The Political Economy of a Modern Pandemic: Assessing Impacts of COVID-19 on Migrants and Immigrants in Canada

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores the COVID-19 crisis with a focus on immigration and migration in Canada using a political economy lens. Neoliberalism has played a major role in shaping pandemic impacts and the responses to it. We critically assesses the deep structural inequalities that have caused disproportionate COVID-19 impacts on migrants and immigrants. Migrants and immigrants carry the unequal burden of COVID-19 because of racialization, labour precariousness, and exposure to health risks on job sites and in the poor neighborhoods and over crowded housing in which many live in. Mobility and borders have also been cast as a particular threat during the pandemic even though domestic sources are the main sources of contagion. We examine the use of borders as filtering mechanisms during COVID-19 and the negative impacts this has had on migrant populations. While crises like pandemics pose many dangers they also open up policy windows through which progressive change may be realized. We reflect on these possibilities.

KEYWORDS: COVID-19; Borders; Immigration/Migration; Neoliberalism; Pandemic Discrimination

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Introduction

COVID-19 has been the 'great disrupter' of the health system and the economy and also the 'great revealer', exposing grave structural inequalities and imbedded racism nurtured by the political economy of neoliberalism. The pandemic has called into question the myth of market efficiency, exposed the risks posed by a greatly diminished social safety net, and the challenges presented by the permeability of national boundaries in a global world. In the process, the hegemony of neoliberal austerity has come under challenge and pathways to more progressive public policy approaches have begun to emerge. A spotlight on the impact and consequences of the pandemic on borders, migrants, and immigrants is revealing in this regard.

The pandemic has been called the great leveler because in one sense COVID-19 does not distinguish between rich and poor or citizen and non-citizen. The mainstream pandemic discourse also likens the pandemic to a war. While there is some truth to these narratives, what they neglect is that the casualties in this battle are disproportionate to some groups such as racialized people, the elderly, the poor, the working class, women, and migrant and immigrant populations. Because of the reality of long-standing structural inequities and engrained discrimination, and the policies of neoliberal austerity, some are much more negatively affected by the virus than others. Just like poverty by postal code (United Way of Greater Toronto, et. al, 2004) we have COVID-19 infections by postal code, with poorer, racialized, and immigrant neighborhoods most negatively affected. The varying ability to work from home and social distance to protect oneself from the virus, is itself a sign of privilege. COVID-19 is definitely not an equal opportunity killer (Blow, 2020).

This article critically assesses the deep structural inequalities that have caused disproportionate COVID-19 impacts on migrants[3] and immigrants[4], a largely racialized and economically marginalized population often concentrated in poor neighbourhoods in Canada. Mobility and borders during the pandemic have been cast as a particular threat even though domestic sources are the main

[3] The International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2021b) defines "migrant" as "a person who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons."

[4] An immigrant is defined as "a person who moves into a country other than that of his or her nationality or usual residence, so that the country of destination effectively becomes his or her new country of usual residence" (IOM, 2021a).

sources of contagion. The paper is broken down into five main sections, after the approach and methods discussion, we set the broader context with a consideration of the political economy of a modern pandemic and global migration. Second, we examine borders, migrants and COVID-19. Next, we consider the pandemic as an economic crisis and analyze its impacts on immigrants/migrants. Fourth, race and the social determinants of COVID-19 are explored. Finally, we address some of the political dimensions arising out the COVID-19 crisis.

The paper adopts a political economy conceptual framework. Political economy embodies a critical approach to examining social science phenomenon based on a social determinant's perspective where economic and political factors are especially salient (see Stilwell, 2012). Political economy helps us document and analyze how neoliberal economic systems have resulted in structural inequalities that disproportionately impact migrant and immigrant groups during the pandemic. Methodologically, we have used a critical descriptive literature review (Grant & Brooth, 2009). Given the recentness of the COVID-19 pandemic, we critically examined extensive media sources, as well as government, and recently published scholarly-based reports to document developments related to our subject. An internet search of materials was undertaken using key words such as COVID-19, migration, migrants, immigration, borders, health inequalities, Canada, to uncover relevant sources. We reviewed in excess of 300 English language sources primarily focused on the period between November 2019 to July 2020 (see Shields & Abu Alrob, 2020) during the first wave of the pandemic. Additional sources, since this period, have been incorporated into our critical analysis.

The Political Economy of a Modern Pandemic in an Age of Global Migration

The German sociologist Ulrich Beck identified new risks posed by the advance of modernity and addressed the "undefined but omnipresent threat[s]" that events, like a pandemic, presented to society (Tooze, 2020). The neoliberal centred *Risk Society* (Beck, 1992) has increased the transfer of responsibility for mitigating many risks from the state onto individuals, especially the most vulnerable ones. Beck also recognized the emerging clash between science versus science sceptics in interpreting the new world of risks (Tooze, 2020). This sets up a policy clash dividing evidence informed versus populist centred COVID-19 responses. In this respect Žižek has noted how the pandemic has helped to foster and bring into the light an epidemic of ideologically populist rooted right-wing viruses centred in "fake news, paranoiac conspiracy theories, [and] explosions of

racism" (2020, 39). Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine* (2007) explains how crises have been used in the past to drive forward neoliberal austerity 'reforms'. It is also the case, however, that crises create policy windows with opportunities to expose the failures of neoliberalism and for the advance of progressive alternatives.

In many respects migration and immigration have been at the centre of late neoliberal capitalism, globalization's inner logic, and its crises. The market model of migration and immigration has been a key part of modern class formation and a major force in pushing forward labour precarity and the modern reserve army of labour. Migration is "directly implicated in generating the patterns of dispossession and unevenness" (Hanieh, 2018, 71). Migration can be seen as a function of capitalism where populations are forced to seek opportunities outside their homeland because of deprivation and forced poverty (Walia, 2014, 25). Capitalism can impact migration through the movement of people that parallels the movement of capital (Hanieh, 2018, 52). This attaches value to migrants and immigrants depending on their economic contribution, essentially dividing people into "deserving and non-deserving" of entry across the border. It follows that the border plays a role in mediating "the value of labor power and differentiating populations through categories of race, status, and access to rights" (Hanieh, 2018, 71). The rapid growth of the use of temporary foreign labour in areas like agriculture, domestic work, care giving, and services have been important to the leaning of labour costs in the neoliberal austerity agenda (Hanieh, 2018, 55).

Securitization is also a primary feature of migration and works to control who is desirable versus non-desirable through restrictive border measures. Securitization of migration concerns the ways that "migrants….are increasingly mobilized and presented as a security threat" (Hanieh, 2018, 55). Securitized border measures and migration policies work to restrict entry of those deemed as a security threat and non-desirable according to neoliberal thinking. Under the pandemic, security concerns have been refocused around supposed health threats posed by migration and immigration. Indeed, migrants and immigrants have long been associated with tropes of disease bearing (The World, 2020). Border restrictions in the wake of COVID-19 have reinforced the image of migrants and immigrants as outsiders (Macklin, 2020). The modification to this depiction is temporary foreign workers whose essential labour is positioned centrally in their exemptions to border restrictions in Canada and elsewhere.

Capitalism, Borders and Migrants in a Pandemic Era

COVID-19 has resulted in widespread border closures to people but not to trade and financial transactions. Following the declaration of the Coronavirus as a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020 over 180 countries around the world moved to close their borders and impose travel restrictions on foreigners (Harris, 2020, March 20; McAuliffe & Bauloz, 2020). According to PEW Research Centre, by March 2020, 91% of the world's population resided in countries where non-citizens were restricted from entry (Connor, 2020). These measures quickly transformed the pandemic from a health to a mobility crisis (Marchetti & Boris, 2020).

Canada's first travel restrictions were imposed on March 16, 2020 after the federal government closed its border to non-citizens and non-residents. Despite exemptions that were later extended to various migrant workers who were deemed essential to Canadian employers and the economy, border closure was firmly imposed on asylum seekers and refugees. Canada ordered the return of all asylum seekers arriving to Canada between ports of entry back to the United States.

The pandemic is further securitizing migration (World Economic Forum, 2020) using the border as a mechanism of distinction where specific groups are differentiated and categorized (Hanieh, 2018, 71). In fact, borders have quickly become a tool used to create a hierarchy among different categories of migrants within Canada's immigration system (Macklin, 2020) by filtering and categorizing migrants into those deserving to be exempted from border closures versus those who are not. Inherent to capitalism, migration and borders are mechanisms used to reinforce accumulation of labour surplus value and capital. As such, borders are tools that create difference between migrant groups and are used to identify "who is and is not" beneficial to the economy and capital (Hanieh, 2018, 52, 60).

Temporary migrant workers have been elevated during the pandemic from simply being useful and highly exploitable 'unskilled' labourers (Hannan et al., 2021) to essential workers (but still exploitable). Their recruitment to perform essential work has been made exempt, with conditions, from border closures and travel restrictions based on their necessity to Canada's 'economic security'. Temporary migrant workers, in particular agricultural workers, have been a major concern in Canada and elsewhere since food security is threatened by migrant labour shortages (Hooper & Le Coz, 2020). In Ontario alone, 20,000 migrant

workers are relied upon for farm work including planting and harvesting (Dubinski, 2020).

While exempting temporary foreign workers from travel restrictions made clear they were essential to the survival of the food industry and the country's food security, and other economic sectors, it also demonstrated the state's capacities to manage and filter "the movement of migrants across borders in accordance with the needs of the national economy" (Hanieh, 2018, 51). Temporary farm workers' exemptions from COVID-19 border restrictions illustrates their essential nature to food security in Canada, but also starkly revealed their vulnerability and poor working and living conditions. Migrant workers tend to live in overcrowded and inadequate accommodations (Basok & George, 2020). They are typically housed in small bunkhouses with 4-8 people living in one room. Further, a total of 30 people may be housed on one floor and share two bathrooms (Kelley, 2020). This makes it impossible for workers to social distance. On May 11, 2020 23 temporary foreign workers tested positive for COVID-19 at Byland Nurseries, British Columbia (Thom, 2020). This was followed by many more COVID-19 outbreaks, like the Cargill meat plant, where hundreds tested positive (Croteau, 2021) with many hospitalizations of migrant workers and even deaths. The origins of COVID-19 and its spread among food workers took place within Canada due to inadequacies in social distancing and lack of protective equipment. In Ontario, the Windsor-Essex County area was delayed from moving forward in COVID-19 restriction easing because of mass outbreaks on farms that were not under control. This makes evident that the labour conditions of migrants are not adequate to protect them from COVID-19 (Kelley, 2020).

The case of temporary farm workers reveals concerning inequities associated with capitalism, border policies and migration, all of which have been intensified by the pandemic. More specifically, the pandemic has exacerbated labour precariousness fostered by neoliberal capitalism (Wise & Covarrubias, 2013). Labour precariousness is characterized by uncertainty and a "lack of security or stability in relation to work" (Liu, 2019). The labour rights of temporary migrants have been greatly curtailed creating a cycle of vulnerability and exposing them to poor working conditions, low wages, and restricted labour mobility (Gordon, 2019). The reliance on and the increased demand for vulnerable workers is a function of capitalist accumulation that requires a large supply of readily exploitable labour. In Canada, employers have increased their demand for temporary foreign labour and numbers have greatly accelerated since

2006. As such, Canadian immigration policies and labour laws have facilitated this demand (Faraday, 2014). These laws and programs have kept migrants in precarious immigration status and subject to highly exploitable conditions (Canadian Council for Refugees, 2016).

Neoliberal-led capitalist accumulation puts into perspective the larger system that continues to recreate inequalities and cycles of precarity. The post-pandemic era needs to bring into force a more stable legal status and more equitable working conditions for migrant workers. Such policy changes need to include greater investments in worker health and safety, more inspections of workplaces, and the extension of worker rights (Ferguson, 2020). Moving forward "we cannot turn our backs to these essential workers" who "put their lives at risk for the sake of" all Canadians (Fraser, 2020).

The COVID-19 Economic Crisis: The Disproportionate Impact on Immigrant Groups

Economies around the globe have been negatively impacted by the pandemic with steep declines in growth and massive surges in unemployment during the initial stages of the pandemic, and state finances cast into enormous debt as revenues decline and expenditures to address COVID-19 explode. In fact, the U.S. officially entered into recession in February 2020, a month before the seriousness of the pandemic made itself felt in North America (Kreiter, 2020). This extensive economic shock has come to be labeled the 'Coronavirus Recession', and by the IMF, 'The Great Lockdown' (International Monetary Fund, 2020).

By March 2020, Canada's GDP dropped by 7.2%, the steepest fall since such data started to be collected in 1961, with hesitant improvements developing after the end of the 1st pandemic wave. In March and April 2020 some 5.5 million in Canada lost their jobs or had significant reductions in their work hours. The official unemployment rate as of April 2020 stood at 13%. This was a far steeper economic decline than the 'Great Recession' of 2008/09 (Evans, 2020). In May 2020, if we consider a broader definition of actual unemployment, over one-third (34.8%) of the potential labour force in Canada was fully or partially out of work. This speaks to the rapidness of the decline and the global reach of its impact (Partington, 2020) with employment levels increasing thereafter. The hope for a rapid V-shaped recovery did not materialize with more of a gradual economic improvement interrupted by 2nd and 3rd wave COVID-19 surges (Stiglitz, 2020). Massive Keynesian-like public stimulus, the antithesis to neoliberal doctrine, has

helped to promote economic growth, but the recovery has taken more of a K-shape form with clear winners and losers in sectors of the economy, and, in the workforce. Those who have better jobs, often able to work from home, and accumulate savings during lockdowns, are well positioned versus those in lower-paid, precarious and front-facing employment who continue to struggle (Jayaseelan, 2021). The latter group is disproportionately racialized, migrant and immigrant.

Economic crises do not affect all parts of the labour force the same. The 2008/09 recession statistics show that in the OECD, immigrants and in particular more recent immigrants, were disproportionally impacted by job loss (Barrass & Shields, 2017, 196). In Canada, immigrants with 5 years or less residency made up 21.6% of job losses but constituted only 3.1% of the workforce (Rosher et al., 2012, 45). Immigrants with 5 to 10 years of residency were also hard hit by unemployment. While the detailed breakdown of unemployment numbers for the pandemic are not fully available, we know that visible minorities and immigrants have been highly vulnerable to layoff and high unemployment levels, especially more recent immigrants (Hou, Frank & Schimmele, 2020). They have borne the brunt of the crisis and the 'recovery'.

Rise in Unemployment

The danger is that lengthy spells of unemployment, especially for those new to the labour market, like many immigrants, can have long-term 'scarring effects' on future employment prospects, including the quality of 'available' future jobs (Arulampalam, 2001). Many employers view long-spells of unemployment or under-employment as a deskilling process. This situation can push such workers into precarious employment traps scarring them in terms of better employment options in the future. In Canada, precarious employment has increasingly become both a social as well as economic concern. In fact, around 30% of Canadians were working in either seasonal, contract or temporary jobs in 2018 (Liu, 2019). Other studies have indicated that the rate of precariousness in employment among the core working population approaches half the labour force (Procyk et al., 2017).

COVID-19 has exacerbated these growing trends of precariousness and vulnerability. For example, there is a high proportion of immigrant workers who are employed in long-term care and frontline health, as cleaners, taxi drivers, in transport, and as factory workers, among others (Bouka & Bouka, 2020). Some 50% of those who have become unemployed or lost most of their paid work hours

in March and April 2020 earned $16 or less an hour. Many of these workers have been compelled to make an unenviable choice of returning to workplaces that fail to provide adequate protection against COVID-19 or lose their financial support base and access to the Canada Emergency Relief Benefit (CERB)/or Employment Insurance (EI) because they 'chose' to leave their jobs (Wherry, 2020).

One case that stands out and is illustrative of the threat to a broader grouping of labourers who work in jobs that involve close human contact, are those employed in meat processing plants. The workforce in these plants is primarily made-up of immigrant workers, many who were recruited under Provincial Nominee Programs or as temporary foreign workers. The Cargill meat packing plant in High River Alberta, which processes some 40% of Canadian beef products, was the site of the largest outbreak of COVID-19 in North America in 2020 with 921 confirmed cases (Dryden, 2020). Other plants in Canada and south of the border also experienced mass outbreaks. Worker protection in these facilities has been deemed secondary to keeping operations going. There have been widespread reports of inadequate protective measures, protective equipment, testing as well as unwell workers being compelled to return to work once their sick leave was used up (Cassidy, 2020). Despite this, these work sites have been deemed essential and required to stay open.

While much of this low paid work has been considered essential in the context of COVID-19, better working conditions, health and safety protections, sick pay, and 'living wages' remain a major concern (Mojtehedzadeh, 2020). A 'pandemic recession' threatens to exacerbate already growing immigrant vulnerability and increase overall levels of health risks and poverty (Fisher & Bubala 2020). The creation of a large immigrant working class and the demand for low-wage immigrant labour is a product of 'free' markets and neoliberal capitalism (Adler et al., 2014). These neoliberal processes have negative implications for social and political inclusion. A neoliberal political economy of belonging focuses on the value of human capital as a core criterion of limited social and political inclusion (Mavelli, 2018). In other words, it economizes rights as well as access to services for immigrants, and migrant groups based on their judged economic value. This is evident in the various exclusions and gaps in COVID-19 measures and supports by the Canadian government.

Differential Economic Supports

The CERB has been one of the key pieces of federal legislation to support those who have lost employment or significant hours of work because of COVID-

19. This was introduced in conjunction with modifications to EI benefits to enhance supports to the unemployed. The CERB paid $2,000 a month for up to four months (later extended by a number of months). To qualify one must have earned $5,000 in the last year (Monsebraaten, 2020) and have a social insurance number (SIN). While the CERB is a significant source of economic support for citizens, there remain important gaps. In particular, more recent immigrants fail to meet all of the targeted criteria for CERB (Jingco, 2020). Immigrants who have just started to settle into the Canadian labour market may have a SIN but not have earned the $5,000 minimum in 2019 to qualify for the benefit (Democracy Dialogues, 2020). In fact, Shamira Madhany of World Educational Services has estimated that some half a million immigrants do not qualify for CERB (Jedwab, 2020). Also, other migrants like temporary foreign workers and international students were excluded. Studies show that new immigrants face high rates of unemployment and underemployment within the first five years of settlement. Further, unemployment and income reductions are found to be higher among new immigrants in comparison to more established immigrants and white Canadians (Liu, 2019). The lack of universal coverage based on economic contribution, which is a prime feature of these programs, means that many of the most vulnerable remain uncovered during COVID-19.

The pandemic has raised the question of the need for alternative social welfare policies that counter the neoliberal social policy cuts. Economic crises have been used in the past to drive forward neoliberal austerity 'reforms' (Klein, 2007). The current COVID-19 crisis, however, can be the driver of more progressive-based reforms of which a lively discussion has emerged (Shanahan & Smith, 2020). In particular, the adoption of universal basic income has come to the fore (Eggleton & Segal, 2020; Harris, 2020, May 3). A properly structured universal basic income could automatically provide both citizens and residents with a basic income. This would forego the need for more complex patchwork supports like EI, social assistance and special emergency measures like CERB, where many fail to qualify. There are of course questions with the guaranteed basic income (will it be a living or a poverty wage), but its value is in that it could ensure all Canadian residents are covered in times of crisis, including groups like new immigrants and precarious migrants. Without deep reform the social determinants of COVID-19 will continue to negatively impact groups like immigrants and migrants.

The Social Determinants of COVID-19: Racialization of Precariousness and Pandemic Discrimination

COVID-19 has amplified underlying economic and social inequalities in Canadian society (Boucher, 2020). Race and processes of racialization under neoliberalism have, for example, pushed categories of immigrants and migrants into precarious low-wage jobs. Precarious employment in the Canadian labour market as a racialized process has been promoted by neoliberalism (Bernhardt, 2015). Racial and ethnic differences have been employed to hinder the development of working-class unity weakening workers' labour market bargaining strength. Immigration has been the major force in increasing the racial diversity of the Canadian population and labour force with some 70% of newcomers being of visible minority backgrounds (Catalyst, 2019).

Race and racial categories are given significance through social processes that result in differential treatment based on the power structures that exclude specific groups. This has economic consequences and leads to "the racialization of poverty which refers to the disproportionate and persistent experience of low income among racialized groups in Canada" (Bernhardt, 2015). Racialization is a social process that categorizes groups based on race and subjugates them to differential treatment and access to resources leading to socioeconomic, political, and health disproportionality among groups in society. Research suggests that discrimination negatively impacts health. Poor health can be associated with higher "exposure to hazardous environments, psychosocial stressors, inadequate medical care, economic deprivation, lack of opportunities, and social exclusion" (Pollock et al., 2011). This is further exacerbated by neoliberal reforms that have created a new economy of care in Canada. The new care economy has increased the workload of doctors, nurses, and staff in hospitals and medical practices. As a result, medical practitioners have become constrained and many come to see patients of visible minorities as "problematic and costly in terms of time and energy investments" as well as "challenging due to linguistic and cultural barriers" (Spitzer, 2004 in Pollock et al., 2011).

Differential treatment of those with immigrant or migrant backgrounds has created barriers to access to health care. Research examining barriers to health for migrant groups like refugees, has found that some health service providers are reluctant to "accept refugees as patients, even when seeking new clients, as they are perceived as challenging due to complex health needs, linguistic barriers and/or complicated insurance coverage schemes that can delay payment for services delivered" (McKeary and Newbold 2010 in Pollock et al. 2011). As such,

neoliberalism works to produce consequences and inequities for newcomers in accessing adequate health care (Pollock et al. 2011).

COVID-19 has exacerbated these processes, highlighting the unequal health and social impacts experienced by those from specific race, ethnic, and immigration status groupings (Platt & Warwick, 2020). In fact, there is a long and troubled association between race, ethnicity, and pandemics (Chotiner, 2020). A study of England and Wales found that ethnicity and race were closely associated with COVID-19 morbidity. Blacks were more than four time more likely than whites to die from COVID-19, with most other ethnic groups three and a half to double the rates. The researchers suspect that the kinds of occupations that ethnic minorities and racialized people occupy may be a primary factor behind the differences (Booth & Barr, 2020). In the U.S. a third of the COVID-19 deaths are among Afro-Americans (Chotiner, 2020). A 2021 Statistics Canada study found that visible minorities were more than twice as likely to die from COVID-19 compared to whites, with Blacks being especially vulnerable (Tasker, 2021).

In Canada, immigrant concentrations in precarious employment and low-wage jobs have added a geographical threat to immigrant populations where the risk for infection is high. A recent Harvard University research study documented that there are much higher coronavirus death rates in communities with high rates of poverty, dense housing, and large numbers of racial/ethnic minorities (Ryan, 2020). Canadian studies have likewise found that these types of communities, that are also heavily immigrant in composition, are also particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 (Contenta, 2020). ICES (a non-profit research institute) matched socio-economic demographic data with testing results for COVID-19 in the Toronto area. It found that there were significantly higher numbers of positive test scores for those who reside "in neighbourhoods characterized by precarious housing, lower income status, and a greater concentration of immigrants" (Wallace & Moon, 2020). Toronto data that linked infection rates to postal code confirmed that by far the highest rates of infection were to be found in neighborhoods in the northeast and northwest of the city that have high number of immigrants (CBC News, 2020, May 27). The key factor for higher rates of infection is not being an immigrant, but the fact that immigrants are much more likely to be living in densely populated neighborhoods and overcrowded accommodation, be low income, racialized, and have employment that places them in circumstances where they are not able to socially distance (Choi et al., 2020, 6-7). Jobs where social distancing is difficult constitute the most vulnerable workers in the economy during this pandemic because of high exposure to

COVID-19 on work sites (Laughland & Holpuch, 2020). These workers of course bring COVID-19 back to their families and neighborhoods.

Widespread stigmatization and scapegoating of Asians have occurred in Canada and false claims that migrants and migration are root causes of the pandemic have been perpetuated (Eligh, 2021). The targeting of migrants and racial and ethnic minorities during the pandemic has been labelled CoronaRacism (International Monetary Fund, 2020) and it plays into the agenda of right-wing populist political movements and governments. For such movements "the pandemic has been weaponized to spread anti-migrant narratives and call for increased immigration control and reduction of migrants' rights" (Guadagno, 2020, 12). Blaming the Chinese migrants (Zeidler, 2020), and other vulnerable populations is, also, a convenient way to shift the blame and distract from governments' mismanagement of the pandemic. CoronaRacism has become the politics of distraction, hate and discrimination. Such attacks discourage immigrants/migrants from being tested and seeking medical assistance when needed (Guadagno, 2020, 11), placing them at risk and hindering efforts to limit community spread. Solidaristic approaches are not only based on respecting human rights but also are the foundation for good health policy in combating the pandemic. As Lorenzo Guadagno of the IOM notes: "… societies that cannot mitigate the economic, social and psychological impacts of the outbreak and related response measures on all communities will be less able to recover effectively and will likely face heavier direct and indirect long-term consequences" (2020, 3).

Political Dimensions of COVID-19

The question of 'what happens next?' is an important one with possible positive and negative dimensions. Too much of the discourse around COVID-19 migrants and immigrants has been negative. Yet, there is an opportunity to flip the negative narrative (CERC, 2020, May 13). Approaches rooted in social solidarity promote human rights and are the foundation for good health policy in combating the pandemic. Small acts of solidarity are not just symbolically important but can help to build deeper support and engagement into the future. A case in point was the nightly display of the banging of pots and pans in support of frontline workers, many of whom are foreign-born and poorly paid. Acts of solidarity are also evident in the Black Lives Matter protests around the globe where whites and other non-black people in large numbers marched to show their

support in opposition to racial injustice (Parker, Menasce & Anderson, 2020) even in the context of the COVID-19 threat.

In some countries where right-wing populist movements have arisen, the pandemic has actually worked to expose the limitations of leaders and ideas behind these movements and led to a growing confidence in scientific authority. This has been the case, for example, in Italy, and Germany (Lassa & Booth, 2020). In other countries right-wing governments have used the crisis to impose more authoritarian measures in order to consolidate their power, as the cases of Hungary, Poland, and Brazil suggest (Kakissis, 2020). Trump, of course, used the Corona crisis to push forward his own 'authoritarian turn' (Acemoglu, 2020). But, as in the example of Brazil and the U.S., the rise of considerable popular opposition threatens the authority of such right-wing leaders and contributed to the electoral defeat of Trump. Hence, the pattern of right-wing populism is mixed and volatile (Sorge, 2020). The mass protests of May and June 2020 against racism in the U.S. and elsewhere is a clear demonstration of this (Keenan, 2020). There are also intensified calls well beyond the U.S., including Canada, to recognize and declare racism a threat and to treat it as a public crisis with demands for action (Allen & Yang, 2020).

The danger remains that post-pandemic there will be a return to austerity and with neoliberalism strategically adapting (Fanelli & Whiteside, 2020), as happened after the 2008-09 recession. Mike Davis has characterized the combination of neoliberal austerity with the pandemic as the equivalent of a 'medical Katrina', exposing deep racial, class and social divides, and representing a significant political threat (2020). Alternatively, COVID-19 could represent a progressive opening with a more general commitment to addressing precarity and the structural inequities made evident by COVID-19. Responses from government will require a progressive activist state. The pandemic has caused widespread economic dislocation that will not be quickly and easily reversed. Times of crisis can open policy windows that provide opportunities for sweeping structural reforms, as happened with the rise of the modern welfare state in the aftermath of the Great Depression and the Second World War.

The importance of advocacy rises to the fore in the post-pandemic period. There will be struggle regarding the shape the future takes. It is important that migrant rights groups, settlement agencies and their umbrella support organizations, and other progressive forces, engage in vigorous public advocacy for policies and programs that support open multicultural societies, anti-racism, protection of the most vulnerable migrants, and robust social programs that

address deep structural inequality. The burden of risk must be shifted away from the individual and, through public policy and institutions, placed more squarely within the collective.

Conclusion

This paper explores the COVID-19 crisis with a focus on immigration and migration in Canada using a political economy lens. Neoliberalism has played a major role in shaping pandemic impacts and the responses to it. This paper finds that the effects of COVID-19 have been uneven, as have been access to protections and benefits especially among immigrants and migrants whose status is temporary or irregular. Migrants and immigrants face greater risks of COVID-19. This is due to rising unemployment and disproportionate economic impact on migrants and immigrants, differential economic supports, the racialization of precarity and geographies as well differential access to health care. Migrants and immigrants confront the unequal burden of COVID-19, clearly demonstrating their more precarious position within Canada. The lived reality is that "not everyone gets to be safe" (Wherry, 2020).

In terms of borders and the international movement of migrants, Canadian actions have been problematic. The closing of borders has severely curbed international travel and other population movements, including refugees seeking asylum. This situation, for a considerable period, virtually halted the landing of immigrants, refugees, and international students in Canada. The question of the rights of the most vulnerable – refugees and asylum seekers – that has been downgraded in this pandemic, needs to be elevated and built into migration policies and emergency responses grounded in social justice. The case of temporary farm workers also reveals the dependence of advanced economies on cheap migrant labour. The vulnerability of these farm workers to COVID-19 once in Canada indicates that their working conditions and those of all temporary foreign workers is exploitative and that rights need to be recognized.

Border closing, with notable exceptions made for what have been deemed 'essential workers' has been justified as a protection against virus spread. Restrictions, however, have gone much further, in many cases being xenophobic nationalist reactions to 'the dangerous other' with arguments for further securitization of migration. This response is connected to governments that call for neoliberal forms of resilience along with right-wing populist positions that promote oppositional narratives that harm immigrants and other vulnerable populations. Neoliberalism calls for sacrifice in the pursuit of "possessive

individualism" (McPherson, 1961), ignoring the differential impacts of COVID-19, and the rewards of solidarity, sharing and mutual accomplishment in the context of struggle.

Neoliberalism seeks to forge paths forward by dividing and polarizing. In fact, such governments' own shortcomings are projected on to others in blame-shifting exercises. The heavy focus on borders pursued by some during this pandemic is designed to shift attention away from other areas where government resources fall short in addressing COVID-19 and the post-pandemic rebuilding. The threat of a return to a neoliberal austerity agenda is real, but crises also open policy windows. This opening must be ceased by progressives in the push for sweeping structural reforms. Inclusive recovery plans can work to "incorporate dedicated investments to cater for the most vulnerable in society and reduce inequalities" (Di Blasi, 2020). The inequalities made evident by the pandemic direct our attention to the need for a human rights and social justice approach to address these issues. The compounded risks of COVID-19 are evident where factors such as immigration status, race, gender, age and ethnicity intersect.

The pandemic has been 'the Great Disrupter' economically, socially, politically, geographically, and certainly in terms of population health. In the words of the World Economic Forum, COVID19 constitutes "a seismic geopolitical event that will transform migration and mobility systems globally" (2020). The question remains as to what shape this change will take. With the aid of social justice centred, evidence-informed advocacy, and grassroots popular support, these changes can be shaped in progressive directions.

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