Anchoring and tracing during COVID: two modalities of mobility governance

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Abstract

This entry considers what migration scholars might learn from the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of securitizing mobilities. Mobility governance during the pandemic has accentuated territorial and de-territorial policy modalities. In this entry, I delineate the interactions between these two modalities to show how they present three paradoxes of mobility governance: populist sedentarism, accentuated and realigned social boundaries and territorial borders, and the reproduction of status quo through circulation.

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The COVID-19 pandemic has accentuated two key governmental modalities. One is territorial, anchoring people to a place. The other is de-territorial, tracing people on the move. Lockdowns, border control and quarantines are part of the COVID pandemic's everyday fabric. These measures exemplify how spatial anchoring becomes a key operational principle for governmental interventions. Territorialised governmental modalities are highly recognisable to most, given how it restricts our everyday mobilities. Yet, a large suite of COVID-19 responses has little to do with spatial control and territory. Contact tracing, face masks and social distancing present policy interventions that operate on different principles than territorial or spatial control. In fact, they are profoundly de-territorial forms of governance. Rather than ossifying subjects spatially, they are premised on enabling continuous circulation.

Circulation, in turn, is premised on two principles: behavioural modulation, and connectivity. Facemasks and social distancing are predicated on recalibrating social behaviours. Slight physio-social alterations (e.g. wearing a mask, maintaining social distance) enable everyday movements (commuting, shopping, attending school and work etc). Although it may be tempting to interpret such governmental measures through a self-regulating Foucauldian framework (i.e. disciplinary power; governmentality), it is more helpful to think of such actions through a logic of *modulation*. Modulation shapes behaviours, not as a mould, but "like a self-deforming cast that will continuously change from one moment to the other, or like a sieve whose mesh will transmute from point to point."[2] The governmental logic is not premised on crafting a particular subjectivity per se, but shaping behaviours in ways which enable circulation. The second principle pertains to social connectivity. Social connectivity in turn relates to information-tracking and social identities. Although this has clearly touched a nerve in terms of people's liberal sensibilities (e.g. privacy concerns), and may appear to accentuate spatial control (e.g. required scanning when entering buildings), what is interesting about these information systems is that they are not primarily interested in either who we are or where we have been, but how we are connected to others. COVID tests and tracing are first and foremost large-scale exercises in social network analysis, not cartographic mapping of movements. In social network analysis parlance, what is of interest are the "edges"; not the "nodes". Hence, behavioural modulation and contact tracing are key governmental constructs within COVID responses.[3] Rather than anchoring people in space, the task of de-territorial governance becomes targeting people as they move *through* territory.

Hence, COVID-19 responses comprise territorial and de-territorial policy modalities. What it analytically interesting (especially for migration scholars) is how the two interact and are mediated by time. For example, in several countries (including Australia where I work and live), lockdowns have in some cases been used not merely to flatten the curve and slowing the spread, but to (in effect) buy time so contact tracers can get on top of mapping the spread of COVID. Hence, one mode of governance is used to enable the other. In other contexts, circulation and territorial control merge through point-to-point labour transport arrangements.[4] Labour movement is enabled but in strict demarcated ways which

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[2] Deleuze, Gilles. 2006. Postscript on the Societies of Control. Cultural Theory: An Anthology, 59. Winter, 3–7. Page 4.

[3] Modulation and tracing point to another key governing logic: anticipation. Face masks and social distancing are both examples of policy interventions that are enacted prior to the event (i.e. spread of COVID). Governance moves beyond a reactive towards a proactive modality. It is beyond the scope of this essay to elaborate the temporal dimensions of COVID responses.

[4] Xiang, Biao. 2021. Point-to-Point Labour Transport: The Securitization of Mobility after Lockdown. *MoLab Inventory of Mobilities and Socioeconomic Changes*. Available online at: https://www.eth.mpg.de/molab-inventory/securitizing-mobilities/point-to-point-labour-transport-the-securitization-of-mobility-after-lockdown. Last accessed on 19 October 2021.

in effect "bubble wraps" migrants as they move (required quarantine subsequent to cross-border travel represents a softer version of the same logic).

So, what is there to learn from all this? How may the COVID pandemic reshape how migration scholars analyse emerging mobilities and migration governance?

The first point to note is that what I explicate above is not new. A rich social science literature delineates spatial (and temporal) qualities of governance.[5] The interface between territorial and de-territorial modes of governance have been empirically observed in a range of different contexts prior to COVID, including safe migration interventions that I have myself been studying over the last few years.[6] A more useful point of departure for approaching how COVID reshapes future migration research may be to build on a key insight within political anthropology: governance logics become most visible through their everyday effects.[7] Lockdowns, border closures and quarantines have generalised a carceral experience amongst the broader population; an experience which already has been well-known to many precarious migrants ranging from asylum seekers (in detention), refugees (in camps) and trafficked victims (in shelters). The question then is how this collective, global experience impacts on migration governance, people who themselves are on the move and the broader public. Based on my own everyday experience as a migration scholar residing and working in Australia (a country with some of the strictest lockdowns and border policies during COVID), the interplay between anchoring and tracing reveals the following three paradoxes:

COVID-19 has given rise to large-scale surveillance and mapping capabilities, including the ever-increasing incorporation of smartphone technologies, as well as frequent lockdowns and border closures. Despite misgivings and protests concerning privacy, creeping state authoritarianism and restricted liberal and spatial freedoms, COVID-19 has shown how many of these policies are surprisingly popular amongst broad sections of the public. State politicians responsible for multiple lockdowns in Melbourne (resulting in the dubious accolade of becoming the most "locked down" city on the planet) enjoy overwhelming support amongst Melbournians (in contrast, countries who adopted liberal approaches to mobility, such as Sweden, have been heavily critiqued).[8] Similarly, Australian state premiers who have upheld strict border closers have done well politically. This presents a paradox of *populist sedentarism*.

Hence, the political challenge with territorial governance has not been its unpopularity. Instead, territorial governance has brought to the surface tensions and contradictions regarding notions of

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[5] The relationship between governance and territory have been subject to considerable academic milage. Several classical works in social theory are premised on this interface, ranging from Weber's theory of the state to key theoretical construct of power (most notably through Foucault's work on the panopticon and James Scott's explication of the synoptical character of state-induced social engineering). In contrast to territorial and cartographic approaches to theorising state power, a range of other scholars have, ranging from Deleuze to Baumann and Guattari Deleuze., explore de-territorial governmental logics. Yet, it is in Foucault's Security, Territory and Population where the intersectionality between the territorial and de-territorial is made clear. Security, Territory, Population. 1977. London: Palgrave.

[6] Molland, Sverre. 2021. *Safe Migration and the Politics of Brokered Safety in Southeast Asia*. London: Routledge.

[7] Gupta, Akhil. 1995. Blurred Boundaries: The Discourse of Corruption, the Culture of Politics, and the Imagined State, American Ethnologist, 22.2, 375–402; Trouillot. 2001. 'The Anthropology of the State in the Age of Globalization: Close Encounters of the Deceptive Kind', Current Anthropology, 42.1, 125.

[8] In October 2021, Melbourne surpassed Buenos Aires in the total number of days in lockdown (245 days), making it the city in the world with most days in lockdown during the COVID pandemic. Boaz, Judd. 2021. Melbourne Passes Buenos Aires' World Record for Time Spent in Lockdown. *ABC News*. 3 October 2021. Available online at: https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-10-03/melbourne-longest-lockdown/100510710. Last accessed 19 October 2021.

citizenry, race and belonging. A large body of literature on migration and border studies point to notable racialised dimensions of border control.[9] It is easy to spot examples of this during COVID. For example, COVID has both visibilised and accentuated how racialised others (such as unskilled cross-border labour migrants) bear the brunt of COVID impacts. Yet, although it has shown how COVID-induced border control can amplify racial and ethnic othering, it can also curtail it.

Australia is an interesting case in point. The government has been critiqued for engaging in racialised border control where they have blocked airlines from certain countries (e.g. China) whilst allowing arrivals from others (e.g. US and the UK), despite high infection rates. Yet, Australia is also one of the few countries that – in the context of India's delta-wave - has prevented international arrivals of its own citizens. The scandalous decision to refuse arrivals of Australian nationals from India raises serious questions regarding how mobility governance alter principles regarding citizenry, race and belonging. Was the decision racialised (as many aspiring returning Australian travellers were of Indian descent)? Or did it present a turning point for the very meaning of sameness, belonging and citizenship (i.e., preventing citizens from legally returning to their home country)? And what do we make of the significant use of Australia's internal state borders in relation to race and ethnicity? Throughout the pandemic, many Australian state borders have been shut. Despite considerable inconvenience and uproar, many of these policies have proven highly popular. The 2020 Queensland state election was largely a contestation between which party could bolster the strictest border control *against other fellow Australian states*. What do we make of inward-looking border control that is designed to protect "us from us" as opposed to "us against them"? De-territorialised governance also appears to bring to the surface class tensions, exemplified by poorer suburbs in Sydney being subject to harsher lockdowns relative to well-healed coastal suburbs. Drawing on Aihwa Ong's "mutations of citizenship" and Didier Fassin's work on territorial borders and social boundaries, incidents like these suggests that territorial-based governance during COVID reshapes how social tensions, identity and belonging are brought to the surface.[10] Social contestations are not about lockdowns per se, but are questions raised by the specific methods of how border closures are implemented. All of this presents a second paradox: COVID-induced territorial governance both *accentuates and realigns how social boundaries relates to territorial borders.*

Whereas lockdowns, border closures and quarantines restrict freedom of movement de-territorial approaches replace spatial freedoms with diminished privacy and individual autonomy (we must wear facemasks and volunteer private information regarding where we are, etc.). Yet, this appears to not amplify the aforementioned social contradictions in the same manner. Although concerns have been raised regarding privacy in relation to tracing apps, and cases of racism have been documented in relation to race and facemask wearing in the early stages of the pandemic, contact tracing and behavioural modulation – once scaled up (and hence normalised) across populations – appear not to

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[9] Khosravi, Shahram. 2008. The "Illegal" Traveller: An Auto-Ethnography of Borders*, Social Anthropology, 15.3 (2008), 321–34.
[10] Ong, Aihwa. 2011. Mutations in Citizenship. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 23.2–3 (2006), 499–505; Fassin, Didier. 2011. Policing Borders, Producing Boundaries: The Governmentality of Immigration in Dark Times. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 40.1.

accentuate social or racial contractions in the same manner as territorial governance.[11] Personal liberties and privacy are compromised but people can to a large extent go about with their everyday activities as long as they put up with the relative minor inconvenience of wearing face masks, socially distance and scan their smartphones when entering public transport, events and buildings. Hence, de-territorial governance offers a third paradox: *continuity in circulation equals continuity in status quo*. This paradox is perhaps the most puzzling but also the most hopeful. Although behavioural modulation and contact tracing may be experienced as profoundly altering our everyday activities, it is at the same time strangely conservative as it preserves both mobility practices and social relations.

The three paradoxes outlined above – sedentary populism, realigned social boundaries and territorial borders, and preserving the state of affairs through circulation – presents important cues to some of the fault lines in terms of how migration governance regimes may unfold in the future. For instance, given the collective experience of lock-downs, will sedentary populism lessen or strengthen spatial confinement of migrant populations who were – prior to COVID – commonly subjected to spatial control: asylum seekers (camps, detention), undocumented migrants (border control) and trafficked victims (shelters)? Relatedly, will governments and policy makers learn from, or repeat various counter-intentional effects of territorialised governance, such as induced "shock mobilities".[12] Or, will COVID serve as a springboard for intensified circulation models premised on tracing, connectivity and modulation (we already see the contours of this approach through "vaccine passports")? And, how will this alter social boundaries and territorial borders? Will notions of belonging expand beyond race and ethnicity towards community of belonging based on health (I.e. vaccinated vs the unvaccinated?) It is difficult to know the answers to these questions. One thing that is certain is that COVID has energized an increased intensification between territorial and de-territorial migration governance modalities.

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[11] Curiously, privacy concerns have been overshadowed by criticisms that points to technical glitches in tracing apps. In other words, the apps failure to surveil is just as much as a concern as surveillance in itself. And, as Vidya Ramachandran points out in another essay in the Mobility Lab series, many demonstrate liberal attitudes towards privacy; See: The Impact of Mobile Contact Tracing Technologies in Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand during COVID-19. *MoLab Inventory of Mobilities and Socioeconomic Changes*. Available online at: https://www.eth.mpg.de/molab-inventory/securitizing-mobilities/impact-of-mobile-contact-tracing-technologies. Last accessed 19 October 2021.
[12] Ibid.