

The virus: Class dimensions of mobility and immobility

Robin Cohen

Robin Cohen is emeritus professor of development studies at the University of Oxford and was formerly professor of sociology at the University of Warwick.

The Covid-19 pandemic has reminded us, the social science community, that some of the basic building blocks of our disciplines have been relatively neglected in recent years. The salience of class to the spread, containment and impact of the disease is particularly evident. The virus travels and hitches a ride on us, the humans who act simultaneously as its victims, hosts and bearers. Consequently, questions of human mobility and immobility are both crucial to understanding the virus and both have significant class dimensions.

Privileged mobility

Perhaps the earliest case of Covid-19 in the UK concerned a highly mobile British businessman who had contracted the virus in Singapore in January 2020 and passed it to others in the French alpine skiresort of Contamines-Montjoie, before returning to the UK on an EasyJet flight (where he may have infected others). He then spread the virus to others in his home city, Brighton. I make no moral judgement on this individual, who carried the virus while asymptomatic, but merely observe that the enhanced mobility derived from his privileged lifestyle provided the virus with an effective delivery service.

In an earlier blog, I pointed to the cases of Italy, Spain and France where those who had the means of transport rapidly exited highly infected areas.[1] In Italy, when a draft decree banning people from leaving or entering Lombardy was leaked by *Corriere della Sera* on 7 March 2020, thousands took trains or jumped into their cars and headed to their extended families in the south, some carrying Covid-19.[2] Switch now to Spain, a few days later. A Spanish newspaper, citing ABC news, reported that the ex-prime minister, Jose Aznar, with his family and entourage, had been spotted arriving at his home in Guadalmina Baja, Marbella. On the afternoon of 13 March, the report noted that 'the motorways leaving Madrid this afternoon have seen four kilometres of traffic jams on the A-4, heading towards Andalucia [while] the M-40 headed towards Valencia and the Costa Blanca also saw tailbacks of at least two kilometres'.[3]

The Spanish flight was largely to second, rather than primary, homes. Wealthier Madrilenos often have homes on the costas to which they retreat when the weather gets too hot, though this time they moved for other reasons. The manifestation of panic mobility in Spain is directly paralleled in France where Parisians (a somewhat derogatory name for Parisians) were met at Cape Ferret (south-west France) by hostile graffiti and a Facebook page on which one local lamented, 'already the Parisians and others with a second home have arrived ... given that the supermarket has been stripped in two days'. Another complained, 'it's very worrying to see all those people fleeing Paris – that will certainly spread the virus'.[4]

The flight of the affluent from New York also started in mid-March. One provider of private health care reported that he was fielding 75 telephone calls a day asking whether it would be better to stay in the city or go to the Hamptons, Aspen, St Barts (an island in the Caribbean catering to the wealthy) or Palm Beach. Private jets were chartered and some even sought to establish their own Intensive Care Units together with ventilators in their second homes.[5] The confusing announcement by President Trump that New York might be quarantined, which he withdrew shortly afterwards, will probably have caused a further exodus.

The mobility of the poor

Movement by the poor has taken a very different form. As factories, offices and businesses close their doors, daily-paid and migrant workers are simply discarded without ceremony. Prime Minister Modi's order to lockdown India from midnight on 24 March 2020 for three weeks to combat Covid-19 has provided a traumatic illustration of the plight of the poor. Desperate migrants tried to return to their home areas, with crowded railway and bus stations becoming giant petri dishes on which the virus could thrive. A *New York Times* story pulled no punches. Headed 'For India's Laborers, Coronavirus Lockdown Is an Order to Starve', *Times'* journalists Abi-Habib and Yasir depict scenes of chaos, with some lives already lost and many facing starvation. They tell of a group of 13 men with about US \$3 between them walking home from Delhi to Uttar Pradesh. The men had not eaten for nearly two days. One of them, 28-year-old truck driver Deepak Kumar, said, 'this may have been a good decision for the wealthy, but not those of us with no money'.[6] At first, the Uttar Pradesh government was sympathetic, sending 1000 buses to pick up the state's workers in

Delhi. When many returnees were greeted with hostility for fear of what they harboured, the pickup was abruptly stopped, causing further chaos. In Bareilly (Uttar Pradesh) returnees were gathered on a street and sprayed with disinfectant. This was both degrading and likely to be ineffective (as we know, the virus travels inside bodies as well as on clothing).



Leaving Delhi after the lockdown. Frame from a BBC News report (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QS84vJrpOsl>)

Privileged immobility

Forgive the use of an autobiographical account, but my wife and I provide a simple illustration of the privileged immobile. We have a comfortable, warm house and a small garden. We are digitally connected with colleagues, friends and relatives worldwide and have paid for streaming services that keep us moderately entertained. We were a little anxious about the lack of delivery slots for our food and household essentials, but we have been reassured by suddenly finding ourselves as ‘priority customers’ on one of the delivery services, without requesting such a status. Why we suddenly were so identified is a mystery and not a little sinister. How exactly did Big Brother know we were both of advanced age, with one or two health issues? Iteration one on the food delivery site was a digital queue of 34,500 customers with a wait time of 5 hours. After we became priority customers, we had to wait in a queue for only a few minutes behind 12 others. We are able to work from home – my wife at editing journal articles and books, me at trying to write them. Next week, the Zoom app – which had never previously crossed our paths – will bring my wife’s Pilates class

to our living room. Of course, life is weird and unnatural, but we experience no pressing hardship.

The immobility of the poor

The immobility of the poor could not be more different. I provide just three examples.

- *Tehran, Iran.* As economic activities and movement shut down, about 1.5 million ‘street children’ who make their living from selling commodities like flowers, cigarettes and chewing gum to car owners and those on public transport suddenly have no means of survival. Many are ‘foreigners’ (principally Afghans), who gain little sympathy from public officials.[7]
- *Johannesburg, South Africa.* Two academics argue that in the townships, social distancing will be almost impossible, while mass unemployment (already at 30 per cent) resulting from a lockdown may mean mass poverty and even starvation.[8]
- *Barcelona, Spain.* There are also notable class differences in the infection rate in European cities. For example, in the working-class district of Roquetes (Barcelona) the infection rate is 533 per 100,000, compared with 77 per 100,000 in upmarket Sant Gervasi.[9]

Conclusion

To make my point quickly, I have relied on a simple four-box matrix – contrasting privileged/poor and mobile/immobile. Of course, any sophisticated class analysis has to be more nuanced. No class theorist would accept a simple bifurcation into privileged/poor. Accordingly, as we begin to get more differentiated data, the analysis will get more subtle. Given the difficulties of collecting data at this time, the most immediately useful indicators of variation will be infection and death rates by postal code. However, it is already apparent that the sections of the working class will be impacted differently.

As Biao Xiang argues, we can develop a category of mobility-related workers, where mobility is their necessary means of livelihood. A China-wide survey conducted after the Wuhan lockdown concluded that over 75 per cent of truckers had lost their livelihoods, while taxi drivers’ incomes had collapsed. However, many more workers were recruited to deliver food.[10] In other words, Covid-19 creates new winners and losers. We can also reasonably surmise that workers who have recovered from Covid-19 and can prove they are immune

will be considerably advantaged compared with those who are not in that position. According to press reports, Germany plans to engage in mass antibody testing, issuing documentation to those who have beaten the virus. A new form of stratification will thus arise between 'CIs' (certified immune persons) and DKs (don't knows). Becoming a CI might be a chosen strategy for many desperate people who will seek to infect themselves and get back to work with a certificate in hand. Even older people might be tempted to take the risk, so that they can look after the children of breadwinners. Perhaps it would be a fictional exaggeration to imagine forged certificates of immunity or distinctive CI tattoos. Who knows? These are desperate times.

Notes

- [1] <https://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/2020/take-me-home-the-coronavirus-virus-and-panic-mobility/>
- [2] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/08/leaked-coronavirus-plan-to-quarantine-16m-sparks-chaos-in-italy>
- [3] <https://www.theolivepress.es/spain-news/2020/03/13/covid-19-madrid-residents-flee-to-spains-costa-del-sol-valencia-and-murcia-despite-government-advice-to-remain-at-home-over-coronavirus-fears-including-ex-pm-jose-aznar/>
- [4] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/18/thank-you-parisians-dont-bring-the-virus-plea-from-rural-france>
- [5] <https://www.ft.com/content/09b48bce-67fd-11ea-a3c9-1fe6fedcca75>
- [6] <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/29/world/asia/coronavirus-india-migrants.html?auth=login-email&login=email>
- [7] <https://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/2020/when-home-does-not-exist-what-does-self-quarantine-mean-street-children-in-tehran/>
- [8] <https://theconversation.com/why-a-one-size-fits-all-approach-to-covid-19-could-have-lethal-consequences-134252>
- [9] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/01/poor-and-vulnerable-hardest-hit-by-pandemic-in-spain>
- [10] <https://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/2020/mobile-livelihoods-in-stress/>

