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Migration and Mobility after the 2020 Pandemic: The End of an Age?

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Abstract

This paper sets an agenda for research on the future of human migration and mobility after the 2020 Pandemic. It poses ten key questions: (1) Will countries need less labour migration? (2) Will migrant decision-making change? (3) Will anti-immigrant sentiment grow? (4) Will autocratic regimes suppress diversity? (5) Will migration restrictions proliferate? (6) Will 'travel bubbles' become economic regions? (7) Will international student migration recover? (8) Will commuter travel decline? (9) Will immobility reshape cities?, and (10) Will demographic and mobility transitions change course? If such things happen, the Pandemic could mark the end of the long post-war global boom in international population movements that is often called 'the age of migration'.

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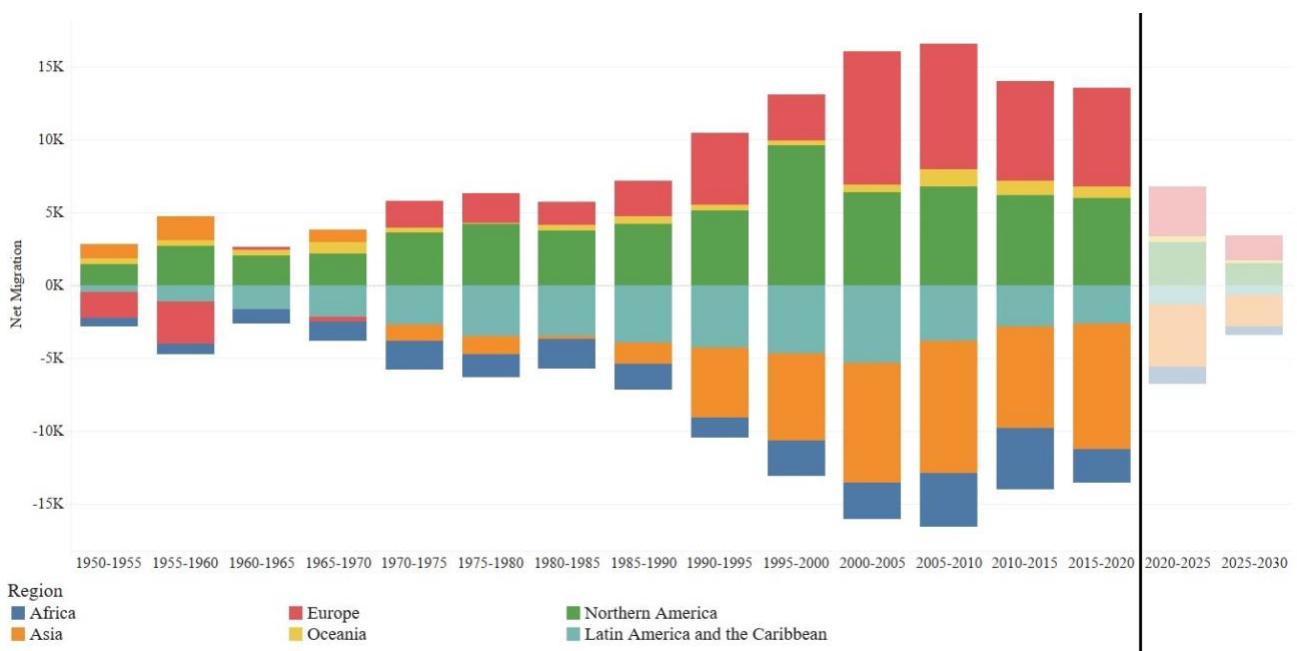
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The Age of Migration

The Age of Migration by Stephen Castles and Mark Miller was first published in 1993, at the knee of an up-curve in international migration that began after World War II. Summarizing key migration theories and presenting a historical-structural analysis of population movements, the book argued that post-war international migration was unprecedented in its global extent, complexity, and centrality to social transformations. The authors had a point. According to the United Nations, net migration flows grew globally from 2.6 million in 1950-1955 to 20.6 million in 2005-2010 (Figure 1).¹ Similarly, global migrant stocks have increased by 150% in absolute terms since 1960, and by 40% as a percentage of the global population in just the past 30 years.² Permanent and long-term migration flows are now but the tip of an iceberg of global mobility, which also encompasses short-term shuttling, circulation, and travel. International tourism, for example, has grown from 25 million arrivals worldwide in 1950, to 1.4 billion arrivals in 2018 – a 56-fold increase in less than three-quarters of a century.³ Until recently, it was widely estimated that more than a million people were literally flying through the air at any given moment.⁴

Figure 1: Average annual net number of immigrants by region, from 1950-55 to 2015-20 (millions)

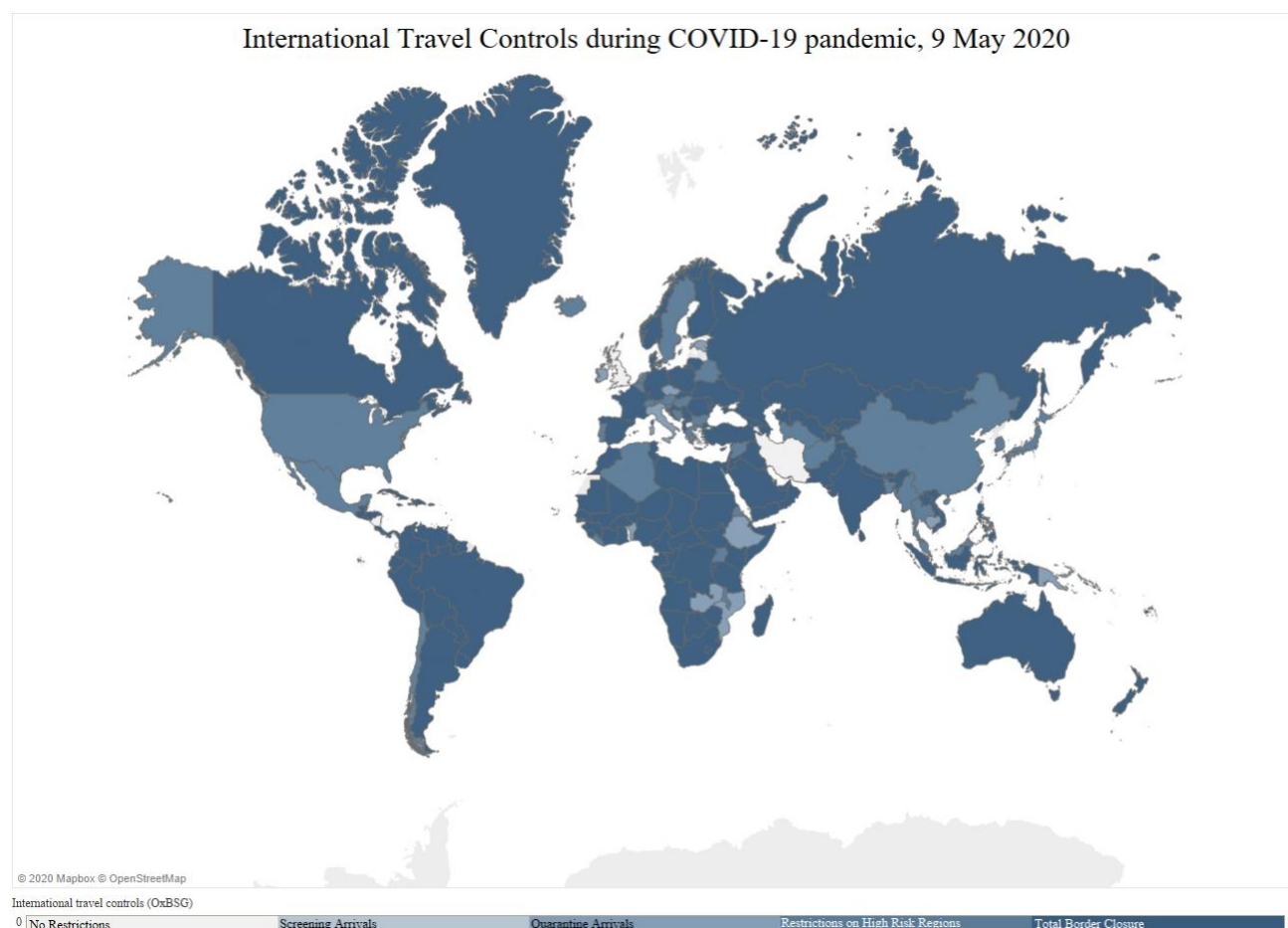


Data source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2019). *World Population Prospects 2019, Online Edition. Rev. 1. Forecast added.* Image credit: Stephanie Daborn.

With migration scholar Hein de Haas now at the helm, *The Age of Migration* is in its sixth edition. However, the age of migration itself may now be ending. In late April 2020, US President Donald Trump announced a temporary halt to most legal immigration to the USA in order to ‘protect jobs’.⁵ Other traditional immigration countries such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand have effectively closed their borders in response to COVID-19, banning all foreign arrivals with few exceptions, for which two-week quarantine periods apply (see

Figure 2). A recent Pew Research Centre analysis found that 91% of the world's population lived in countries with coronavirus restrictions on foreign arrivals.⁶ The United Nations World Tourism Organization announced that these 'represent the most severe restrictions on international travel in history'.⁷ The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees recently told the *New York Times* that, of some 120 countries under lockdown, only around 30 'are giving any consideration to the claims of asylum seekers', while the resettlement of recognized refugees 'has stopped for all practical purposes'.⁸ Remittances may also grind to a halt, cutting financial lifelines to some of the world's poorest regions.⁹

Figure 2: International travel controls during the COVID-19 pandemic



Data source: Thomas Hale, Sam Webster, Anna Petherick, Toby Phillips, and Beatriz Kira. (2020). Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker, Blavatnik School of Government. Image credit: Stephanie Daborn.

Does the COVID-19 lockdown represent a temporary trough in global population movements, or the end of the most recent age of migration? This paper sets an agenda for research on the future of human migration and mobility after the 2020 Pandemic, posing ten key questions for migration and mobility researchers in the coming months and years.

1. Will countries need less labour migration?

Unemployment has mushroomed during the Pandemic. At the time of writing, Australia witnessed a 45% drop in retail shopping while New Zealand experienced a 91% drop – i.e. an almost complete shutdown in the retail sector.¹⁰ With corporate borrowing at a historic high, many firms now lack the revenue to service debt and are either folding or cutting staff. Unemployment in the US is ‘at its highest level since the Great Depression.’¹¹ By March 29th, almost 6.9 million Americans filed for unemployment, perhaps nine or ten times as many as during the peak of the Great Recession in 2009. In just six weeks after the lockdowns took effect, US unemployment figures rose to some 30 million. It is difficult to over-state the scale of this unemployment crisis. The International Monetary Fund is predicting the worst downturn since the Great Depression, beginning with a global economic contraction of 3% in 2020.¹² The European Union is predicting its worst depression ever – which is really saying something, given how bad things got during the 1930s.¹³

Such **high unemployment rates will depress demand for immigrant labour**. Firms that survive this great cull will have access to a large recruitment pool of unemployed native workers, and will face growing political pressures to employ native workers instead of immigrants. Some of these native workers may not retrain for new jobs, and others may disdain jobs perceived to be below their station. Even so, the net result will be an economy less dependent overall on immigrant workers to fill seasonal and skill shortages in the labour force – a reversal of a decades-long trend. Moreover, the impacts of COVID-19 restrictions will fall unevenly across the labour market. In some countries, immigrant workers are predominantly concentrated in high- and low-skilled jobs in sectors classified as ‘essential’, such as healthcare, infrastructure maintenance and food production as well as delivery: fewer jobs will be lost in such industries. Losses may be concentrated in medium-skilled jobs in sectors such as manufacturing, retail, and tourism, which are often classified as ‘non-essential.’¹⁴ This may contribute to dangerously toxic public attitudes regarding immigration and immigrants (see below). It will therefore be important for researchers to closely monitor how employer demand for migrant labour relates to trends in unemployment and anti-immigrant sentiment in the next few years.

2. Will migrant decision-making change?

The Pandemic may also reshape individual- and household-level decisions about migration. On one hand, some types of people may be *less* likely to move. For example, we know that disasters have lasting effects on how people make decisions. Economists Arnaud Dupuy and Michel Beine found people affected by the 2019 Albanian earthquakes were more risk averse and impatient after the crises; they suggest the Pandemic may have similar impacts.¹⁵ Interestingly, risk and time preferences interact. For example, patience may be a deliberate technique for controlling risk: investors hold risky assets for longer to increase profit. Similarly, migrants risk savings, career and social status by uprooting, and may need to wait many years to recoup the costs. If the Pandemic makes them both less tolerant of risk and less patient in their preferences, some people may be considerably less likely to choose migration.

On the other hand, the Pandemic may make other kinds of people *more* likely to migrate. In developing countries, many households decide to send a family member abroad so that they can send back money.¹⁶ These remittances allow migrants' families back home to expand businesses or homes where there are no bank loans, or to weather periods of unemployment or ill health where there is no insurance. According to 2018 World Bank data, more than 30 countries received remittances equivalent to 10% or higher of their GDP. This is similar to the proportional contribution of the entire manufacturing sector to the USA's economy; more than the contribution of financial services to the UK's economy on the eve of the Global Financial Crisis in 2008; and more than the combined contribution of mining and agriculture to Australia's economy. However, because many migrant workers have either returned to their places of origin, in what Robin Cohen calls 'panic mobility',¹⁷ or have lost work in their places of residence, remittances are plummeting.¹⁸ In late April, the World Bank forecasted that annual global remittances would fall by 20% in 2020.¹⁹ If this keeps up, some families may be desperate to send family members abroad as soon as lockdowns end.

The Pandemic may make certain people *less* likely to move and others *more* likely, resulting in **a period of unpredictable and fast-changing migration flows**. As Erol Yayboke of Washington's Center for Strategic and International Studies put it, 'once you turn the faucet back on, it's not going to immediately flow.... And when it does flow, it's not necessarily going to flow in the same direction'.²⁰ For these reasons, studying the individual-level micro-economic drivers of migration will remain important, even as more macro-economic and historical-structural analyses gain prominence once again.

3. Will anti-immigrant sentiment grow?

Unemployment and economic downturn often goes hand-in-hand with increased anti-immigrant sentiment.²¹ As Susan Carland puts it, 'racism and recessions go together'.²² Empirical debates still rage regarding the extent of the correlation and the exact causal mechanisms at work,²³ but during such crises we almost always see the resurfacing of age-old myths about immigrants stealing jobs or lazing around on unemployment benefits. Neither stereotype finds strong support in migration research. Unemployment rates among immigrants quickly settle to similar or lower levels than the rate among non-immigrants. Additionally, immigrants contribute more in taxes than they consume in benefits, and they stimulate domestic demand by purchasing local products and services. Moreover, the effect of immigration on native wages and unemployment, if any, is vanishingly small because immigrants tend to do different jobs: they are concentrated in the essential but often unglamorous jobs that native workers either cannot or will not do.

However, in this so-called 'post-truth' era, the numbers matter less than the way they are interpreted in political narratives, media stories, and urban myths. In turbulent periods of global history, migrants make convenient scapegoats for everything destabilizing about globalization. For example, it might be technically true to tell someone they are losing their home because of a global spread in mis-valued collateralized debt obligations. However, this does not make a good soundbite or campaign slogan. Since the Global Financial

Crisis, politicians have found it much simpler to project the problems of globalization onto people who look and sound different.

Anti-immigrant sentiment was already on the rise well before the Pandemic, as shown in a 2014 Special Issue of the journal *Migration Studies* on the topic.²⁴ However, **the pandemic is exacerbating xenophobia, racism and anti-immigrant sentiment worldwide.** In Australia, hundreds of people wrote to the national ABC news network to report seeing or experiencing ‘racially charged incidents in supermarkets, on the streets and in their cars throughout the lockdown period’, including people being ‘coughed on, insulted and spat at’ in public places such as supermarkets.²⁵ Similar trends have been highlighted across Asia as well as in the USA, Hungary, and Italy, among other places.²⁶ To mitigate against the risk of another 1930s-like episode of xenophobia, it will be crucial in the next few years for migration researchers to closely watch trends in anti-immigrant sentiment.

4. Will autocratic regimes suppress diversity?

As *The Economist* put it, ‘autocrats are using COVID-19 as an excuse to grab more power’, by insisting that ‘strong measures are needed to keep the public safe’ (see Figure 3).²⁷ The Pandemic has prompted unprecedented displays of state economic power, in the form of colossal stimulus packages. It has also prompted classic authoritarian emergency measures such as cancelling public events, restricting gatherings and internal movement and public transportation, launching public information campaigns, tracing who contacts whom, limiting freedom of press, speech and expression, suspending protections for minorities and private individuals.²⁸ For example, some African governments have used ‘emergency decrees and disinformation laws to silence critics’.²⁹ Public health officials have released information about potential coronavirus cases, including their ages, neighbourhoods and travel patterns, which has enabled ‘a new kind of vigilantism and threatened personal privacy’.³⁰ A group of UK-based scholars has condemned India’s government for a ‘brutal crackdown’ on dissent and protests and a ‘witch-hunt against students and activists’ during the lockdowns.³¹ Some governments, such as Ethiopia, are using the pandemic as an excuse for postponing elections;³² others (including, according to some accounts, the USA) are trying to do so.³³ Emergency executive powers may be reasonable at the time they are implemented, but governments rarely relinquish these powers once crisis has receded. For example, the emergency ‘homeland security’ powers seized by the USA Government in the Patriot Act after 9/11 largely remain in place today.³⁴ Egypt seized emergency powers in 1967 and has retained them almost continuously ever since.³⁵

Figure 3: The Economist's list of recent pandemic-related power grabs

Country	What Happened
Hungary	Parliament gives prime minister Viktor Orbán almost unlimited powers, with no expiry date.
Cambodia	Emergency law allows government to take any “appropriate” measures to fight covid-19, including seizing property and imposing martial law. Penalties include ten years in prison.
Serbia	Emergency law in effect puts the president in sole charge. New powers include imposing curfews.
Turkey	Up to 90,000 prisoners to be released to avoid spreading covid-19 in jails. Political prisoners are pointedly excluded.
China	Prominent pro-democracy activists arrested in Hong Kong. Government creates a gaping hole in the territory’s Basic Law, which protects Hong Kong’s freedoms.
India	The ruling party blames Muslims for the spread of covid-19. Government slow to quash rumours about Muslims spitting in food. Muslims are beaten up.
El Salvador	2,000+ people are locked up for violating social-distancing rules. The Supreme Court orders the government to stop arbitrarily putting them in overcrowded detention centres. President Nayib Bukele refuses.
Uganda	Police raid a shelter housing 20 gay and transgender people. They are accused of violating social-distancing rules.
Togo	President can rule by decree. Relief money goes to those with voter ID cards, which opposition supporters lack after boycotting the recent rigged election.
Azerbaijan	President vows to use social distancing to “isolate” the opposition, saying it may become a “historical necessity”.

Source: The Economist 2020, Protection racket: Would-be autocrats are using covid-19 as an excuse to grab more power, International Section, April 23.

People who look or sound different are particularly vulnerable when governments seize emergency powers to enforce compliance and conformity. During the Pandemic, migrants and minorities have often been scapegoats for government mistakes or targets for displays of national unity. Allegations of the ‘heavy-handed police treatment of ethnic minorities during the coronavirus lockdown’ has led to rioting in Paris.³⁶ In Singapore, the main Chinese newspaper published a letter blaming migrant workers for a new coronavirus outbreak, because ‘foreign workers had poor hygiene habits that they had acquired from backward countries’.³⁷ Malaysian authorities detained hundreds of undocumented migrants,³⁸ including young children, during immigration raids conducted under cover of virus testing – despite having assured ‘undocumented migrants [that they] had nothing to fear when coming forward to be tested’.³⁹ Myanmar’s military has been accused of carrying out ‘war crimes’ against ethnic minorities, emboldened by special extended powers intended to help control the spread of the coronavirus.⁴⁰ In various countries, during lockdowns ‘people speaking differently have been denied access to restaurants, lodging and public transport, and physically assaulted’.⁴¹ As governments become stronger and less open, it will be important to study how they manage diversity and seek social cohesion, and migration researchers are in a position to make key contributions to knowledge of this type.

5. Will migration restrictions proliferate?

In such an economic, social and political climate, migration policies will probably become more restrictive. This was starting to happen well before the current lockdowns.⁴² Border walls were already going up around the world when Donald Trump launched his USA presidential campaign by calling Mexican migrants ‘rapists and murderers’, and promising to make Mexico pay for a ‘big, beautiful’ border wall.⁴³ His administration quickly targeted Muslim arrivals, and tried to hobble the country’s refugee program.⁴⁴ The Pandemic has provided the perfect excuse to cut it further.⁴⁵ Having used the Pandemic to temporarily halt the Green Card Program, the Administration is now targeting the visas that allow graduates of US universities to remain and work in the country.⁴⁶ His approach has become a template for anti-immigrant populists around the world; for them, the Pandemic has in a sense been a godsend, and they will continue pushing for stricter immigration controls in the coming months and years.

It is particularly likely that **temporary labour migration programs and immigration points systems will proliferate**. On one hand, guest worker programs have already been coming back into fashion since the 2000s, after being abandoned by European and North American countries since the 1970s. Such programs let foreign workers into the country to build infrastructure, clean homes, care for children and elderly people during busy times, or to pick crops during the harvest. However, they carefully restrict both the numbers and the rights of such workers, and send them back home as soon as they are no longer needed.⁴⁷ Such programs are particularly important when political resistance to immigration is high but native workers cannot or will not do essential but dirty, difficult or dangerous jobs. At the height of lockdown in early April, countries like Germany were flying in seasonal workers, such as asparagus pickers, ‘from Eastern European countries such as Romania, Bulgaria, Ukraine, and Hungary’.⁴⁸ On the other hand, it is not quick or easy for governments to train people for all the highest skilled jobs, especially as they cut funding to higher education. Instead, they are increasingly following the model of the Commonwealth countries Canada, Australia and New Zealand in using immigration points systems to cherry pick people with skills and resources. One example is Britain, which intends to use a points system to help it ‘bring overall migration numbers down’ while keeping the UK open to ‘the brightest and the best from around the world’.⁴⁹ As Steven Vertovec put it, many countries are facing ‘Singapore Futures’, involving a welcoming climate for high-skilled migrants and a tightly controlled, indenture-like temporary guest worker environment for low-skilled migrants.⁵⁰

Immigration controls are only part of the equation. **Emigration restrictions may also become more normal** as part of the spread of authoritarianism already discussed. Exit controls have been a defining characteristic of totalitarian regimes throughout history, from Nazi Germany, to Soviet Russia, Communist Eastern Europe, and current day Eritrea.⁵¹ Some liberal democracies refuse even to count exits at the border for fear of interfering with emigration, so precious is the notion of freedom of exit to their political cultures. However, such a ‘hands off’ approach is increasingly rare: more than half all UN states now not only count emigrants but also maintain an office or ministry overseeing the affairs of their expatriate communities.⁵² Such

offices were almost unheard of just 25 years ago, partly because of their perceived interference with emigration. But liberal democratic ideas are increasingly on the back foot. Such trends are particularly concerning among ‘authoritarian emigration states’ in Egypt, Yemen and parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, which use labour migration for foreign policy goals,⁵³ and may also extend surveillance, intimidation, authority and ‘remote control’ over emigrants and their descendants living abroad.⁵⁴

Meanwhile, exit controls are also arising as a direct consequence of anti-immigrant sentiment in liberal democracies. It has become standard for wealthy states to ‘externalize’ asylum policy, by persuading other countries to accept and process asylum seekers, and to prevent them from migrating onward to their intended final destinations. Australia’s Gillard Government (2010-2013) attempted this with its ‘Malaysia Solution’, and the same principle is at the heart of the EU-Turkey deal that brought to an end the 2015 European refugee crisis. One of Turkey’s earliest responses to the 2020 Pandemic was to tighten up controls on refugee exits to Greece.⁵⁵ In light of such trends, migration and mobilities researchers should watch out, not just for rising restrictions on immigration in the coming period, but also for governments using public health concerns to restrict the emigration and international mobility of refugees, dissidents and exiles.

6. Will ‘travel bubbles’ become economic regions?

The aviation, tourism and hospitality industries are major casualties of the COVID-19 crisis. Cheap air travel and an ever-expanding network of worldwide destinations have buoyed post-war global migration. The Pandemic has fundamentally disrupted this network and it may never fully regenerate. Most countries have imposed two-week arrival quarantines, effectively forcing round-trip travellers to spend a month in isolation, and thus putting ‘an end to most business and tourism travel’.⁵⁶ International travel restrictions will be eased slowly and cautiously to prevent a second wave of the Pandemic. This means that significant international travel restrictions will probably persist at least until a vaccine is developed – which is likely to take at least 12-18 months or longer (see below). Nor will demand bounce back quickly: reduced household spending power and fears of infection will make staying home more attractive to many regular travellers. The *Guardian* quotes senior officials from the aviation industry expressing that it ‘may take several years before passenger demand returns to 2019 levels, if it ever does’.⁵⁷

An emerging alternative to reinstating global travel is forming ‘travel bubbles’ between states that have successfully controlled the spread of the Pandemic within similar timeframes. Australia and New Zealand implemented stringent lockdown measures that achieved quick results in curbing the spread of COVID-19.⁵⁸ They are championing the idea of a ‘Trans-Tasman bubble’, which was first proposed by New Zealand’s Foreign Affairs Minister, Winston Peters, in April. It was tentatively reiterated two weeks later by the Australian Prime Minister, Scott Morrison who commented that, ‘I can’t see international travel occurring anytime soon,’ but ‘the only exception to that ... is potentially with New Zealand’.⁵⁹ The tourism hub of the Pacific, Fiji quickly expressed interest in joining the bubble.⁶⁰ By early May, Austria, Greece, Israel, Norway, Denmark, the Czech

Republic, Singapore, Australia and New Zealand had met twice to discuss the idea of ‘creating tourism safe zones’.⁶¹ Meanwhile, the European Commission was advising countries to reopen in phases, bringing together member states with ‘similar overall risk profiles’.⁶² Although Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were first to establish travel bubbles,⁶³ the *Financial Times* opined that ‘New Zealand’s travel bubble could be a model’ that other states could follow.⁶⁴

These **travel bubbles may evolve into economic regions, with production systems and supply chains mirroring travel patterns**. Some commentators highlight that the Trans-Tasman bubble may not be just a short-term strategy for bolstering tourism and commerce, but also an opportunity to reduce Australia and New Zealand’s long-term dependence on business with China.⁶⁵ Experts are cautioning that states heavily dependent on tourism and international students will need to consider and plan how their economies will be restructured.⁶⁶ The Economist Intelligence Unit is advising businesses to prepare for ‘The Great Unwinding’ of globalisation, through ‘the regionalisation of global supply chains’ due to the coronavirus restrictions:

... as a result of COVID-19, it is likely that [the current] period of globalisation will not only come to a halt, it will reverse ... COVID-19 will push more companies in other sectors to relocate parts of their supply chains As more firms make this decision, therefore, the shift to regionalised supply chains will be an enduring outcome of this crisis.⁶⁷

Studying such macro-economic shifts will be increasingly important, not just for migration and mobility researchers but also for scholars of economic geography and regional studies in the coming months and years.

7. Will international student migration recover?

In the last 25 years, international students have become a massive global business. From 2001 to 2017, the global total of international students swelled from under 2.1 million to over 5.3 million.⁶⁸ A 2019 report estimated the total annual economic impact of international students at US\$300 billion, including both the direct dollar amount spent in fees and living expenses by international students, as well as ‘indirect and induced’ impacts such as spill overs onto jobs, tax revenues and household incomes.⁶⁹ Whole economies now depend on the ‘export education industry’. International students provide employment for hosts of recruiters, administrators, counsellors, landlords, and suppliers. While studying, international students fill key unskilled labour gaps. After they graduate, they provide an important recruitment pool from which countries fill crucial gaps in high-skilled sectors of the labour market.⁷⁰

However, until quite recently universities were not businesses at all. As Ben Kunkler writes, in Australia, they remained 90% publicly funded until the late 1980s, but now receive only about 40% of their income from the government.⁷¹ At the same time as pressuring universities to demonstrate their research competitiveness, the Australian government now funds just 34% of university research. ‘Gifts, bequests, and private sponsorship arrangements’ – some of which can allegedly compromise academic independence – now account for 15% of university research funds. However, the remaining 51% of university research funding is now ‘cross-subsidized

by sources not earmarked for research' – largely, in other words, by international student fees.⁷² Similar restructuring has affected higher education sectors across the OECD.

The Pandemic is taking a wrecking ball to this business model. By late April 2020, the number of US colleges at risk of closing had risen from 10% to 20% because of the Pandemic.⁷³ A UK report predicted a 47% decline in international student enrolments in the next academic year, with a cost of £1.5 billion to the sector. Universities Australia predicted the loss of up to 21,000 jobs in higher education, and an AU\$23 billion (US\$14.5 billion) drop in export income from international students. At the height of the crisis, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison publicly said that international students without work should 'make your way home', so that Australia could 'focus on its citizens'.⁷⁴

Governments of Australia, the UK and the USA have all largely excluded universities from their bailout measures, in part because of a perception that universities are just big, inefficient companies. As an 'industry', higher education is protected by regulatory advantages and subsidies: governments often pay universities a substantial sum for every person that the marketing team can persuade to sign an enrolment form. The resulting cash bonanza has driven many universities to remodel themselves as large corporations, in which professors are production-line labourers, non-academic administrators form a thick layer of middle management, and various Pro-Vice Chancellors are corporate vice-presidents on stratospheric salaries.⁷⁵ Vice Chancellors reply that, far from this stereotype, universities are in fact very efficient.⁷⁶

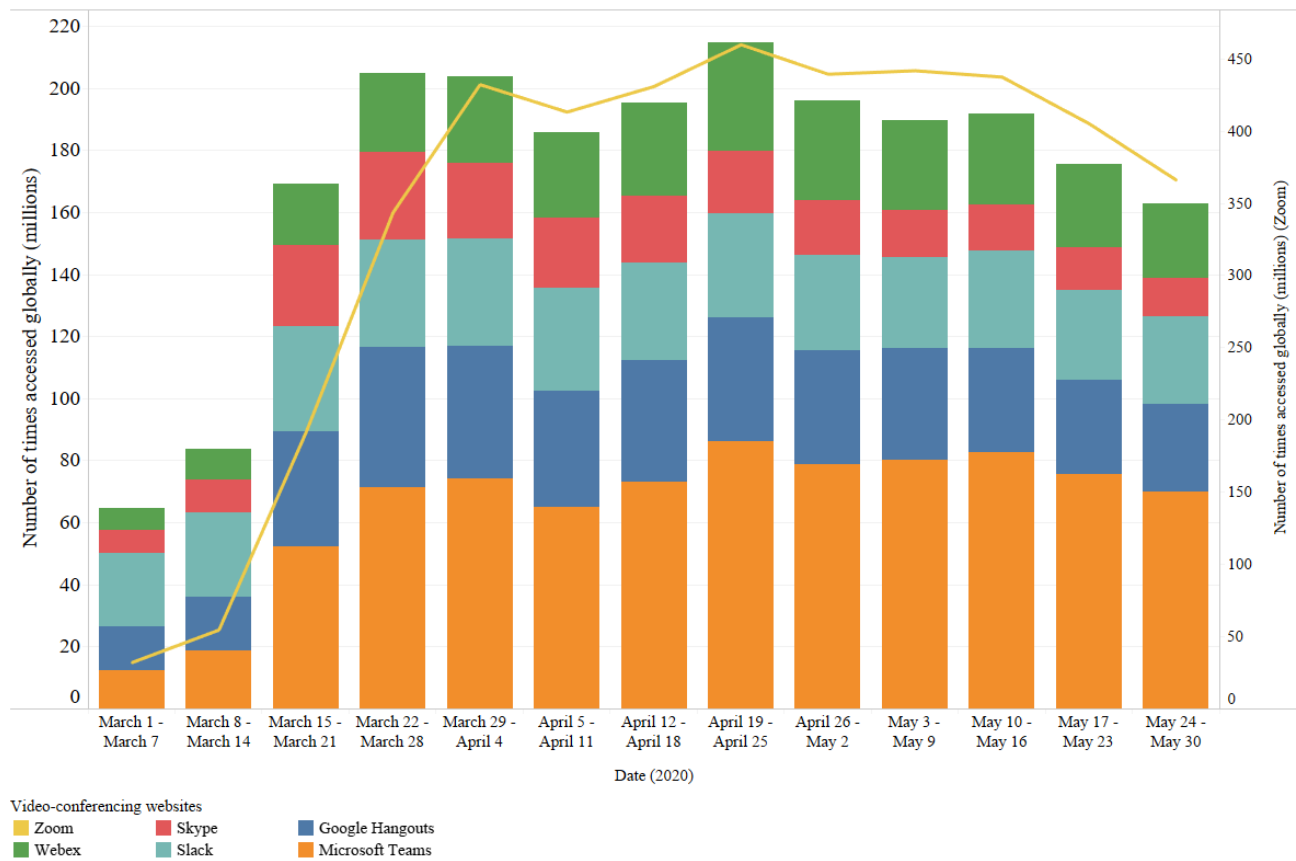
However, critiquing or defending universities on their efficiency misses the point that universities can never really operate like companies because education can never really operate like a market. Markets rely on buyers having accurate information about the value of what vendors are trying to sell them. Unlike customers, students by definition do not have such information: the 'product' is the information. Better models for universities may instead be found in other independent organs of government. Their role in determining what is 'true' is not unlike the role of the courts in deciding what is 'right'. Their role in providing neutral expert advice to decision makers and opinion shapers is not unlike that of a specialized branch of the civil service. Their role in public deliberation over important issues is not unlike that of an upper legislative house. **Can universities depend on a rebound in international student migration after the 2020 Pandemic?** A major task for migration and mobility researchers in the coming years will be to monitor changes in these flows and in their impacts on the economy as a whole, and the higher education sector in particular.

8. Will commuter travel decline?

The Pandemic is accelerating existing trends of e-commerce, remote work, and 'distant socializing' enabled in the past two decades by fast internet and social media. E-commerce may become even more dominant as lockdowns force companies to accelerate their existing plans for digital transformation.⁷⁷ In late April, *Forbes* reported that social media usage has skyrocketed during the lockdowns: 'A study of 25,000 consumers across 30 markets showed engagement increasing 61% over normal usage rates.'

Messaging across Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp has increased 50% in countries hardest hit by the virus. Twitter is seeing 23% more daily users than a year ago.⁷⁸

Figure 4: Change in global access to video-conferencing sites March 1 – May 30



Data Source: SimilarWeb (2020). Worldwide website traffic data 1 March - 30 May. Retrieved 11 June 2020, from SimilarWeb database. Image credit: Stephanie Daborn.

Of all changes, the switch to remote working may be the most significant. *The Economist* quotes a source at Deloitte suggesting that the Pandemic has brought about a ‘five-year acceleration’ in the remote working trend.⁷⁹ In December 2019, only about 1 in 20 people worked from home. Just 6 months later, business analysts are now anticipating that 25-30% of the workforce will transition into working remotely permanently by 2021.⁸⁰ This shift is turbo-charging the uptake of digital conference and collaboration tools. In late April, the video-conferencing app Zoom announced a 50% increase in daily users over the past month, leading to a sudden 12.5% increase in the company’s share price (see Figure 4).⁸¹ The resulting stimulus to tech companies involved in communications R&D may hasten the development of technologies that make remote working even more feasible and attractive. The trend may drive efficiency, for example by reducing time wasted on commuting and on booking and travelling for meetings. However, it may also sharpen inequalities, as remote work is far less feasible for most blue-collar jobs than for most white-collar ones.⁸² By flipping the prevailing norm that business meetings should happen virtually only if they are truly not possible in person, the COVID-

19 lockdowns will result in some enduring changes to work-related mobility and the nature of work itself. Researchers of migration and transnationalism have a major stake in the study of these trends.

9. Will immobility reshape cities?

Declines in business travel and commuting and the increase in uptake of digitally mediated forms of socializing will profoundly impact households, firms and whole economies. For one thing, companies may no longer need to maintain centrally located headquarters in major cities. A recent *New York Times* article notes that JP Morgan Chase, one of the largest office-tenants in New York City, has 180,000 employees working from home during the Pandemic, and is reviewing how many workers will be allowed to return to the office afterwards. Facebook, Google and Twitter have either extended their work-from-home policies until the end of the year or offered staff in some positions to permanently work remotely.⁸³ Many companies have previously cut office costs by introducing open-plan offices.⁸⁴ In addition to sapping productivity,⁸⁵ such spaces may now also be deemed unsafe.⁸⁶ Some companies may have little choice but to consider culling office space altogether, with potentially ruinous consequences for inner city property values.⁸⁷

Such reductions in mobility may fundamentally reshape cities. As Mathew Haag of the *New York Times* writes: 'entire economies were molded around the vast flow of people to and from offices, from the rush-hour schedules of subways, buses and commuter rails to the construction of new buildings to the survival of corner bodegas. Restaurants, bars, grocery stores and shops depend on workers for their survival'.⁸⁸ If commuting dwindles, questions will be raised about the desirability and feasibility of urban planning decisions made prior to the Pandemic. For example, in late April, Australia's Acting Minister for Immigration, Alan Tudge, confirmed that 'coronavirus is driving the biggest population decline in Australian history'.⁸⁹ Experts are already asking whether, after the COVID-19 crisis, Melbourne will still need its planned \$32 billion infrastructure program, formulated in response to concerns about congestion and house prices due to rapid population growth.⁹⁰ Major cities have seen plummeting inner-city property prices and degenerating urban infrastructure in the past, particularly during the period of 'urban decay' during the 1970s and 1980s. Will the middle-classes once again move outwards and upwards to larger, leafier blocks beyond decimated inner-city zones as they did in that period? Will levels of socio-cultural diversity drop in central city areas, and rise in the rural and regional areas, from where it is suddenly possible and permissible to 'telecommute'?

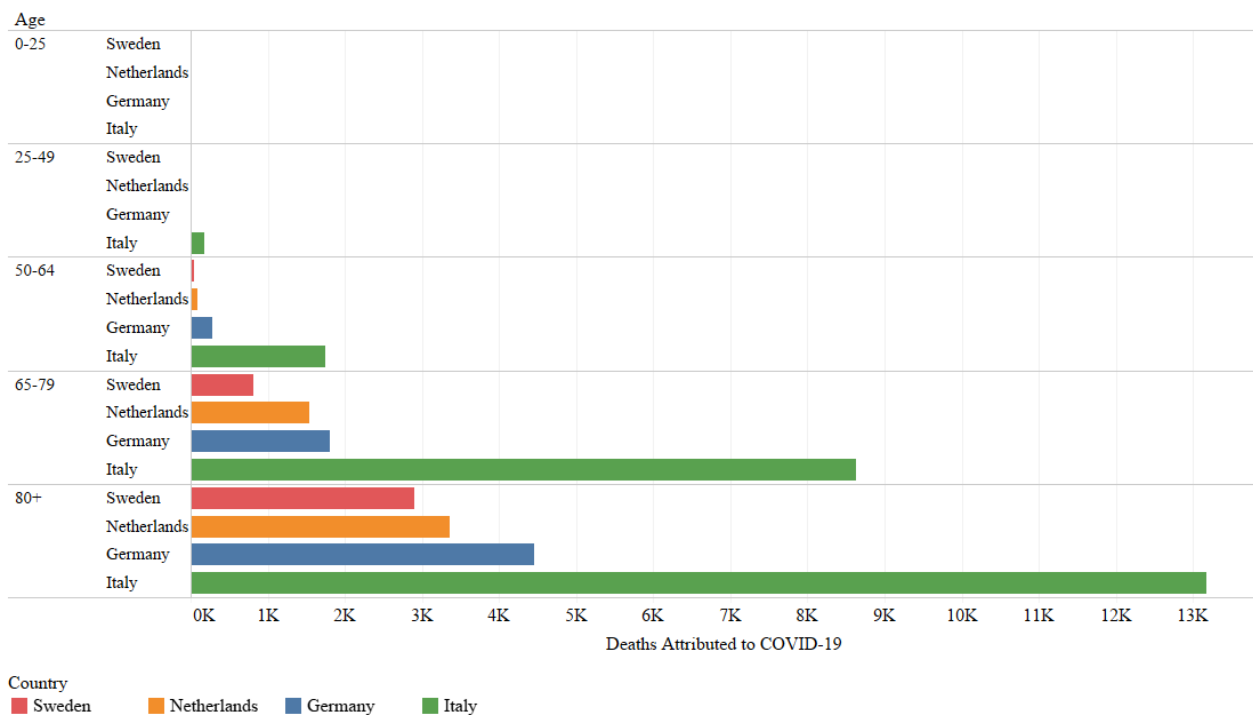
As *The Economist* puts it, 'the need for workers to cluster together in offices has shaped every aspect of modern life', and **'if the pandemic has weakened the office's hold on society, the implications will be profound'**.⁹¹ This may also signal revolutionary changes in the nature and purpose of households, reviving some aspects of the pre-modern condition in which households were the primary units of production as well as consumption. As Chris Hann puts it, the COVID-19 crisis is 'reinventing earlier forms of the household in the sense of working and living in the same space, [but] we are unlikely to approximate self-sufficiency, marry locally, or exchange labour services with our neighbours'.⁹² The emergence of a distant, digitally mediated

social life is producing new patterns of intra-urban mobility and social organization, some of which may be long lasting. Researching these effects will be a major task for scholars of migration, mobility, urban geography and transport studies over the next few years.

10. Will demographic and mobility transitions change course?

The basic problem of COVID-19 is not that it has caused socio-economic turmoil but that it is killing people. It is surprising therefore how few analyses of the long-term impacts of COVID-19 consider its potential impacts on mortality rates, and thus on dependency ratios and processes of demographic and mobility transition. First, although the disease is a relatively small contributor to overall mortality⁹³, COVID-19 takes a heavy death toll in a specific age cohort: those over 60 years old are far more likely to die (Figure 5). Second, COVID-19 deaths are almost certainly under-reported, especially in African and Asian countries. Because the virus is not always detected in carriers, a significant number of deaths related to the illness are attributed to other causes such as cardiac arrests and respiratory failures. Therefore, a better approximation of COVID-19 deaths is provided by calculating the difference between expected and actual observed mortality rates. The results of such analyses vary widely by location, but there is a clear pattern of excess deaths correlated closely with the spread of the virus, but not attributed to it (Figure 6).

Figure 5: Coronavirus case fatality rates by age



Data Source: The European Surveillance System (TESSy). Cases by age group and gender. Retrieved 10 June 2020 from the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, COVID-19 Enhanced surveillance data. Image credit: Stephanie Daborn.

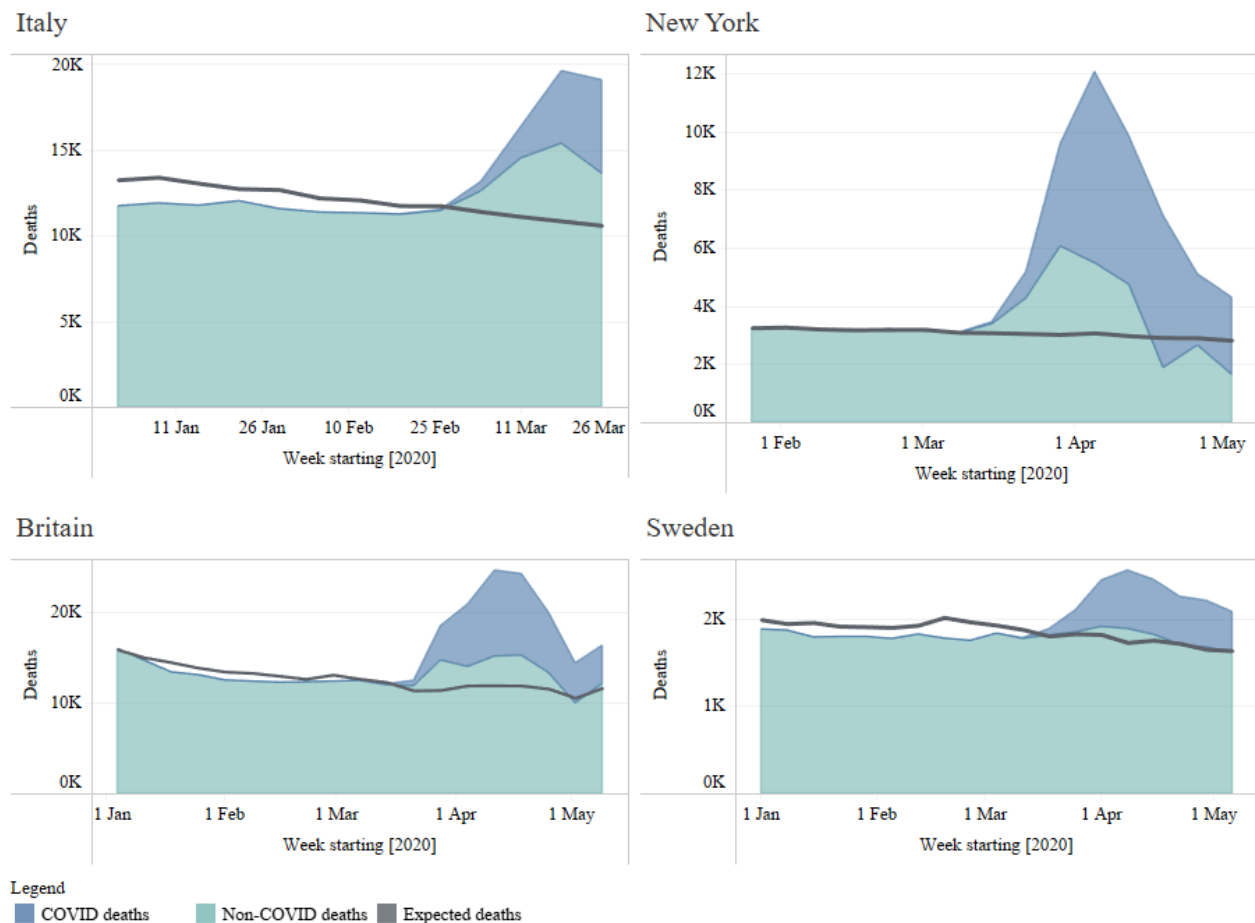
Third, whether directly or indirectly, COVID-19 is likely to be a significant contributor to excess mortality until a significant portion of the global population is vaccinated against the virus. The previous record for the

fastest production of a vaccine was 5-years, for Ebola.⁹⁴ Some scientists are optimistic because some vaccines against other coronaviruses are already in the pipeline.⁹⁵ Estimates of 12 to 18 months for virus production have been published widely, but many scientists call these ‘aspirational’ at best and ‘naively optimistic’ at worst.⁹⁶ If current mortality rates persist, the overall death toll could amount to a significant portion of the elderly cohort in the coming years.

If the Pandemic devastates a specific generation, it will affect long-term dependency ratios and dynamics of demographic transition. Traditional demographic transition theory, based on the work of Frank W. Notestein, posits that as they industrialize, populations move through distinct stages of growth and change. Preindustrial societies have small, stable populations – based on high birth rates because large families are needed for agriculture, and high death rates from illness and conflict. Populations grow exponentially when medical technology drives down death rates and urbanization commences even though large families remain the norm. Governments that invest in health, education and job creation at this stage may benefit from a ‘demographic dividend’ when the baby boom hits adulthood, creating an excess of productive working-aged people compared to numbers of dependant elderly and young people.⁹⁷ If current patterns of excess mortality continue, COVID-19 could catalyse such processes by significantly reducing the size of the dependent elderly population, as well as generating a boom of babies conceived in lockdown (although lockdowns could also catalyze more divorces⁹⁸).

The resulting savings would be dwarfed by the costs of the disease and associated lockdowns, but the 2020 Pandemic may have other significant impacts on processes of population change and socio-economic development. For example: in the short term, because the age-groups most affected by the virus own the largest shares of residential property, their increased mortality rates may raise housing supply, at the same time as housing demand is falling due to decreases in urbanization and international migration. This mix could lead to significant falls in residential property prices. In the longer term, as cultural geographer Wilbur Zelinsky noted, processes of demographic transition interact with macro-shifts in the mobility patterns of a society. During periods of rapid population growth, there is rapid rural-to-urban internal migration, followed by growing inter-urban migration. When population growth eventually stabilises and then falls, there is a shift from net emigration to net immigration. By nudging mortality and birth rates, COVID-19 may tweak the demographic inputs to population growth and socio-economic development in ways that complicate or even reverse prevailing patterns of urbanization and net migration. Examining such effects will form an important strand of migration and population studies well after the lockdowns have dwindled into a distant memory.

Figure 6: Confirmed weekly deaths



Data Source: *The Economist*, based on multiple sources.⁹⁹ Image credit: Stephanie Daborn.

The end of an age of migration?

The 2020 Coronavirus Pandemic has led to a global health, economic and social crisis of an order not seen since the first half of the 20th Century, and this has major implications for the future of human mobility and migration. What should we make of the current unprecedented restrictions on all forms of human movement? How should we interpret the sudden surges in anti-immigrant sentiment around the world? Where do the current restrictive changes to immigration policy originate and where are they headed? What will cities look like after the current disruptions to patterns of mobility for work, commerce and social life? Will the 2020 Coronavirus Pandemic lead to temporary troughs in human migration and mobility, or are they the start of a long-term trend that spells the end of the most recent round of globalization? The answer to this final question will depend on many decisions that have not yet been made, but it is fair to say that the 2020 Pandemic has accelerated a range of existing trends so rapidly that the world has already sunk into the migration equivalent of an economic recession. It is all but inevitable that the numbers of people crossing borders will fall further before they bounce back – if they ever do.

Does this mean we are seeing the end of the 'age of migration'? It depends – not least, on whether there was an age of migration to begin with. The standard critical response is that the term was never more than a rhetorical device. Sceptics have pointed out that international migration stock has formed a remarkably stable share of global population since WWII, and one that – currently at a post-war peak of 3.5% – is vanishingly small in comparison with the numbers seen in the so-called 'age of mass migration' during the height of European global colonization.¹⁰⁰ How can we talk of an age of migration when 96.5% of people aren't migrants? Such criticisms do have a point, but they are exaggerated. Something epochal really did happen to international migration in the first few decades after World War II with the advent of mass global air travel. The world really did become more mobile after 1990, as national borders softened following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the spread of democracy and free markets. Humans did become more transnationally connected with the rise of new globe-spanning information and communication technologies in the 2000s. Twenty-first Century governments really have become demographically and economically dependent on high levels of immigration, particularly temporary migration. There is no doubt that the world has been living through an age of migration. This may now be coming to an end.

Putting aside objections to the term itself, this working paper has articulated a research agenda for studying international migration and mobility in the wake of the 2020 Pandemic, at the end of the age of migration. However, this paper does not address a final question that is at least as important as any of the others it poses. Would it be a good or a bad thing if the age of migration were to come to an end? Certainly, the global economy is dependent on migration, and if we want to restore the economy to its previous state, then migration has to bounce back. However, the real question is, do we want to go back to normal or – as Bridget Anderson puts it – 'was normal the problem?'.¹⁰¹ A return to the halcyon days for many would be a return to the dark ages for some. We have seen how the global crisis has re-mobilized a sense of human congregation that has not existed in many Western nations since World War II. However, these moments of increasing social cohesion also have their costs. We are already seeing how, by re-mortaring existing power structures and dynamics, COVID-19 lockdowns have led to financial crises for the most vulnerable, growing domestic violence, and rises in xenophobic attacks. For a growing number of populist and authoritarian governments around the world, the 2020 Pandemic is presenting an opportunity to implement migration and mobility restrictions to curb the rights of migrants and minorities in ways that they could previously only dream of.

As the historian Margaret Macmillan puts it, the Pandemic represents a turning point in world history: 'we face a choice: to build better ways of dealing domestically and internationally with this challenge (and prepare for inevitable future ones) or let our world become meaner and more selfish, divided and suspicious.'¹⁰² In the coming years, migration and mobility researchers will play an important role in monitoring the impacts of the 2020 Pandemic, and highlight key questions about the best role for international migration and human mobility in the new normal that emerges.

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