

Viral Borders

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In the specific context of the COVID-19 public health emergency, states on a global scale have resorted to a logic of “national” quarantine to justify border closures, and tactics of migrant and refugee immobilization, more generally. The frequently racialized equation of border-crossing “foreigners” with the putative threat of contagion is nothing new, of course. Thus, like the coronavirus itself, migrants are depicted as a disruptive and dangerous menace that somehow intrudes from “outside” the presumptively self-contained space of each nation-state, and triggers a simplistic and often cruel logic of implausible insularity and self-isolation in the guise of public health precautions. Such misguided conceptions of the public health responsibilities of the state are enacted as purportedly protective measures intended to exclusively safeguard the nation-state’s citizenry. As exercises in bombastic nationalism, such measures become crudely “populist” occasions for re-bordering “the people.” Notably, in the context of the mass expulsions enforced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the equation of migrants with contagion has sometimes also characterized the reaction against returning emigrants or deportees even in their countries of origin, where they are similarly figured as invasive and unwelcome external vectors of disease and viral transmission. Hence, migrants have often been challenged by a double process of re-bordering driven by both “sending” and “receiving” states’ false and ultimately futile logic of preemptive and punitive exclusion, leaving the migrants trapped in transit, while exposed to heightened risks of exposure and infection. Thus, the often brutal tendencies of these border regimes have plainly exposed migrants and refugees to an inordinate risk of COVID-19 infection as border closures have contained migrants to makeshift border zone

encampments or hostels or subjected them to over-crowded migrant detention prisons with no provision of adequate health care. From the standpoint of public health, of course, this is plainly a self-defeating strategy that merely multiplies the conditions of possibility for the virus to spread, but it underscores the extent to which a neo-Malthusian public health rationality mercilessly subjects some lives to a statist calculus of human lives that are deemed to be expendable and may be disregarded and discounted as “affordable” deaths. Thus, the feckless bordering of the pandemic has served to unleash a pandemic of viral borders.

Even confronted with the ever more devious reaction formations of border policing and militarization, migrant detention, and immigration enforcement by state powers, the constitutive force and autonomy of human mobility must nonetheless be central in our analyses of the veritable making and remaking of our contemporary world. Amidst the chaos and confusion of the pandemic, and even against the considerable forces aligned to immobilize their migratory projects, which may to greater or lesser extents compel them to revert to a kind of “standby” mode, migrants’ subjective autonomy remains an incorrigible force. And waiting to be re-activated, their mobilities remain an intractable and always potentially disruptive constitutive power.

BIO:

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