Humanitarian Im/mobilities

Expatriate Ways of Movement in Haiti

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Abstract: Humanitarian aid workers are permanently on the move. The mobility embodied in people who travel from one emergency to the next is perceived as a legitimate form of movement and often stands in sharp contrast to the ones whose lives they are intervening in. However, the mobility of aid workers is more restricted than the image suggests. Within their zones of intervention, the work life and social time of humanitarians is often strictly limited to humanitarian spaces; compounds, secure vehicles and hotels. The emergency imperative reduces their radius to a world of red, yellow and green zones. The humanitarian state of emergency not only moves bodies and materialities, it also transforms hierarchies. While moving through spatial borders humanitarians also transcend social ones, experiencing an uplift in status and privileges in socio-economic and social terms often incomparable to their pre- and post-humanitarian lives. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork on international organizations and their employees in the humanitarian aid sector in Haiti, the paper seeks to dismantle and demystify expatriate im/mobilities and offers a more nuanced way of classifying the various forms of mobilities of humanitarian aid workers.

Keywords: humanitarian intervention, expatriate mobility, Haiti, NGOs, UN

Port-au-Prince, Jaborandy Camp, November 2016: I am visiting the Brazilian military base in Port-au-Prince. The colonel in charge assigns one of the few women on staff to me, a Captain of the Brazilian army serving the troops as a psychologist. Today she will show me around the base, introduce me to other soldiers and accompany the interviews I conduct on their personal and professional experiences of serving the United Nations Stabilization Mission to Haiti, MINUSTAH. After a couple of hours, she offers to show me the other Brazilian military base in town, the one in Cité Soleil, an ill-famed neighborhood of Port-au-Prince.

To go there, I am told, I have to comply with UN security regulations. That means I have to put on one of the trademark blue UN helmets and a bulletproof vest. Both rest heavily against my body as we leave the military compound. We take the same long road I took hours earlier to come here. In the morning I took a motor taxi off the street from where I lived. It is a 45-minute long uncomfortable ride over hot, dusty and pot-holed roads through the heavy and notoriously accident ridden and therefore

dangerous traffic of the capital. Like the majority of motorcyclists in Haiti, I wasn't wearing a helmet. My seat at the back of the motorcycle left me exposed. The fact that I was a *blan*, an outsider, was physically visible to everyone. Yet, like most of the time here, I felt very safe. Now I am sitting in the back seat of a white UN SUV, two armed UN soldiers in the front and one in the back next to me, bullet proof gear and in my head, I keep asking myself, for what bullet? I look outside the closed tinted windows and suddenly I don't feel safe anymore. The people on the other side of the window, those on motorbikes, those sitting at the side of the road selling vegetables look distant, those who pass by look at me /at the car/ at us with a strange mix of ignorance and contempt that I have not seen directed at me in the past six years I have been in and out of Haiti. All of a sudden the outside looks like a threat to me. There is a seemingly insuperable barrier between me and the world outside, me and Haiti. I haven't felt that estranged from my immediate Haitian environment before. For the first time I really absorb and embody the experience of expatriate insecurities. For a short moment only, I can relate to those who fly into Haiti, debark at Port-au-Prince airport, are picked up by secure vehicles and are driven to their compounds, military bases, restaurants, supermarkets and hotels where they are immediately absorbed by their bubble. I feel enclosed, restricted, unfree.[1]

MOBILITY REVISITED

In 2016, more than 663,000 people worked for the United Nations (UN), the International Red Cross, and the major international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) on an international assignment in countries of humanitarian and development intervention (Stoddard/Harmer/Czwarno 2017). This group of people is seen as being driven by a common set of values, sharing similar backgrounds, education and trajectories (Goetze 2017). They are referred to as a mobile cosmopolitan elite (Goetze/Bliesemann de Guevara 2014), a mobile oligarchy (Pandolfi 2011), or mobile professionals (Fechter and Walsh 2010). Their patterns of privileged work migration follow the flow of resources and materialities set free by the recurrent nature of global crisis. Mobility it seems is the hallmark of humanitarian engagement. People involved in humanitarian, development and stabilization efforts cross borders frequently

1 | While this particular ethnographic vignette refers to experiences with military personnel employed by the UN, it is certainly applicable to international staff of other organizations, too.

and easily. Often, they are granted access to places and spaces ordinary people cannot enter.

Furthermore, the mobility embodied in humanitarian aid workers is viewed as a legitimate, honorable, and necessary form of movement. Their mobility often stands in sharp contrast to the ones whose lives they are intervening in. A person moving in a reverse direction let's say from Aleppo to Berlin, from one emergency imperative to the next (Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, the Mediterranean, Greece, the Balkans), does not enjoy the same privileges. Even within the humanitarian work sphere professionals employed locally in the zones of intervention – who actually make the vast majority of active humanitarians (Redfield 2012: 375) – do not enjoy the same benefits, neither in terms of movement, nor in terms of security. Fassin carved out the differences between those whose lives are sacred and others whose lives may be sacrificed. The emergency mobilities (Adey 2016) of expats also work the other way: They are the ones who are rescued out of potentially dangerous situations whereas others have to stay put (Fassin 2007). This divisive line runs directly between the national and international staff of organizations. Indisputably, the passport of the expat is the most valuable currency of emergency mobility (Redfield 2012).

LIMITED MOBILITIES

Yet, the mobility associated with expatriates is highly contextual. The ability to move through national borders, or even without borders as the name of one of the most prestigious humanitarian organizations *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF) suggests, is certainly a given. Within the zones of intervention though, the lives of expatriate professionals are rather marked by confinement than by extended mobility. Large humanitarian and development organizations rent houses, sometimes compounds for their international staff. Those spaces are enclosed by barb wired fences and guarded by armed security personnel. Depending on the situation on the ground, organizations impose curfews, confining staff to the organization's compound after sundown.

Forms of movement outside of a confined and predetermined radius are a potential security risk and possible insurance liability.[2] Taking certain roads is considered as

2 | To some extent that dynamic also applies to researchers. Andersson describes how his fieldwork in Mali was preceded by intense negotiations with his university, which would only let him leave after he agreed on insuring himself against kidnapping with the university's private security contractor (Andersson 2016). For my first fieldwork in Haiti early 2011, I too had to file an official request with university for allowing fieldwork despite a travel warning issu-

a breach of protocol. In one of my earlier research engagements I got a national employee of a humanitarian organization in trouble by inadvertently sharing with expatriate staff that the driver, to avoid one of the notorious traffic jams of Port-au-Prince, took a road he wasn't supposed to be taking through a part of town considered potentially dangerous. The safeguarded landscape of intervention limits expatriates' radar of mobility to red, yellow and green zones (Andersson 2016).

Those aspects refer to physical mobility. Yet, this structure also determines the social mobility of individuals. What Autessere has described as *Peaceland* for the case of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is equally valid for Port-au-Prince. While those spaces provide expatriate interveners with materialities »necessary for them to operate efficiently – including reliable communication systems, power generators, safe settings, and hygienic conditions that reduce exposure to local pathogens« (Autessere 2014: 166), they also produce forms of socialities that limit peoples' lifeworlds to enclosed expatriate circles orbiting around bars, restaurants, and shopping malls, inside closed air-conditioned spaces. This so called »expatriate bubble« is one of the key characteristics of ethnographic studies of aid work (Fechter 2007). Seeing internationals frequent those humanitarian spaces, Haitians referred to staff of the UN mission, MINUSTAH, with the pun *touristah*, Haitian creole for tourist, during several stages of fieldwork between 2011 and 2016.

My own research has suggested that those lifeworlds are highly self-referential in nature. When referring to experiencing diversity in the context of the UN mission to Haiti for example, many reported about how much they learned and gained. Yet, this experience is ultimately connected to inner-UN relationships as one Deputy Chief of the mission recounts:

> »One of the valuable aspects is inter-cultural-cross-linguistic integration. And this is gonna pay dividends because the longer you have senior officers exposed to other senior officers from different cultures in different countries you gonna have a lot better cross country dialogue, diplomatically, militarily. And I think the ability 40-50 years from now for someone to be able to pick up the phone and call a buddy of theirs that they used to work with on some stuff somewhere. You can't put a value price tag on that.«

Instead of experiencing Haiti by moving through the country's physical and social spaces, the intercultural surplus value lies in the interchanges with Chilean, Nigeri-

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ed for Haiti by the German Foreign Ministry. To safeguard my funding network against legal repercussions, I had to sign a security agreement with them, too.

an or Canadian colleagues in office settings. People employed by the UN in Haiti talk about their professional experiences as stories of personal growth. Being faced with challenges connected to the mission, experiencing Haitians' poverty through the tinted windows of vehicles strengthens their personality and above all improves their career chances. In this picture, the context of intervention is reduced to an interchangeable backdrop. With a few exceptions the lives of international intervention professionals do not take place in Haitian villages, on Haitian streets, markets, restaurants frequented by Haitians, in the world inhabited by ordinary Haitians. It is a parallel world only occasionally disrupted by national employees of NGOs and the so-called *facilitateurs*, professional brokers whose main job is to establish contact to Haitian stakeholders and beneficiaries.

Otherwise those expatriate humanitarian spaces of work and leisure, may they be the bars and restaurants of Pétionville or Pacot, the wealthier neighborhoods of the capital, or the UN log base in its outskirts, remain impenetrable for ordinary Haitian citizens. This logic became especially apparent in the post-earthquake reconstruction phase, which was defined by a general pattern of exclusion of Haitians from the recovery process, also in the efforts of coordinating relief operations. The cluster meetings of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) for example took place in the heavily guarded UN log base. Representatives of Haitian grass roots organizations were repeatedly denied entrance to this space, while white internationals entered unchecked (Miles 2012). Having said that, the »structures of inequality and difference« evolving around contemporary humanitarianism are inevitably intertwined with colonial notions of race and supremacy and affect non-white humanitarians, too (Benton 2016).

UPWARD MOBILITY

The emergency mobility embodied by expatriate intervention professionals also affects their social mobility, it somehow »boosts their privileged position« (Wolf 1996). They attain a quality of lifestyle, in economic as much as in social terms in the receiving countries of humanitarian intervention, that most of them would not be able to establish or uphold in their countries of primary residence. They turn from more or less ordinary people to Sahlinish »Big Man« with the power to determine the lives of a multitude of Haitians with one flight from Miami to Port-au-Prince (Steinke 2017). They often live in bigger, more luxurious houses, can afford the most expensive item on the menus of the various upscale restaurants, they pay someone who cooks their food, looks after their children and cleans their house. »These houses? We could never

afford them back home. These houses we have because they don't«, a disillusioned aid worker wrote in a New York Times Op-ed on Haiti (Schenkel 2013).

Haiti is an opportunity for staff of international organizations. It serves as a career pusher, a triumph on a humanitarian CV that reads: »If you make it here, you make it anywhere«. Especially research on the Brazilian role within the UN mission has shown that MINUSTAH as a whole helped Brazil to distinguish itself as an emerging peacekeeper with the prospect to be in charge of other major UN missions around the globe (Müller/Steinke 2020). The individual soldiers, too, stated that having served for the Haiti mission enhances their chances to a successful career. It allowed them to easily move up the ranks of the military.

OUTLOOK

If we are to understand migration and the various forms of mobility it entails as a social relation (Römhild 2014) then we can speak of the mobilities of expatriate professionals in Haiti as enclosures, drawn to the predicament of self-referentiality with a limited range of possibility to overcome the confines of their professional existence, least of all because of their own ignorance, but rather because of the growing securitization of humanitarian space, insurance liabilities, the short term character of emergency engagement and the structural violence inscribed in the humanitarian system as a whole. Those »double binds of humanitarian mobility« (Redfield 2012) lead expatriates to living lives detached from the everyday realities of the people that are the *raison d'être* for their mobile professional lives.

While researching other aspects of humanitarian engagements of international NGOs and the UN, the scrutiny of expatriate intervention professionals emerged as a relevant field of study. Considering this particular group of professionals as well as the »cultures of humanitarianism« as relevant categories of analysis will facilitate a more comprehensive answer to questions of failed interventions. It also means including the various forms of mobility and their limitations into a discussion of inequalities inherent to the humanitarian politics of life (Fassin 2007). This approach points at a structured critique of the humanitarian system rather than blaming individual expatriates for their »luxurious lifestyles, a lack of language skills, arrogance, ignorance, and possibly racist attitudes« (Fechter 2007: 5).

That means also taking crucial aspects of expatriate mobility into account, which relate back to an order reminiscent of colonial models of space, especially with regard to Haiti as the first Black Republic whose revolutionary achievements of 1804 have been silenced by the defeated colonial powers (Trouillot 1995). Intervention, may

it be of the humanitarian or military kind, is first and foremost a spatial practice (Henry/Higate 2009). Haiti is located in the center of the Caribbean. It constitutes the colonial gateway to the domination of the Americas, the cradle of Europe's self-proclaimed modernity (Boatcă 2018). The Caribbean region is the area longest under the control of European empires outside of Europe (Trouillot 2003). This colonial practice of space modeled contemporary spatial approaches to Haiti, manifested the continuing geostrategic importance of the country and is particularly tangible in the fact that with its seventh mission currently mandated, no other country in the world has seen more UN missions deployed and more UN staff moving through than Haiti.[3]

Research for this article was conducted in two settings: First of all during PhD fieldwork on faith-based humanitarian organizations in post-earthquake Haiti and secondly for the project: »Transnationales Peacebuilding als Süd-Süd-Kooperation: Brasiliens MINUSTAH-Engagement in Haiti« (Principle Investigator: Prof. Dr. Markus-Michael Müller) funded by the German Foundation for Peace Research (DSF).

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3 | In 2017, MINUSTAH was replaced by a subsequent peacekeeping mission, the United Nations Mission for Justice Support in Haiti (MINUJUSTH) which completed its mandate in 2019. Currently, the UN is present with a political mission United Nations Integrated Office in Haiti (BINUH).

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