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A great equaliser

The coronavirus is reminding some of the world's privileged what it is like to experience daily stigmas

Economic history shows epidemics are great equalisers. The most cited example (for which we also have most data) is still the Black Death, which hit Europe around the mid-14th century. In some places, it killed up to one third of the population.

But by reducing population, it made labour more scarce, increased wages, reduced inequality and led to institutional changes which — for some economic historians, such as Guido Alfano, Mattia Fochesato and Samuel Bowles — had long-term implications for European economic growth.

According to these authors, the growing power of labour was checked in southern Europe by restrictions on its movement and other extra-economic constraints imposed by local landlords. In northern Europe, however, where feudal institutions were not so strong, after the Black Death labour became more free and more expensive, which set the foundations for technological progress and eventually the industrial revolution.

A little over two months of coronavirus have already wrought economic changes. Many will be easily reversible if the epidemic is quickly contained and stopped. But if not, they may endure. And, as with any extreme event, epidemics suddenly shed light on certain social phenomena which we hazily know about but often tend to ignore or prefer not to think about.

'Statistical discrimination'

Consider citizenship and 'statistical discrimination'. Until about a year ago, a traveller entering the United Kingdom could enter a shorter line if she was a UK citizen or a citizen of another European Union country — or wait in a much longer queue, if otherwise. The distinction made sense because the movement of labour within the EU was free. Since about a

year ago, however, the rules have changed in such a way that the fast lane applies, in addition to UK nationals (which is obvious), to citizens of the EU, the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Singapore and South Korea.

One is at first shocked by such an assortment of countries: it does not correspond to any single political entity or criterion. There is no political organisation which includes all of these countries and only these countries.

The decision as to which nationals to process quickly was clearly based on income criteria (gross domestic product *per capita*) and low likelihood that citizens of such countries would try to find a job or stay illegally in the UK. It was thus premised on 'statistical discrimination': individuals of other nationalities will be more thoroughly investigated, not because they themselves may be more suspicious but because a group of which they are members is inherently 'suspect'.

A 'fall from grace' is always a shock and, in addition to trying to ascend back to grace, does make us question the rationale of similar statistical discriminations in other cases.

Those who benefit from such regulations generally give them little thought — especially Europeans who have been used, thanks to the Schengen agreement, to travelling between countries without documents and elsewhere mostly without a visa, and being received (thanks to their high income) with open arms. As Zygmunt Bauman argued, *the right* to travel has become a luxury good. If you spend years facing close to zero obstacles to your travel, you will tend to assume that this is something normal and should last forever. Likewise, you would scarcely think of others or assume that this is their unfortunate, yet inevitable, lot.

With the outbreak of the virus, the US stopped or reduced air traffic to some exposed countries and put on a special list travellers from China, Iran, South Korea and Italy, ordering them to quarantine themselves during the first two weeks: 'Do not take public transportation, taxis, or ride-shares. Avoid crowded places (such as shopping centers and movie theaters) and limit your activities in public,' the announcement said. Organisers of a conference I was supposed to attend in Washington only a few days ago sent 24 hours before its beginning the following notice: 'We ask that any invited participant who has visited a CDC Level 3 country (currently China, Iran, Italy, and Japan) within the last 14 days to … refrain from attending any meeting.' More recently, similar rules were extended by Israel towards citizens of France, Germany, Spain,

Austria and Switzerland.

China and Iran are frequently on US blacklists which, it seems, US legislators enjoy drawing up at the slightest opportunity. But South Korea and, even more extraordinarily, Italy were surprise additions. Some of my Italian friends, or people who just came back from Italy, expressed disbelief at such 'statistical discrimination'. Suddenly they seemed to rejoin this other list of citizens of countries who are 'statistically discriminated' against from time to time — or, as is the case for Africans travelling almost anywhere, almost routinely so.

'Stop and frisk'

A 'fall from grace' is always a shock and, in addition to trying to ascend back to grace, does make us question the rationale of similar statistical discriminations in other cases. 'Stop and frisk', introduced in New York by the then mayor Michael Bloomberg, is one such policy.

Stop and frisk was based on racial profiling. Its logic was the same as that of UK border controls: the proportion of crimes committed by African Americans is significantly higher than their share of New York's population. Hence, let's embark on a policy whose objective will be to focus on checking and stopping African Americans more than others.

As should be apparent, the three policies — border control, virus-related restrictions and 'stop and frisk' — share the same idea. The first and third are to a large extent targeted against the poorer members. The second is, in principle, applied equally and depends on where the virus is particularly virulent. This is why its sudden application to those not normally subjected to similar statistical discrimination was such a shock. The virus levelled the playing field and made some of us think about the general validity of policies which use statistical information about groups to target individuals.

Policies of 'statistical discrimination' are currently, I think, almost inevitable: they save time for the authorities (as in the case of border controls), they purportedly lead to the reduction of crime (although the difference in New York was actually the extra police deployment) or curtail (hopefully) the transmission of a virus such as corona. But we should think about the moral justification of such policies and how they substitute collective for individual responsibility — or even impose an implicit collective guilt.

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