



Pandemic (Im)Mobilities: Motorbike Delivery Workers in Locked-down Athens

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7. MAI 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic has drastically affected mobility practices across the globe, as governments try to control the spread of the virus and hence to “flatten the curve” by closing land borders, freezing international flights, and encouraging self-isolation and social distancing. In Greece, the economy of which only recently began to recover from a decade-long recession, the almost certainty that the austerity-ravaged National Health System would be unable to cope with the pandemic led the government to implement early on, among other measures, a rather strict lockdown. Since 23 March, police patrols ensure that those who move in urban and rural areas alike carry a temporary permit – in the form of either an SMS or a handwritten note – that stipulates the reason for their movement. Similarly, professionals on their way to and from their workplace are expected to carry a permanent movement permit provided by their employer. The measures have so far proven to be successful, for, despite the many similarities between them, Greece has managed to avoid a crisis similar to the one experienced by neighbouring Italy: at the time of writing on 29 April, the official number of confirmed cases and deaths remains relatively low, at 2,566 and 138, respectively.

In the usually bustling metropolis that is Athens, the fact that the majority of the population stay confined to their homes is attested by the city’s empty streets. The few vehicles that roam the densely populated suburban neighbourhood where I live are small- and medium-sized delivery vans and delivery motorbikes, as the lockdown-inflicted immobility of many of the city’s inhabitants has increased the need for goods to be delivered to their door. This stillness has also instigated a large number of shops and companies that previously did not deliver their products to offer such services, often at no extra charge, in order to stay in business. The larger among them have outsourced delivery to established logistics companies, which has increased the latter’s demand for drivers on short-term contracts. Neighbourhood shops, cafes, and restaurants, unable to afford contracts with logistics companies, have been hiring individuals of all ages who own their own motorbikes to deliver their products to customers. And more and more young people on bicycles, armed with little more than a smartphone, have

taken on the steep streets of Athens to earn an income by delivering products for online platforms. The immobility of the majority of the population, thus, has only enhanced the mobility of goods and, by extension, of those delivering them, which is very telling of how mobility and immobility are interrelated both dialectically and symbiotically.

Athens is no stranger to such mobility flows, for home delivery services carried out by delivery workers on motorbikes were very popular and well developed long before the lockdown. The relatively affordable courier companies have for years constituted the fastest and most reliable way to deliver documents and parcels across the city even during peak hours, whereas neighbourhood cafes and restaurants can hardly survive in the very competitive market if they do not offer free home delivery. Yet, despite their importance to both the companies they work for and their customers, the lives of delivery workers – the vast majority of whom comes from lower social strata and, often, from the ranks of the unemployed – are characterised by uncertainty and precariousness. Indeed, while couriers working for large logistics companies are often employed on formal contracts that provide them with some social security and free access to healthcare, many motorbike delivery workers hired by neighbourhood shops, cafes, and restaurants are employed on low-paid informal and undocumented arrangements with no social security or health insurance. Some operate without any institutional safety net and it is not uncommon for employers not to take any responsibility when their employee becomes involved in a traffic accident; others work full-time but are insured as part-time employees; still others are forced to work up to 14 hours a day; and a few are even expected to pay for fuel from their own salary.



A delivery worker delivers food in locked-down central Athens.

Photo: Nikolaos Olma

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the precariousness of these motorbike delivery workers has taken the form of a health hazard, as their enhanced mobility means that they are constantly on the road and engage with dozens of individuals potentially infected with COVID-19 on a daily basis. Despite this face-to-face contact and the fact that each of them touches dozens of bells, doors, and elevators on an average day, few delivery workers wear masks and gloves, either because they are not formally required to or because protective gear is not provided to

them by their employers. Risks are somewhat lower for couriers working for established logistics companies, many of which have turned to a “no contact” policy wherein the only interaction between courier and customer is the physical passing of the product. Yet, motorbike delivery workers working for neighbourhood shops and restaurants accept only cash, for which they often have to give back change, and require a signature that the product has been indeed delivered to the customer. Such practices put them at significant risk, which becomes all the more acute in light of the fact that their informality makes many of them ineligible for free access to healthcare should they become infected themselves.

Simultaneously, delivery workers constitute a risk for others as well, for they can become the medium for the virus to pass from one customer to another by means of both personal contact and potentially infected bags, packages, and even money. This possibility is acknowledged by some of the delivery workers I have spoken to; as one of them told me: “It is a relief when I see young people like you. Every time I enter a building, I am scared that I might have the virus and might pass it to someone elderly. I would not be able to live with it if something happened to them...We [delivery workers] are like mosquitoes taking the virus from one person to another.” Yet, most delivery workers have no other option than to continue working notwithstanding the dangers lurking for both themselves and others, for in the current economic climate a job is far from given; in the words of another delivery worker: “If I don’t work [as a delivery worker], I have a 100 percent certainty of not having any income. If I work, I have about a 10 percent chance of contracting the virus. What would you do?” With several years of unemployment behind and another recession ahead, the choice for many of these individuals is obvious.