In der Corona Krise: Eine Stimme aus der Zivilgesellschaft / In the Corona crisis: a voice from civil society
17

The corona virus outbreak induced a wave of fear in citizens world-wide, causing them to increasingly want to protect what's theirs. This gave way to a movement of so-called 'citizen-detectives' who decided to take the state administered borderwork-practices to the next level.

A column by Nathalie Prange

17 July 2020

COVID-19 and the 'business of bordering':
The rise of citizen detectives and state implemented borderwork-practices.

Border work, here also referred to as the 'business of bordering', can be understood as different acts or activities carried out by citizens in an attempt to help establish and uphold the borders of its state (see "Citizens and borderwork in Contemporary Europe", Rumford). The term 'border work' has long moved away from referencing to the physically guarding of external borders and has moved in the direction of the

guarding of a more conceptual image of borders, which is generalised throughout society. In today's world borders are everywhere, i.e. at airports, ports, or train stations, and with this realization came a change in how individual citizens protect 'their borders'. Citizens are constantly busy with the manifestation of borders around them: ranging from creating barriers for others, with for instance the so-called 'no cold calling zones' by groups of UK citizens, all the way to the undermining and removal of borders altogether.

A change in, or the motivation to engage in, border work is often initiated by fear. Most ordinary citizens value nothing more than a sense of security in their everyday life and once their sense of security is threatened, an extreme "everyone for themselves" reaction might be triggered. The concurrent pandemic has instilled such a sense of fear in a lot of people, with the accompanying reactions. As the world leaped head-first into somewhat of a state of chaos, each state reacted differently in its attempt to protect their own citizens. Newly planned measures directed at fighting the spread of COVID-19 were introduced, but interestingly enough citizens more often decided to help themselves in order to protect what is theirs: either enacting their own set of rules or going to far extents in enforcing the governmentally imposed guidelines. What has been intended to be a courageous act of citizenship could turn into a movement of vigilantism, with random citizens promoting themselves to 'detectives' (i.e. citizen detectives; see below).

With the involvement of civil society in the fight against corona, a new phenomenon can be observed: the rise of 'social border control'. While ordinary citizens have been encouraged to stay indoors and avoid any unnecessary contact with others, many citizens started extending and actively taking part in warning others about being outside, keeping the proper distance, and sticking to the government imposed curfews. Consequently, people have even increasingly moved to report on others, as records have shown. Vaughan-Williams (2008) once coined a name for citizens adopting such behaviour; "citizen-detectives" (http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13562570801969457). A fitting quote by Walter Benjamin (1939) reads: "In times of terror, when everyone is something of a conspirator, everybody will be in the position of having to play detective."

Now, referring to the COVID-19 pandemic as a 'time of terror' might be exaggerated in the eyes of some, but when taking a good look at what has occurred in Italy, Spain, the United States, Brazil, etc., it appears to be spot on. Even though most of these measures are aimed at achieving a sense of security on a large scale, ideally the eradication of corona, they have often triggered a more hostile situation, fuelling mutual suspicion and dissent among citizens. Furthermore, there is the problem of deciding who belongs to the group of 'good' citizens that are on the watch for 'bad' citizens; currently experienced as, for instance, who is wearing a protective mask and who 'looks' like they take care of themselves vs. those who don't. This commonly supports prejudicial perception, taking the U.S. as one of many examples of a country where COVID-19 is increasingly linked to racial profiling. The problems that arise through this are, unfortunately, apparent all around.

Where certain states are encouraging this 'citizen-detective' behaviour, it is quite uncommon in others. The encouragement of such citizen detective behaviour in authoritarian states such as Singapore, China, or Russia gives room to critics who question their real intentions hidden under this protective, anti-corona, element. Many believe that governments in such states attempt to tighten their grip on society by stimulating this state of fear and mistrust among their citizens. European states, for instance the Netherlands also seem to, at least currently, encourage this behaviour. Dutch citizens are rarely encouraged to actively report on each other, as the incentive to do so is close to very low (excluding crime-related incidences). With the outbreak of the pandemic the incentive on calling out fellow citizens was suddenly more of a given. Not only are citizens eager to protect themselves, but they are also motivated by the government to embrace the imposed corona measures and secure their borders. Currently, the Netherlands installed corona-related hotlines over which citizens are encouraged to report inappropriate behaviour.

There is no doubt that this pandemic has significantly influenced the way individual citizens attempt to support state implemented border work practices. The behaviour increasingly displayed by citizens across the world is that of a protective nature; attempting to protect themselves, their families, and their surroundings. Depending on which country one is currently in, this newly found, let's call it 'passion' of, surveillance of neighbours or fellow citizens, is meant in good faith. Nonetheless, it will be

challenging for some to shed these newly learned behaviours and rules. Psychologically speaking, it can take up to a year to break new learned habits, and only if one actively tries to. The question remains if these changes in borderwork induced by the pandemic will be for the short or long term, and what role there is for organized civil society in facing the challenge of reinstalling mutual trust, a liberal outlook on fellow citizens' behaviour, and a cohesive, bridging society.

Nathalie Prange is an intern at the Maecenata Institut. She completed her MSc. in Psychology and is currently pursuing her second masters degree in International Crimes, Conflict and Criminology at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. Contact: LinkedIn

Previous issues: In the Corona Crisis: A Voice from Civil Society:

1 Dr. Rupert Graf Strachwitz
2 Dr. Rolf Alter
3 Dr. Eckhard Priller
4 Malte Schrader
5 Marie-Catherine von Heereman
6 Jasmin Aksan und Finn Büttner
7 Dr. Rupert Graf Strachwitz
8 Goda Milasiute
9 Carmen Hussein und Malte Schrader
10 Dr. Siri Hummel
11 Dr. Henning von Vieregge
12 Dr. Hind Arroub
13 Dr. Chris Lange
14 Wolfgang Chr. Goede
15 Dr. Stefan Toepler
16 Daphne Büllesbach