Lockdowns and Migrant Solidarity

A Review of Ibrahim Serkeci and Jeffrey H. Cohen (eds.), *Covid-19 & Migration: Understanding the Pandemic and Human Mobility*, Transnational Press London, 2020. 203 pp. £24.50 (PB). ISBN: 978-1-912997-59-6

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In this review of *Covid-19 & Migration: Understanding the Pandemic and Human Mobility*, I reflect on the profound challenges to practices of migrant solidarity, and anti-racist activism more generally, which have been presented by the limitations on human mobility (lockdowns) that many states have imposed as part of a number of measures designed to curtail the spread of the coronavirus.

No doubt, there will be many lenses through which lockdowns will be described and analysed in future years. Here, I argue that they should be placed in the context of a long line of government policies, enshrined in law, which - despite being addressed to the general population - in effect make citizens complicit in undermining the health and socio-economic rights of migrants and people with recent histories of migration. In the latter group I include people like the descendants of the first group of Caribbean migrants to arrive in the UK on the ship named Empire Windrush for the purpose of supplementing the UK's much depleted labour force. As has been extensively documented elsewhere, directly as a result of state immigration laws, many of the Windrush descendants were either unlawfully deported or rendered homeless or forced into unemployment.

The UK is one country in which migrant solidarity networks and anti-racist groups have been working hard to combat the effects of immigration legislation which has caused employers and a range of service providers, such as landlords and NHS providers, to prevent people from accessing basic means of subsistence on the basis of their *perceived* as well as *actual* nationality (see: *Secretary of State for the Home Department v JointCouncil for the Welfare of Immigrants*: para. 66).

Unlike these so-called hostile environment measures, lockdowns do not bring citizens into a direct relationship of surveillance with migrants. Instead, lockdowns require the majority population to engage in the seemingly innocent *non-action* of staying at home. However, as the seventeen chapters which make up *Covid-19 & Migration* illustrate, the inaction which lockdown rules impose on the majority population is far from being passive - because it enables a "redistribution of mobility [as] empty trains are accompanied by the intensified movements of "key workers" (Xiang 2020: 24) who are seen as both "essential" and "disposable" (Rao, Gammage, Arnold and Anderson 2020: 55). These workers are disproportionately represented among those who have died after contracting the coronavirus. Their health vulnerability is due to a number of factors. Most particularly, they "may not have other options than using public transport to travel for work…[and]...a high proportion of [those] in healthcare and...in the service and transport industry...cannot avoid face-to-face contact with other people" (Skogberg, Hussein and Castaneda 2020:133-4).

Writing can be an act of solidarity, and, in its attempt decouple social protection from citizenship, *Covid-19 & Migration* represents a particular mode in which migrant solidarity and anti-racist activisim is performed. However, it needs to be emphasised that racial minorities have always experienced citizenship as a highly negotiable commodity. For racial minorities, citizenship is a precarious status, which does not guarantee them access to basic social and human rights.

About the volume

Covid-19 & Migration examines government responses to the outbreak of the coronavirus in a number of countries across the global North and global South, including China (chapters three & four), Finland (chapter 12), India (chapter fourteen), Malaysia (chapter nine), Mexico (chapter eight), South Africa (chapter seven), Portugal (chapter ten), Uganda (chapter eleven) and the United States (chapter thirteen). Chapters four (Zhan, Tse, Fu, Lai and Zhang 2020: 27-46) and five (Gondauri and Batiashvili 2020: 47-54) provide important statistical data which enables

readers to evaluate the impact of lockdowns and other measures on the control of the virus. Chapter five (Gondauri and Batiashvili 2020: 47-54) trains this statistical analysis on several states in Europe that have had the highest number of infections and deaths; including France, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom. Overall, the chapters in the volume evaluate the costs borne by migrants, and those racialized communities who are *perceived* as migrants, so that others can 'stay home, stay safe'.

In a context in which "[m]igrants are most vulnerable to urban disasters and epidemics' (Bhagat, R.S, Sahoo, Roy and Govil 2020: 158), these costs inevitably include loss of life. Contributors document the "alarming over representation of immigrant doctors in COVID-19 related healthcare worker deaths" (Zard and Lau 2020: 177) in Britain - where " the first four doctors...to die of COVID-19...while treating patients, were all from an immigrant background" (Bhagat, R.S, Sahoo, Roy and Govil 2020: 160). In the UK and the US, "frontline healthcare workers from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds...had at least a five-fold increased risk of COVID-19 infection compared to the non-minority general population" (Zard and Lau 2020: 177). Moving beyond the healthcare sector, in Finland it was found that "migrant origin groups are over represented among the diagnosed cases. In particular…[b]y the middle of April, 1.8% of the Somali population in Helsinki were tested positive for COVID-19, whereas the respective prevalence was 0.2% in the Finnish origin population" (Skogberg, Hussein and Castaneda 2020:133).

The volume also documents the toll on the mental health of migrants that lockdowns have produced; caused not least by "being far from family, friends, and from a common past that supports a linkage between the immigrant and the community of origin" (Posch and Cabecinhas 2020: 112). Mental stress was also occasioned by the loss of opportunities for social integration caused by lockdown restrictions ((Posch and Cabecinhas 2020: 111).

Family members of migrant workers living in desperate situations in some of the poorest countries in the world are also impacted by the lockdowns. Two of the chapters in the volume (chapters thirteen and seventeen) examine why levels of family remittances - "money that migrants send back to friends and family members in their countries of origin" (Siegel 2020: 195) - fell sharply in 2020, and continue to fall (Siegel 2020: 195).

There are a number of reasons why remittance levels have fallen. First, remittances are at their highest and most consistent when the migrants' "home countries are experiencing crisis and hardship. This time, however, the pandemic has affected every country in the world, creating additional uncertainties". (Zamora and Olvera 2020: 143). Second, because the "majority of migrants are currently hosted in some of the most COVID-19 affected countries" (Siegel 2020: 200), lockdowns have especially impacted those migrants who are not deemed "essential workers". In essence, the "[m]illions of migrant workers...located in non-essential services such as domestic work, beauty salons, hotels and restaurants" (Lumayag, Del Rosario and Sutton 2020: 102) are being severely tasked to provide for their own basic needs, much less attend to the needs of others. For those migrants who retain their jobs, lockdowns have removed the option of "physical hand carrying by the migrant on visits home or via sending cash with others travelling back to their area of origin" (Siegel 2020: 200). The crisis relating to family remittances also highlights the fact that migrants and their families do not have equal access to electronic banking services (Siegel 2020: 200).

The significance of this loss of revenue cannot be overstated. For some countries, remittances "account for more than 20% of their GDP" (Siegel 2020: 198), and amount to "three times more than Official Development Assistance and [exceeds] Foreign Direct Investment" (Zamora and Olvera 2020: 145). Although sent directly to families, "remittances bring in foreign exchange that can alleviate balance of payments burdens...and increase a country's credit worthiness" (Siegel 2020: 196). It is important to note also that, even with the predicted fall in the level of remittances, this form of income will still outstrip other sources of foreign investment because "foreign direct investment is projected to decrease even more, by about 35 per cent" (Siegel 2020: 196).

Interrogating the 'Stay Home, Stay Safe' Message

One of the strongest features of the volume is that it lays bare the deeply exclusionary nature of the 'stay home, stay safe' message that has been adopted by governments around the globe. As the chapters relating to the position of migrant domestic workers (chapter six) and refugees (chapters eleven & fifteen) show, several decades of advancement in the protection of refugees and persons suffering gendered forms of violence have been endangered by government-led discourses that present the home as an enduringly safe space. As stated in the introduction to this review, although 'staying at home' is presented as a form of supportive non-action *vis-a-vis* other individuals, it becomes more problematic when seen from the vantage point of migrants (and racial minorities who are perceived as migrants) whose intensified mobility is the very condition that allows others to stay at home.

Threatening the safety and security of those forced to flee their countries of origin or domicile is the fact that "[i]mmigrants and the refugee population are often left out of epidemic preparedness planning" (Bhagat, R.S, Sahoo, Roy and Govil 2020: 160). This fails to acknowledge that "[a]sylum is a life-saving measure" (Zard and Lau 2020: 174). Writing in the context of Uganda, Igoye reminds us that "[t]he COVID-19 pandemic, and subsequent restrictions on the movement of persons, collided with other crises around Africa, causing forced migration. Specifically, these crises include Climate disasters such as drought, landslides, floods and locust plagues, as well as civil/political instability" (2020: 121). Not surprisingly, given this lack of planning, "[a]round the world, COVID-19 related border closures have trapped asylum seekers in increasingly desperate situations without access to protection" (Zard and Lau 2020: 175). Zard and Lau go on to say, with poignant irony, "a virus that knows no borders has effectively closed the door for many refugees and asylum-seekers" (2020: 179). This point is reinforced by Skogberg, Hussein and Castaneda who note that in Finland "[t]he number of first-time asylum seekers diminished dramatically during the COVID-19 pandemic" (2020: 132).

Noting as many others have that "[s]harp variations in mortality rates have forced us to acknowledge pre-existing inequalities of class, race and gender in the ability to be safe" (Rao, Gammage, Arnold and Anderson 2020: 58), the volume draws attention to the plight of migrant domestic workers who are often bound by immigration regulations to one particular employer, (Rao, Gammage, Arnold and Anderson 2020: 61) and, as a result, are sometimes "trapped in abusive employment relations" (Rao, Gammage, Arnold and Anderson 2020: 61).

More generally, each chapter of the volume reveals the enormous gulf between the non-essential travel of the majority population that was paused during lockdown and the situations of "those who rely on mobility for their livelihood" (Xiang 2020: 19), or, put otherwise, those who are forced to see [m]igration [as] a livelihood strategy" (Bhagat, R.S, Sahoo, Roy and Govil 2020: 154). Chapter two, on migrant agricultural labour, and chapter six, on migrant domestic workers, are especially revealing of the volume of work done by migrants that was designated 'essential' and therefore able to continue during the lockdowns. During the earlier stages of the pandemic, efforts were made to hire local workers to fill the positions that migrant workers assumed on farms - in anticipation of border closures. The strategy failed, which "persuaded many governments that only international migrant workers will accept most seasonal farm jobs" (Martin 2020: 14). For migrant domestic workers, "COVID-19 has brought to the fore the critical role of care work undertaken by...workers who are both essential and excluded workers – essential to social protection systems yet excluded from any rights and protections afforded other native workers" (Rao, Gammage, Arnold and Anderson 2020: 66). Igoye's chapter also emphasises that migrant workers, like domestic workers, who are situated in the "informal economy...are excluded from labour rights and Social Security safety nets. Their exclusion is particularly linked to certain characteristics: irregular status, unpredictable income and work time, working with multiple employers and as live-in workers" (2020: 120). Writing in the context of India, Bhagat, R.S, Sahoo, Roy and Govil state that "[t]he most vulnerable [are] those migrant workers who are employed in the informal sector, those who do not have either security of employment or any social protection" (2020: 159).

Although the position of women migrants commands especial attention, the contributors underscore that, in general, migrants and racial minorities (who would usually have recent histories of migration) are treated as "disposable" in a context where [t]he most prepared to face the pandemic effects seem to be those with the highest levels of human capital, and those inserted in the formal sector (Pederzini Villarreal and Meza Gonzalez 2020: 92). Among other factors, "[c]ompared to nationals, migrant workers are often the last to gain access to testing or treatment" (Igoye 2020: 120).

Overall, migrant workers have borne the costs of the virus lockdowns because they occupy the extreme ends of the spectrum of work - when measured according to how essential the work in question is. Those working in beauty salons, hairdressers and other non- essential fields lost jobs, and, as a consequence, were placed in even more precarious positions in terms of their legal status (Lumayag, Del Rosario and Sutton 2020: 102). Those working in the food supply chain, or who held delivery jobs, retained their economic livelihood, but were placed at greater risk of exposure to the virus. In short, "[w]hile on the one hand many migrants lost their livelihoods, the ability to draw on migrant workers to continue to provide essential goods and services emerged as an important strategy that countries used to manage these lockdowns" (Rao, Gammage, Arnold and Anderson 2020: 55).

To conclude this part, the contributors to *Covid-19 & Migration* collectively perform an act of solidarity in their insistence that "[i]mmobility is a privilege and self-isolation a luxury" (Xiang 2020: 23), or, as Zard and Lau put it, "[f]or more than 70 million people forcibly displaced around the world, mobility is not a luxury but a lifeline - one that is in danger of disappearing during the current pandemic" (2020: 179). The remaining sections of the review highlight other acts of solidarity that the volume both documents and performs.

Social Protection Beyond Citizenship

As has been observed in different contexts, the agency of non-state actors in times of humanitarian emergencies are downplayed by governments. In fact, it is often as a result of local organising that vulnerable individuals and groups are given the means of basic subsistence. As was tragically displayed in the aftermath of the Grenfell Tower Fire, this vital assistance not only comes in advance of government support, but, crucially, is not offered in exchange for the modes of surveillance and control that frequently accompany government financial and other support.

The Covid-19 pandemic is no exception. Taking the UK case as an example, the early stages of the pandemic revealed glaring gaps in government support to children reliant upon schools for their basic subsistence, including food. The UK government's voucher scheme, whereby children who are entitled to free school meals would still be able to access food during school closures, immediately faced problems of distribution - making it necessary for teachers, parents and other volunteers to deliver food parcels to those in need (Guardian, 19 March 2020). Further, in the context of the severe shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE) available for NHS workers, care home workers and others involved in essential work among the general public, it was schools that donated science goggles as alternatives to standard PPE (Guardian, 25 March 2020).

Covid-19 & Migration does not neglect discussion of community organising of this kind. For example, it documents the efforts of those migrant charities that "make claims on home and host country governments" (Rao, Gammage, Arnold and Anderson 2020: 65 & 66) on behalf of migrants. It also documents instances of community self-organising "[i]n the face of inadequate social protection systems, and COVID-19 responses that don't take migrants and documented workers into account" (Rao, Gammage, Arnold and Anderson 2020: 65-66). Community interventions extend to support of the kind that enables migrants to resist some of the more pernicious effects of their situation - utilising virtual platforms to encourage mutual support

efforts (Lumayag, Del Rosario and Sutton 2020: 96-102). However, the fear that "the pandemic [would] engender a deepened digital surveillance that risks civil liberties and rights, just when migrant workers realised the importance of virtual resistance to achieve [change]" (Lumayag, Del Rosario and Sutton 2020: 103) is very real.

It is important to stress that these examples of community support do more than simply take on a burden that should be assumed by the central government. Crucially, they actively demonstrate that social assistance need not be conditioned on citizenship.   Bhagat, R.S, Sahoo, Roy and Govil express the situation that migrants face very simply: "[m]igrants suffer from the double burden of being poor and migrants. Many programmes meant for the poor do not reach them due to lack of identity and residential proofs" (2020: 154). The forms of community support which the volume documents actively instantiate an idea of belonging in which the citizenship/migrant divide is displaced.

The contributors to the volume speak with one voice about the urgent need to "make the necessary changes socio-economically and politically for an all-inclusive country regardless of citizenship" (Manik 2020: 82). They are encouraged by the example set by the governments of Portugal and Ireland which, respectively, accorded "temporary citizenship rights to migrants and asylum seekers, providing full access to the countries healthcare services, social support, housing and financial systems during the pandemic" (Zard and Lau 2020: 177), and "granted undocumented migrants full access to healthcare and social welfare while upholding the firewall principle separating service provision and immigration enforcement" (Zard and Lau 2020: 177). However, for the majority of countries, the only concession made to the insistent claims of national citizenship was to allow "access to health care of the migrant population, focusing on COVID-19 testing and/or treatment" (Zard and Lau 2020: 178).

Of course, the argument that social protection should be decoupled from citizenship is not a new theme of migrant activism and critical migration studies. However, "COVID-19 underscores the truism that all health is public. There is no social benefit to only protecting some essential workers while implicitly or explicitly risking the lives of others based on migration or citizenship status" (Rao, Gammage, Arnold and Anderson 2020: 67). So, "[e]xcluding individuals from healthcare on the basis of citizenship, immigration status or ability to pay makes little sense in the face of a universal health threat, such as COVID-19" (Zard and Lau 2020: 178). In the words of other contributors, "[t]oday, more than ever, it is necessary to implement strategies that, avoiding stigmatising the most vulnerable population, help them maintain a minimum level of well-being through a well-designed economic and social policy that may include, among other measures, unconditional transfers to those most in need" (Pederzini Villarreal and Meza Gonzalez 2020: 92).

Race and Critical Migration Studies in a Post-Covid-19 World

I conclude this review with the observation that critical race studies and critical migration studies must engage one another more closely. The aim of decoupling social entitlements from formal citizenship status is a laudable one. However, the strategy will not bring about an ethical and equitable redistribution of public goods unless what we might refer to as the *operations of citizenship* are examined from the perspective of racial minorities who have either acquired citizenship or who have gained indefinite leave to remain in a country. All too often, racial minorities have been placed in extremely precarious economic and social situations -despite their formal legal statuses. The plight of the Windrush descendants is a case in point. I was not convinced when reading *Covid-19 & Migration* that this thread of analysis ran consistently through the various chapters. That said, there is no doubt that the contributions make clear that the position of migrants and racial minorities during the pandemic was largely dictated by their treatment and perception *before* the pandemic. To put it another way, their condition during the pandemic is a logical corollary of decades of policies in which the majority population are encouraged, and quite often compelled by law, to treat migrants as objects to be monitored and reported upon.

This environment contributes to deep feelings of insecurity among migrants and, inevitably, has a deleterious effect on their emotional well-being: "[m]igrant workers feel extremely insecure in at least two domains: the loss of job, and therefore hunger for their families back home, and digital surveillance of the state" (Lumayag, Del Rosario and Sutton 2020: 97).

Thus, many of the chapters in *Covid-19 & Migration* underscore the need to "trace the realities of the politics (policies and practices), socio-economic events and immigrant experiences pre-COVID-19" (Manik 2020: 70). Writing in the context of South Africa, Manik identifies ideologies that are as evidently entrenched in the UK and other European states, whereby "policies and practices...are risk oriented, with the explicit aim of keeping prospective migrants (with the exception of highly skilled migrants) outside the country through securitisation of the borders and numerous immigration deterring efforts" (2020: 69). Manik writes of a South Africa that "pre-COVID-19 was replete with anti-immigrant socio-economic and political discourses which served as an indicator of SA as a violent country for immigrants" (2020: 73).

Against this context, people who have, or who are perceived to have, recent histories of migration are viewed with suspicion as main carriers of the virus: because "[t]he playbook linking foreigners to the spread of disease and restricting immigration on public health premises is age old, but it has found new expression in a novel disease" (Zard and Lau 2020: 175).

Several controbutors comment on the "[e]ffect of the COVID-19 pandemic on ethnic relationships" (Skogberg, Hussein and Castaneda 2020: 138) - observing, for example, that "publication of a higher prevalence of COVID-19 among the Somali origin population in the Helsinki area has reportedly increased experiences of blatant discrimination" (Skogberg, Hussein and Castaneda 2020: 138). Others also note the fact that "in times of public health disturbances, history shows that...processes of social segregation based on scapegoating are not rare" (Posch and Cabecinhas 2020: 106)

The question that several of the contributors pose is whether the lessons learned from Covid-19, and the strategies deployed to control it, will further entrench racism and anti-immigrant sentiments, or, conversely, will lead to efforts to engineer a society that is more inclusive of migrants. Not surprisingly, many of the writers are unable to adopt an unequivocal stance on the question. For Naujoks, "two competing perceptions of mobile populations [are evident]. While some viewed immigrants and refugees as suspicious 'bringers of the disease', the pandemic seems to have simultaneously boosted migrants' perception in many parts of the world" (2020: 191).

It is fitting that the editors of this richly engaging volume should have the last word on the subject:

"The political impact of COVID-19 [will] follow the patterns of earlier crises. The tightening immigration regulations, Visa and admissions regimes after the 9/11New York and 7/7 London bombings are now part of the "normal". Increased airport security is similarly so. The restrictions imposed to "tackle" the pandemic are, therefore, likely to stay with us and become part of the "new normal" (Sirkeci and Cohen 2020: 6-7).