In a VIRAL CONJUNCTURE

Locking Down Mobilities

David Morley

Abstract **This article offers a conjunctural analysis of the various factors that must be taken into account to explain the development of the COVID-19 pandemic. It offers an interdisciplinary perspective on questions of how virtual and material geographies are enmeshed, paying particular attention to the continuing importance of transport infrastructures. The key concerns are with the politics of differential power over—and access to—mobility, in both its actual and virtual modalities. The COVID-19 crisis is argued to have functioned both as a mode of amplification of many preexisting forms of inequality and as a powerful solvent of the unexamined presumptions of the dominant discourse of globalization.**

Keywords **mobilities, inequalities, instabilities, boundaries**

Toward the end of 2019 our increasingly mobile world (as we then knew it) was turned on its head by events originating in Wuhan, China. Of course, at that point, the severity of the difficulties about to be faced the world over, as COVID-19 wreaked its havoc, was only hypothetical, and those warning of their potential seriousness were often dismissed—not least by the UK government—as intemperate scaremongers (O'Toole 2020). At that stage, as for some time beforehand, "going viral" still had a positive connotation in common parlance. Indeed, it was the ambition of celebrities, politicians, and advertisers for their messages to achieve viral status—ideally, on a worldwide basis, as an index of hyper-success. Nowadays, the experience of COVID-19 has made us all rather more aware of the complications in which the politics of mobility are necessarily enmeshed.

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Even before the virus took hold globally, there were some emerging critiques of the overblown encomia to the wonders of globalization, networking, and mobility that had dominated much of contemporary discourse in the first two decades of the century. In an earlier book (Morley 2017) I was concerned to reintegrate the study of the mediated forms of communications with material questions of transport geography and with the mobilities of people and commodities (see also Allen 2003; Adams 2009). In doing this I was influenced by the "new mobilities" paradigm (Adey 2006, 2010; Urry 2007) and, in particular, by its insistence on the necessity to pay attention not only to the seemingly desirable contemporary increases in the speed of circulation of "goods" (be they commodities or tourists with valid passports, visas, and credit cards) but also to the speed of circulation of "bads" (whether drugs or illegal or unwanted life-forms), often smuggled in the sealed container boxes that have become the standard medium of global trade (Donovan and Bonney 2006). Indeed, attention was sometimes drawn to the potential of high-speed air transport to also "mobilize" undesirable organisms (such as viruses) across vast distances, in a rapid and potentially problematic manner. Historically, as James Meek (2020) notes, it was imperialism that spread diseases like cholera from the peripheries of empire back to its centers. Thus, he notes, there was much hand wringing in the nineteenth century over the potentially "perilous sanitary consequences" of the grand imperial transport projects for which Europe itself was largely responsible. The Suez Canal made Europeans feel "dangerously close" to India, and the plans for Bismarck's Berlin-Baghdad railway certainly worried those who saw its ambivalent significance as a potential route for the import of tropical diseases as much as a mechanism for efficient long-distance troop deployment (Meek 2020; see also Diamond 1997). Considered from another angle, one might say that the ultimate form of circulation of bads was the Atlantic slave trade, on which so much of the wealth of the Western world was built.

Looking back now, the optimistic perspective on globalization originally articulated by its cheerleaders around the millennium seems merely naive (Friedman 2000, 2007). However, at the time, it was still possible for people to mistake those forms of unpoliced hyperglobal mobility as representing the beginning of a historical period set fair to sail onward, in that same style, far into the future. There are still ongoing attempts to revamp its image for a new era (see Khanna 2017 on the wonders of "connectology"). Indeed, at present we discover a variety of Silicon Valley technology giants preparing to return to the cyber hype of the early 1990s, when the "meatspace" of bodily contact was derided in favor of technologically mediated experiences. As Naomi Klein (2020) explains in a recent interview, in a post-COVID-19 context, in which any form of human contact is redefined as a potential "biohazard," the earlier cyber hype is now being rebranded as the only hygienic approach for the future organization of many aspects of life (medical, educational, etc.), precisely because it offers a supposedly viral-free form of "touchless technology." Evidently, it is more apparent day by day that the pre-COVID-19 "normal" world was no more than a short-lived (and not only exceptional, but unsustainable) form of social organization (see Servigne and Stevens 2020 on what they call the study of "collapsology"). Later, I will address the significance of the turn to highly immobilized forms of sociality necessitated by the

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"lockdown" of social life worldwide, at the height of the coronavirus crisis. However, I want to go back to its beginnings, in order to clarify the forces in play in the conjuncture in which the virus emerged.

COVID-19 in Wuhan—A Conjunctural Analysis

For some considerable time now, we have been told that "old-fashioned" forms of sociality based on the physical copresence of persons would gradually decline in importance as a matter of both technological and generational change. However, the conduct of family life in all societies has, at its heart, the performance of certain key rituals, which, for their proper observation, require the physical copresence of all household members (Douglas 1991; Susskind 1992). In predominantly Christian countries in Europe, that is what happens at Christmas; in the United States of America it happens at Thanksgiving; in many Islamic cultures a similar thing happens at Ramadan/Eid; and in China it happens at the Lunar New Year. At those moments, custom requires that all family members gather in the home—and at that point, a letter, phone call, or video conference just will not suffice. Work on multisited migrant households has long demonstrated that many creative forms of electronic long-distance parenting have already been developed within migrant families (Madianou and Miller 2012; Vertovec 2004). But while these virtual interactions can often be usefully substituted for actual presence in routine interactions, nonetheless, as these authors show, they are noticeably less successful on key symbolic occasions (a wedding, a child's birthday party, etc.). At such moments, you simply have to be there (actually, not virtually) to physically demonstrate, in a manner satisfactory to all concerned, your continued commitment to full membership of the household.

The first point to make about the crisis that emerged in Wuhan is that it happened at exactly such a point in the calendrical year, when a substantial proportion of China's very large population was in movement to visit their families for the lunar holiday. As the still developing narrative stands in June 2020 (as I write), it seems that the first cases of coronavirus infection probably occurred in Wuhan in December 2019 (or possibly, earlier that autumn). However, the city wasn't locked down until January 23, 2020, just two days before the new year, which fell on January 25. Throughout January, Wuhan continued to host annual, large-scale political conventions for representatives who traveled in and out of the city from all over Hubei Province. By the time the city was locked down, many (unknowing, symptomless) infected people had already begun their journeys through and from Wuhan, so it was too late to prevent the spread of disease. Moreover, given China's extensive geography, this process involved massive numbers of people making complex journeys (often involving changing planes or trains) over very long distances. The speed of industrialization—and, consequently, urbanization—in China in recent years has dictated a massive population movement from the countryside to the cities. Indeed, one could argue that the scale of this internal migration, within China's national boundaries, effectively dwarfs the scale of global transnational migration in most other parts of the world. The key issue here concerns how the calendrical timing of the crisis, in this holiday period, interacted with the demographic and geographical dimensions of the conjuncture.

Wuhan is the most populous city in central China (11 million people) and is at

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the heart of the economic, industrial, and geographical structure of the country. In terms of geography, it is one of the major interchange points in the entire Chinese transport system for both passengers and freight traveling by road, train, boat, or airplane. The largest transport hub in inland China, Wuhan sits at a strategic position at the intersection of the Yangtze and Hanjiang Rivers, both major inland waterways. It has an extensive network of roads and expressways leading to other provinces and is one of the major hubs in the Chinese railway system, giving direct access to many far-flung destinations via high-speed trains. The city's airports are among the busiest in China, and the central government regards the city as a national comprehensive transport hub. In effect, Wuhan's position in China's transport system is analogous to that of Chicago in North America—in either case, if you are going from one part of the country to another, it is very likely that is where you will have to change trains or planes.

The flow of people traveling back and forth to visit their families in Wuhan (or of migrant workers traveling from the city to their homes elsewhere) for the holidays will have readily mingled with the flow of those changing planes there en route to and from quite different parts of China. Overall, 5–6 million people are estimated to have passed through the city over the New Year period. They would then have merged with the transnational flows of travelers to and from the rest of the world, going through other Chinese airports. Wuhan itself has an excellent range of direct flights to cities worldwide. These include Rome, where the authorities began examining flights arriving from China only on January 23—a month after the disease had first been suspected in Wuhan. It may or may not be coincidental that Italy subsequently had one of the worst of the early outbreaks of the infection in Europe.

To move to questions of political authority and mediated forms of communication, a further issue concerns the way in which the Chinese authorities attempted to repress recognition of the crisis in Wuhan in the early period. In the initial phase, they reacted punitively to the medical staff in the city who were using social media to try to warn colleagues about the worrying new type of "pneumonia" cases that were being seen in Wuhan. They were all accused of undermining political authority by irresponsibly spreading "false information" (for which they were punished by the local security services—see Meek 2020). It took the central government the first three weeks of January to recognize that the problem could no longer be swept under the carpet, by which time it was too late. In all this, they unfortunately emulated the way that the authorities at the damaged Chernobyl nuclear power station in the Soviet Union in the 1986 crisis refused to recognize and report the difficulties there until things had already got completely out of hand (Alexievich 1997). Here we readily see that the Chinese authorities themselves created the conditions for a perfect storm as a result of their refusal to recognize the seriousness of the problem when it first emerged. When they later moved to close down all social life in the city, they succeeded in controlling the local progress of the outbreak in a highly efficient (if authoritarian) manner. However, it was by then far too late to help the rest of the world, as the virus was well on its way, courtesy of long-distance airline travel, to many other countries.

Post-Wuhan/Post-Mobilities?

Writing as I do, while the lockdown in the UK persists, it is hard to make predictions

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at this stage as to what post-lockdown life will be like, without giving dangerous hostages to fortune. However, one thing that already seems clear is that there will be no "return to normal" in respect of mobility. It also seems that the health considerations raised by this pandemic dictate the necessity of redesigning forms of currently overcrowded public transport to a much lower density of occupation, before they are safe for the future, if we are to reduce patterns of cross-infection. That consideration has severe implications, if our cities are not to grind to a halt in even worse traffic jams, as people choose the private car as a more hygienic mode of transport. The combination of these difficulties may preclude the resumption of the patterns of commuter travel necessitated by contemporary modes of work.

All this also has serious implications for the future of the tourist industry on which so much of the global economy has come to rest. Tourism is now the largest single industry in the world, contributing 10–15 percent of world gross domestic product and total world employment (Urry 2007; Brouder 2019; de Bellaigue 2020). Given tourism's central economic position, a crisis in this industry has enormous knock-on effects elsewhere—not least in relation to the future of air travel. It may be a question of not when the global air transport system returns to normal but whether such a return will be possible at all. At some point, we shall have to recognize that cheap air travel, which has underpinned a great deal of tourist travel in Europe over the last twenty years, was, in fact, circumstantially dependent on quite particular historical conditions that no longer pertain.

Substitutability—The Actual and the Virtual

In the UK, the lockdown has functioned as a crash course in the acquisition of digital skills for many people. This has certainly been the case for many businesses and organizations, which have discovered that, for routine purposes, they can operate via virtual means such as Microsoft Teams rather than in-person meetings. Many ordinary people, otherwise starved of social interaction during lockdown, have also discovered how much of their social lives can be conducted through virtual interaction technologies such as Skype or Zoom. The population at large has rapidly discovered some of the possibilities previously explored by many migrants, concerning the viability (and problems) of using various forms of virtual communication to maintain long-distance relationships (Madianou and Miller 2012; Madianou 2016).

The lockdown has vividly highlighted the degrees of inequalities in access to the virtual world available to different categories of persons. In the UK there are serious concerns about how much the lockdown will have exacerbated inequalities of achievement among children during the period of home schooling, given the vastly greater amounts of economic, technological, and cultural capital available in the homes of more affluent parents. In the digital realm—as in most others—it is very expensive to be poor. Paying for the quantity of data that your child needs to keep up with their home schooling on a pay-as-you-go phone (which is all anyone without a good credit rating can hope to get) may effectively mean that you cannot also afford to feed them adequately (Polson, Schofield Clark, and Gajjala 2020; Morley 2020).

Likewise, it has now been demonstrated, throughout the global North, that

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routine health care can be administered much more cheaply in virtual form than face-to-face, by means of call centers and automated patient-advice systems. There will thus be a continuing temptation for national governments to reduce health-care costs in servicing their (increasingly elderly, and thus needy) populations, by providing them, in future, with virtual, rather than in-person modes of health care, whenever possible. The forms of private medicine now available to the more affluent may perhaps be the only ones that will continue to involve consultations with physically present doctors. Nonvirtual forms of health care may thus become a luxury good, available only to the affluent, except perhaps in cases of emergency.

The Rise and Fall of Globalization

As Brian Holmes (2011) explains, logistics and supply chain management, as the distributional machinery of international transport, has slashed freight costs and thus made the present international division of labor feasible, providing the key operational discipline of the global economy. However, the problem with the just-in-time logistics of the distribution industry on which long-distance supply chains are now based is that, in order to make the industry so much more profitable than it was before, what had to be sacrificed was "spare" capacity at any stage of the process. Thus it has become a matter of pride for logistics operations to eliminate any surplus of time or space, cutting things down to the bone, so that the entire system becomes maximally profitable, by virtue of the fact that it is, in one of the catchphrases of the industry, "lean and mean." But this also means that in conditions of crisis, even small or temporary bottlenecks in the supply chain—or unexpected surges in demand (as seen recently, in the case of medical protective equipment)—can rapidly exacerbate crises, especially when the items in short supply affect matters of life and death. The central point concerns the extent to which, in outsourcing production to distant low-cost economies, the gain in short-term profitability is offset by a long-term decline in the overall resilience of the system.

Perhaps none of this should this come as too much of a surprise. Part of the difficulty is that, as Jean Pierre Dupuy notes, the time of catastrophe involves an "inverse temporality" in which what had previously been deemed impossible and out of the question is perceived, once it has happened, as having been, by definition, within the realm of the possible all along. The catastrophe itself then must be understood as having demonstrated the falsity of the previously perceived limits of that realm (Dupuy, quoted in Servigne and Stevens 2020: 99). In their exploration of the complex temporality and geography of what they call "collapsology," focusing on the growing systematic instabilities of globalized systems, Pablo Servigne and Raphaël Stevens (2020) offer a critical exposition of the weaknesses of hyper-globalism (see also Ehrlich and Ehrlich 2013; Diamond 2005). It is not only that just-in-time logistics delivery systems mean that stocks of vital materials are deliberately kept at such low levels that they can be rapidly depleted in a crisis. Servigne and Stevens further argue that the very complexity of globalization, as an ever more interconnected system, inevitably multiplies the risks specific to each of its previously separate sectors. Thus the higher the level of interdependence of infrastructures and supply chains, the greater and more widely felt will be the consequences of even small disruptions in any one part of the system. As they point out, this was perfectly illustrated

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in the UK in the case of what began as a strike by a small number of truck drivers in 2000. Localized blockades of fuel depots rapidly escalated to a point where, within a week, oil refineries closed down all over the country, petrol stations ran out of fuel, supermarkets rationed their stock, hospitals postponed operations, and postal deliveries stopped.

In many countries, the same principles of systemic leanness in matters of logistics have, in recent years, also been applied to hospitals. Those institutions were originally designed to never run at more than 85 percent of their total capacity—precisely to have the room to spare that may be needed in a crisis. The worst tragedies we have seen in this recent period have often been in hospitals, whose surplus capacity has been deliberately stripped out by the "austerity" politicians determined to cut costs everywhere.

The recent period has also seen a return to forms of nationalist protectionism in many fields, with governments (most notably the Trump administration) competing with each other to monopolize the supply of vaccines or protective equipment for the exclusive use of its citizens. To this extent, protectionist boundaries are clearly on the increase and are likely to continue to be hardened. In this context, one must note that the wartime principle of rationing provisions, which many governments have been forced to adopt in recent times (sometimes against their ideological inclinations), harks back to a much older set of geopolitical imperatives, central to the era of the nation-state according to which it was long regarded as axiomatic that national governments should ensure that their citizens could, in times of crisis, be provided with essential supplies in a self-sufficient manner from within their own territory. This approach is the complete antithesis of the modes of globalized interdependency that have dominated our lives until recently.

COVID-19 as Solvent of Presumptions

The thing about the logistics systems that are responsible for distributing the fruits of globalization is precisely that nobody cares about or even notices them, until they go wrong. In one sense, this crisis has served to (dramatically) render visible many of our unquestioned assumptions, such as regarding it as "normal" for the richer consumers of the world to expect easy and continuous access to whatever exotic foods they might desire from faraway places, in any season of the year.

But before we project any of our previous experiences and assumptions into the future, we need now to reconsider the prospects for the many and various forms of mobility to which we have become accustomed in recent years. In the UK and elsewhere we have seen fierce competition in world markets to consolidate the positions of cities as attractors of capital and as hubs of the global transport system. Thus, to return to my earlier discussion of air transport, the key debates have been about issues such as where exactly more airports or runways should be built, the better to attract tourists, business travelers, and various forms of inward investment. But once we recognize that a closely packed plane of people may be a very efficient system for the rapid (and ultimately uncontrollable) long-distance transport of germs and viruses, we begin to see how high the potential price of all this hypermobility may be. For countries such as the UK, which have happily allowed their manufacturing sectors to decay, on the previously unquestioned assumption that they can entirely support themselves through growing their service sectors, selling

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education to international students, and selling the pleasures of their national heritage to tourists, the crisis portends a very serious reckoning. Many British cities have reinvented themselves in recent years by building convention centers designed to attract large numbers of the professionals who routinely travel the world (often with their partners) to annual conference gatherings, bringing a major boost to the relevant cities' restaurants, bars, shops, and hotels (Landry 2000; Florida 2002). But the future of such gatherings is now very much in question—in which case, neither these convention halls nor the city center leisure facilities that they provide with customers will fill up again anytime soon.

Any economy that depends centrally on tourism, and on income from the leisure and hospitality industries, is now in a particularly vulnerable position. Even if the presently locked-down activities can gradually be loosened up, rates of tourism are unlikely to return to anything approaching previous levels for a very long time (Brouder et al. 2020). Indeed, if there are (as many anticipate) second waves of infection, this will exacerbate the conflicts between the economic imperatives espoused by right-wing politicians worldwide to restore business profitability and the contradictory requirements to carefully police mobility on public health grounds. The sedentarist (and protectionist) rhetoric of slogans like "Stay Safe/Stay Home" and the continuation of forms of social distancing (however measured) into the foreseeable future are fundamentally at odds with the visions of networked hypermobility that have dominated public discourse in recent years. All this, in combination with the revival of forms of authoritarian populism, nationalism, and protectionism, not only in the UK but on a worldwide basis (Donald Trump in the United States, Vladimir Putin in Russia, Narendra Mohdi in India), means that future mobilities may take a rather more constrained shape than anyone might have anticipated but a short time ago (O'Toole 2019; Muller 2017; Mishra 2017).

The Amplification of Inequalities

One of the things that has increasingly come to be recognized in the UK is the extent to which the COVID-19 crisis has amplified preexisting forms of inequality and heightened their visibility. As Klein (2020) argues, the rhetoric of us "all being in this together" is cruelly untrue, insofar as "that is not how disasters act"; rather, disasters are "magnifiers and intensifiers" of preexisting problems. Thus it has become apparent in the UK that rates of infection in poor areas and in sections of the population disadvantaged by institutional racism have been significantly higher than among other categories of people. Similarly, as noted earlier, in the context of school closures, it quickly became apparent that the advantages reflected in middle-class children's better access to digital technologies at home meant that the children of poorer families have been much more likely to fall behind with their school work, to a degree that potentially threatens their future educational progress (Balmford and Hjorth 2020; Humphry 2020).

As has previously been demonstrated in analysis of other crisis situations, such as the flooding of New Orleans in the Hurricane Katrina disaster, it also becomes clear in such a situation that having access to key technologies such as a smartphone or a private car is often vital to people's survival prospects. As Tim Cresswell (2006) demonstrated in his analysis of the New Orleans crisis, those without these "prosthetic technologies" of effective

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citizenship were the most endangered. In the absence of effective public provision, it was the private ownership of these technologies that enabled people to find out about different aspects of the crisis as it developed and to move themselves to safety. Those without them suffered most heavily—and same pattern emerged in the case of Wuhan. People there with the necessary technologies (and thus with access to the relevant information and modes of mobility) found out in advance about the looming crisis and were better able to remove themselves before the lockdown was enforced. Those without them were much more likely to get stuck in situations from which they were unable to extricate themselves. Thus Chinese media reported poignantly contrasting stories—such as that of a poor man working in Sichuan Province who bought a ticket back to Zhejiang for the holidays, which involved a transfer at Wuhan, thus making his journey cheaper than a direct ticket to his final destination would have cost. Unfortunately, he subsequently found himself marooned—and later destitute—on the streets of Wuhan as, while he had been waiting for his transport connection, the city was closed down. Conversely, we learn of well-educated, well-connected, technologically sophisticated businessmen who were able to avoid any such inconvenience precisely because they had the information, technology, and money to get themselves out of the city before it was too late (Qiuming 2020).

Here we see that mobility is not for everyone, and a variety of Ban-Opticon databases designed to police the mobility of different categories of persons determine who can have access to which types of places (Lebbe 2011). Zygmunt Bauman (1998, 2000, 2016) distinguishes between the tourists of the contemporary universe, whose desirable passports and sound credit ratings make them welcome wherever they would like to shop, and the "vagabonds" who are increasingly unwelcome anywhere. In his essay on questions of "extreme displacement," Eric Kluitenberg (2011) speaks of "bordering regimes" both inside and beyond the territory of the nation-state. These involve differentiated forms of filtering, according to particular socioeconomic and ethnic profiling, so that privileges such as the right of residence or access to knowledge, infrastructures, and services are granted to certain social groups while being denied to others. Drawing on Paul Virilio's (1992) concept of "polar inertia," Kluitenberg (2011) describes how, amid the accelerating flows of data and commodities, certain biological bodies are allowed only a shrinking amount of space and are increasingly forced into a state of immobility. In this process the majority of the world's population is increasingly excluded from the privileges of the bright new world of transnational hypermobility (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013).

We see all around us the emergence of radically enhanced forms of inequality in many spheres. Some people have increasingly wider menus of choice available to them in respect of both virtual and in-person forms of communications and mobility, while others face a much more restricted set of choices. At one extreme, air travel may well be reinvented as the expensive (and therefore exclusive) option for the rich that it was in the earlier twentieth century. At the other, for the poor, life may well become much more geographically circumscribed, as they are increasingly confined to their localities (or post codes) by the decay of the transport facilities on which they rely, of economic pressures, legal structures, and everyday

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practices of policing (de Blij 2009). That is certainly going to be true of the majority of the world's future population, for whom it will be increasingly difficult to find exit routes from the mega-slums of the Third World cities where they live. We thus face the daunting prospect of a future in which mobility itself may become a luxury good, available only to the affluent—except, of course, for those forced into (often illegal) forms of mobility as refugees and asylum seekers, desperately trying to escape circumstances over which they have little or no control.

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