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**National Center of Competence in
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Towards a Novel Mobility Regime? The Legacies of the COVID-19 Pandemic Regarding the Governance of Human Movement

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14.11.2023 , in ((Towards a Novel Mobility Regime)) , ((Christin Achermann, Sélim Clerc, Janine Dahinden, Francisco Klauser et Eloise Thompson)



Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, authorities deployed a myriad of « exceptional » measures that severely impacted the possibilities of human movement. States restricted, controlled and monitored people on the move at various social and spatial scales. The emerging « regime of (im)mobility » turned out to be highly differential and inherently discriminatory – depending on intersectional social categorizations such as gender, nationality, race, class, etc, that were used to assess people’s profiles, risks, eligibility and levels of access to a range of spaces and services.

In the fight against COVID-19, mobility and immobility were entangled in manifold problematic ways. What emerged was a « programme of government of movement » (Côté-Boucher, 2008), aimed at establishing specific spatial, social and symbolic logics of control for filtering, channeling, tracking and monitoring, as well as facilitating and speeding up various types of movement, from passage point to passage point, from border to border, from security zone to security zone.

Engaging with Potential Legacies

As most countries have now re-established a situation of « the old normal, » there is a critical need to engage with the legacies of the measures taken in the governance of human movement in the fight against COVID-19. This blog series contributes to this task. It explores and challenges the potential transformations – gradual and fundamental, ruptures and continuities – induced by the policy response to COVID-19 with regard to the governance of human movement. In addressing this issue, the blog series not only opens up a critical discussion of the logics that shaped the governance of (im)mobility during the pandemic, but also explores the historical situatedness of these logics and asks to what effect, in the long run, they might change the very ways of dealing with differing types of movement in everyday life. In sum, are we moving towards a novel (im)mobility regime in the present-day world? Hereby, the blog series grounds on four basic premises.

Multi-Scalar « Regimes of (Im)mobility »

We propose a multi-scalar understanding of the concept of « regimes of (im)mobility. » We use this concept to distinguish between different forms of (human) mobility and to link these distinctions to questions of political economy and power (among many see De Genova 2017; Wyss 2022; Horvath, Amelina, and Peters 2017; Tsianos and Karakayali 2010; Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013). We understand regimes of (im)mobility as both the mechanisms that divide mobilities into categories and hierarchies, and their effects (Dahinden et al. 2023) – be it at the global, transnational, European, national but also

subnational or local levels.

Mobility regimes encompass a multitude of actors – both state and non-state – and involve regulations, representations, categorizations and everyday practices (Wyss 2022). Following this approach, the blog series explores the governance of human movement in the context of COVID-19 on differing social and spatial scales. This implies a focus not only on the governance of movement across national borders, but also on the techniques and strategies of monitoring, filtering and restricting the everyday movements of individuals and social groups within the national territory, among them micro-spaces of specific institutions and spaces of flows.

Crises as Social Constructions

The blog series adopts a fundamentally constructivist understanding of the COVID-19 pandemic, which is approached not only as a paradigmatic example of a « crisis » that is constructed through specific bureaucratic, political and technologically mediated practices and narratives, but also as a « critical juncture, » i.e., as an « exceptional » situation that is being instrumentalized to introduce all kinds of measures to deal with the considered threats. Put differently, the blog series approaches the policy response to COVID-19 as both the product and producer of complex relationships bringing together various actors and interests.

Countering Ahistoricity

Channeled through a focus on the « legacies » of the COVID-19 pandemic, the blog series pursues a strong interest in the differing temporal and processual logics of the governance of human movement. We assume that techniques of control and restriction introduced in the fight against COVID-19 fundamentally drew on past experiences and pre-existing plans and intentions (derived from other « exceptional » events, but also from more ordinary circumstances) and, in turn, they leave their mark beyond the present. Connecting with recent critiques of the ahistoricity of existing research and theories on mobilities and movements (i.e. Bhambra 2014), this approach places center stage the historical connections of the fight against COVID-19 with broader processes of colonialism, dispossession and appropriation, amongst others.

Legacies in the Making

The blog series moves beyond an understanding of the fight against COVID-19 as a somewhat unitary block of shared and universally accepted measures. Instead, we focus on the internal contradictions, tensions, twists as well as on the various forms of contestation and resistance conveyed. The point is to study « legacies in the making »

as a process, which relies on complex and heterogeneous relational configurations that result from both converging and conflicting positions and intentions.

Multiple Perspectives and Interdisciplinarity

In sum, the blog series invites an approach to the legacies of COVID-19 as dynamic and multiscale assemblages of individuals, ideas and things whose assimilation is constantly re-enacted by multiple processes, power relations and projects, bringing together various actors, interests and concerns, through multiple channels and in multiple sites. This asks for a fundamentally interdisciplinary engagement, informed by different conceptually and empirically informed grounds, that combines migration and mobility scholarship, but also draws on a wide range of additional theoretical strands and disciplinary sensitivities. Following this « program, » each of the blog entries illuminates, from different angles, this question of ruptures, continuities, and transformations of a diverse range of « regimes of (im)mobilities. » We wish you much inspiration while reading the blog entries!

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Balises (im)mobility, Border policies, frontières, COVID-19, Union européenne, mobility, Suisse



The National Centres of Competence in Research (NCCR) are a research instrument of the Swiss National Science Foundation