16. Emergent bordering tactics, logics of injustice, and the new hierarchies of mobility deservingness

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Borders and bordering practices have long been used by nation states to selectively include and exclude migrants and foreigners, whether in-territory or ex-territory. This was no different in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic. On the one hand, travel lockdowns hardened existing external borders, preventing inward and outward mobilities. Under the guise of health security, additional layers of internal and external borders emerged. This accentuated and complicated existing structures that stratified the already selective inclusion and exclusion of 'others'. On the other hand, in juggling pandemic control and economic recovery, some countries introduced new bordering tactics such as travel bubbles, green lanes, and fast lanes to spur the mobilities of those who were considered eligible (Abdullah 2020).

These new and emergent borders and bordering tactics were used by state authorities in an attempt to manage and control the spread of the virus and its implications. Underlying these tactics, however, were certain logics and assumptions about who should be protected, who should be kept away, and who should be allowed in or out, when and where (Ferhani and Rushton 2020; Laocharoenwong 2020). In this reflective chapter, I put forth a twofold argument: first, the COVID-19 pandemic shed light on the enduring logics of injustice that inform existing and emergent borders and bordering tactics; second, as health security becomes intertwined with the governance of mobilities, we will be seeing the emergence of new hierarchies of mobility deservingness that have important political and ethical implications.

To develop this argument, I first outline the metaphorical understanding of borders. I then discuss how Ayelet Shachar's (2020b) conceptualisation of the shifting border can help us understand borders

and the bordering tactics that nation states used during the COVID-19 era. In doing so, I highlight the enduring injustices that underlie and inform such bordering tactics. Finally, I put forth the argument for the emergence of the new hierarchies of mobility deservingness. I conclude by calling for greater attention to the urgent task of considering the political and ethical issues surrounding border(ing)s in the COVID-19 era.

Borders: from lines to time-specific spaces

When thinking of borders, it might be easy to jump straight into using linear metaphors – lines that demarcate, walls that segregate, boundaries that include/exclude, partitions that divide, or gates that open/close. Regardless of which metaphors we use (see Parmar 2020, pp.177–179), the important thing about borders is that they perform these functions *selectively*. The criteria – for inclusion/exclusion, entry/ non-entry, permission/restriction – are typically based on selective sets of requirements. Furthermore, these sets of selective criteria may vary across contexts and in time. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, we saw rapid shifts in the development of new international travel restrictions and authorised entry on the basis of medical requirements and other conditions for selective groups of people (Figure 16.1).

Of course, none of this was new: borders and bordering tactics had been in use for a long time for different purposes – whether to selectively include/exclude certain groups or to produce certain (economic/political) subjects (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013; Newman 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic, however, gave us more concrete examples of borders as *spaces*, in contrast to lines. For example, we saw the emergence of 'travel bubbles' (Wong 2020), also known as 'travel corridors' and 'corona corridors', as a kind of protected zone of travel – almost like a tunnel. These corridors were theoretically sealed from the point of origin to the destination as well as throughout the journey – including quarantine facilities at the destination. We also saw the emergence of 'green lanes' (Chong 2020), 'fast lanes' (Toh 2020), and 'fast-track entry' (Chang 2020) for less restricted travel depending on multilateral agreements.

What is interesting here is that *the border became a space tied to a specific temporality*. These bubbles and corridors existed only in a specific spatio-temporality (i.e. between an origin country and a destination country during a specified timeframe) created through the mutual agreement of the authorities involved. As people travelled in and through these border(ed) spaces, their mobilities were circumscribed
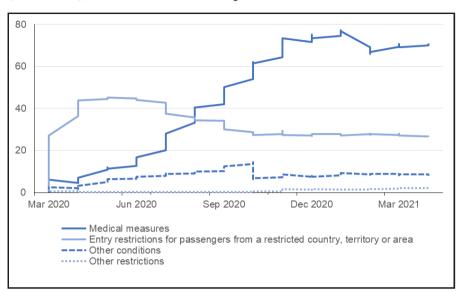
Figure 16.1. COVID-19-related international travel restrictions (thousands), 8 March 2020 to 12 April 2021

Source: IOM (2021), reproduced with permission by the IOM.
Note: As changes in restrictions were monitored at biweekly and weekly intervals and the dynamic of the measures was at times changing on a more frequent basis, the graph cannot be indicative of the exact date of change in travel restriction policies.

and characterised by different velocities and viscosities. On the one hand, some were able to move from point A to point B with higher speeds, fewer hassles, and fewer additional costs – whether these were financial or opportunity costs. On the other hand, some mobilities were significantly slowed down, subject to multiple starts and stops along the way, suspended, or even entirely prohibited. As Susan Martin and Jonas Bergmann (2021, p.9) have noted, COVID-19-related travel bans and restrictions 'clearly affect[ed] the capabilities of people, regardless of their aspirations, to move from one location to another'. As borders morphed into time-specific spaces that are in constant flux, travel, migration, and mobility also significantly changed.

Shifting borders and enduring injustices

To understand borders and bordering tactics during the COVID-19 era, I turn to Ayelet Shachar's (2020b) *The Shifting Border*. Shachar (2020b, p.4) has argued that the border 'has become a moving barrier, an unmoored legal construct' that is not fixed in place. Indeed, as

the border becomes disentangled from a fixed locality, it attains *spatial agility*. Nevertheless – and perhaps because of this unfixed nature – the shifting border can be flexibly used to suit different purposes at different times. In this sense, the border becomes a method (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013) and a means to creatively and flexibly operationalise inclusion and/or exclusion as necessary. Importantly, this carefully calibrated instrument that is the shifting border has been rapidly expanding its reach beyond territorial confines.

In the context of pandemic control, the shifting border offered nation states the ability to contain or keep out those deemed risky in order to protect those deemed worthy of protection. Ann Stoler (2016, p.121), however, has highlighted that 'what and who must be kept out and what and who must stay in are neither fixed nor easy to assess. Internal enemies are potential and everywhere.' During the pandemic, there was similarly no clear and universal answer to the question of '*who gets in*, … *[who] gets out*, and *who gets rescued*' (Ferhani and Rushton 2020, pp.461–462, original emphasis). We saw this fear of the potential enemy manifested in increased health and mobility surveillance, lockdowns resulting in selective im/mobilities, and deportations. In this regard, the shifting border was 'revived as a *dispositif* to protect the state from a virus that [had been] increasingly portrayed as a foreign invader' (Radil, Pinos, and Ptak 2020, p.3), in- and ex-territory.

It is here that the COVID-19 pandemic exposed enduring injustices based on structures of inequality such as race and class that were unequally shouldered by different groups. Those who had been marginalised and scapegoated in pre-COVID-19 times (e.g. migrant workers or asylum seekers) were easily and uncritically turned into 'enemies'. They were contained, detained, fixed in place, kept waiting, stopped in their tracks, and deported (e.g. Sukumaran and Jaipagras 2020; *Straits Times* 2020). Such bordering tactics imposed on the so-called 'enemies', however, disregarded the precarious conditions that made them more at risk to the virus in the first place (Yea 2020). Bordering tactics also disregarded the medium- and long-term vulnerabilities that these groups faced, such as the risk of contracting COVID-19, lack of access to appropriate and affordable care, livelihood insecurity, stigmatisation, and discrimination (see Guadagno 2020). Regardless of prior and potential contributions to and membership of local and national communities, the migrant was made 'disposable, subject to (even more) heightened security, and racialised as the source of pathogenic risk' (Collins 2021, p.80) during the pandemic.

By contrast, those *not* seen as enemies were allowed to move and to cross internal and external borders because they were not considered (health) security threats. As part of state strategies to revive national economies weakened by prolonged lockdowns, we saw nation states taking on a certain degree of calculated risk to partially reopen borders to certain groups. These included business travellers and investors (Ahmad Naqib Idris 2020), medical tourists (Valentina 2020), international students (Adam 2020), and border commuters (*Malay Mail* 2021) – groups who arguably had more capacities and resources to take on the additional (financial and time) costs of pandemic travel and whose mobilities had not been seriously curtailed, compared to the groups who were seen as 'enemies'.

As Meghann Ormond (2021) has highlighted, both routine and exceptional treatments of different groups during the pandemic can reveal 'how embodied "risk" is imagined, evolves, and gets differentially attributed and practiced by national governments'. The bifurcated bordering tactics imposed upon 'enemies' and 'non-enemies' revealed 'the underlying script states follow when they embrace or filter *The Other*' (Kenwick and Simmons 2020, p. E37, original emphasis). The pandemic brought the problematic logic that informs existing and emergent bordering tactics into greater clarity, showing how control regimes that delineate '(im)mobilities of the "past"' (Lin and Yeoh 2021, p.96) continued to shape mobility regimes in the COVID-19 era.

New hierarchies of mobility deservingness

Putting aside legitimate public health considerations that might have justified the pandemic's bordering tactics, it is important to recognise that the shifting border translated into material violence that positioned people in 'new relations of power in political spaces of im/mobility' (Shachar 2020b, p.6; see also Shachar 2020a). Indeed, it has been widely acknowledged that border control and migration governance have been inherently political, both during and before pandemic times (Kenwick and Simmons 2020). As health security becomes intertwined with the (political) governance of mobilities in the COVID-19 era, I argue that we will be seeing the emergence of *new hierarchies of mobility deservingness*.

In their article on Malaysia's healthcare regime, Meghann Ormond and Alice Nah wrote about 'hierarchies of healthcare deservingness' (Ormond and Nah 2020) whereby migrants have been positioned along

a hierarchy of differential access to healthcare largely on the basis of moral judgements. There are some parallels that can be drawn here: in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, those who were deemed fit for travel – that is, deserving of (risk-free) mobilities that did not compromise public health – were allowed to move. On the one hand, this is arguably a relatively objective judgement (i.e. health status on the basis of scientific measurements) in comparison to subjective moral judgements. On the other hand, the seeming neutrality of its 'objective-ness' obscures pre-existing structures of inequality and inequity that might have contributed to an individual's compromised health status in the very first place (e.g. differential access to housing, healthcare, nutri-tion, economic opportunities, networks, and information). Moreover, frames of deservingness are neither static nor apolitical (Landolt and Goldring 2016).

If the emergent hierarchy of mobility deservingness develops into an accepted norm, those positioned higher in the hierarchy will be able to enjoy greater access to mobility and opportunities to accumulate mobil-ity capital (i.e. resources from previous experiences of mobility *and* the potential to undertake future mobilities; see Moret 2020). Accumulated mobility capital can then be converted into other forms of capital in the future, locally as well as in another transnational locations. As Moret (2020, p.238) has explained, mobility capital 'opens up and solidifies options in more than one place'. The unequal access to mobility capi-tal, in turn, contributes to the exacerbation of inequalities as this new structure of inequity – mobility deservingness – overlaps and interacts with existing ones (e.g. race, class, and citizenship).

Concluding thoughts

In moments of crisis, great uncertainties, or a pivotal moment in history – like the COVID-19 pandemic – we can observe that states display a tendency to add more layers to the 'highly variegated terrain of social protection and vulnerability' (Sheller 2018, p.xi). Protection becomes selective, while non-protection or outright abandonment expands to more groups and individuals. This clearly signals and reminds us that the rights and privileges accorded by nation states are highly discre-tionary (Koh 2020). One's status and access to rights and privileges are subject to changing circumstances and shifting state priorities (Shachar 2020a). They are not – and cannot – be taken for granted. This applies equally to those of us who belong to groups of relative privilege (e.g.

citizens, permanent residents, privileged migrants) as well as those of us who belong to groups of relative underprivilege (e.g. undocumented migrants). This is because, as borders shift, morph and mutate, we become positioned within these categories, sometimes without even realising it.[1]

The development of new hierarchies of mobility deservingness is important because we know that migration and mobility are ways for people to achieve their aspirations, have a chance at attaining social mobility, or escape vulnerabilities. Furthermore, mobility has implications for residential status and citizenship acquisition later on or for the next generation. This is therefore not just a question of equity and justice for the current generation; it is also about that for future generations. The new hierarchy of mobility deservingness raises political and ethical questions that should be carefully thought through, critiqued, and debated.

Note

1. See Lin and Yeoh (2021) for examples of how different groups in Singapore were recategorised according to their (state-perceived) risks of spreading the COVID-19 virus.

Acknowledgements

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