Reversal of (Im)mobility Privilege and Borders During COVID-19

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The global lock-down triggered by the coronavirus pandemic reshuffled the privileges, power, borders and hierarchies of im/mobility. Human mobility, has always functioned simultaneously as both privilege and punishment, depending on the passport you hold and whether you are from the Global North or the Global South. To illustrate, refugees and migrants from the global south are racialized subjects that have been traditionally excluded from the safe and expeditious venues that organize the journeys of privileged travelers (European and North American travelers). Many individuals and groups from the global south are routinely excluded and discriminated against in the 'global (im)mobility regime' as they are targeted by 'externalization strategies', which come in several forms such as formalized migration policies, visa regimes, and outsourcing migration policies to third countries. Perversely, these ad hoc procedures and measures are designed to stem the tide of migrants, including asylum seekers and restrict their freedom of movement.

As the coronavirus continues to unleash disruptions and disarray, we could be on the verge of an overturning of mobility privileges and the emergence of what we call "immobility justice". In these heterotopic times, it is puzzling that immobility also emerges as a form of "privilege". That is to say, citizens from the Global South, whose elementary freedom to move had been historically curtailed due to the imposition of visa/passport travel regulations/restrictions (Schengen zone system as an example), now enjoy a kind of safety as the immobility shields and protects them from the vastly infected Europe and the USA. Moreover, in an unprecedented way, the coronavirus prompted young Moroccans to carry out reverse migration from the supposedly 'European Eden' to Morocco in order to escape the epidemic that has ravaged the old continent. In other words, the "home country" has become their refuge and haven.

The entanglements of immobility are not a new phenomenon, especially in Europe. Consider the deadly waters of the Mediterranean Sea that criminalized migrants crossing in the hope of a better future, only to undergo the violence of what Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbemebe labels as 'necropolitical' EU border control apparatus. 'Necropolitics' implies a political violence being administered to a particular group by depriving it of the opportunity or freedom to improve its hazardous or miserable condition. Besides all that, at the present time, there is a high risk of contracting COVID 19 if one makes it across to Europe.

Conversely, the relatively privileged native-born citizens of the Global North, whose passports permitted them to roam the world with almost no restrictions, are confined within their closed geographical borders. Numerous African countries shut their doors to Europe and America in order to combat coronavirus. From being highly privileged and mobile travelers, citizens of the Global North have become paradoxically the 'undesirables in the time of Corona'; the ones who hold liability for being massive carriers of the virus. Therefore, what COVID-19 has laid bare is that people from the Global North are feeling fairly the very same entanglement that was imposed on citizens from the Global South. Those who once described migrants trying to reach Britain as a 'swarm' or those who planned to Isolate unwanted migrants on a small Island, are may be drinking from the same pot of bitterness.

Interestingly, this could be viewed as a form of 'immobility justice'. Immobility Justice is a new way to understand the deep flows of inequality and uneven accessibility in a world in which the mobility commons have been enclosed. It is

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a call for a new understanding of the politics of movement and a demand for justice for all.

The coronavirus pandemic has additionally collided with a reversal in travel privileges. For some people, a passport is a portal to the world. For others, it is a barrier to the travel freedom they seek. The fact remains that today, depending on the type of passport you have on you, you can have access to between 28 and 173 countries, which draws a world of variable geometry: some can, without a visa, have access to 4.3 billion people and discover 73 million square kilometers, while the rest are restricted to 230 million people on only 5 million square kilometers. But here is the flipside now: privileged travelers from the Global North —with easy access to global mobility—are the ones mostly affected by the coronavirus. For example, if we compare France with its previous colonies using the Google Corona Virus Counter, the results are astonishing. France whose passport is ranked 6th in the world has 131.000 cases and 24,760 deaths. Tunisia whose passport is ranked 74th has 1,009 cases and only 42 deaths.

In the same vein, England whose passport is ranked 7th has 182.000 cases and 28,131 deaths while Pakistan whose passport is ranked 104 has 20,084 cases but only 457 deaths. Another example worth mentioning is the USA whose passport is ranked 7th in the world has 1.18M cases and 68,040 deaths in contrast with Iraq whose passport is ranked 108th. These statistics reinforce the idea that travel privileges have turned into a curse. In other words, states that are eminently benefitting from the global mobility regime are the ones who are highly infected. Angèle Mendy, a sociologist specializing in African health systems with the University of Lausanne argues that Africa's relatively weak exposure and integration into the global networks of mobility has delayed the arrival of the pandemic.

In many people's imaginations, closing borders means repelling migrants. But Covid-19 has ridiculed this assumption: the virus spreads from one country to another via travelers of all kinds, without inquiring whether they are migrants, expats or tourists. The novelty of this combat against Covid-19 can be accounted for on two levels: first, it is crystal clear that immobility has become synonymous with collective prevention. As borders have been shut, mobility limited, social distancing imposed, being locked up in one's home is key to saving each other's lives. Second, we are experiencing a sudden, seismic acceleration of multiple borders. That is to say, boundaries manifest themselves not only along national borders, but between states and provinces, around cities, care homes, hospitals, apartments, and bodies.

Borders are not vanishing but rather metamorphosing. In the words of Professor Ayelet Shachar, they are no longer 'static and immovable barriers, but they have become mobile, agile, sophisticated, and ever transforming'. More precisely, they can be erected and re-erected in innumerable spaces, with substantial ramifications on the most vulnerable.

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