Can blue-collar migrants survive city lives amidst Covid-19?

A Conversation between Nina Glick Schiller[1] and Amrita Datta[2]

This conversation is a part of the web-talk series *Corona Conversations: Mobility in a (post)Covid Future*[3], moderated by Amrita Datta, hosted by the Global South Studies Centre (GSSC), and supported by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD).

AMRITA DATTA : Can blue-collar migrants survive city life amidst Covid-19? It's undeniable that low-skilled, low-wage migrants across different parts of the world have found themselves thrown into a plethora of catastrophic situations in the face of the pandemic. On one hand, we have witnessed innumerable inter-regional blue-collar migrants in India walking from cities back to their native villages, crossing thousands of miles barefoot, starved, with children, dehydrated; only to collapse in the middle of highways under the scorching heat. We have witnessed migrant women in India giving birth in the middle of the road during a national lockdown just because they lost their jobs in the big cities. They had no means, and no public infrastructure, in the cities to sustain themselves without employment even for a few days. On the other hand, hundreds of blue-collar migrants who fled political tensions in Africa to find work in Arab countries were forced back to their home countries right after Covid hit. They lost their income too. It is only logical that discussions on the challenges of blue-collar migrants in cities find special and extensive mentioning within the general discussion of Covid and mobility. And so, who better than Prof. Nina Glick Schiller? Prof. Glick Schiller's seminal work on cities and their relationship with blue-collar migrants needs no introduction; nor does she.

With phenomenal work on transnationalism, methodological nationalism, migration, cities and urbanism, Prof. Glick Schiller has deconstructed several myths around mobility, labour and migration, allowing for the emergence of concepts like urban sociability, cosmopolitanism, multi-scalar networks and the dispossariat which permeate the everyday lived experiences of migrants. So before wasting any more time, please allow me to welcome all of you to the second session of *Corona Conversations: Mobility in a (post)Covid Future* where Prof. Glick Schiller and I are going to engage in a conversation starting with a question – can blue-collar migrants survive city lives amidst Covid-19?

Prof. Glick Schiller, you grew up with stories of the flu epidemic of 1917-18 that impacted the lives of your grandparents, your father and your aunt in a big city like New York right after the First World War. So it was a post-war period and, by any standard, the lives of blue-collar migrants in big cities were tough — and on top of that, when a flu strain became a pandemic, it must have complicated the entire dynamic in which migrants had to negotiate multiple challenges to survive in cities. From that perspective, to what extent has the ghost of a pandemic shaped and informed your perspective on migration, cityscapes and urbanity?

NINA GLICK SCHILLER : I was aware from childhood that my grandparents fled political, religious and economic oppression and came to New York City to seek a better life. That is to

say, categories of refugees or economic migrants never made sense to me and I have questioned outlooks that choose to classify who is a deserving migrant. I was also aware that my father's father, a young and healthy carpenter, died after a few days of sickness in the flu epidemic, leaving my grandmother, Rebecca Zaretsky, pregnant and with three children under the age of 10. I understood that epidemic disease can change the life opportunities and possibilities of the survivors forever. My grandmother got an abortion and put her children in an orphanage, while working in the laundry to support herself and be with her children. Then she worked for furriers to support her children and took in boarders, never sleeping in a bedroom, which she put on rent to increase her income.

My grandmother survived and managed to educate her children and they prospered. But there were two important lessons here. First, grandma was only able to find work and get on with her life because of working conditions and legal rights obtained through collective struggles going on all around her. Urban reformers and unions struggled for decent pay and working conditions. Grandma's distant cousin was in fact a union activist and communist. There were massive demonstrations for social benefits, health and safety regulations and housing regulations that produced the conditions that allowed for my father's and aunt's and uncles' mobility into the US working class. However, and this is an important caveat about methodological nationalism, the economy of the US was global. It was an expanding US imperial economy and its military-industrial complex — extracting wealth and vital resources from oppressed labour and nations all around the world — that provided a decent life for blue-collar workers after World War II. Second, the pandemic and the poverty that followed affected the personalities of my grandmother and her children in multiple ways that I am only now coming to understand – these were various forms of post-traumatic stress, we would say now.

The broader lesson is that there will be long-term effects across generations from the deaths and the trauma of the pandemic on individuals and families — for migrants and non-migrants. But how people will survive and the politics they will participate in afterwards depends on the availability of employment and social benefits including healthcare, education and housing. And right now we are in a different historical conjuncture. The restructuring of capitalist economies globally has created massive profits for the wealthy by accumulating capital through the demolition of workers' protections, pensions and social benefits. US capitalists, having unleashed neoliberalism on the world, make profits from globally exploited labour, but also are losing the competition with other base areas of capitalism, especially in China. This means that post-pandemic, blue-collar migrants, non-migrants and, in fact, all of us face an immediate choice: go along with nationalist/racist agendas that tell us the problem is migration, or create a politics and a political movement against the global systems of wealth extraction that cause migration and the deterioration of living standards all around the world, including in Europe and the USA.

AMRITA DATTA : So, as you just said, the nationalist discourse insists on us believing that migration is the problem, consequently pitting us against each other in a migrant-non-migrant binary. Now to discuss more on this, let us take a step back and think about the existential challenges of blue-collar migrants, which have hit them very differently from white-collar migrants; especially in neoliberal economies where there is no social security for gig workers or in the informal economy. Now with a pandemic that restricts mobility and in turn the possibility of moving from one job to another, and also in view of border controls that nation-states are exercising as mechanisms to protect their citizens from the contagion, where would

you locate this present crisis in the multi-scalar network and how do you see it affecting or at least impacting the lives of blue-collar migrants? Since you have maintained that the differences between migrants and non-migrants are blurry at best in cities and urban spaces, where social cohesion is one of the key elements to understand power relations across multiple scales, do you still think that this approach holds true during Covid-times or even after?

Nina Glick Schiller : First let me clarify what the term multi-scalar implies and why I find it helpful in understanding the current crisis, the inequalities that are intensified by urban regeneration, and why this concept allows us to put migrants and non-migrants in the same analytical and political lens, but also to talk about distinctions between blue and white collar.

Ok, so what is a multi-scalar? The term multi-scalar reminds us that actually we live in networks of differential power that link us simultaneously to "here" and "there". Multi-scalar abandons the idea — common in science and politics — that we live within bounded, discrete and nested territorial units: households, neighbourhoods, localities (cities, towns, rural areas, etc.) regions, nation-states, supra-states such as the EU, global regions and the globe. This is the Russian-doll view of economics, politics and social life. Multi-scalar says that state regulations matter but they don't make economies or society national. Wealth, ideas and people have always moved and continue to move around the world through interconnected networks of capital production, wealth extraction, knowledge and cultural production.

Once we acknowledge that our economy and our daily lives are lived within networks that connect all these territorial units and that what happens globally — like a pandemic — can directly affect whether we live or die, and that we might feel closer to a friend, relative or cultural producer across the globe than to the guy next door, we are ready to do a multi-scalar analysis of how and why we are inter-connected.

Interconnectedness reminds us that processes of capital accumulation affect us all. The people who produce value from their work, whether in our city or on the other side of the globe, and the people from whom wealth is taken in the form of their loss of housing or their loss of land through corporate theft, and the people to whom that wealth is distributed are linked together through multi-scalar networks. The division between migrants and non-migrants focuses our attention on divisions imposed by borders and laws, and away from the realities of these interdependencies. But noting our interconnectedness is not to deny that there are very different positions of power within multi-scalar networks.

Blue-collar workers in Germany — whether they are migrants or non-migrants — confront different working conditions than white collars, whether during the pandemic or at other times. We have seen this all around us. Those who can work from home often continued to get paid. People who had to go into a factory or a service industry either couldn't work during a shutdown or they had to go out and continue to work despite the higher risk to their health. Migrants are particularly vulnerable because they can be pressed into the worst working conditions. This is what happened in the meat-packing industries and farm work.

In Europe, North America and elsewhere, contract workers — highly exploited workers — were brought across borders to work in unsafe exploited conditions. This is more like time-

limited slavery than anything else. Sick with Covid, they are shipped home, contributing to the pandemic. This has exposed that the control of borders is more about intensifying nationalist/racialized thinking that blames foreigners for disease than it is about controlling the virus. Rounding up, detaining and deporting migrants has also contributed to the globe spread of the disease. A multi-scalar analysis, by discarding methodological nationalism that assumes nation-states as the unit of analysis and identity, also facilitates a class analysis both within and across state boundaries.

In addition, a multi-scalar analysis of the processes and locations of capital accumulation highlights that white collar workers — migrant and non-migrant — are also facing precarity that has intensified at the time of Covid. The freedom to move and get a new job is only a freedom if there is also the freedom to stay and keep a good job on a long term basis. Neoliberal economics has expanded the gig economy, putting professionals all over the world in a race for temporary jobs at the lowest salaries. Nationalism, including methodological nationalism, also obscures the different social and economic positions of men and women, and, in Europe and North America, the different positions of people categorized as part of the core white nation and people of colour, regardless of citizenship.

Racialization and gender hierarchies, as well as citizenship and foreigner categories, legitimate and obscure unequal access to quality healthcare which — in addition to differential risks to exposure because of working conditions and crowded housing — has led to disproportionate death rates.

AMRITA DATTA : So understanding multi-scalar networks enables us to break free from the restricted categories of nation-states and cities and offers a more complicated terrain for workers of all sorts – both blue- and white-collar, both migrants and non-migrants. In fact, you maintain that cities as place–making projects are about the ways in which residents actively construct institutions, neighbourhoods, political economy, daily life and the city's positioning in multi-scalar networks. In global cities, one imagines that a significant portion of residents are the migrants in the informal and formal economies who contribute to the regeneration of city life. This process of regeneration invites a certain amount of trust in the lives that migrants imagine in cities, trust in the neighbourhood or larger economic structures that encourages migration and trust in the ability of the migrant worker to make it big in big cities. In the past year since Covid struck, the plight of low-wage migrants in cities, be it regional migrants like in India or international migrants like the Mexican migrants in the USA, have taken a massive turn for the worse. This highlights the indispensability of cities as quintessential locales for immigration and achievement. In light of this, do you think that low-wage migrants will still have faith in city lives and opportunities, or post-Covid will there be a back-to-the-village pattern of return migration?

NINA GLICK SCHILLER : First of all, my more recent research, done together with Ayse Caglar, has examined the role of migrants within city-making processes, including urban regeneration in disempowered rather than global cities, although I have also done research in NYC. In disempowered cities the proportion of migrants may be much smaller, but they still can occupy significant positions in both public narratives about re-envisioning the city and in the social fabric. But we emphasize social and economic positioning and imaginary; rather than trust.

I think as a result of the neoliberal restructuring of the economy and the stress of individuality — on looking out for number one, in a world of selfies — legitimacy in public institutions and trust is generally in short supply, with fanning from right-wing authoritarian/neo-fascist organizations. Maybe Germany, which kept more of its industrial infrastructure and has more of a fear of fascism, has done better. But demonstrations in Berlin and elsewhere against Covid measures are a sign of the extent of the problem.

It is true in most places that migrants have tended to identify more with their new city than their new country during the first years of settlement. Research has indicated that this is true also of the second generation (children of migrants) whether they live in sexy cities such as Berlin or NYC or disempowered cities such as Halle/Saale, Germany or Manchester, New Hampshire, in the USA. It is also important to note that whatever the degree of local identification, migrants assess the opportunity/possibility structures where they are living and see if there are better possibilities elsewhere. Non-migrants do the same, which is why the city of Halle had so much outmigration of people born there to cities in western Germany in the years after reunification.

It is also important to note when assessing local possibility structures that neoliberal policies exacerbated differences. There was disinvestment in the countryside, small towns and disempowered cities and intensified investment in major urban centres in terms of the availability of jobs, social services and healthcare. This has been dramatically true in Scandinavia — where small towns and hamlets stand almost abandoned without schools or doctors. It's true in Germany as well as in regions of India. It is also true — in Scandinavian, Germany as well as in the USA or India — that even disempowered cities may provide more opportunities than rural areas. Our research has shown that some of these cities provide unique possibilities for handfuls of migrants if those cities have migrant-friendly narratives as part of urban regeneration, as well as business and professional opportunities within regeneration. But growing nationalism entering into local politics may be destroying these possibilities — and with it migrants' trust in the system.

It is true that in many places those with resources, including the wealthier and whiter, are fleeing cities to more rural settings where they can exercise and be around nature, rather than people. But these are folks who can work from home or afford a second home. If you are working in a city, or are reliant on charity or social services for food and housing assistance, which is mostly an urban phenomenon, you don't have the resources to flee. However, for very poor rural-to-urban migrants or those whose housing depended on their employment, we have seen — with India being a prime example — poor migrants forced out of the cities and walking vast distances to get to their home villages.

AMRITA DATTA : You said that opportunity and economic and social positioning is what determines whether migrants settle in a city, or move to a global city from a disempowered city. But within the context of this coronavirus pandemic, is there a possibility that Covid-19 will bring the ethnic lens back into the discourse on city-making and urbanism – replacing the idea of urban sociability or cosmopolitanism?

NINA GLICK SCHILLER : It is not Covid but the bankruptcy of contemporary capitalism in many regions of the world, including in Europe and North America. There is currently a worldwide tendency of accumulation of capitalism by dispossession — theft of land and resources,

of pensions and wages (through debt, interest, fees and fines). Those who experience this kind of loss and expropriation can be socially positioned as the dispossariat. The prominence of this form of capital accumulation has become an aspect of the emerging historical conjuncture and its crises. Of course, the value produced by workers within industrial and agricultural production continues to be part of the global economy and contributes globally to a race-to-the-bottom as investors seek the cheapest labour with the least labour protections. During the 19th century and most of the 20th century, wealth from imperial and other forms of global, national and local accumulation was used to build national welfare states and to invest in infrastructures of production. Let me emphasize that the wealth redistributed in European nation-state, including Germany, was interdependent with processes of wealth and resource appropriations taking place elsewhere. Now as capital accumulation is increasingly dependent in many of these states on processes of dispossession including urban regeneration, real estate investment and debt instruments, many nation-states are offering citizens identity — in the form of national /racialized pride, hatred of foreigners — and blaming their problems on those defined as alien. This disinvestment in public welfare and infrastructure is not happening at the same rate everywhere. Germany kept more of its industry but the same trends are seen there, including the employment of temporary workers and the use of hyper-exploited migrant contract workers in construction and agriculture.

I have been seeing a hopeful politics arising around the globe as the dispossessed have been building social movements with a global perspective and unity against all forms of oppression. You can see this in Black Lives Matter, the movements to welcome refugees, to say that all people are human and the No Borders movement. The US election, in which both parties distanced themselves from such politics and leadership, as well as demands for a redistributive economy and an end to imperialism, showed the limitations of relying on politics as usual. So it is up to us. We have to set aside artificial divides and understand the common interests we share in building a world without exploitation and structural racism. A better world is possible.

Amrita Datta : So we must set aside state imposed categories and explore opportunities to address exploitation beyond the stereotype of who is a migrant and who isn't. Thank you so much Prof. Glick Schiller for the very enriching perspectives on migration, labour and city-making especially in a Covid-ridden world.

Just thinking ahead from what you are saying here, there are several things that emerge from this conversation today. Firstly, migrants and non-migrants are always in interaction with each other, through participation, through social exclusion and through social cohesion. Therefore, what you call urban sociability is what we increasingly need to engage with, to understand the process of city-making where all sorts of people inhabiting the city are trying to contribute to what that space is all about. Blue-collar migrants, through their everyday invisibility and apparent silence, do bring certain characteristics to city life which surfaces only when there is a social movement against exploitation. Time and again, through the works of scholars like Arjun Appadurai or Martin Albrow, we have brought discussions of the universalization of global financial flows and global cultural flows into a context that only tells us more about how we must look beyond existing models of categorization because global flows of events, institutions and structures have made migrant experiences over the years identifiable across the world. Neoliberal capitalist expansion has made exploitation standardized, to the extent that the local and the global are intrinsically tied. In this light, social cohesion defines the pulse of migrant lives, perhaps much better than general frame-

works of transnationalism.

Secondly, we need to think about new languages to understand migration, migrants' relationships with cities and their role in city-making even more because while neoliberal capitalism compels migration it also invokes sentiments of racism and hyper-nationalism. Therefore, dispossession as an existential crisis is not just restricted to blue-collar migrants. While there is no denying the fact that labour exploitation of blue collar migrants is much more severe than for others, it is also equally true that massive corporatization has expanded the gig economy where both blue- and white-collar workers are reduced to temporary migrants. Come to think of it, soon enough we might not even need these strict categories of blue collar or white collar to understand the lived experiences and everyday insecurities of migrants. We may want to engage more with multi-scalar networks and take a global perspective to explain the entire migration situation.

Now what could be a better reference point to engage with this global perspective than the coronavirus pandemic, which has really impacted both everyday lives and grand structures and institutions all over the world. From what I understand from our conversation today, an entirely new discourse could emerge from this pandemic as an epoch in history that is affecting migration of all sorts, across ethnicity, across class positions and across gender. This is not to say that migration will decrease or will become more challenging; in some cases, migration might be facilitated too. But notwithstanding the trajectory of migration, I think Covid and the post-Covid future could offer us a very important starting point to talk about migrant experiences in city lives from a global, multi-scalar perspective. So from that light, I think this conversation today has been extremely meaningful and very timely, and we can take this forward to construct newer frameworks to understand migration better.

Notes

[1]Nina Glick Schiller is Emeritus Professor, University of Manchester, UK and the University of New Hampshire, USA, Research Associate at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology and is Co-Editor of Anthropological Theory. Her writings address the transnational migration, cosmopolitan sociability, methodological nationalism, urban restructuring, and the ethnic lens. Her over 100 articles and nine books include Migrants and City-Making: Dispossession, Displacement and Urban Regeneration; Nations Unbound Georges Woke Up Laughing: Long Distance Nationalism and the Search for Home; and Whose Cosmopolitanism?. She is the Founding Editor of Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power. Her current research explores domains of commonality between migrants and non-migrants.

[2]Amrita Datta is a researcher on migration and transnationalism at the University of Cologne. Earlier, she earned a doctoral degree in Sociology from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India. Presently, she is moderating a webinar series titled "Corona Conversations: Mobility in a (post)COVID Future" hosted by the Global South Studies Centre (GSSC), University of Cologne and supported by the DAAD. Her research interests include mobility, gender and migration, ethnography, Indian diaspora in Germany.

[3]More on the series can be found here: https://gssc.uni-koeln.de/veranstaltungen/webinare/2020-corona-conversation-mobility-and-migration