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COVID-19 and “Zoomist” Forced Migration

COVID-19-driven permanent lockdown will not stop forced migration. It will continue because global confinement has increased poverty and inequality in impoverished countries and places where conflicts continue. However, the new pandemic will stigmatize human mobility the same way HIV/AIDS stigmatized gay sex and drug use —class, gender, and race will determine stigmatization targets. Virologist Luc Montagnier, who won the Nobel Prize for his research on HIV, claimed a remarkable similarity between SARS-CoV-2, the cause of COVID-19, and HIV, the cause of AIDS. Since both viruses attack the immune system, Montagnier argued that SARS-CoV-2 was created in a laboratory embedding HIV into a coronavirus. Of course, this assertion has entered the pantheon of the conspiracy theories around the new worldwide pandemic threatening the civilization model known as globalization. It may be the case that both

viruses’ biochemistry is different, and they have no biological connection. However, the truth is that both viruses have similarities in their social and discursive construction, in how we assign them human materiality and bodies.

HIV/AIDS, we know, emerged in the early 1980s, first attacking men who had sex with other men and then other groups, which stigmatized the spread: drug users and hemophiliacs. The first person to be infected with HIV was a man in Africa who consumed chimpanzee meat; chimpanzees are carriers of a similar virus called the simian immunodeficiency virus (SIV). So far, HIV/AIDS has killed 35 million people all over the world. However, HIV was widespread among gay men and drug users in its early stages, leading to the biased and prejudiced claim that it was a disease of gays and drug users. This idea permeated the world’s imagination for a long time, making its diagnosis, treatment, and social visibility very difficult and shameful in a hetero-patriarchal world.

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The SARS-CoV-2/COVID-19, for its part, received its name so as not to stigmatize nationalities in the way that the Spanish or Chinese influenza previously did. The new coronavirus emerged in the Chinese city of Wuhan, so that stigma was easy to establish. The first carriers of SARS-CoV-2/COVID-19 to the West were travelers, middle-class and wealthy people returning from vacation, business trips, and backpacking. Immigrants in Europe and North America returned to their home countries for the winter holidays taking the virus to Latin America, Asia, and Africa. Although SARS-CoV-2/COVID-19 took a colonial route to spread worldwide, it is likely that, like HIV/AIDS, it will stigmatize the mobility of the poorest, the new underclasses of the COVID-19-generated microeconomics (“Zoomism”), and the peoples who were already facing conflict, violence, and environmental degradation. Mobility will be the new “unsafe sex.” However, let us not forget that control over mobility has always been associated with at least two characteristics: class and race. Within class and race, gender and sexual orientation deepen stigmatization experiences. COVID-19 is likely to pick on the most vulnerable and stigmatize them. In this case, the “infectious” bodies will be those of the “Zoomist” forced migration.

“Zoomism” is a term I first used in a short article to describe the new form of production emerging from self-enclosure and the increasing and intensive use of teleconferencing platforms like Zoom for work, education, and leisure purposes—hence, the term Zoomism.¹ I wrote that article a couple of months after the global lockdown started; my understanding of how Zoomism affected migration was embryonic. In this article, I shall pick up on the original idea and offer a prospective analysis of the probable impact of Zoomism on migration. The argument is that Zoomism will intensify the precarious conditions of what Standing (2015) called the “precariat,” creating new underclass layers, which I shall describe as the Zoomist nomad and the “walking waste.”

Zoomism

In the short article referred to above, I argued that for the middle classes around the world, mobility control started through what I called “Zoomism.” A year ago, few people knew about Zoom, a platform for digital teleconferencing. Although other platforms have emerged (Meet, Jitsi,

Webex, Blackboard), the word “Zoom” has become part of daily life and even a verb describing the work-related activities in confinement. Zoom established the production model for which capitalism is disciplining us; it names a series of socioeconomic changes as significant as the transition from Fordism to Post-Fordism. The current change aims to immobilize us sufficiently to control human mobility without bringing production and consumption to a halt. Zoomism is a microeconomy of self-enclosure.

Fordism was the industrial production model that replaced Taylorism and guaranteed full employment and universal or employment-linked social and economic rights after World War II. The passage from Fordism to Post-Fordism in the late 1970s instituted a model of economic regulation based on labor and organizational flexibility through transnational networks over institutional sites. Networks include states as well as non-governmental organizations and corporations. The sophistication of digital technologies allowed for increasing labor flexibility, which produced ever-increasing labor insecurity and precariousness.²

Zoomism will be the production model for self-enclosure, which also increases added value since businesses are transferring their corporate offices’ operating costs to workers—electricity, the Internet, water, and even coffee. Without the need for time to travel, commute to work, and even venture outside for leisure, workers become more productive. The lockdown is disciplining us to immobility, to seclude our bodies, and to project our professional avatars through digital platforms, reformulating the perception of time and space of globalization. David Harvey conceptualized this as the compression of space and time through information technology and low-cost flights that increased and changed tourism, business, and work. We will progress from a relative perception of global space-time as something compressed to space-time perception and experience in absolute terms: a materially immobile present and space that moves only virtually.

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Zoomism leads to the emergence of new economic sectors and the radical digital transformation of others while pushing still others to close definitively (manufacturing, entertainment, the arts, sports, publishing, retail, fashion, restaurants, tourism, and transportation). Zoomism is leaving millions of people unemployed, earning half their wages, or experiencing even more flexible work hours. Zoomist microeconomics has gender implications because homeschooling has pushed millions of women worldwide to give up their jobs or drastically cut their work hours. Also, thousands of internal and international migrants are returning to their home countries or regions because they have lost their jobs or their business or are unable to pay the rent in global cities. These newly unemployed people include youngsters and young adults studying abroad, men and women with clerical or teaching jobs, women and men who lost their small businesses, and women forced to seek family support because of their young children's homeschooling.

What will happen with this Zoomist unemployment and generalization of part-time work? I believe that Zoomism will continue to impact work and, consequently, class and migration.

The New COVID-19-Forced Migrants: The Zoomist Nomad and the Walking Waste

Throughout the pandemic's first year, the economic impact on the population's well-being reversed the initial class trend discussed in the first part. While the upper classes were able to keep their jobs, people in manual and clerical jobs in the so-called "essential" activities could not remain locked up or lose their jobs. This differentiated class and gender impact on work will eventually produce new forms of forced migration generated by Zoomist economics and related labor reorganization. Zoomism will intensify and make massive mobility a logic of digital work beyond what scholars call the "digital nomad."³ It will be

a historical adaptation of what Karl Marx⁴ called the "nomadic population" based on the massive increase of "digital commuters" (Thompson 2018).⁵ There will be two types of Zoomist migrants: the existing privileged digital nomads and two new layers of the precariat (Standing 2015): the Zoomist nomad and the walking waste.

Back in 1997, Tsugio Makimoto and David Manners envisaged a world in which "The Internet would provide a liberatory utopia in which [a] worker[s] could log on (from the beach), work four hours a week, and then catch the afternoon waves on his surfboard—and he was surely male."⁶ This type of worker was the digital nomad, enabled by the gig economy—the digital service-based economy in which work is project-based. As soon as the digital nomad completes the project, the app-based employer has no further commitment. The gig economy's precarious workers have neither rights nor pension or health care certainty. Before the 2020 COVID-19 epidemic, digital nomadism was a lifestyle for an entire generation of young people in the First World: Millennials. Thompson claims that digital nomads are different from an even more precarious kind of digital worker: the telecommuter. "(Telecommuters are often balancing family duties; while nomads are balancing leisure and work—and rarely, childrearing); both find it challenging to have distinctive boundaries between work, leisure, and family life. . . . Telecommuters with small children in the house, women especially, find it hard to protect their work time from family commitments."⁷

In Zoomism, wealthy travelers, tourists, and elite digital nomads (well-established YouTubers and other influencers) will have no problem traveling because of their economic and social status; they will likely carry vaccine records, or even biological passports, becoming a privileged type of migrant. In contrast, telecommuters will become the digital version of Marx's "nomadic population." When illustrating the general law of capitalist accumulation, Marx locates the nomad population at the bottom of the social heap, the most precarious type of laborer. He argues that the nomadic population is mostly rural people working in the industrial sector, the "light infantry" of capital who are "thrown by it, according to its needs, now to this point, now to that," marching from one workplace to another, living in inadequate housing, carrying disease, and exploited as workers and tenants.⁸

Some scholars have compared labor migrants to Marx's nomadic labor, especially temporary migrant workers.

Others, like Standing, include migrants in a broader lumpen global underclass structure he calls the precariat, a global structure of millions of independent, flexible workers with neither economic stability nor social consciousness; freelancers, digital nomads, and migrants are part of the precariat.⁹ Zoomism is likely to massively increase the telecommuting precariat, exponentially multiplying the numbers of what used to be a small economic sector employing the First World's Millennials. Zoomism is transforming people into labor soldiers and tenants because telecommuting is becoming massive, and their homes are becoming their workplaces, using their own resources and earning half their previous salaries. Thousands must go back to their home regions or countries, back to their parents or abusive partners. They are, of course, potential carriers of the disease (COVID-19). They have become the "Zoomist nomads," a mass of impoverished and more precarious digital nomads and digital commuters.

The most precarious workers, forced migrants, however, are not Zoomist nomads. Manual, industrial, and essential service workers will continue to migrate because they have no qualifications for the Zoomist economy. COVID-19 pandemics will construct this type of migrant as potentially contaminated. Some biases are at play already: Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro said in August 2020 that citizens returning from Colombia would be considered "bioterrorists" and called on people to report them to the authorities. Maduro apologized the next day, but it is a sign that COVID-19 will be associated with precarious mobility. The poor and racialized migrants' bodies will become toxic, similar to what Svetlana Alexievich's book *Voices of Chernobyl* refers to as "walking waste," that is, living beings whose bodies are so toxic that they are not even useful for food.

To sum up briefly, Zoomist workers are more like digital commuters than digital nomads. However, given the

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Zoomist economic logic, there will be an intensification and worsening of their conditions and they will multiply. An ever-increasing number of digital commuters will eventually become a part of what Karl Marx called the nomadic population, but a digital nomadic population, the Zoomist forced migration. **MM**

Notes

- 1 Ariadna Estévez, "El zoomismo y el disciplinamiento para la inmovilidad productiva," *Nexos*, 2020, <https://medioambiente.nexos.com.mx/?p=277>; and "Zoomism and Discipline for Productive Immobility," *Critical Legal Thinking*, 2020, https://criticallegalthinking.com/2020/05/13/zoomism-and-discipline-for-productive-immobility/?fbclid=IwAR0qf-2TExuzOZwiL_w0ilHXEYQ1VeHN1zDZ8rThgbvhATwqdujkhfp7J7Q.
- 2 Nancy Fraser, "¿De la disciplina hacia la flexibilización? Releyendo a Foucault bajo la sombra de la globalización," *Revista Mexicana de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales* vol. 46, no. 187 (2003), pp. 15-33.
- 3 Tsugio Makimoto and David Manners (1997), quoted in Beverly Yuen Thompson, "Digital Nomads: Employment in the Online Gig Economy," *Glocalism: Journal of Culture, Politics and Innovation* (2018).
- 4 Karl Marx, Chapter Twenty-Five: "The General Law of Capitalist Accumulation," *Capital Volume One*, 2020, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch25.htm#S5c> and <http://la.utexas.edu/users/hcleaver/3https://medioambiente.nexos.com.mx/?p=27757k/Chapter%2025.html#c>.
- 5 Thompson, op. cit.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- 8 Karl Marx, op. cit.
- 9 Guy Standing, "The Precariat and Class Struggle," *rccs Annual Review*, no. 7, 2015, <https://journals.openedition.org/rccsar/585>, accessed October 27, 2020.



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