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ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Looking through the lens of "essential workers": a landscape of (im)mobility, labor, and social reproduction

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Abstract

This article explores the contradictions the category of "essential workers" entails, especially in conjunction with the governance of their mobility, citizenship, and the dilemmas thereof. I concentrate on the temporary/seasonal migrant workers as the epitome of essential workers' paradoxical assemblage of rights and value to scrutinize both labor and its production and reproduction in contemporary capitalism. The essential workers were not only caught between mobility and immobility but also between visibility and invisibility vis-à-vis their activity as labor and, outside of it, between worthlessness and being of value. Their governance and location in society and economy reveal the structural dilemmas of capital and labor, as well as social reproduction in contemporary capitalism.

Keywords Covid-19 · Essential temporary workers · Labor · Capitalism · Coloniality

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic took the world into its grip from March 2020 onwards and unleashed economic and political dynamics, which unsettled long-standing assumptions about the principles of market, globalization, mobility, borders, and the role of the state in and the neoliberal organization of the society. As several scholars underlined, the COVID-19 pandemic provided opportunities to think with the big questions about society, crisis, economy, contemporary capitalism, labor, social policy, the role of the state in the economy, the health of its population, and the provision of care and social infrastructure; the questions regarding the sites and the processes of creation of economic value also came to the forefront of analysis (Rodrik 2020; Collins 2023; Narotzky 2021; Buğra et al. 2020). Most importantly, the pandemic not only

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laid bare, but also contributed to the contradictions inherent to labor, borders, citizenship, and social reproduction in contemporary capitalism in a striking way. As Fassin and Fourcade (2021, 6) rightly underline, the pandemic acted as a major eye-opener, revealing the underlying inequalities and uncovering and aggravating the less perceptible trends and contradictions in society. It not only unveiled "a moral geography of the value of the life and worth of lives" (Fassin 2021, 171) but also augmented cracks and colossal injuries of neoliberalism, especially in terms of health disparities and injustice-ridden, already-broken care provisions (Fassin 2021; Collins 2023). Multiple hierarchies of worth became visible and were enacted in times of COVID-19.

More concretely, the pandemic revealed and contributed to a complex landscape where mobility rights did not conjugate with citizenship; visibility/invisibility of borders at different scales (municipal, regional, national, supranational) did not necessarily adjoin with the scale of their governance; the mutual dependence between the production of labor and practices of social reproduction became strikingly apparent. I will concentrate on these dynamics and contradictions through the lens of the category and discourse of "essential workers" and "essential work," which already became part of the COVID-19 vernacular by the spring of 2020 (Collins 2023). The crystallization and unfolding of the contradictions in the assemblage of rights and values of those who are designated as "essential workers" become particularly visible in relation to temporary/seasonal migrant workers. Their governance and location in society and economy reveal the structural dilemmas of capital and labor, as well as social reproduction.

I will first address the content and the contradictions the category of essential workers entails, especially in conjunction with the governance of their mobility during the pandemic, citizenship, and the dilemmas thereof. Afterwards, I will focus on how the dynamics unleashed by COVID-19 highlight the importance of social reproduction for the constitution of labor power. The pandemic exposed the importance of invisibilized and unvalued (unwaged) forms and sites of work for the production of labor anew, urging us to once again conceptualize capital and capitalism as a social relationship and social order (Fraser 2016; Kalb 2024). In the concluding section, I focus on the centrality of a particular form of power in the extraction of value and accumulation processes in capitalism, namely, the "coloniality of power" (Quijano 2000). COVID-19 brought the relevance of this form of power and the concepts of racial capitalism, as well as the flexible governance mechanisms and policies of borders and labor utilized in colonialism (colonial frontiers) to the forefront as key to understanding the dynamics of contemporary capitalism.

Governing mobility in times of COVID-19

In the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, many countries introduced measures to restrict both cross-border and internal mobility.[1] More than 90% of the global population was subject to such restrictions. No matter what kind of

[1] Parts of this paper are based on Çaglar (2022). The arguments here are expanded with a new focus on social reproduction.

regional and/or supranational border regulation jurisdictions to govern the borders existed pre-pandemic, in the new reality, the nation-states determined who would be subject to inbound and internal travel bans across their territories, who would be exempted from them, and on what basis. Management of the pandemic was closely entangled with management of (im)mobility. Forced mobility and immobility marked the COVID-19 crisis (Mezzadra and Neilson 2024).

Interestingly, the groups of people whose movement largely remained unimpeded by cross-border and internal mobility restrictions were not always defined on the basis of their citizenship status, which otherwise is taken to be a key criterion in the regulation of people's movement across national borders. While in some countries, only citizens or permanent residents were exempt from inbound travel bans (for example, the USA), in others, foreign residents and students were allowed to evade restrictions on cross-border inbound mobility (for example, Austria, Germany). However, as I will elaborate below, as a surprise to many, (foreign) migrant workers, even the undocumented, were granted exemptions from cross-border mobility restrictions. Thus, citizenship status (including EU citizenship) was neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for people to be subject to or exempt from cross-border bans related to COVID-19.

The governance of mobility and its complex relationship to citizenship during COVID-19 times might appear paradoxical. However, what might look like a paradox, in fact, reflects the inherent contradictions of citizenship as an apparatus of government (Isin 2024), which COVID-19 travel bans and their exemptions disclosed in a striking way. Labor is the key to understanding the otherwise puzzling landscape of (im)mobility and citizenship in the wake of the pandemic. As I will demonstrate, this became very clear in relation to the category of "essential workers." Temporary/seasonal migrant workers are the epitome of the contradictions that the category of "essential workers" entails.

Essential workers: rights, (im)mobility, and borders

Essential workers and their disjointed landscape of rights

While national borders remained closed to non-residents or non-citizens almost everywhere, including the EU, people employed in certain sectors (such as agriculture, industrial labor, logistics, health, and care work) and designated as "essential workers" were allowed to bypass these mobility restrictions at all scales. The category of "essential workers" and its genealogy are related to military power. It is a classification that arose from the security frameworks of WWII and the early days of the Cold War to secure infrastructural continuity and the governance of collective life in cases of emergency (Lakoff 2022). During the pandemic, despite the fluidity of this category, the term was used to refer to the "critical infrastructural workers" whose operations and services were defined essential in ensuring the circulation of goods and services (such as logistics, food

supply, energy) and the reproduction of labor and life (such as health and education) (Lakoff 2022; Mezzadra and Neilson 2024). The "essentialness" of this labor power was seen from the perspective of securing the well-being of "the collective" and the operations of just-in-time supply chains.

Importantly, the category of essential workers, endowed with mobility rights, compromised citizens (including EU citizens coming from other member states) and non-citizen residents (labeled as the third-country nationals (TCN)). Laboring in the sectors that were defined to be "essential" gave rise to a legal persona vis-à-vis cross-border mobility to an otherwise heterogeneous group of workers with varying legal (citizenship/residency) status. Cross-border inbound mobility rights of the essential workers did not conjugate with their citizenship status.

Mobility rights were unmoored from citizenship, and this decoupling became even more striking vis-à-vis internal travel bans and their exemptions. At the height of the COVID-19 crisis, many countries (Germany, Turkey, Austria, India, China, Indonesia, the Philippines, South Africa, and Kenya) introduced internal travel bans between regions and cities. COVID-19 mobility regulations and restrictions introduced unconventional bordering regimes. However, almost everywhere, in Europe, India, the USA, and Turkey, for example, agricultural and seasonal workers were exempted from internal travel bans, while *citizens and residents* were notably subject to them. Essential workers for whom national borders remained porous, such as seasonal agricultural workers, were allowed to bypass internal mobility restrictions within national territories. Again, the right to mobility within the nation-state over municipal boundaries depended on the designation of seasonal/agricultural labor to be essential to the economy. This group of workers was also of heterogeneous legal status. It was comprised of citizens but also of *refugees and undocumented* persons. For example, the agricultural/seasonal workers in Turkey and Italy who were exempted from internal travel bans included refugees, irregular migrants, and citizens alike.

In short, exemptions to COVID-19 cross-border and internal travel bans produced a category of mobile labor whereby people with various legal statuses were united by the exceptional cross-border and internal mobility rights granted to them. The "essential workers" category reorganized the (mobility) rights register of the population who were otherwise fractured into citizens, residents, refugees, undocumented migrants, third-country nationals, etc. During the pandemic, both inbound and cross-border mobility rights did not align with citizenship. Thus, essential workers is a category which cross-cuts the common divides of citizenship in the society and introduces a new form of social classification which interacts with existing forms of social inequality in a complex way (Lakoff 2022).

The well-being of the collective, security, and "emergency" are pivotal to the concept of "essential work(ers)." This concept is embedded within a moralized discourse of sacrifice required for the survival and the health of the whole (the collective), beyond the value of the individual, which Wendy Brown identifies as "sacrificial citizenship" (Brown 2016). The irony of the inclusion of the undocumented and refugees in securing the well-being and the future of "*the collective*" from which they are excluded is noteworthy.

It is important to note that there was a disparity between the exceptional right to (cross-border and internal) mobility and social and economic rights. Despite their privileged cross-border and internal mobility rights, this group of workers were deprived of social, economic, health, and housing rights in the places they were allowed to move as a labor force. Importantly, this disjunction between mobility and socio-economic rights persisted even for the citizens. For example, in Europe, no matter whether the temporary/seasonal essential workers were EU citizens or not, workers from EU countries (such as workers from Bulgaria and Romania) in other EU countries such as Germany or Austria, as well as TCNs in agriculture or care sectors (such as workers from North Africa, and the Middle East in Italy), were dispossessed of their social and economic rights at their workplaces as temporary/seasonal workers. Despite their varying citizenship/residency status, dispossession of socio-economic rights was their common denominator. Ironically, the very exceptional right to mobility granted to them by the national governments became the ground upon which their vulnerability vis-à-vis social and economic rights was constructed. To a large extent, it was the duration and interim nature of their employment contracts that excluded EU-citizen temporary workers from accessing social rights (Deneva-Faje 2019).[2] Thus, temporary essential workers from EU countries, both as migrant workers operating outside of their country of origin as well as citizens working in their own countries, slipped through the cracks of "state care." The regulations and discourse of emergency (such as war, military threat, natural disasters) provide the states a rationale for suspending certain rights and regulations.

Managed (im)mobility, value, and worth of essential temporary workers

It is important to note that temporary/seasonal workers' right to mobility is strictly *managed mobility* (Stoler 2022). There is a striking contrast between these workers' exceptional mobility rights vis-à-vis borders of various scales and their enforced immobility at their place of temporary/seasonal work. Often, the transport arrangements of these workers to and from the workplaces were organized by the employer or the employment agencies. The labor and mobility of temporary/seasonal workers had a kind of "bonded" nature. Their mobility was "bonded" to their employer and they were often confined or immobilized in their places of work.[3] Thus, both their mobility and immobility were of a strictly managed nature and closely connected to labor.

[2] The temporariness and particularly the legal and regulatory arrangements about the duration of employment contracts played an important role in the deprivation of these workers of social, economic, and key welfare rights. During the pandemic, for example, Germany introduced legal changes to the regulations in that regard and increased the temporary workers' vulnerability (Deneva-Faje 2019). In many places, neither cross-border nor those designated as frontline and essential workers *in their own countries* qualified for the benefits of national COVID-19 relief and welfare programs due to the duration and nature of their contracts (Deneva-Faje 2019).

[3] Like in other forms of "bonded" labor, the temporary/seasonal essential workers could be borrowed by other employers. See Stoler (2022) for managed mobility during colonial times and incarcerated labor as well as such practices of borrowing.

The mobility rights granted to temporary/seasonal workers, as well as the technologies through which they were deprived of social and economic rights during the pandemic, highlight once more the simultaneity of their inclusion in and exclusion from rights regimes in a particular way. In fact, COVID-19 complicated the legal fragmentation and erosion of labor conditions. This kind of simultaneity strongly characterizes the discourses of essential workers' worth. COVID-19 multiplied hierarchies of worth, more precisely, the simultaneity of being essential and worthless, which characterized the case of temporary and seasonal workers (Fassin and Fourcade 2021; Narotzky 2021; Çaglar 2022). Like the disjuncture between the essential workers' privileged access to (managed, in fact, forced) mobility and their deprived social and economic rights at the workplace, there has been a striking contrast between the value and worth attributed to essential workers as labor and their living conditions, respectively. In contrast to their exceptional mobility rights, their living conditions at their place of temporary/seasonal work were marked by deprivations, immobility, and confinement. The essential workers were not only caught between mobility and immobility but also between visibility and invisibility vis-à-vis their activity as labor and, outside of it, between worthlessness and being of value.

While, on the one hand, essential workers had a strong discursive presence as unsung heroes, thwarting the breakdown of supply chains,[4] on the other hand, they were seen as the dangerous mobile bodies spreading the virus, who needed to be isolated and confined beyond the view of the public (Collins 2023; Narotzky 2021). The migrant, when outside of practices of labor, became visible, but primarily as a dehumanized, dangerous body—as the mass exodus of millions of migrant workers in India in 2020 showed when they were forcibly displaced from inhospitable cities to their home villages where they were equally unwelcome. While the figure of the migrant *as labor* acquired positive visibility in the economy and across the media, it simultaneously became negatively invisible in politics (Samaddar 2020a).

Thus, there is a striking contrast in migrant essential workers' value as labor, closely connected to their workplace and their worthlessness outside of their work sites.[5] In fact, the simultaneity of mobility/immobility, visibility/invisibility, and being of value and worthlessness/disposability, which is clearly crystallized in the category of "essential workers," draw attention to the core characteristics of labor in capitalism.

Borders and legal dispossession

The pandemic provided an opportunity to the nation-states to further militarize their borders. Berries, cucumbers, tomatoes, apples, and asparagus had to be picked and

[4] Their declining number in several sectors led to shortages and the breakdown of supply chains. Italy, Spain, France, Germany, and New Zealand all suffered shortages of migrant workers (Faus and Hunt 2021; IHS Markit 2020; Meland 2020; Cooke et al. 2021).

[5] Some scholars have identified this simultaneous embedding of the essential workers into multiple and contrasting hierarchies of worth as a ground for "cognitive dissonance" (McCallum 2022 cited in Collins 2023).

harvested quickly and inexpensively; children and the elderly had to be cared for at homes; goods had to be delivered. Reduced to their identity and presence as *labor*, these migrants were welcomed even by anti-migrant-right-wing local governments (such as in Burgenland, Austria), because they ensured the continued functioning of certain sectors. In some places, such as in the USA and Italy, COVID-19 prompted discussions and even a possibility to reevaluate the legal status of undocumented "essential" workers (Guerrero 2021; Minsky 2021).[6] The pandemic mirrored the "spectral presence of migrants *as workers*" in both the Global South and the Global North (Samaddar 2020a).[7] Migrants, viewed simultaneously as desired and undesired mobile bodies, acquired a further ambiguous designation vis-à-vis the bordering regimes.

Scrutinizing the COVID-19 mobility regimes during the pandemic through the lens of temporary/seasonal essential workers enables us to see that bordering rearrangements, which might look paradoxical at first sight, were, in fact, closely related to the making and remaking of governable *mobile* bodies of vulnerable dispossessed *labor*. States and connectedly the legal arrangements played a crucial role in the constitution of this labor. In almost all countries, travel restrictions and their exemptions were defined through a set of emergency legislations (Bentzen et al. 2020; Popp 2020).[8] Thus, an intricate set of legal arrangements reorganizing borders and mobility rights contributed to the further precarization and flexibilization of mobile labor during the COVID-19 closures. Legal and political constraints that shape uneven landscapes of social, political, and economic rights, in close connection to legal status/citizenship, always play a role in the production of vulnerable and cheapened labor. Lack of legal status has always been and still is constitutive of vulnerable migrant/temporary labor and social subjects. The pandemic was no exception. As Mezzadra and Neilson (2024) aptly argue, despite the increasing rule of highly financialized capitalism, the multiple crises (mobility, labor, and economic) unleashed by the pandemic made it clear that labor still plays a crucial role in sustaining the circulation and accumulation of capital. COVID-19 has not only initiated intensified forms of extraction and exploitation, it itself was a symptom of deeper crises and the undergoing "mutations" of capitalism.

Borders produce legal dispossession. Though it is often the national borders that multiply the labor into assemblages of rights (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013), during the pandemic, the municipal borders acquired visibility and effectivity vis-à-vis

[6] Such as GovTrack.us 2022; Testore 2020; Migration Policy Centre, n.d.

[7] The COVID-19 pandemic heightened the visibility of migrant workers, especially in sectors in which the share of migrants has been high (such as agriculture and care work). In Italy, for example, the majority of seasonal workers were migrants from Africa and the Middle East; that is, they were TCN mobile labor with a large proportion of irregular, undocumented migrants (Soguel 2020). A high proportion frontline and essential workers were also migrants, people of color, and women who were subjected to heightened danger and inequalities. The exposure of migrant lives to health hazards and death in particular was notably higher during the pandemic in comparison to pre-pandemic times (International Organization for Migration 2020).

[8] Almost everywhere, states enacted emergency regulations by decree laws and instituted them without parliamentary consent, oversight, or accountability. This increased the executive powers of states beyond the purview of the legislative.

mobility regimes. At the height of COVID-19 in 2020, there were travel bans across municipal borders. The internal mobility restrictions within the nation-states, as well as the heterogeneous composition of the agricultural/seasonal labor beyond legal status, gave rise to further refracturing and segmentation of labor and to an uneven spread of such vulnerable and dispossessed labor within the state territory (Duruiz 2023).[9] Internal and cross-border mobility regimes of the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to the production of flexible and more easily governable labor by dividing and re-classifying them through a differentiated status. The temporary/seasonal essential workers' seemingly paradoxical assemblage of rights and value provides a fruitful entry point to scrutinize both labor power, its production and reproduction in contemporary capitalism.

Social reproduction

Temporary/seasonal workers' disjunct landscape of rights (between mobility and socio-economic rights) brings the question of the maintenance of the social lives of these workers to the forefront. Care workers among the temporary workers are of particular importance in this regard. The questions of how and where the labor power is produced and maintained, that is, its social reproduction and its sites, acquired new relevance during the pandemic. Social reproduction is understood as the production and reproduction of labor power, the renewal and maintenance of the existence of workers beyond the workplace and of their productive lives as labor (Collins 2023; Bhattacharya 2017; Weiss 2022; Narotzky 2021; Burawoy 1976). The practices and sites of the production and the reproduction of available labor, which takes place in spaces defined as "non-work," are integral to the production of value at the workplace. Thus, it is crucial to recognize the mutual dependence of spaces of production and social reproduction as interconnected geographies (Katz 2001; Weiss 2021). No matter how the spaces outside of workplaces are invisibilized in analysis and public discourse, these spaces designated as "non-work" are constitutive in the making, unmaking, and remaking of labor power.

Temporary/seasonal workers' connections to home and the care arrangements there, as well as at their places of temporary work, are part of the processes through which they are constituted as social subjects. Not only have the remittances of the temporary/migrant workers always been essential for the maintenance of the households back home, but also the daily care arrangements organized back home *and* among themselves at the places of their temporary work have always been crucial to maintaining their lives as labor. The pandemic regulations of the temporary/seasonal essential workers revealed the importance of reinstating the dynamics of social reproduction and its interconnected spaces in the analysis of the governance of labor and the pandemic. "Social reproduction is accomplished through the

[9] For example, in Turkey, the more vulnerable and further cheapened "refugee" Syrian labor increasingly replaced the labor of racialized citizen minorities (such as Kurds) in seasonal agricultural work (see Duruiz 2023). COVID-19 closures contributed to the segmentation of the "contractual" seasonal labor.

everyday practices, enduring social relations, and structuring forces associated with the state, the household, civil society, and capital" (Katz 2008, 165). Consequently, the breakdown of social and care infrastructures during the pandemic (both at home and places of temporary work of the migrants) revealed the importance of the practices and sites of social reproduction, as well as the unwaged labor of care at both places. This is why COVID-19 was not simply a health crisis but a crisis of care and social reproduction.

Social reproduction and capitalism are coupled in historically contingent ways; thus, the restructuring of global capitalism and regimes of (im)mobility and the restructuring of social reproduction are intertwined (Miraftab and Huq 2024). The tensions between the logic of accumulation, the reproduction of the society, and the well-being of the population unfolded vividly during the pandemic. COVID-19 contributed to the breakdown of the multiple sites and means through which social reproduction is accomplished. It is important to note that the backdrop of this breakdown was a neoliberalized context marked by the state's withdrawal from public support of basic infrastructure and social services (such as child, elderly, and health care) required for social reproduction. The resulting commercialized intimate life was already operating on the outsourced and cheapened (geographically segregated) migrant care work and housekeeping. The border closures had a profound impact on this labor force vis-à-vis both their own households and the households where they provided their labor. In addition to the border closures, the lockdowns exerted significant pressures on these households on both ends as well. The lockdowns which included the closure of parks, playgrounds, and public spaces as well as online education and home office exacerbated the burden on social reproduction, particularly on women. It has been repeatedly underscored during the pandemic that the actual living conditions and care arrangements of temporary migrant and care workers, both back home and at their place of work, were drastically deteriorated and invisibilized.

As mentioned before, the exceptional mobility granted to temporary/migrant workers was an organized and managed mobility that simultaneously depleted but also reinforced temporary workers' social bonds. The essential workers were not only subject to managed (im)mobility but also to (forced) managed accommodation. Often, through particular transport arrangements, the workers were brought not only to their work destinations but also to a pre-arranged and often secluded accommodation at their work sites. Although the employers or the employment agencies made the arrangements, the (high) costs of transport and/or accommodation were systematically deducted from the workers' payments (Fries-Tersch et al. 2021; Soguel 2020; European Commission 2020). Such a set-up, which depletes the social bonds of the essential workers with the locals at the arrival places, can only function by means of the very existence of social bonds and care arrangements among the temporary workers in their workplaces as well as "back home" and/or transnationally.

Essential workers, who are not covered by health care as they lack social rights, need to rely on each other to maintain their (health), bodies, and daily lives outside of their work in their places of arrival.[10] Furthermore, without the care arrangements

[10] At least those who are EU citizens would have had medical care at their places of work within EU if they had not been subject to the legal alterations of their contractual conditions.

elsewhere (including the transnationally outsourced childcare back home), it is almost impossible for these workers to sustain their livelihood as temporary migrant workers. The sites of such "micro-politics of care and solidarity" among and by the people subject to forced (im)mobility provided spaces for the alternative imaginaries of "biopolitics from below" or "radical care" and of decoupling of care work and capital accumulation (Miraftab and Huq 2024; Samaddar 2021).

The mobility, accommodation, and living arrangements shifted the responsibility for the social reproduction of labor as a whole to the workers themselves. Neither states nor employers provided for the "maintenance" of the essential workers' lives. Thus, the complex landscape of (im)mobility and the social/economic rights regimes during the pandemic laid bare the dilemmas of labor and capital accumulation, as well as social reproduction.

Flexible border governance, citizenship, and coloniality

The essential workers' seemingly paradoxical assemblage of rights and value provides a fruitful entry point to scrutinize the tensions and contradictions present in citizenship arrangements that govern mobility and people too. COVID-19 certainly unveiled the paradoxes, tensions, and lineages of citizenship and the governance of borders.

Scholars working on the emerging architecture of contemporary citizenship draw attention to the simultaneity of selective openness and restrictive closures of borders and the increasing reign of flexible strategies and mechanisms in today's migration and border governance (Shachar 2020). Such a perspective highlights the proliferation of legal barriers that mark the increasing elasticity and selectivity of citizenship. Divergent treatments of time, place, and space for the mobility of different categories of migrants, particularly of mobile labor, mark the tension and contradiction of new realities of governance (Shachar 2020, 25).

It might be useful to situate the increasing elasticity and selectivity in the governance of mobility and borders of our contemporary world in relation to colonialism.[11] In fact, the complex architecture of flexible mobility governance during the pandemic shows strong resemblances to the colonial forms of regulating mobility. These resemblances draw attention to the centrality of a particular pattern of power, namely the "coloniality of power" (Quijano 2000) in the constitution and governance of people and, above all, of labor in connection to the accumulation of capital.

Scholars calling for the application of a postcolonial lens to better understand the dynamics of today's Europe and the world underline the importance of unraveling the colonial gradient in migration management regimes and citizenship (De Genova 2017; Samaddar 2020b). In order to reveal the tangibility of colonial pasts in today's mechanisms and strategies of population control and politics, these scholars argue that we need to see colonial/imperial debris in the making and remaking of today's migrations and their governance. It was in the colonial age that the governing

[11] This section is built on Çaglar (2022), 405-6.

principles of mobility and the control and governance of mobile bodies, labor, and population were first laid down. This becomes most apparent in *flexible* frontier policies and the governance mechanisms utilized to regulate migration and labor (Samaddar 2020b, 154). Colonial rule needed flexible border policies to manage, stabilize, and govern population groups and labor. Thus, the governance technologies of colonial/imperial rule were strongly anchored in differentiated and racialized rights, mobility, and the porousness of frontiers. Most importantly, these flexible bordering policies were important to ensure the flexible management of variably dispossessed and devalorized labor supplies. Thus, the production of migrant labor as a politically invisible group without rights was laid down as an integral part of colonial and imperial rule. Regulation and governance of labor were at the heart of such flexible frontiers of colonial formations. Today's proliferation of borders and their simultaneous restrictiveness and selective openness that became strikingly apparent during the pandemic have their lineages in the technologies and policies of colonial rule, which were directly related to the governance of population and, above all, of labor.

Here, it is important to note that what the pandemic exposed is not simply the return or the remains of the bordering technologies of colonialism. COVID-19 exposed coloniality (of power) as an inherent feature of the production of vulnerable labor and capital accumulation in contemporary capitalism. Coloniality of power was a term coined by Quijano (2000) to underline the constitutive role played by a particular form of power and its associated racial hierarchies for capitalism. Most importantly, coloniality differs from colonialism in that coloniality is structurally inherent to capitalism and does not vanish with independence. Quijano's clarion call is about exploring how a particular form of power (coloniality) structures and shapes the social and political life of capitalist societies.

What is crucial for the coloniality of power perspective is the fundamental role played by racialized and racializing logic and the associated hierarchized differences in capital accumulation. Such a position is based on the recognition that we only understand capital once we approach it as a set of unequal social relations within which the naturalizing and legitimizing narratives of racialized, culturalized, gendered, and nationalized differences play a fundamental role in appropriations and the dispossessive processes that underlay capital accumulation (Luxemburg 1951; Butler 2016; Quijano 2000; Melamed 2015; Edwards 2021; Harvey 2004). Such a perspective not only puts differences but also the production and reproduction of social relations within which such differences are embedded at the center of attempts to understand capitalism and the value regimes of accumulation. This is a perspective that urges us to analyze processes of accumulation and the construction of culturally and socially constructed hierarchies of difference, their "social separatedness" (Melamed 2015), and social reproduction in relationship to each other. Hierarchized social differences, divisions, and separation of people—and, above all, labor—are pivotal to capitalism (Melamed 2015). For this reason, those who approach the dynamics of capitalism from within this perspective underline the racialization of populations and the narratives of appropriations and dispossessions to be inseparably related to the requirements of accumulation, which inherently involves loss, disposability, and unequal differentiation of human value and rights (Melamed 2015; Çaglar 2016; Fraser 2016). Production, appropriation, and reproduction of

differences are crucial to the constitutions and the accumulation of capital and capitalism (Çaglar 2021).

Within this perspective, the bordering technologies, referred to above, are a form of regulation based on dividing and classifying people to constitute a differentiated labor force required to accrue capital. In other words, multiple and selective rights assemblages and policies of COVID-19 ensured labor in legally and socially dispossessed forms that were crucial for the extractions required for capitalism. Thus, rather than highlighting the *remains* of colonialism in today's regimes of mobility, what COVID-19 closures and their contradictions revealed was the *actual* coloniality of today's border(ing) policies that produced differentiated forms of access to resources and rights, which, in turn, multiplied labor, subject positions, and their value (Clarke et al. 2015; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). The proliferation of mobility regimes is crucial for the production of an uneven field of access to resources and rights, hierarchized differences, and thus differential inclusions that are central to appropriations and consequently to the accumulation of value. Like borders, citizenship has always functioned through simultaneous inclusion and exclusions on an uneven terrain of rights. Coloniality thus lies at the heart of bordering regimes and their governance as well as of citizenship. This uneven terrain of rights is exactly what became very apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic. They played a crucial role in the constitution of mobile but dispossessed labor within the category of temporary/seasonal essential workers.

In Conclusion

Focusing on the category of essential workers and its complex landscape of value and worth, marked by tensions of (im)mobility and (in)visibility, enables us to highlight the centrality of the disposable and legally constrained migrant labor for capital accumulation. The pandemic regulations and their dynamics once more highlight the importance of the production and reproduction of flexiblized and cheapened migrant labor for capital accumulation. Furthermore, a focus on the reconfiguration of the governance of mobility through the lens of essential workers helps us to explore the contradictions and disjuncture of sovereignty, rights, and the responsibilities of care that lie at the heart of citizenship as an institution. What appear to be tensions and ambiguities of citizenship that became more visible during the COVID-19 pandemic can actually be seen as contradictions inherent to citizenship itself. We can and should relate these tensions and contradictions to colonial forms of power that produce governable subjects and labor power in close connection to processes of accumulation. These tensions and contradictions, which constitute the category of "essential workers" as an essential and worthless labor force, in fact, draw attention to the structural contradictions of labor and social reproduction in capitalism (Narotzky 2021).

Arguments about the coloniality of power and racial capitalism help us to understand the seemingly paradoxical human mobility regimes in times of

COVID-19. As I have argued here, the coloniality of power that lies at the heart of tensions about citizenship, dispossessions, and accumulation of capital became once again starkly visible in the context of COVID-19. This argument should be understood as a call to recognize the relevance and importance of the coloniality of power in understanding today's accumulation processes and logic of governing mobility and labor despite the varying forms of power currently in play (Isin 2022).

It is true that during the pandemic, non-national borders, such as municipal/city ones, became visible and effective vis-à-vis internal mobility bans in several countries. These measures restricted citizens' mobility within the nation-states across municipal or regional boundaries unless they fell into the category of essential workers. However, it would be misleading to read the increasing visibility and importance of city borders as an indicator of a rescaled or more decentralized governance and decision-making. In almost all places, these restrictions were imposed by the central authorities. Furthermore, the decision-making processes in these restrictions were very much top-down, in line with the increasing power of the executive that often overruled the legislative and the justice system, limiting civil liberties and increasing surveillance (such as in Italy, France, Germany, Austria, Turkey) (Fassin and Fourcade 2021, 4).[12]

The pandemic thus contributed to the reign of autocratic rule in variegated forms aggravating the decline of checks and balances. Though, the rise of authoritarianism, marked by the increasing power of the central political authority, by no means started with COVID-19, as Fassin and Fourcade (2021, 8) rightly underline, the pandemic has quickened and contributed to the recentralization of state power by the expansion of the executive power at the expense of the legislative and the judiciary. It gave the opportunity for the states to toughen public security and surveillance with a durable regression of democratic foundations in both liberal and illiberal countries (Hungry, France, states in East Asia, Turkey) (Fassin 2021). COVID-19 revealed and accelerated a kind of recentralization (DIPLOCAT 2020; Fassin and Fourcade 2021) "on the guise of contingent decentralization" (Tansel 2019, 12). Increasing visibility and the prominence of cities and municipal borders during COVID-19 were ironically paired with central governments increasing their power over municipalities rather than the empowerment of cities. Like in many other areas, the social, economic, and political dynamics unleashed by the pandemic not only revealed but also accelerated the visceral reign of autocratic rule. The "contingent empowerment" of local authorities and their capture by the increasingly recentralizing state power was part of the changing world order COVID-19 "annunciated."

[12] Thus, the central state acquired a kind of power overruling the municipalities' governance of their borders and population. In fact, we had seen a similar kind of overruling of the local governments during the 2015 "refugee crisis." In several countries, the allocation of refugees to different provinces and cities (in Germany and in Austria for example) was decided top-down, overburdening the local governments and cities with the mammoth task of provisioning of services including accommodation to these newcomers.

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