries like the US, which led to the victimization of ethnic minorities and the socio-economic discrimination of marginalized groups (Teixeira da Silva 2020). In addition, stigmatization and the creation of stereotypes in connection to the spread of the virus have also created a harmful climate for migrants. In many contexts this phenomenon has been politically instrumentalized to spread anti-migrant narratives and promote increased immigration control, the interruption of SAR operations, and the reduction of migrants’ rights (Banulescu-Bogdan et al. 2020).

4. Biopolitics of public health have emerged as a political and ethical battleground:

Following from the above, the public health struggle has, perhaps inevitably, become highly politicised. Giorgio Agamben, for one, has channelled outrage at lockdowns and disease control measures by decrying a biopolitical ‘state of exception’ and its threats to European societies. This message has resonated particularly in West Europe, for example in France, Germany, Italy and the UK. It has also been appropriated by extremist groups who aim to gain visibility by supporting anti-lock-

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down measures (e.g. Alternative für Deutschland in Germany, white supremacists in the US). his perspective has been countered by many scholars, for example by Jean-Luc Nancy who argues that theoretical commitments, such as those of Agamben, and a lack of connection with real life have led to delusional conclusions about the significance of states of exception. Roberto Esposito has also weighed in by defending the relevance of biopolitics, but also suggesting that in Italy (and elsewhere) we have seen rather “a breakdown of public authority and health systems than that of a dramatic totalitarian grip.”²

This raises the question whether a democratic biopolitics is indeed possible. Sergei Prozorov (2019) defines this option as the coexistence of diverse forms of life on the basis of reciprocal recognition as free, equal, in common and derived from lived experience. Similarly, Panagiotis Sotiris has stated that: “Biopolitical measures as the result of democratically discussed collective decisions based on the knowledge available and as part of a collective effort to care for others and ourselves. (...) instead of a permanent individualized fear, which can break down any sense of social cohesion, we move towards the idea of collective effort, coordination and solidarity within a common struggle, elements that in such health emergencies can be equally important to medical interventions. This offers the possibility of a democratic biopolitics. This can also be based on the democratization of knowledge.”³

However, concerns remain regarding the long-term effect of control policies and limitations to individual and collective freedom introduced or enhanced in the fight against the pandemic. Actions were put forward to safeguard society’s health through mobility restrictions, police surveillance and sanctions, the development of mobile apps for tracking individuals, quarantine measures, the radical interruption of social life and gatherings. All these measures could be also used to enhance surveillance and tighten control, actually limiting civil rights, and they might “serve as a dramatic precedent for limitations on human mobility, targeting the most vulnerable, and setting up future draconian restrictions” (Slack and Heyman 2020: 5)

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