Breaking Immigration Norms Towards Refugees in the Age of COVID-19

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Capitalism and white supremacy, together the axes around which most of our contemporary existence has revolved, appear to have been dealt a rattling blow with the arrival of COVID-19. Maybe this is an unfashionably optimistic statement to make in the nascent tendency towards pessimism in the world in which we live, but a glance at recent events indicates the once unthinkable may have become possible.

In the creation of the dystopian universe we presently inhabit, refugees, at one time shut out due to their (perceived) lack of value in capitalist terms, have seen their value abruptly begin to hinge on, dare I say it, more humanitarian considerations. Political parties which found popularity in jingoistic rhetoric have begun biting their words in the cogent awareness that isolationist logics may be harmful to all. *"Us" and "them" have momentarily collapsed into one diseased body* in the realization that individualism as a long-held principle of neoliberalism will not address the health crisis. Prospects of collective solidarity, devastatingly torn up by notions of individualism, no longer seem impossible as notions of the common good surface.

As the virus first reared its ugly head in November 2019, those of us living in the United States were only vaguely concerned. COVID-19 was a world away from our busy suburban lives, our countless drives to and from school, the supermarket, yoga, and conference travel. By mid-March however, the virus joltingly inserted itself into the most intimate details of our life.

At the time, I was in the middle of writing my doctoral exams in rhetoric and media studies, a rite of passage for doctoral students. My work delved into the rhetoric of transnational social movements, dashed with discussions of post-coloniality, imperialism, immigration, and borders. My writings had been haunted by the massive exodus of Syrians from Idlib, a humanitarian crisis of epic proportions in the long saga of Syrian war and genocide over the last nine years. Displaced Idlibans had been staying in make-shift camps, while others took refuge under olive trees in the sub-zero cold. Suddenly, my words were outdated in their inability to respond to the exigencies facing our

existence. I found myself lingeringly re-evaluating my writing responses, wondering how my articulations would be read by a committee which would receive my work in a decidedly different climate than that in which it had originally been produced.

Meanwhile, the United States catapulted into its own existential crisis, in a panicked frenzy over Trump's ongoing ineptitudes as the health system collapsed under the virus's strenuous pressure. In my eyes, all of this heightened the inherent imperviousness of the Global North to phenomena beyond its borders, in an on-going detachment from the material realities of refugees and other vulnerable migrants.

In line with historical patterns, immigration bans continued to be fiercely enacted and punitive measures taken towards "diseased" refugees. In this sense, the virus has laid gruesomely bare the vulnerability of refugees, its microbial trail exposing the socio-economic disparities of our neoliberal system.

For Syrians, currently the largest forcibly displaced population, COVID-19 is a death sentence. While the majority of Americans are able to shelter safely in their homes, Syrians are being shelled out of their homes and their health care system is simultaneously being decimated into oblivion. Those stranded in exile in no man's land at the Turkish-Greek border are taking refuge in the open air as the virus rages unhindered between them. This situation is summed best by a young Syrian boy in a camp, holding a banner with the words *Fighting over toilet paper? We're fighting for shelter."*

Nevertheless, elsewhere, the pandemic has eventuated a challenge to hegemonic neoliberal immigration tendencies. Contra to teleological narratives of western supremacy, the *real* crisis of COVID-19 became sacrosanct above the imagined crisis of refugee entry. A case in point: In Saxony, the heartland of the right-wing Alternative for Germany (AfD), which had notoriously harnessed anti-immigrant sentiment to gain political influence, the regional medical board has been calling on its social media platforms for migrant doctors without licenses to help combat the shortage of medical personnel. Though the AfD had vocally criticized Merkel's decision to open borders to refugees fleeing the Assad regime's tyranny, it found itself leaning on the very immigrants it had so callously shunned as sub-human.

The far right is struggling to retain popular support–some are starting to note that their ideology of "nationalism spearheaded by fascism is precisely the wrong one for the period we are in." The use value of citizenship, once so callously assigned according to capitalist metrics, is now viscerally weaved to other humanitarian considerations. This is not only due to the obvious fact that migrant doctors are needed to provide urgent medical care but arguably stems from the diminishing resonance of the "threat" of refugees to the community. As such, instead of calls to shield the population from refugees, the State Chamber of Physicians has stated that 14,000 Syrian refugee doctors are awaiting their qualifications to be approved to serve in the health system. In a similar vein, Portugal has taken the unprecedented move of providing asylum seekers and migrants full citizenship rights as the pandemic's threat escalates.

Such stories should not be taken as an allegorical emblem of the whole. But these conflicting accounts explicate the shifting nature of how refugees are rhetorically constituted in the disjunctive world of the contagion. On World Refugee Day [June 20—ed.], we must realize that the pandemic is an ideological crisis as much as a medical crisis which reveals the absurdities of our neoliberal logics, their tenuousness, and inherent fungibility. While neoliberal policy frameworks have created the global shortage of hospital beds, medical supplies and robust welfare, in other ways, *neoliberal tendencies are being unraveled*, and this too must be acknowledged.

The pandemic's long-term productive potential in disrupting neoliberal frameworks of immigration is

still debatable. As we respond to a virus that knows no borders, the pandemic will no doubt refract the distance between "us" and "them" in an interconnected world. One thing is certain: The disdainful discourse of neoliberal immigration rhetoric can no longer find comfort in the same tired spaces of yesteryear. What remains to be seen is how far the current ecological crisis will succeed in viscerally "breaking" hegemonic immigration norms towards refugees after the epidemiological decline of COVID-19.