

The Meaning of the Move: An Argument for Analytical Displacement

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In this paper I draw comparatively on ethnographic material from my work with war-affected populations from post-colonial Mozambique and Angola, diasporan Liberia, and colonial Portuguese Africa to argue for the usefulness of a fundamental shift in the conceptualization and study of displacement: from an emphasis on physical mobility per se to an empirical focus on a less-than-self-evident relationship between physical mobility and social mobility. I illustrate how the meanings and outcomes of physical mobility are far from given but must be treated as an empirical problem in which the structure of social and economic opportunities that cultural agents ultimately navigate are reconfigured in complex, contradictory, and inadvertent ways that simultaneously pose new and socially-differentiated challenges and opportunities. As my ethnographic material demonstrates, such navigation can result in a broad spectrum of outcomes that sometimes defy commonplace assumptions about the outcomes of migration --or emplacement--in crisis contexts. These outcomes can include cases in which displacement serves as the conduit for ultimate upwards socio-economic mobility and empowerment, as well as situations of social disenfranchisement through involuntary immobilization -- and other forms of displacement in place. I argue that a more analytically robust analytical frame for examining the relationship between physical and social mobility will: 1- recognize the culturally generative agency of those who deploy a range of mobility strategies to assess and cope with crisis; 2- examine how agents interact in and with historically constituted and specific political, economic, and social fields; 3) recognize the effects on actors of the mobility of significant social others--and thus takes the reconfiguration of social relations, opportunity-structures, and power as its central problem; and 4) thus ultimately recognize the social constitution of both the physical and social components of “lifespaces” against which a sense of emplacement is rendered meaningful to social agents.