

Dislocation and Unsettlement: Migrancy in the new Millennium

Provisional Proposal for a Research Agenda

COMMITTEE ON GLOBAL THOUGHT

Prepared by Rosalind C. Morris, December 13, 2015

Unsettling Numbers

On December 16, 2015, the International Labor Organization will release a report containing its new estimates of the worlds' international migrant population, including those categorized as domestic laborers. At present the ILO puts that number at approximately 232 million, of whom 13% are between the ages of 15 and 24. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees has stated that at the end of 2014, the world population of refugees was 38 million, but also that this number has likely increased precipitously since then, thanks to the expanding crises in Iraq and Syria, as well as in Myanmar, the so-called 'AfPak' region and elsewhere. In China, an estimated 252 million individuals were moving from rural residencies in search of work in urban centers in 2011, a number that has almost certainly increased since then. China's internal migrants have their counterparts in other countries, although they are rarely so well tracked. Much migration, both internally and inter-regionally, goes untracked. There are, for example, no reliable statistics for regional migration in sub-Saharan Africa or the Mekong Delta—areas in which the historical movement of people, much of it coerced by colonial capitalism and the aftermath of anti-colonial warfare, leads one to believe that significant percentages of the population are migratory out of need.

Even without reference to the many millions of people who are regularly but exceptionally displaced for extended periods thanks to natural disasters (the Nepal earthquake, for example, saw more than 2 million people rendered homeless), the numbers of people who are presently displaced from their homes ranges from several hundred million to more than a billion. These 'unsettled' people may be stateless or without access to the securities that are (ideally) tied to residency within a single political jurisdiction. They may be the recipients of temporary shelter, aid and employment provided by states or non-governmental organizations. Or they may be incarcerated in camps, prisons and other detention centers, depending on whether they are deemed to be fleeing political violence directed at particular social groups, or escaping 'merely' criminal violence. Almost invariably, the distinction between political and criminal violence maps directly onto the distinction between refugee and illegal immigrant. However, it does not lead to a distinction in the forms of vulnerability afflicting migrants. They may be subjected to violence by the agents of their home or their host states or by criminal organizations in the countries that send or receive them. For some, voluntary movement is transformed into forced relocation en route. Similarly, flight from

criminal violence may become exposure to political violence. It is in this context that we may also ask whether mass incarceration, especially in the US, should not be considered a category of forced relocation, if not migration.

The scale and temporal extension of these movements, as well as the heterogeneity and complexity of the groups moving, demands a recognition that these phenomena can no longer be understood as exceptions to conditions of normative stability or locatedness (although the political truism that the state of exception has become the rule is too analytically blunt to generate a more supple understanding). It goes without saying that the axiomatic opposition between the local and the global, which polarity organized so much cultural analysis in the 1990s, and which the naïve neologism of 'glocal' attempted to supersede, is entirely without explanatory value here. Moreover, the dislocations and unsettlings indexed above are likely to continue, expand and/or intensify in the near future. The reasons for this are political, economic and environmental. Quite obviously, and poignantly, military conflict and struggles over natural resources are likely to persist into the near future. In addition, mutations in the global economy have linked intensifying inequalities in income to new transformations in the international division of labor, with growing rates of migrancy among domestic and manual laborers. Still structured by gender and generation, this new international division of labor is nonetheless something of an inversion of the early stages of digitized financial capitalism, which saw the movement of capital to sites where currency and wage rates made production more 'cost-effective'. Today, workers are ever more on the move and capital circulates at a different level, virtually independently.

Issues of climate change complicate this picture profoundly. For, regardless of form and distribution, these compulsions to move are likely to be exacerbated as increasing parts of the globe which have, until now, been densely inhabited become unlivable under conditions of climate change. States, international NGOs, and global governance bodies are currently drawing up plans for the strategic movement of populations in an effort to mitigate catastrophe as a result of rising water levels or changed riverine flow patterns and other climate-related events. Informed by actuarial calculations, long-term financial planning, and real efforts to anticipate the material and social needs of communities at risk, these efforts are nonetheless threatened by their resemblance to earlier forms of violently enforced dispossession and displacement. The need to learn from those earlier and deeply unjust histories grows in proportion to the risk of their reproduction.

Accounting for the Unsettled

However shocking the numbers, the problem of migrancy is not merely numerical. As already suggested, it is neither reducible to a question of scale, nor addressable from within the *dispositif* of biopolitical governmentality. That is to say, it is not a problem of population management. The problem is conceptual.

For most of the twentieth century, discussions of population movements were organized around three sets of problems and their associated concepts: 1) labor migration; 2) the question of the refugee, and 3) displacement associated with natural disaster.

These three conceptual rubrics may also be understood in terms of broad disciplinary and epistemic orientations, including the axioms and causal logics that inform them. Thus, the question of labor migration corresponds to an analytic in which economic factors are determinant, and where actors are thought to move (or not) based on a relatively rational calculations of risks, costs and benefits associated with either cyclic movement or more permanent relocation. The question of the refugee typically corresponds to an analysis that privileges political factors. Accordingly, the refugee's flight is conceived as a response to war and political violence, and in terms of a loss of rights and the obstruction of access to the protections afforded by states and institutions of international governance or civil society. In this case, the actor is presumptively coerced into movement, and remains exiled only as a matter of duress. With regards to the person/s displaced by natural disaster, the causalities are generally conceived in terms of relatively immediate threat, and the displaced person/s are understood to be reacting to that threat in similarly immediate terms.

The disciplinary and epistemic frameworks within which these questions have been cast and analyzed are never exclusive, of course. Nevertheless, even the brief enumeration above shows that these categorical distinctions no longer function, if ever they did. If some migrants are only temporarily mobile (as are the contract domestic workers traveling between Southeast Asia and the Gulf States for example, or mineworkers in sub-Saharan Africa), many who believed they would return to their places of origin have now become resident in the sites to which they were dislocated—in more and less temporary forms of habitation—for decades and even generations (as is the case for many Palestinians or the stateless *bedoon* deported from Gulf States). Some have abandoned the category of migrant and embraced that of reluctant immigrant, but others are deported to nations that they have never seen (such as the children of Cambodian refugees 'returned' to Cambodia from the US following commission of crimes and the exhaustion of prison sentences).

A Task for Thought

What is revealed in these brief and partial indications of contemporary mass migrancy and the speculative anticipation of even more such migrancy is the need for new policies, practices and legal instruments. It is clear that different material infrastructures and forms of education will also have to be invented, and as this occurs new forms governance will arise but so will new aspirations to autonomy. However, none of this can be produced without new thought and understanding of the causes and entailments of such processes, the social dynamics and psychic

investments that inform them, the sources of resistance and conflicts that shape them.

It is impossible to underestimate the intellectual task of responding to this nexus of problems and the tasks that emerge therefrom. Many of the organizing concepts and institutionalities through which we have previously addressed questions of migrancy need to be either radically rethought or abandoned. We need, for example, to rethink the presumptive oppositions between voluntary and involuntary movement linked to the distinction between political and criminal violence, and between temporary versus permanent migration. The implications of such a rethinking extend far beyond the issue of migrancy, however. They demand that we rethink the nature and function of nation-states as territorial entities and the regulative systems through which they operate and on which basis they stage their own claims to sovereignty relative to economic logics that are increasingly imagined to be autonomous, and viz. the institutions of global governance.

Indeed, the definition of migrancy as a question or problem depends on where and on the basis of which foundational concepts one addresses it. Thus, in policy contexts structured by the idea of the nation-state and national priorities (wherever the nation) questions of migrancy are typically addressed as matters of security, border control, influx, labor force flexibility, remittance values, and infrastructural burden—to name a few of the dominant themes. In policy contexts oriented by environmental concerns, the matter is often conceived in the idiom of vulnerability, risk, and, in the parlance of the new aid dispensation, sources of resiliency. These managerial, governmental, regulatory and prospective addresses to migrancy often stand in stark contrast to much of the literature about the issue produced in the humanistic social sciences and humanities, where it is often addressed via the lens of cultural memory, and with an explicitly or implicitly retrospective temporality. Concepts of the diasporic and the exilic, which animate much thought about the experience of migrants, enable a recognition of the psychic burden and symbolic mediations that make migrancy both a mode of displacement and discontinuity, on one hand, and a form of extended continuity and tenuous descent—as well as a translational imperative—on the other.

The research project, '**Dislocation and Unsettlement: Migrancy in the New Millennium,**' would convene a group of scholars in a rigorous theoretical exploration of the concepts, questions and tasks of responding to the current and short-term future of migrancy.

The initial undertaking of the group would be to read and review the major strands of thought that have informed our understanding of migrancy, from across the social sciences and humanities. Once or twice a month, the group would convene with a set of readings, including major theoretical work and contemporary policy documents (such as Arendt on the refugee, and UNHCR reports). The responsibility for each set of readings would fall to a different member, who would provide context, contribute an introduction and provide some intellectual

shepherding of the conversation. This ‘reading group’ would be supplemented by occasional (1 per semester), thematic symposia at which case studies would be presented by scholars from a variety of disciplines with long-term and specific engagement with these issues. The symposia might be regional or topical in focus, but in their aggregate they should permit sustained, cross-historical and cross-regional comparison so that we are able to distinguish long-term continuities within which new intensities can be grasped. At the same time, we do not want to lose the capacity to distinguish between the different kinds of migrancy associated with different political and economic logics, different legal regimes, and in the context of different histories.

Stage Two of the project could include engagement with more professionally practical dimensions of these issues: in law, architecture and spatial planning, public health, environmental sciences, engineering and the arts, as possible and appropriate. It is not necessary that those engaged in Stage One would be involved in Stage Two of the project in the same degree. Indeed, as the project matures, it will like entail a multiplication and even a splitting of possible activities, and a diversification of partnerships—depending on interest, funding and institutional support. A possible intervention at the interface between these two stages would be the creation of a publication or a series of publications organized around specific problematics. The platform might vary, depending on topic, and the publications would ideally address themselves to a diversity of audiences, via scholarly monographs or edited volumes and special issues, via more provisional, web-based media, via more popular writer formats, such as *Global Reports*, or in catalogues associated with artistic collaborations and installations.

It would be ideal if the symposia could themselves migrate between global centers, with a core set of issues addressed differently in each location based on the expertise of local scholars and their conceptualization of the problem from within the traditions and geopolitical pressures that inform their own work. The goal would not be to simply transfer concepts and problematics. Rather the aim would be to use the global centers as stages from which to learn---how globality and its phenomena, but especially the phenomenon of migration, look elsewhere. For example, we could assume that the question of statelessness looks different and is defined with reference to different histories in Istanbul and in Beijing, and that the temporal dimensions of displacement are considered differently in Amman and in Nairobi, both centers of cross-generation and transregional migration in the long *durée*, and in Paris, where current response to the so-called crisis of immigration often includes an aspiration to reign it in. Labor migration in Mumbai is likely to be conceived quite differently than in Rio de Janeiro, and so forth.