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Borders

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COVID-19 has exposed the false security of national borders by showing how a virus can travel across them. Similarly, the negative impact of climate change and the ecological crisis disregard borders, revealing that security can only come from global collective action. In April 2020, while top scholars were asking for borderless collaboration, 194 countries adopted cross-border restrictions, and an increasing national competition emerged over personal protective equipment, medical machineries, drugs and, more recently, vaccines. Against growing nationalism, of which Brexit is the clearest expression, COVID-19 demands new transnational governance. However, the border between the Global North and the Global South has never been greater. While things may slowly improve, at the end of January the WHO denounced that while higher-income countries had administered more than 39 million doses of vaccine, only 25 doses were administered in lowest-income countries: illustrating the growing border of global inequalities. National borders in COVID-19 times further affect the most marginalised. In violation of international law, some countries are preventing asylum-seekers and refugees from entering their borders. At EU borders, migrants are beaten in the Balkans, rejected on the Italy-French border, and drowned in the Mediterranean Sea. Within borders, migrants, who have lost jobs and income due to COVID-19 and have become stranded as a result of travel restrictions, are increasingly exposed to risks of deportation, exploitation, and often excluded by COVID-19 social protection measures. Owing to movement restrictions and curfews, individuals are forbidden to move beyond their local area or municipality, or a few hundred meters from home. Houses have become the borders. Borders we can only transcend digitally. This is changing our perception of space and freedom. The collective protection of the right to health and life has affected our ability to move, creating new borders. These borders are experienced very differently depending on social identities, including gender, age, race and class. The elderly have been shielded away from society, dying alone in for-profit care homes without being able to see their loved ones. Students who travelled to universities have found themselves forcibly confined within these new borders. New boundaries have also been created through the categories of essential and non-essential workers. Within the essential worker category there are medical doctors but also, more significantly, a low paid, working class of cleaners, carers, supermarket workers and delivery staff. Such workers often come from ethnic minority or migrant backgrounds, and are exposing themselves to the virus without adequate social protection. As new borders are emerging, traditional borders can be transcended digitally, allowing new and sometimes more inclusive ways of working globally. Academics can teach to a global class from anywhere in the world, as well as conducting the fieldwork of complex global projects from their bedrooms. This all requires a theoretical rethinking of space. With these new boundaries, what does spatial injustice mean? How to study it? Do our methodologies and research questions take these changes into account? Are they leading to more inclusive research? The new de facto borders that prevent researchers from travelling offer a glimpse into the future of our work: networking globally, relying heavily on locally based researchers, and reducing our ecological footprint. Academics on twitter say they miss airports; they need to understand that international travel isn't a perk of XXI century academic jobs. The limits to travel are here to stay, should we want a just present and a future for coming generations.