

Towards a Dialectical Understanding of Displacement and Emplacement

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During the past twenty years or so, existential questions regarding the dynamics between mobility and identity have moved from fairly specialized studies of exile and refugees into main stream social theory. Fuelled by an interest in the social and cultural effects of globalisation, anthropology and its neighbouring disciplines have become interested in studies of increased long-distance labour migration and transnational lives, as expressions of a significant change in the world today. These new empirical interests have, in turn, inspired theories of interconnectedness, hybridity, deterritorialisation, partiality, etc. that build on the constructivist approaches to social theory, and argue for an optic that cuts across the conceptual divide between structure and agency.

This paper reviews a selection of the anthropological and sociological literature on globalization and mobility, with a particular focus on notions of 'place' and 'home'. Building on this overview, it is argued that while the pioneers in the emerging subfield of globalisation studies remained devoted to an intention to create 'grand theories' that would condensate the analytical lessons of delimited ethnographies, the present moment calls for analytical ideas that inspire new questions and provoke alternative interpretations, without aspiring for the status of meta-theory.

Arguing for a dialectical understanding of displacement and emplacement, the paper centres on the study of people who experience a sense of loss in connection with mobility. While displacement is often presumed to imply a sense of loss almost by definition, the argument challenges the intuitive connection between mobility and loss, and at the same time the equivalent assumption regarding fixity and belonging. Drawing on fieldwork in Dakar (Senegal), Korhogo (Côte d'Ivoire), and Bobo Dioulasso (Burkina Faso), the paper discusses the feelings of immobility among young aspiring migrants, and the mobilisation of 'returning' second-generation emigrants under the banner of 'diaspora and development', as counter-intuitive cases calling for a revised understanding of the alienating and disenfranchising potential of 'home', as well as the potentially empowering aspects of 'displacement', respectively.

These empirical cases call for an analytical approach that at once questions the tendency to perceive migration and other forms of mobility as anomic to the social order, on the one hand, and the equation between fixity and belonging, on the other.