Commentary: Spaces of Solidarity and Spaces of Exception at the times of Covid-19

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The last five years have been marked by the intensification of mixed (both humanitarian and economic) migration flows in different parts of the world: across the Mediterranean from the Middle East and Africa to Europe, from Central America to the USA, and from Venezuela to neighbouring countries, only to name a few of the most obvious examples. These mixed flows have been met by increased securitization of borders, as destination countries have become increasingly suspicious towards asylum seekers (accused to making false claims) and have sought to create “buffer zones” among transit countries (such as the Sahel, North Africa and Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan concerning the flows towards Europe, and Mexico along the South to North Central American migration corridor). The current Covid-19 pandemic appears to further reinforce this trend of securitizing borders and seeking refuge in national sovereignty in the effort to protect the national ingroup from the “outsiders” – migrants or refugees presenting a threat to the national well-being. The Covid-19 crisis appears as only one further ring in this securitization chain.

As the Covid-19 pandemic intensifies around the world, we are witnessing countries making unprecedented decisions to close borders to non-citizens. National borders become more visible and less permeable than ever, and citizenship appears to have resurfaced as the ultimate marker of belonging and solidarity. The Covid-19 crisis though perhaps bears within it the seeds also of transnational solidarity and the transcendence of national borders. Indeed, the virus itself has proven to be truly transnational, moving fast, and ignoring these borders and their sovereign governments. What can however this pandemic crisis teach us about borders, belonging and solidarity?

The concern that travellers increase the risk of Covid-19 contagion is legitimate. At the same time, border closures do not keep “everyone” out, only those who are non-citizens (and non-permanent residents in some countries). In other words, states weigh their obligation towards solidarity and protection of citizens above the risk that they may be carrying the virus. Instead, outsiders (temporary residents, visitors) are banned from entry, as are asylum seekers or irregular migrants. The rationale is the same: it is a balance between risk on one hand, and belonging and solidarity, on the other. Those who do not belong must stay out. Solidarity to vulnerable people in need of protection weighs less in comparison with solidarity and the obligation to protect public health within our society.

In a courageous move though, the Government of Canada, has clarified, only four days after the initial ban and two days after which this was effectively implemented, that: Exemptions to the air travel restrictions will apply to foreign nationals who have already committed to working, studying or making Canada their home, and travel by these individuals will be considered essential travel for land border restrictions. Canada has thus redefined the basis of solidarity within our community on the basis of effective residence. People who have made Canada their home and who pay

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taxes, send their kids to school and have their health protection in this country are on this occasion treated like citizens and permanent residents. The temporary exclusion for them was over quickly.

These developments beg a wider question: what does solidarity look like at the time of a pandemic? What does membership to a social or political community mean and what are the citizen’s or resident’s obligations towards their community?

Maria (the name is fictitious), originating from Sicily, studying in Lombardy, in northern Italy, travelled in early March back home, as Lombardy became a “red zone” and moving in and out of the region was forbidden. Upon arrival, she paid a visit to her grandfather at a senior’s home near Palermo. Five days later, Maria developed symptoms of Covid-19. The senior’s home is now in quarantine with its staff voluntarily staying to help. In the effort to contain the contagion, one hundred people, including staff and seniors, are directly affected, while the risk reaches out to many more. Maria did not travel across international borders and is a citizen of Italy. But her behaviour betrayed this notion of solidarity, loyalty and belonging, even if inadvertently. And of course she is not the only one who is betraying her own community. The throngs of people walking the Stanley Park Seawall in BC the first weekend of Spring is just another example of this “blind” betrayal.

AND WHAT ABOUT TRANSNATIONAL SOLIDARITY THEN? AND HOW DOES IT RELATE TO SOLIDARITY TOWARDS THOSE SEEKING PROTECTION BY CROSSING INTERNATIONAL BORDERS?

On 13 March, Chinese doctors and medical supplies arrived in Italy to help address the crisis, while Cuban doctors arrived in Italy too on the 22nd of March. On 20 March, the German Land of Baden-Württemberg offered to take some seriously ill patients from France, as neighbouring southern Alsace was running out of ventilation spaces. Canadian policy leaders and medical staff continuously report how colleagues from across the world take time out of their frontline crisis to share their lessons learned to help us prepare here. For some, this is Covid diplomacy, but for others this is solidarity across borders, among distant countries.

Transnational solidarity is also taking place within borders. Non-governmental organizations supporting asylum seekers and refugees in France and Greece, plea with their own governments to provide extraordinary support to these vulnerable populations of non-citizens. And in Canada, voices such as that coming from the Canadian Council for Refugees ask the Canadian Government to remember its responsibilities to protect the rights of refugees and vulnerable migrants. Unfortunately, these voices seem to fall on deaf ears. National governments appear more preoccupied with ensuring the security of their residents in the midst of a global pandemic than providing protection to the most vulnerable albeit non-resident, non-citizen populations.

States practice their sovereignty at this time in precisely the way that Agamben (2005, see Humphreys 2006) specified: they exercise their power in deciding on the exception – and they suspend the juridical order because of the serious crisis threatening the state and its “legitimate” population. Thus, protecting the most basic rights of asylum claimants and irregular migrants, notably the right to life, the right to basic human security, becomes secondary, if at all, a concern. Border closures such as that of Canada and the USA to avoid any asylum claimant to enter Canada, or the border closures at the Greek islands, reinforce a sense of national solidarity among citizens and permanent residents, a transnational solidarity among sovereign states, but leave in limbo, in a space of exception, those who are among the most vulnerable populations: asylum seekers and irregular migrants. They become true “hominis sacri” as Agamben defined them. They fall into this zone of indifference that is neither inside nor outside the polity, and it is just there at the border.

At the time of a global pandemic, citizenship and national borders should not become defining elements of who is entitled to protection and care and who is not. Rather like states express
solidarity among one another in providing medical staff or supplies to those regions and countries mostly in need, we should apply this principle of solidarity also to those most vulnerable like asylum seekers and irregular migrants at border areas or in refugee camps. The notion of national community cannot be separated by our notion of humanity. We cannot uphold civic solidarity and responsibility while creating spaces of exception at national borders. Community and civic responsibility at the time of a pandemic must transcend national borders like it must exist also within them. One positive outcome of this global pandemic crisis can be a reconsideration of state obligations towards those seeking asylum. Perhaps the global threat can serve as a reminder that we have obligations not only to our own citizens and residents but also towards our joint humanity.

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