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Racism, Migratism, Covid

BY ALYOSXA TUDOR

We have been asked to 'shelter in place', to isolate within the household. All contributions in this FR blog series investigate the pre-given assumptions about the 'safety' of the household and the privilege that comes with being able to shelter in place, in contrast to forced confinement and exposure to danger, be it in prisons, in abusive households, in immigration detention or, as I want to add, in seasonal work migration 'labour camps'.[1] The Covid-19 pandemic has made inequalities apparent that have existed all along—as Kimberle Crenshaw puts it, it 'lays bare' intersectional vulnerabilities. Looking specifically at the situation of seasonal migrant workers who live and work under exploitative conditions and stay in mass accommodation where no social distancing is possible, I extract political and epistemological claims going forward: the need for anti-nationalism (including open borders and pro-immigration legislation), transnational analysis, and a thorough critique of the paradigm of the nation state in knowledge productions.

In both Germany and the UK, the media reported recently that charter flights have brought over thousands of Romanian workers, both white Romanians and Romanian Roma, to harvest the crops. Images of big crowds of people rwaiting at the airports show the absolute lack of protection. These people are seasonal, cheap workers, staying in mass accommodation, and in the British case after Brexit, will not even be allowed to settle in the UK (the planned post-Brexit point system for preventing immigration of so called 'low skilled' workers already has built-in potential for short-term, exploitative work conditions). It
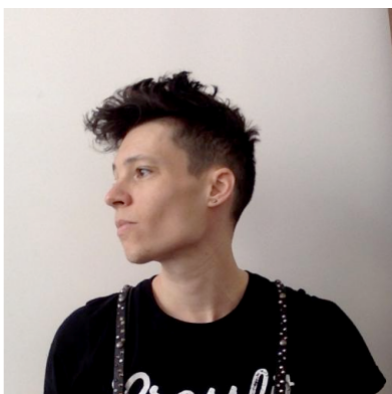
is a disposable migrant workforce with people coming from already vulnerable and precarious situations.[2] Therefore, it is not surprising that in Germany in April 2020 in a meat plant more than 400 Romanian workers tested positive for Covid-19. These workers are not even employed by the factory; they work for subcontractors, earn less than 4.50 Euros per hour, work 260 hours a month, mostly in night shifts, share mass accommodation, and will be transported back to Romania after a few months. The ones who tested positive have been quarantined. Many Germans who comment on social media sites regard the migrants as being the ones who bring contagion to the region, who don't 'understand' social distancing and 'misbehave' in public. They are constructed as the 'perverts', compared to the normative Germans sheltering in their households with their families. As I want to stress, this example sheds light on both the normativity and privilege of the 'household' and on uncomplicated belonging to the nation: there is a mismatch between the confinement in mass accommodation—that cannot be described in terms other than 'labour camps'—vs. the expectation that the Romanians practice social distancing (among each other) in public.

For me, having grown up as a Romanian migrant child in Germany and now living and working in the UK, it is very clear that falling back on a nation state for protection is nothing natural. I am struck by the fact of how the national has become, often even in critical analysis, the unquestioned paradigm. This also resonates with Leticia's Sabsay's theoretisations of multiple locations and lives. We could see the drama of national time unfold: every nation state started counting from their own first cases and ignored the radical interconnection of what was evolving. What happens in other countries does not seem real to most people. It was mostly migrant and diasporic subjects who have been operating in *non*-national time, seeing this coming, from following transnational analysis. And more: in the case I mention above, in the exposure of migrant workers, and also in the fact that in the UK for example, it is mostly Black and ethnic minorities who die of Covid, both in the regular population and among health care staff, as Yasmin Gunaratnam (2020) points out. Racism—and what I theorise elsewhere as 'migratism' (Tudor 2018a and 2018b)—both create populations that are not under the protection of the nation state in the crisis. And have not been all along. We must take this seriously in our responses to the current situation. Transnationalism does not mean 'a lot of nations sitting at the same table'. Paying attention to what happens elsewhere and paying attention to what happens to populations that *are seen* as having come from 'elsewhere' in the moment of crisis belongs together and is often missing in critical knowledge production and intervention. 'Transnationalism' means going beyond the nation, questioning national/ist thinking structures (Grewal and Kaplan 2006; Tudor 2017). A lot of migrant subjects do not have an automatic sense of belonging to a nation state—which is a good thing, as it allows for a profound critique of nationalisms.[3] Next to demanding protection and justice for racialised and migratised groups, transnationalism also means something for our thinking structures: how can we make sure to not always—and only—fall back on the nation as a paradigm in our political analysis and activism?

Gender and sexuality come in through the interconnection of the household and the nation state. Both depend on highly normative gender and sexuality (McClintock 1993; Manalansan 2006; Luibheid 2008). The household is understood as the heterosexual and heteronormative family, consisting of properly gendered individuals as both Kiran Grewal and Clare Hemmings show in their contributions. Who belongs to a proper household is classed and racialised and depends on migration status. Historically in the US, this becomes very clear in kinship under slavery and settler colonialism: the family that remains together as a household is a privilege of white settlers/slaveholders (Spillers 1987; Arvin, Tuck and Morrill 2013). Children being separated from their parents at borders in the US in this very moment underlines the continuation of these practices (Batra Kashyap 2019). As we can see in the example of the migrant workers, mass accommodation and the lack of privacy are markers of

already existing precariousness. Both shelter in place—having a private place—and being confined with *chosen* loved ones is a privilege. Migrants worldwide are being exposed to danger and death (see for example reports of migrant workers in India trapped in lockdown), during the crisis but not only then. This is why no-border movements are so important. Moreover, even if borders can be crossed legally for work migration, the normalisation of the idea that a migrant (worker) has fewer rights than a citizen as they don't belong needs constant political and epistemological pushback. It is the precarious crossings, precarious movements, precarious exclusions from uncomplicated belonging that put people in danger (Schmidt Camacho 2005; Luibheid 2008; Nyanzi 2013; Tudor 2020). Intersectionality as an epistemology teaches us that gender and sexuality multiply the danger of migration and / or racialization; they not only add but make it into a specific vulnerability (Crenshaw 1991). In the household, women, queer, trans and gender-nonconforming people are subjected to domestic violence. In the labour camp or other precarious migration situations, there are also women, queer, trans and gender-nonconforming people who are subject to the violence of their employers, superiors, co-workers and the hostile dominant society.

Not all Germans who comment on social media on the hundreds of Covid cases in the German meat plant are openly hostile towards the Romanians. Many comments from people living in the region call the conditions the migrants live in 'modern slavery' and condemn the situation. However, they often come from a place that opposes migration and calls for well-paid jobs for the local population 'instead'. Similar to anti-trafficking arguments, these postulations first and foremost want to restrict migration (Mai 2018), but mask this with opposition to the exploitative conditions. Critical scholarship therefore cannot only call for closing these facilities down, but needs a broader analysis of risk, exploitation, nationalism, border regimes and consumerist privilege and expectations. Who buys that cheap meat the Romanian workers chop into pieces for BBQs? What kind of animal exploitation is usually condemned, which is normalised? (Think Chinese wet markets vs. Western industrial animal farming.) I am interested in the question of how these insights change how we think about the world, about this crisis and about politics going forward. I am interested in teaching and producing knowledge on these complex intersections and ask how a transnational perspective radically deconstructs pre-given conditions. We cannot go back to normal! How can we also change the way we think, produce knowledge and teach, how can we question nationalism, the normal, the household, in our political engagement and theoretical interventions?

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Notes

[1] I contributed with an earlier version of this entry to the panel series *Under the Blacklight: The Intersectional Vulnerabilities that COVID Lays Bare* hosted by Kimberle Crenshaw.

[2] As Roma have been subject to discrimination and violence for centuries and therefore mostly live under the most precarious conditions in Romania (Oprea 2012; Tudor 2017; Parvulescu and Boatcă 2020), it is very likely that a high proportion of Romanian migrant workers are Roma, and are also marginalized within the group of Romanian labour migrants (Yıldız and De Genova 2018).

[3] For a critique of cross-border-nationalism in migrant communities, see Tudor 2017.

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