Notes from lockdown: A series of reflections on some of the political and cultural impacts of the pandemic

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Bordering under the corona virus pandemic
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In our recent book *Bordering*, we discuss the paradoxical phenomenon that, under neoliberal globalisation, instead of disappearing borders have proliferated, both off- and in-shore – from consulates across the globe to everyday spaces like railway stations and places of work.[1] Bordering functions through processes rather than static boundary lines – and, like computer firewalls, borders are often invisible for some but impermeable to many others. Its excluding practices contribute to inequalities and precarities at every scale, from the global – as in the closing of borders to refugees – to the local – as in exclusions of migrant workers from access to health services, housing and work. They are forcing more and more people to be stuck in a precarious limbo, in grey border zones, with no possibility of building regular lives with civil, political and social rights.

It is important to examine the ways the pandemic has affected these processes of everyday bordering. Of course, it is far too early to know, or even predict, the longer-term transformations in bordering that the pandemic will bring. However, it is safe to say that, as after earlier major crises, such as 9/11 and the AIDS crises – to mention just two major transformatory crises in recent decades – the 'new normal' is not going to go back to how things were, in several major ways. Everyday bordering, from the lockdown of individuals in their homes to the lockdown of regional and national borders, is at the heart of the technologies of control currently being used to try to contain the pandemic, and it is thus hard to believe that free movement will be restored any time soon.

The reinforcement of boundaries
Free movement, of course, has never been free for most people. Border controls may be invisible or easily passed through by some, but they have been blocking the majority for many years. The main facilitators for passing through them are money and/or the possession of skills required by the neoliberal economy. We can see these permeable firewalls continuing to operate during the pandemic, at different ends of the scale. The super-rich flying in private jets are able to travel without being subject to the usual restrictions and seasonal workers from Eastern Europe are being flown into the UK by the farming industry to ensure that fruit is being picked.

Two weeks into the lockdown, however, the Home Office published its guidance for post-Brexit immigration rules, aimed at preventing low-paid workers – those same key workers on which healthcare services are currently depending – from working in

the UK. Even this glaringly obvious dependence on migrant workers could not deflect the government from its populist drive to restrict freedom of movement.

Across the globe, practices of everyday bordering have been reinforced by, and have themselves reinforced, the growth of nativist extreme right movements, which have brought to power authoritarian rulers in many countries, and were a major factor in galvanising support for Brexit in the UK. Blaming and scapegoating the 'Others' have been a reaction to the pandemic at every level, from Trump calling the corona virus 'the Chinese virus', to social media blaming George Soros in the traditional antisemitic blood conspiracy theories, to the growing incidence of street hate crimes – including health workers reporting abuse from strangers for leaving their homes.

One of the positive 'side effects' of the lockdown has been the development and reinforcement of mutual aid groups in local communities. Neighbours have got to know each other, and have helped elderly and vulnerable people with their shopping etc. However, the other side of the strengthening of local bonds has been the rejection of 'others'. Local media have reported people crossing county borders as violating lockdowns – *Kent Online* reported 'Lockdown louts from London have been fined after once again invading the county', after being found by 'enforcement officers from the council who were patrolling the area'. This has been aided by regional bordering policies, which in some countries, such as Italy, have meant the official closure of regional borders for non-essential traffic; in the UK, Sussex police, for example, praised 'the amazing community spirit across Sussex', whilst noting that 'Unfortunately, a small number of people from outside of the county deemed it appropriate to visit the area'.

The purpose of this argument is not to oppose bordering policies in the age of the pandemic, but rather to argue that using them as almost the only counter-pandemic measure is dangerous, both now and in the future. This is particularly the case given that voluntary lockdown policies on their own – without mass testing and sufficient protective equipment for those who are not in isolation – cost many lives, as well as creating psychological, social and economic hardships.

Some of the bordering practices operating during the crisis reflect continuing and intersecting political projects of governance and of belonging. Very few states (the exceptions including Ireland and Portugal) have recognised all migrants as fully entitled members of society during the pandemic; only a few states have recognised the right of all members of societies for minimum income during the pandemic; and policies aimed at the exclusion and deprivation of all those who live in national and global grey limbo zones are endangering the lives of millions across the globe.

Everyday bordering policies are evolving in which the surveillance of people is reaching sci-fi dimensions. Similar Covid-19 related technologies are being developed globally by authoritarian and liberal governments. Israel has authorised counter-terrorism surveillance to track corona virus patients; compulsory colour-coded health apps determine whether individuals can travel in China; and Russia uses face recognition technologies to enforce self-isolation. In Hong Kong and Singapore, Covid-19 apps identify locations and contacts of individuals. European governments are copying these apps whilst also collecting telecom data and using drones to spot transgressors.

Such developments add force to [Yuval Noah Harari's speculations](#) that the epidemic may normalise biometric surveillance, with authorities becoming able to detect people's emotions as well as their lifestyles and whereabouts. This would be the utmost paradox: a borderless world with the most tightly operated everyday bordering technology.

The extension of 'grey zones'

Increasing numbers of people are currently 'suspended' in grey zones across the globe – spaces whose residents live outside the protection of contemporary states. These spaces are neither socially nor spatially neutral creations – they are likely to be occupied by specific groups living in particular places, and experienced differently according to individuals' social and economic positionings. We believe that national and local Covid lockdowns have led to a creeping expansion for these exclusionary and menacing grey zones: in the global north they are now inhabited by older citizens, low-paid care-workers in residential homes, precarious workers and overseas students; while across the globe they are making life even more difficult for mobile labourers and people seeking refuge.

The lockdown has had hugely disproportionate effects on elderly people confined in residential homes [https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/13/coronavirus-real-care-home-death-toll-double-official-figure-study-says], and it has also extended the grey zone inhabited by citizens who were previously just about surviving in precarious jobs. And this zone has now become a looming prospect for increasing numbers of UK citizens, including those in previously 'secure' work, especially for those who [need to cross income thresholds](#) and demonstrate suitable accommodation to [reunite with family](#) living abroad. Furthermore, since the lockdown of universities, many [students have been trapped in the UK](#), dependent on charity because the precarious work on which they previously relied no longer exists.

Racialised workers on cruise ships and migrant miners across the Global South have become more like prisoners in the Covid-19 lockdowns. At the beginning of the pandemic the media focused on wealthy passengers [stranded in the ocean on cruise ships](#), denied access to a series of ports and dependent on their governments to repatriate them whilst the crew who looked after them remained invisible. Three months later, [sick and isolated crew from across the global south](#) are confined to cabins in leisure ships registered to low-regulation states that exist outside the jurisdiction of the countries where they sail.

When lockdown policies were declared, in many cities, including in [India](#) and [Chile](#), workers from rural areas were evicted and stranded with no public transport operating. The numbers of those who have died after starting to walk home to their remote villages are unknown, while many thousands who cannot prove their citizenship have been threatened with arrest and being put in [detention camps](#), with no adequate sustenance, let alone proper care or social distancing. Documented migrant labourers, including in the [Gulf states](#), have experienced unemployment and loss of income, but for the reserve armies of [undocumented migrant labourers](#) the situation is even worse: they have been forced in many countries to hide to escape detention by the authorities.

Meanwhile, the longstanding grey zones in which some refugees have been forced to live for decades have become harsher and more dangerous. In Bangladesh, the government has withdrawn 80 per cent of humanitarian aid staff, severely limiting aid to the 900,000 Rohingyas confined to camps near the Myanmar border. In Calais, the minimal food resources provided by the French state to refugees have been halted, and food distribution left to a dwindling group of volunteers.

In the UK, hostile environment discourses and everyday bordering policies have led to asylum seekers not accessing health services to which they are entitled, in (justified) fear that their personal details will be reported to the Home Office, and/or because they are asked to pay full charges as private patients and cannot afford to pay them.

The worry is that with growing suspensions of democratic and civil rights under the pandemic regime, and the growing dependency on surveillance as the basic technology to regulate all citizens' movements, any rights-based approach which would protect those in the grey zones will be further delegitimised. People suspended in the grey zones are going to be even more excluded from the social and political contracts that states are currently engaged in rewriting.

This is an edited and revised version of blogs previously posted on the Social Scientists Against the Hostile Environment website: https://acssmigration.wordpress.com.

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Notes
Nira Yuval-Davis, Georgie Wemyss and Kathryn Cassidy, *Bordering*, Polity 2019. One of the things we explore in the book is the many bordering functions that governments have imposed internally, through compulsory checks on migration status before engaging in many everyday activities/necessities – e.g. for work, study, housing, medical care. For more on everyday bordering see also Don Flynn, 'Frontier anxiety: living with the stress of the every-day border', *Soundings* 61, winter 2015 (Kate, can we make this free to view).