

COVID-19, Nation-States and Fragile Transnationalism

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Abstract

In this intervention, we discuss how the COVID-19 pandemic has reconfigured transnational mobilities, connections, and solidarities, which reveals the fragility of transnationalism predicated on cosmopolitan ethics but rooted in nation-level politics. We show that as the pandemic severely disrupted transnational (infra)structures predicated on state-centric transnationalism from above, the survival and well-being of diverse transnationally mobile groups, such as refugees, transnational families, and international students, have been placed under unprecedented threat. In doing so, we reflect on the configurations of transnationalism in sociological understandings of globalisation, in and beyond the context of COVID-19. We advance an urgent call for action to address the consequences of the pandemic for vulnerable people who lead precarious lives in a transnational limbo caught in the gaps between nation-states.

Keywords

COVID-19, globalisation, migrant, nation-states, transnationalism

Introduction

In unprecedented ways, the COVID-19 pandemic has reconfigured transnational (infra) structures, mobilities, and connections that have been foundational to post-Cold War globalisation. Such reconfigurations have severely disrupted macro-level (infra)structures underpinning ‘sustained linkages and ongoing exchanges among non-state actors based across national borders’ (Vertovec, 2009: 3), while re-emphasising the predominance of nation-states in the organisation of societies and social life. In this process, COVID-19 has engendered a retrenchment of ‘transnationalism from above’ (Portes

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et al., 1999). This retrenchment has, in partial but significant ways, impacted grassroots ‘transnationalism from below’, disturbing and remaking everyday transnational social connections, ways of belonging, and migrant mobilities (Glick Schiller et al., 1992; Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004).

In this intervention, we draw on the case of the COVID-19 pandemic to reflect on the conditions that enable transnationalism and their key conceptual underpinnings. We argue and show that the pandemic has revealed the fragility of contemporary transnationalism, in terms of its structural dependence on nation-level politics and governance. Against the backdrop of disrupted transnationalism from above, we discuss how this ‘fragile transnationalism’ has left the transnationally mobile (e.g. migrant workers, refugees, international students, and transnational families) hanging in a structural limbo, rendering them exceptionally vulnerable during the pandemic. As a matter of urgency, we encourage scholars, policymakers, practitioners, and the public to recognise, scrutinise, and mitigate the severe consequences of the pandemic for those whose lives are forged and sustained in a transnational social space.

COVID-19 and ‘Fragile Transnationalism’

The emergence of transnationalism as a field of sociological study roughly coincides with the end of the Cold War and the high phase of neoliberal globalisation. From above, it has been characterised by a political emphasis on the structures for free trade, export-led development, and an assemblage of regimes and infrastructures that facilitate the cross-border circulation of goods, ideas, and people (Harvey, 2007). From below, focusing on individual agency in forging transnational lives, the concept of ‘migrant transnationalism’, defined by Glick-Schiller et al. (1992: 1) as social ‘processes by which immigrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement’, has been used to characterise the lives of the transnationally mobile, from refugees to labour migrants, international students, and transnational families.

The salience of migrant transnationalism in the era of neoliberal globalisation has been bound up with debates about the emergence of post-national forms of social solidarity, belonging, and citizenship (Delanty, 2020). The central assumption of such post-national citizenship, as Carvalhais (2016: 107) argues, ‘lies in the idea of denationalized access to citizenship rights as well as in a liberal-republican commitment to public action, once voluntary adherence to democratic participation has taken place’. This conceptualisation is predicated on nation-states’ ethical commitment to a cosmopolitan vision of social solidarities (Beck, 2006), which has been substantially undermined during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic has brought to the fore what might be described as ‘fragile transnationalism’ from above—one that is constituted and maintained through post-national cosmopolitan ethics but has political processes and modes of governance rooted in nation-states, which can therefore equally be curtailed or closed down through action at the national level. During the pandemic, a direct consequence of ‘fragile transnationalism’ has been the retrenchment of transnational social spaces and processes, fashioned by crisis responses and ideologies that centre on the nation-state, which cascaded through at least four layers:

1. *'Bordering'*: The first year of the pandemic has seen over 111,000 travel restrictions and border closures worldwide (Benton et al., 2021). National borders are further fortified through extensive quarantine regimes applied to cross-border travellers (World Health Organisation [WHO], 2020a). Mobility surveillance, such as technology-assisted location tracking and 'health code' software, is used to regulate cross-border mobility (Liu and Bennett, 2020). This upsurge in bordering has been global in scale for the whole duration of the pandemic so far (WHO, 2020a). While some countries, such as European Union member states, have sought to maintain travel channels to selectively enable transnational migration, others, such as Australia and China, have almost completely closed their borders (Benton et al., 2021).
2. *Infrastructural disruption*: State-mandated 'bordering' has cascaded into a disruption of transnational mobility infrastructures, including transport, communication, brokerage, and networks (Xiang and Lindquist, 2014), that sustain migrant transnationalism. For example, almost 200 European airports are at risk of closure (United Nations News, 2021). As states withdraw from a transnational social space, the capacity of non-state actors (e.g. travel agents, airlines) in coordinating the disjointed acts of state actors becomes very limited. Such limitations have also been encountered by international organisations (e.g. the WHO), for example in facilitating transnational exchanges of medical equipment and vaccines for COVID-19 (Felter, 2021).
3. *Biopolitical nationalism and racism*: The pandemic has coincided with and to some extent fuelled the resurgence of nationalistic ideologies and politics across many countries. Popular and political discourse has come to be characterised by biopolitical nationalism (Kloet et al., 2020), in terms of which country fares better in the pandemic (Samadashvili, 2020), speculation and racialisation of the origin of SARS-CoV-2 (Verma, 2020), and a spike of anti-Asian hate and violence (Wu et al., 2020).
4. *Resource competition*: Fuelled by biopolitical nationalism, the ethos of cosmopolitan solidarity between nation-states has been severely undermined, as different nation-states compete for resources such as vaccines and medical and personal protective equipment (Lavallée, 2021). In this competition, low- and middle-income countries, such as those in Africa, in command of limited means were faced with unprecedented difficulties of securing lifesaving medical resources (Kavanagh et al., 2020). As a result, such competition has exacerbated global inequalities and led to new forms of international tension and conflict.

Taken together, these processes have entailed an abrupt distancing of nation-states from one another and a shrinking and fractured transnational social space from above. As every country is preoccupied with its own crisis, the room for effective international cooperation to tackle the pandemic has been squashed.

'Fragile transnationalism' has its long roots in nationalist politics, structural racism, and the postcolonial global order. Before the pandemic, nationalism, racism, and xenophobia had already been on the rise, and the benefits of globalisation had come to be hotly contested in many societies (Wodak, 2015). Exposing the (infra)structural weakness of

‘fragile transnationalism’, the pandemic has exacerbated these pre-existing tensions, from ongoing warfare in the South Caucasus (Gugushvili and McKee, 2021) to the escalation of the ‘refugee crisis’ (Vonen et al., 2020). It has also created new conditions for nationalistic, racist, and xenophobic public discourses calling for nation-states’ withdrawal from a transnational space.

Vulnerabilities and Inequalities in a Transnational Limbo

‘Fragile transnationalism’ from above, exacerbated by nation-states’ lack of attention to and care for the transnationally mobile during the pandemic, has given rise to a ‘transnational limbo’ for diverse groups of people whose lives extend across national borders and are caught in the gaps between nation-states (Benton et al., 2021). With weakened (infra)structural support, the lives of transnational migrants, who either remain immobile or struggle to cross borders, have been cast into a transnational limbo. Such a limbo undermines the survival and well-being of the transnationally mobile in at least five ways:

1. *Transnational immobility*: With interruptions to transnational mobility infrastructures and regimes, many of the transnationally mobile are forced to stay put. The resulting immobility entails prolonged separation between transnationally located family members, undermines the economic subsistence of those whose livelihood hinges on cross-border mobility, and jeopardises the survival of nearly 80 million refugees stranded in warfare and climate disasters (WHO, 2020b). The challenges are exacerbated by the unpredictability as to the course of the pandemic and nation-states’ policies regarding border closures, movement restrictions, and surveillance (İçduygu, 2020).
2. *Temporal (biographical) disruption*: The coming of age of migrant transnationalism means individuals increasingly forge their biographies across nation-states (Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004). During the pandemic, people’s capability to develop transnational biographies is limited. The pandemic’s sudden outbreak has also abruptly disrupted the transnational biographies already in progress, for example, for international students who are stranded in their host countries or unable to travel and begin their studies (Hu et al., 2020).
3. *Violence*: Transnationally mobile groups are increasingly exposed to symbolic and physical violence, ranging from refugees’ entrapment in pre-existing, intensifying violence (WHO, 2020b) to migrants’ victimhood of new racial abuse in a range of countries such as the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (Wu et al., 2020).
4. *Service/support scarcity*: Before the pandemic, many non-citizen migrant groups had already often been denied full access to social security and public services in their host societies, for example in certain parts of Europe (Degen et al., 2019). Despite their heightened vulnerability during the pandemic, migrant groups across a wide range of world regions are largely marginalised, and their particular needs are often left unattended in nation-state/citizen-centred pandemic responses.

5. *COVID-19 infections and deaths*: The long-term vulnerability and poor living conditions (e.g. crowded dwelling, economic deprivation) of certain migrant groups, coupled with a lack of structural support and intensifying adversities during the pandemic, has led to their high COVID-19 infection and mortality rates, particularly among low-skilled migrant workers and refugees on a global scale (Migration Data Portal, 2021).

The precarity of living in a transnational limbo urges us to interrogate inequalities exacerbated by and arising from 'fragile transnationalism'. Emerging evidence suggests that the pandemic has exacerbated economic and well-being inequalities between migrant and non-migrant groups in the UK and the United States (Hu, 2020; Wu et al., 2020). Yet further, nuanced inequalities are also noted between different migrant groups commanding differential social, economic, and cultural resources. Thus, for example, a recent report by the Organization for Economic Development and Cooperation concludes that the pandemic is likely to worsen the living and work conditions for workers in manual, low-wage occupations on a global scale, due to reduced access to international migration and remittances (Gagnon, 2021). Moreover, COVID-19 has exacerbated global gender inequalities and undermined women's experiences of migration, for instance due to migrant women's overrepresentation in informal, precarious, and low-paid work hard hit by the pandemic (Gottardo and Cyment, 2020). These developments give rise to nuanced, intersecting forms of inequality among the transnationally mobile.

Furthermore, different forms of transnational activities and connections have been impacted to different degrees. Physical stasis during the pandemic has been accompanied by a global boom in the use of digital platforms, such as Zoom, FaceTime, WhatsApp, and WeChat. However, the fact that remaining pathways for transnational connections rely to a significant degree on various forms of commercial brokerage opens up new possibilities for social inequalities. As commercial empires such as Facebook and Tencent accrue the essential means of transnational communication and mounting personal data, digital capitalism has rapidly expanded to colonise, monopolise, and gatekeep people's transnational access. This trend, alongside nation-states' withdrawal from the transnational social space, may have further elevated the importance of commercial (versus state) actors in fashioning neoliberal globalisation. It directs future inquiries into how global capitalism, in renewed digital forms, may shape post-pandemic trends of global inequalities.

Conclusion

Despite incipient debates about an 'end of globalisation' during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hameiri, 2021), it seems impossible, at the time of writing, to estimate the duration of the pandemic, the extent to which it will have a lasting impact on transnational social, economic, cultural, and political structures and processes, and the resilience of these structures and processes. Nevertheless, two observations are clear. First, within a year or so, the pandemic has shown the fragility of transnationalism that is constituted and maintained through political processes and modes of governance rooted in nation-states. Second, as the pandemic has

substantially weakened transnational (infra)structures and undermined post-national cosmopolitan ethics from above, the lives of the transnationally mobile are thrown into a limbo with, at best, weak structural support. The transnational limbo jeopardises the basic survival of some and impairs the well-being of many others. A coordinated development of formal, resilient transnational social protection across nation-states is urgently needed to safeguard the survival, health, and well-being of those caught in the limbo.

While the course of the pandemic cannot be predicted with certainty, it is almost certain that its impact will not fade away quickly, and that other crises of a global scale may be on the horizon, for example as a result of global climate emergency. Therefore, there is a pressing need to re-examine and re-consider the configurations of transnationalism in the slowly emerging post-pandemic world and to theorise more fully the complex, interdependent relationships between transnationalism from above and from below. Moreover, we invite sociologists, policymakers, and the public to reflect critically on the assumptions underpinning transnationalism and (neoliberal) globalisation; to tackle persistent inequalities exacerbated by, and new inequalities emerging from, the pandemic; and, most ambitiously, to forge structural changes that will allow us to move beyond 'fragile transnationalism' to face our next global crisis differently, together.

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Supplemental Materials

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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