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The Politics of Refugee Protection in a (Post)COVID-19 World

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic is not a "great equaliser" as some have claimed, but rather an amplifier of existing inequalities, including those associated with migration. Perhaps not surprisingly, it is refugees, often the most marginalised of all migrants, who have had the most to lose. Refugees and displaced populations living in crowded and unhygienic conditions have often been unable to protect themselves from the virus, face increasing economic precarity and often find themselves excluded from measures to alleviate poverty and hunger. The threat to refugees comes not only from material (in)security, but from increasing exclusion and exceptionalism associated with the politics of protection. Evidence from the first nine months of the pandemic suggests that some governments, in Europe and US but also the Global South, are using COVID-19 as an excuse to double-down on border closures and/or dip into their migration policy toolboxes to demonstrate the robustness of their response to it. Refugees are increasingly prevented from accessing the international protection to which they are potentially entitled or used (alongside migrants more generally) as scapegoats by populist leaders exploiting the pandemic for political mileage. Some states have used the pandemic to push through controversial policies that further limit access to protection and/or institutionalize the marginalization of refugees. In this context, it seems likely that COVID-19 will accelerate the course of history in relation to refugee protection, rather than changing its direction.

Keywords: refugees; forced migration; international protection; asylum; politics; COVID-19; inequality; exclusion

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1. Introduction

In the dying days of 2020, it is hard to imagine—let alone write about—life in a post-COVID-19 world. Whilst mass vaccination programmes will start to roll out in early 2021—at least for those fortunate enough to live in the small number of rich countries that have pre-ordered the majority of vaccines under development (Mullard 2020)—the impacts of COVID-19 clearly go well beyond the pandemic itself. Even before COVID-19 came along, there was evidence of growing inequality within and between countries (UNDESA 2020). Whilst a sustained period of economic growth in some of the largest emerging economies, such as China and India, has helped lift millions of people out of absolute poverty, the benefits of this growth have not been evenly distributed (World Inequality Lab 2018). Countries where inequality has grown are home to more than two thirds (71%) of the world's population (UNDESA 2020), whilst income inequality in OECD countries is at its highest level for the past half century (OECD 2015). A person's life chances increasingly depend on where they are born (Roser 2013).

Based on emerging data and evidence, this article argues that the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified these existing inequalities, pushing those already on the margins of society still further away from the rights and opportunities that many of us take for granted. This includes inequalities associated with migration. Whilst migration has the potential to reduce inequality by redistributing resources at the national, regional and even global levels, the equalizing effects of migration are far from guaranteed, not least because there are significant differences in the right to move, the right to be protected and in opportunities to access work, education and healthcare (Black et al. 2005; UNDESA 2020).

Rights and opportunities associated with migration often reflect and reinforce existing spatial, structural and social inequalities, including those related to gender, age and income (Crawley 2019). The result is that migration can serve to amplify existing inequalities and create new ones in the form of irregular and precarious journeys, poor labour conditions and a lack of rights for migrants and their families. Meanwhile, politicians in Europe, the US and some countries in the Global South have increasingly sought to capitalise on the fear with which migration can be associated, manufacturing and manipulating fear for political ends (Huysmans 2006; Smith and Pain 2016). The consequences of adding COVID-19 into what was already a heady political mix have been depressingly predictable, amplifying migration-related inequalities across a wide range of geographical and migratory contexts. Emerging evidence of these impacts is being collated by a number of research-led organisations, including the MIDEQ Hub http://www.mideq.org/en/blog/ (accessed on 11 December 2020) and Kaldor Centre https://www.kaldorcentre.unsw.edu.au/publication/COVID-19_Watch (accessed on 11 December 2020).

2. The Politics of Refugee Protection

Decisions made by states about whether or not to provide protection under the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees ('the Refugee Convention") to those forced to leave their homes and countries have always been intensely political (Saunders 2014; Crawley and Setrana forthcoming). In theory, such decisions are based on evidence about the human rights abuses that an individual has experienced (or fears) in their country of origin and the ability and/or willingness of the authorities in their home country to provide protection. In reality, the conceptualisation of a "refugee" and, in turn, who is and is not able to access international protection, is defined and understood in ways that primarily reflect the interests of the Global North rather than those of the Global South where the vast majority of refugees are located. This idea is nothing new. Refugees—together with their advocates and protectors—have long been positioned within the global politics of migration in specific ways: as symbols of a country's allegiance or opposition to a particular regime or conflict (Goodwin-Gill 2008); as abusers of the hospitality of otherwise generous States (Safouane 2019); and, increasingly, as deviants and a potential threat to security (Huysmans 2006). In the first few decades after World War II, the acceptance of refugees from countries comprising the Communist bloc was a way to position the West as morally and ideologically superior (Goodwin-Gill 2008). After the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Western nations became less interested in championing refugee rights, but refugees have, nonetheless, remained a critical tool in global "migration diplomacy" (Adamson and Tsourapas 2019). Despite constituting only around 10% of all international migrants (UNDESA 2017), refugees and the systems designed to protect them have become highly symbolic, representing a "touchstone issue" for a wide range of other anxieties and concerns across the countries of both the Global North and, increasingly, South (Crawley and McMahon 2016). Crawley and McMahon (2016) define a "touchstone issue" as an issue which has come to symbolise or signify a broader range of concerns or anxieties in society). Migration is therefore one of the most important issues facing the world today not just because of the humanitarian needs of those on the move, but because it can make us feel deeply insecure, tapping into our deepest fears and anxieties.

There are many examples from recent history that illustrate the profoundly political contexts of refugee protection into which COVID-19 arrived. It is worth starting in Europe, not because the scale of forced migration to Europe is particularly large—only Germany ranks within the top 10 refugee-hosting countries in the world, with as many or more in Turkey, Pakistan, Colombia and Uganda (UNHCR 2020a)—but because it is in Europe that the politics of migration have taken a particularly toxic turn. Much has been written about the so-called "migration crisis" that began in 2015 when more than 1 million people travelled across the Mediterranean in flimsy overcrowded boats, arriving on the shores of Europe in search of protection from well-documented conflict and human rights abuse, most notably the conflicts in Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq (IOM 2016). As people drowned

at sea or found themselves trapped in badly managed asylum systems, the countries of the European Union jostled for position, closing borders, building fences, restricting search and rescue (SAR) efforts and frequently using the movement of people to maintain or consolidate political power internally and in relation to one another. European countries were slow to respond and failed to share responsibility for dealing with increased arrivals in a pragmatic and principled way, instead concentrating their efforts—individually and collectively—on preventing or discouraging people from attempting to enter. This was seen, for example, in restrictions imposed on SAR efforts by the Italian government and the agreement between the EU and Turkey trading enhanced border controls, readmission to Turkey and the resettlement of Syrians from Turkey to the EU for visa liberalisation and accelerated EU membership negotiations (Crawley et al. 2018). This response reflected broader struggles facing an enlarged Europe, still entangled in the aftershocks of a deep recession and riddled by populist and separatist national movements (Dustmann et al. 2016). The politics of protection were evident at every turn, but nowhere more so than in Hungary where the Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, invited all citizens to complete a questionnaire on how they thought the government should respond to Europe's "migration crisis" and explicitly contrasting Orbán's exclusionary approach with the "lenient policy" of Brussels (Bocskor 2018). Bocskor (2018) notes that, whilst the declared aim of such consultations is to discuss important matters with the public by sending out questionnaires to all potential voters, the questionnaires are often biased, ask overly suggestive questions, and only serve to validate decisions already taken. For example, in his introduction to the questionnaire, Orbán presented migration as a threat to Hungarian livelihoods, stating that "[a]s Brussels has failed to address immigration appropriately, Hungary must follow its own path. We shall not allow economic migrants to jeopardise the jobs and livelihoods of Hungarians". Respondents were then asked whether they would "support the Hungarian government in the introduction of more stringent immigration regulations, in contrast to Brussels' lenient policy?". The findings of the survey, answered by nearly one million people, were used to legitimate a series of giant billboards telling refugees to stay away or move on. Since few, if any, refugees understand Hungarian, these warnings were clearly intended to increase public anxiety and win support among citizens for planned anti-immigration laws and measures (Howden 2016).

Across the Atlantic, similar political forces were at play. Donald Trump made immigration one of the centrepieces of his 2016 Presidential campaign, with the emphasis on both stopping migration from Mexico by "building a wall", and significantly reducing the number of refugees able to enter the US through what had once been the world's largest refugee resettlement programme. As in Europe, Trump both explicitly, and in more subtle ways, portrayed refugees and other migrants as being responsible for increased security concerns, arguing that existing migration policies, including the refugee resettlement programme, potentially allowed the admission of terrorists to the United States (Scribner 2018). This was despite evidence that terrorist incidents in the United States had been steadily decreasing since 9/11 and that perpetrators were more often than not white, far-right extremists acting alone and originating from within the US (Silva et al. 2019). Once in power, Trump followed through on these campaign messages by imposing a ban on issuing visas—including for the purpose of refugee resettlement—for those originating from seven Muslim-majority countries including Syria: the so-called "Muslim ban" (Panduranga et al. 2017). Since that time, refugee admissions to the US have fallen by two thirds, and while the shutdown has not been complete, refugee resettlement for Muslims has plummeted: in 2019, 79% of refugees were Christian and 16% Muslim, as compared to 44% Christian and 46% Muslim in 2016 (Greenberg et al. 2019). The use of religion and anti-Muslim sentiment to mobilise political opposition to refugee protection has also been seen across Europe (Hamid 2019) and in India (Kaushal 2020).

The politics of refugee protection are also increasingly evident in the countries of the Global South, including South Africa, one of the world's major destinations for those seeking protection. In 2019, South Africa hosted an estimated 277,581 refugees and asylum

seekers (UNHCR 2020a). As elsewhere in the Global South, the majority (84%) originate from within the region—mostly from Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo—escaping poverty, political violence and war (Masuku 2020). Whilst the laws protecting those seeing protection in South Africa are among the most progressive in the world, in practice, they are hard to access and associated with long procedural delays (Amit 2019; Masuku 2020; Mukumbang et al. 2020). As a consequence, many refugees remain entirely undocumented and without access to rights, including opportunities to work (Crush et al. 2017) or access healthcare (Alfaro-Velcamp 2017) and education (Willie and Mfubu 2016). Moreover, xenophobic violence aimed almost exclusively at African nationals surged during 2019 and early 2020, resulting in deaths, displacement and damage to homes and businesses (Human Rights Watch 2019). Such violence is increasingly understood as part of South Africa's "Afrophobia" problem, defined as "an intolerance towards other black Africans . . . manifest in the daily insecurity of living as a foreigner in the country, and the menace implied by the whisper of 'amakwerekwere'—a pejorative label reserved specifically for African foreign nationals" (Oliver 2020). This xenophobia, rooted in a system of entrenched economic and social inequality that endures long after the end of apartheid, is fuelled by the idea that poverty and inequality, chronically high unemployment, high crime rates, and poor public services are the result of abuses by migrants from other parts of the continent. The South African government actively promotes this idea. For example, in December 2016, the Executive Mayor of City of Johannesburg Herman Mashaba labelled foreign nationals living in Johannesburg "criminals" who had hijacked the city. In November 2018, the then minister of Health, now minister of Home Affairs, Aaron Motsoaledi, accused migrants of burdening the country's health system. In South Africa, as elsewhere, the politics of protection are often tied to issues of security, economic propensity, racial or cultural integrity and national identity and resistance to refugee protection are increasingly mobilized for political purposes. It was into these contexts that COVID-19 arrived.

3. COVID-19, the Great Amplifier

News of COVID-19 started to hit the headlines from the beginning of 2020. By early March, the dynamics of international migration had been turned on their head, with the vast majority of airlines grounded and travel restrictions confining people to their homes and neighbourhoods (Ullah et al. 2020). It has sometimes been claimed that COVID-19 is the "great equaliser": anyone, we are told, can catch the virus, no matter where they live or their social and economic status (Crawley 2020). Such claims are often bolstered by widely reported instances of high-profile individuals—actors and media personalities, sport stars, members of royalty, ministers and even heads of state, all firmly rooted in the socio-economic elite—contracting COVID-19 (Bandyopadhyay and Chanda 2020). The reality of course is very different. As noted by the UN General Secretary Antonio Guterres (2020):

"COVID-19 has been likened to an x-ray, revealing fractures in the fragile skeleton of the societies we have built. It is exposing fallacies and falsehoods everywhere: The lie that free markets can deliver healthcare for all; the fiction that unpaid care work is not work; the delusion that we live in a post-racist world; the myth that we are all in the same boat. Because while we are all floating on the same sea, it's clear that some are in superyachts while others are clinging to drifting debris" (Guterres 2020).

In other words, whilst we have all been affected by the seismic shifts taking place in the world as a result of COVID-19, we have not all been affected equally. Rather, the pandemic has served to amplify and deepen existing inequalities (Goldin and Muggah 2020). The impacts of the pandemic are racialized: Black, Indigenous and racialized communities are disproportionately represented on the frontline of the very same healthcare services that they are often unable to access and more likely to be undocumented, unemployed, food insecure, addicted or imprisoned than their white counterparts, all factors that reduce an individual's ability to resist the virus (Timothy 2020). The impacts are gendered: women

disproportionately face the burden of increased homeworking and caring for others (children, family members, the sick), even whilst the lockdowns, stay-at-home orders and other measures have led to what the UN has described as a "shadow pandemic" of rising gender-based violence (more at https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/in-focus-gender-equality-in-covid-19-response/violence-against-women-during-covid-19, accessed on 11 December 2020). Moreover, the impacts disproportionately affect those living in poverty who are at greater risk of getting infected and often carry the brunt of its economic fallout (Goldin and Muggah 2020). Widening socio-economic inequalities within, as well as between, countries mean that these impacts are felt by people living in precarious conditions across the globe, regardless of whether the countries in which they live are nominally "rich" or "poor". The impacts of the pandemic have been particularly devastating for refugees because they frequently sit at the intersection of these inequalities: refugees are often the poorest and most disenfranchised of all migrants and their identities and needs for protection, both racialized and gendered. These impacts are particularly evident in relation to three areas: border closures, asylum procedures and livelihoods.

Firstly, the closure of borders associated with the pandemic has made it virtually impossible for refugees to travel to other countries in order to be safe and seek international protection (Ghezelbash and Tan 2020; Ullah et al. 2020). Virtually all countries have introduced travel restrictions to contain the virus, including by prohibiting entry of residents from other countries, and some countries have closed their borders entirely (UNHCR and IOM 2020). While border restrictions or closures can be justified on health grounds, any measures put in place to limit the spread of the virus—for example, screenings, testing, quarantining or restrictions on travel—must be applied in a way that is non-discriminatory, proportionate, and in accordance with the law (Ní Ghráinne 2020; Ramji-Nogales and Lang 2020). Blanket border restrictions that deny people in need of international protection an effective opportunity to seek asylum violate the principle of non-refoulement, which prohibits states from turning away people at a border and returning them to a country where they would be at risk of persecution or danger (UNHCR 2020b). Nonetheless, some countries have acted unilaterally to institute travel restrictions and border closures potentially violating the Refugee Convention (UNHCR and IOM 2020).

According to UNHCR, an estimated 167 countries had either or fully or partially closed their borders to contain the spread of the virus as of 21 April 2020, with at least 57 states making no exception for people seeking asylum, seriously limiting the rights of persons in need of international protection. Some of these countries are in Europe. Guidance issued by the European Commission in the context of coordinated restrictions on non-essential travel to the EU explicitly states that these restrictions should not apply to travel by people with an essential need, including persons in need of international protection or for other humanitarian reasons (Marin 2020; Meer and Villegas 2020). This is because member states are bound by the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights which, in addition to the Refugee Convention, guarantees the right to seek asylum (UNHCR 2020b). Despite this, the Italian government declared its ports "unsafe" for disembarkation of people rescued at sea "for the duration of the national public health emergency" (Ní Ghráinne 2020). As noted earlier, the Italian government has attempted to prevent the disembarkation of refugees and other migrants onto its territory ever since the "migration crisis" of 2015 (and arguably before—see Crawley et al. 2018) and to restrict SAR efforts at sea. Elsewhere in Europe, there is also evidence of border closures and push backs, which have limited the rights of refugees to access international protection. In May 2020 for example, the Croatian military handed over migrants to the national police who drove them to the border and forcefully returned them to Bosnia. They were reportedly beaten, had their belongings stolen and the police painted crosses on their heads and faces to mark them as migrants before being forced into the border river and told not to return (Akkerman 2020; Carlucci 2020). These border closures resulted in a dramatic decrease in asylum applications across Europe in 2020 (Ghezelbash and Tan 2020; Marin 2020; Ramji-Nogales and Lang 2020).

Denial of entry, forced returns and push backs at borders, both on land and at sea, can also be seen in other regions. In the US, the Trump administration used the COVID-19 pandemic to achieve its core policy goal of closing the border to asylum seekers (Ramji-Nogales and Lang 2020). As noted earlier, Trump built his presidential election campaign on promises to reduce migration to the US, including by limiting the arrival of refugees. Using the COVID-19 pandemic as justification, the Trump administration banned 31 countries from entering the US, starting in February 2020 with Chinese nationals. This order aligned with the racialized rationale behind the Muslim Ban outlined earlier (Ramji-Nogales and Lang 2020). As in Europe, there is theoretically an exception for those seeking asylum, but it remains unclear how this would—or indeed could—work in practice. In addition, Trump introduced new policies at the southern border under the guise of COVID-19. According to Ghezelbash and Tan (2020), more than 105,000 individuals had been returned to Mexico under the rapid-expulsion procedures by 31 July 2020 (see also Ramji-Nogales and Lang 2020). Elsewhere, Amnesty International (2020a) reports that refugees seeking protection have been trapped in East Africa due to border closures in Burundi, Ethiopia, Rwanda Somalia and Uganda. There are reports that refugees crossing into Kenya are sometimes arrested and returned to the point of entry. In Malaysia, the pandemic has been used to justify increased border security (Khanna 2020). Dozens of Rohingya refugees from camps in Bangladesh reportedly starved to death at sea after the Malaysian government refused to take them, citing virus-related border closures (Akkerman 2020; Chakrabarty 2020). Finally, in South Africa, the government announced in March that it would erect or repair 40 km of fence along its border with Zimbabwe to stop the spread of COVID-19, which effectively prevented access to the country for those in need of international protection. This was despite Zimbabwe having no confirmed cases of the virus at that time (more at https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/3/20/south-africa-to-build-40km-fence-along-zimbabwe-border, accessed on 11 December 2020).

Secondly, some states have suspended asylum procedures in response to COVID-19, leaving those refugees able to reach potential countries of asylum prior to the pandemic in situations of protracted uncertainty—and often very poor living conditions—whilst they await a decision about whether or not they will be allowed legally to remain. In Hungary, Spain, France and the Netherlands, the right to apply for asylum was suspended in March 2020 and the UK and Germany suspended their refugee resettlement and humanitarian refuge programme around the same time (Meer and Villegas 2020). In Greece, the pandemic has exacerbated the already dire living conditions of refugees on the Greek islands (Noble 2020). On 1 January 2020, Greece's International Protection Act (IPA) entered into force. Although presented by the Greek government as a "significant breakthrough" for combining all relevant EU legislation in one national law, in practice, it introduced harsher, punitive measures that seem likely to result in people being cast out of the asylum procedure and returned to Turkey and/or their countries of origin (Oxfam and Greek Council for Refugees 2020). Then, as tensions once again increased between Greece and Turkey, the Greek government introduced an unprecedented—and unlawful—month-long suspension of the right to seek asylum in the country. The Greek Asylum Service (GAS) was then suspended for new applications from March–May due to the pandemic leaving many thousands of refugees on the Greek islands living in extremely poor and unsanitary conditions (Noble 2020). The use of the pandemic as a justification for the suspension of asylum procedures in Greece and elsewhere has subsequently been institutionalised through the EU's new Pact on Asylum and Migration, discussed further below.

Finally, refugees have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic itself due to their marginalized socio-economic position in virtually all countries. Many refugees are living in poor housing and overcrowded conditions in camps, informal settlements and urban areas. In these settings, the terms "stay home" "stay safe" and "social distancing" carry very little meaning (Ullah et al. 2020). Crowded conditions and a lack of infrastructure put people at increased risk of contracting the virus, not just in low- and middle-income countries, but also in Europe. Fires that destroyed the Moria camp on the Greek island

of Lesvos in September 2020 resulted in 13,000 people being forced to live and sleep on the streets, with almost no assistance, no hygiene measures and no sanitation facilities (Digidiki and Bhabha 2020). Most were then moved to a new camp, Moria 2.0, where they live in flimsy tents, some of which are pitched just 20 metres from the sea and have already been flooded and battered by strong winds. Even though the camp was built well into the pandemic, its design failed to prevent the spread of COVID-19, with cases among the migrant population rising to almost 300 within three weeks (Digidiki and Bhabha 2020). For the majority of refugees who are not living in camps but in informal settlements and urban areas alongside other poor and marginalised communities, the impact of the pandemic on already precarious livelihoods is the most pressing concern. According to Dempster et al. (2020), refugees are especially vulnerable to the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic because they are 60% more likely than host populations to be working in highly impacted sectors, such as accommodation and food services, manufacturing, and retail. The authors conclude that COVID-19 will likely lead to widespread loss of livelihoods and an increase in poverty among refugee populations and that these impacts will be exacerbated by the fact that COVID-19 has made it more difficult for refugees to access the labour market, social safety nets, and aid provided by humanitarian organizations. Meanwhile, some countries have institutionalized discrimination against refugees through policies to address the impacts of COVID-19 on vulnerable communities. In South Africa for example, both the pandemic itself and the containment measures announced in March 2020 to help curb the spread of the virus, have had disproportionally negative impacts on refugees because of existing vulnerabilities affecting this population (Mukumbang et al. 2020). Even before the arrival of COVID-19, foreign nationals living in South Africa had relatively weakened social support structures, bleak socio-economic prospects, unequal access to health care and social services, precarious housing conditions, tenuous living and working conditions, and higher risks of exploitation and abuse. According to Mukumbang et al. (2020), the lockdown containment measures worsened their conditions, as they found themselves suddenly jobless, being evicted from their homes, experiencing food insecurity and trapped in dormitories or camps where adequate physical distancing is impossible. Moreover, the various economic and hunger alleviation measures put in place by the South African government to address the socio-economic hardships associated with the pandemic have effectively institutionalized discrimination and xenophobia. Businesses which are not 100% owned by South Africans are excluded from schemes providing government relief, whilst individual refugees, asylum seekers and other migrants are unable to access the financial support, food parcels and health care services made available to others because of the absence of documentation confirming their entitlements (Garba and Willie 2020).

4. Migration, Disease and the Politics of Fear

The evidence presented above confirms the observation made by Antonio Guterres (2020) that COVID-19 has acted like an x-ray, shining a light on the marginalization of refugees (and other migrants) in Europe, North America and countries across the Global South, and revealing significant inequalities in access to protection at the local, national and global scales. The pandemic—and the responses of states to it—have served to deepen these inequalities further still by severely curtailing the ability of refugees to move to another country in order to find safety, to access procedures for claiming asylum, and to secure housing, food and accommodation for themselves and their families. Some of the impacts might be understood as unfortunate "side effects" of the pandemic and of policies put in place to protect people from its socio-economic and health consequences. However, such an interpretation would be generous given what we know about the politics of refugee protection and the recent history of migration policy development more generally. It seems more likely that COVID-19 is being used by states as a pretext for evading their responsibilities towards refugees under international law and for introducing even more restrictive policies that may well become (semi) permanent once the pandemic is over (Akkerman 2020; Human Rights Watch 2020a; Ramji-Nogales and Lang 2020).

As noted by both Bieber (2020) and Gover et al. (2020), pandemic-related health crises have been associated with the stigmatization and "othering" of people throughout history and there is a long-established pattern of linking minorities, racial groups, and specific communities to disease. Fear and migration, meanwhile, have already become close bedfellows (Huysmans 2006; Smith and Pain 2016). In this context, it is perhaps not surprising then that some politicians, most notably those in countries where migration policies were already strongly linked to populism, have increasingly sought to capitalise on the fear with which both migration and COVID-19 are associated, manufacturing and manipulating fear for political purposes. At best, the needs of refugees and other migrants are been presented as another "problem" which governments cannot be expected to handle in the context of a pandemic. At worst, migrants are blamed for the spread of the virus and used as scapegoats by populists exploiting the pandemic for political mileage (Ullah et al. 2020). Hungary once again leads the way. The first COVID-19 patient happened to be an Iranian student studying legally in Hungary. Claiming that "migration is responsible for the spread of epidemic" (see https://euobserver.com/coronavirus/147813, accessed on 11 December 2020), Viktor Orbán ordered the deportation of Iranian students and passed an emergency law closing down Hungary's already very restrictive asylum system and requiring refugees to contact the country's consular offices in Ukraine or Serbia, in clear contravention of the Refugee Convention (Bieber 2020; Carlucci 2020). In Italy, where steps had already been taken to prevent the arrival of boats into Italian ports, the country's powerful far-right opposition party used the virus to attack its fragile government, attempting to tie COVID-19's spread to wider issues of border controls and migration (see https://time.com/5789666/italy-coronavirus-far-right-salvini/ accessed on 11 December 2020). In the US, Donald Trump repeatedly referred to COVID-19 as the "China virus" (Bieber 2020). There is strong evidence that the linking of COVID-19 to particular geographical places or ethnic/nationality groups has significantly increased anti-Asian hate crime in the United States (Gover et al. 2020) and elsewhere (Wang et al. 2020). There have been reports of increased racism and discrimination directed against individuals of Chinese origin or those who are assumed to be Chinese in the United States and beyond.

The overall trend therefore is one of weaponizing fear (Banulescu-Bogdan et al. 2020), fear that was already being whipped up in relation to migration and been given increased legitimacy by being linked explicitly and implicitly to the COVID-19 pandemic. This has very concrete—and wholly intentional—consequences for those seeking international protection. As noted above, borders across Europe have closed and some countries have been accused by UNHCR and IOM (2020) of preventing access to their territories. In many respects however, COVID-19 has simply acted as an accelerator of what has already been happening in Europe for many years, further normalizing what was previously considered exceptional (Crawley et al. 2018). This can be seen in the New Pact on Migration and Asylum announced by the European Commission in September 2020 (EuroMed Rights 2020). As noted by Dimitriadi (2020), COVID-19 both delayed publication of the New Pact and proved a game changer for migration and asylum policy, insofar as it enabled EU Member States to clamp down even further on access to the territory and to procedures accessing international protection, using COVID-19, in part, as the pretext for doing so. The hardened stance of Greece outlined above, provided an important backdrop for the Pact, which includes provisions for the suspension of asylum procedures in situations of "crisis", new pre-screening border procedures and the increased use of detention (Human Rights Watch 2020b; Joannon et al. 2020). It would seem that fear-exploiting rhetoric around the pandemic and migration to Europe has provided the political space to push through structural anti-migration policies that will be detrimental to the rights of refugees beyond the life of the pandemic itself.

Elsewhere, there is similarly evidence that governments have taken advantage of the pandemic to operationalize policies and practices towards refugees around which there has previously been significant international scrutiny and opposition. In Myanmar, ongoing

violence and persecution of the Rohingya have gone largely unreported, assisted by the closure of the country from the eyes of international tourists and journalists able to report on the ongoing atrocities. A ceasefire was announced by the Tatmadaw (armed forces) in May 2020 to carry out COVID-19 prevention, containment and treatment, but specifically did not include "the places where groups declared by the State as terrorist groups are active", including Rakhine State, where the majority of Rohingya live (See https://www.gnlm.com.mm/tatmadaw-releases-statement-on-ceasefire-eternal-peace/ accessed on 11 December 2020). There were reports of increased violence and human rights abuse in Rakhine during September (Amnesty International 2020b) following the designation on the Arakan Army as a "terrorist group" in March 2020 (see https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/more-violence-feared-myanmar-names-arakan-army-terrorist-organization accessed on 11 December 2020). Meanwhile, according to media reports, the Bangladeshi government has moved about 1600 Rohingya refugees from camps in Cox's Bazar to Bhasan Char in the Bay of Bengal, a low-lying and previously uninhabited island completely cut off from the mainland and said to be vulnerable to cyclones and flooding (see https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-55177688 accessed on 11 December 2020). The permanent relocation of Rohingya refugees to the island has been an objective of the Bangladeshi government since 2017, when large numbers of Rohingya refugees arrived in Bangladesh from Myanmar, but has met with considerable international opposition (Simoniya 2019; Khanna 2020). Concerns about COVID-19 and the over-crowed conditions in which the refugees are living at Cox's Bazaar has provided the perfect pretext to push this controversial policy forward.

5. What Next for Refugee Protection?

"Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it" (Roy 2020).

These words were written by Arundhati Roy in April 2020, as hundreds of thousands of internal migrants left the cities where they were working to return to their hometowns following the declaration of a national lockdown by the Indian government. In the absence of alternatives, most had no choice other than to walk hundreds of miles and many died during the journey. Roy's words epitomize the idea that the COVID-19 pandemic provides an opportunity to take stock of the ways in which our contemporary societies function and the inequalities with migration have come to be associated.

This article concludes with some reflections, albeit speculative, on the politics of refugee protection in a post COVID-19 world. Writing as we cross into 2021, the prospects do not look good. The pandemic has clearly had a devastating impact on the institution of asylum and severely limited the opportunities for refugees to seek international protection: indeed, the early months of 2020 saw an effective end to the right to seek asylum (Ghezelbash and Tan 2020). The problem is not simply that border closures to prevent the spread of the virus have had disproportionate impacts on those for whom crossing borders mean more than a lost holiday or business trip. The problem is that COVID-19 arrived at a time when the institution of asylum was already under serious threat, mired in a politics of protection, which had taken a particularly pernicious turn in Europe during the so-called "migration crisis" in 2015 and with the arrival of the Trump administration in 2016. Whilst COVID-19 does not grant States an excuse to derogate from their non-refoulement obligations (UNHCR and IOM 2020), it seems likely that constraints on cross-border travel and other measures to restrict migration introduced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic will remain in place, with an expanding security apparatus to back them up (Akkerman 2020). In this context, one of the most important things that we can do as academics and activists is bear witness to the violations of international refugee law that are taking place behind the cover of COVID-19, drawing attention to the ways in which inequalities in

access to protection and to the right to be safe are deepened by both the pandemic and government responses to it.

At the same time, the pandemic reminds us that whilst borders are material, they are also highly symbolic (Marin 2020). Globally, over the last two decades, populists have harnessed concerns about migration to increase fear and consolidate power. As Crawley and McMahon (2016, p. 8) note, "[w]hen people feel insecure their first reaction is often to look for someone to blame and history gives us many examples to draw from. Ironically this has increasingly been directed towards the most vulnerable in our societies, those who have already lost everything and have no voice". At a time when a global pandemic threatens daily life, external borders have once again been employed to foster feelings of protection and security from external threats, even where the containment of the virus is no longer an issue. This article has highlighted the ways in which fears of migration and COVID-19 have been weaponised by governments in ways that fundamentally undermine the effectiveness and humanity of our responses to both. In this context, it is more important than ever to try to imagine another world for refugee protection, one which leaves behind the carcasses of prejudice and hatred as Roy suggests, which "resets" the politics of protection and builds solidarity around our common interests and concerns. The hope, if there is any, lies in the nature of the pandemic itself and the possibility that it has created new ways of understanding ourselves and each other. COVID-19 has highlighted the frailty of human existence, the insecurity of taken-for-granted privileges including the ability to travel, to hug friends and family, to work, create and play. These are aspects of life and identity that have typically been out of reach for women, men and children forced to leave their homes and countries due to conflict and human rights abuse. In other words, whilst COVID-19 may not be a great equalizer in terms of material privilege, it has served as a reminder that we, as human beings, are intricately and intimately connected regardless of our differences. Prior to the pandemic, there was evidence that people were starting to come together to challenge the politics of refugee protection and to develop new ways of thinking about—and responding to—migration and diversity. The emphasis was very much on what people from different backgrounds have in common rather than the differences between them (Crawley and McMahon 2016). Whilst these initiatives may not be prominently placed in mainstream media and political debates, they are there, quietly—and sometimes noisily—challenging the dominant narratives that can feel all-powerful and resistant to change. They offer hope that it is possible to mobilise people power and create a new narrative on refugee protection—as well as broader issues of migration and diversity—that move beyond fear and hate and generate the broader commitments to solidarity and responsibility sharing needed to counter the long-standing demise of the institution of asylum (Ghezelbash and Tan 2020). The challenge then is to build on common experiences associated with the pandemic to fight for another, better, world. In the absence of these commitments and the political will to do things differently, it seems likely that COVID-19 will accelerate the course of history in relation to refugee protection, rather than changing its direction.

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