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Evacuation: a crucial type of mobility

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What about mobilities which have already started before they've gone? Mobilities which are planned, coordinated, imminent. Or at least that's the plan. That's the plan in emergency arrangements which coordinate a series and sequences of actions to occur in the advent or in preparation of an emergency, a punctual event of threat to life, and other thresholds. Evacuation plans are maybe put on standby and then

activated. Some evacuation mobilities are longer term, whilst others are of the quality of a more 'sudden impact event'. Evacuees may be self-evacuated, much more chaotic, informal, illegal even, although the legalities are contested and ambiguous. Evacuation is often, although not exclusively a problem for cities. Evacuation produces peculiar spaces of evacuation, places left and evacuated of presence? In amongst the various things that evacuation is, it is a particular form of, or way of organising, watching over and governing mobility, and it requires far more sustained study. Evacuation is noticeably absent from many of the diverse mobilities of humans, non- humans and things that have been opened up to critical insight through the putative 'new mobilities turn' or 'paradigm' (although see Sheller, 2012 for an exceptional study of precisely those who could not evacuate). Indeed, the few studies that have turned their attention to evacuation from this perspective, have elaborated precisely the depoliticisation of the term (see for example T Cresswell, 2006). In other words, evacuation mobilities have often been approached, and are often represented – in such a way that they are loss of meaning. This is problematic, because to present evacuation as a purely technical act or engineering solution is a political move of closure. That is, mobility is naturalised as the only possible outcome. What does this do to how we weigh up decisions, guilt or the politics of who is evacuated, how and with what consequences?

What is at stake during evacuation?

Evacuation seems a poor fit for existing and more familiar categories of mobile subjects, such as 'the homeless', 'refugees' and/or 'migrants', 'passengers', 'drivers' even if evacuation certainly touches upon these subjects. Evacuation mobilities have traditionally been some of the most contentious and 'unknown' forms of mobility, demonstrated by the fact that, since the Second World War, numerous systems of governmental surveillance and registration have sought to manage their inherent plurality and unpredictability. More recently, 'the evacuee' has figured on the agendas of authorities pertaining to public health, transportation and highways, policing and emergency services, at a whole variety of scales. It is becoming increasingly important, therefore, to ask just what is at stake in the surveillance, categorisation, mobilisation and treatment of the evacuated as it is a figure that seems to be moving across different grounds, approaches, institutions and understandings,– different terminologies, different ideas and concepts, different practices – orbit this figure. Central to this are the ways in which the evacuee has been subjected to an extensive, but uneven effort to render it as 'legible' (Scott,

1999) through the administration of different forms of authority, bureaucracy and technology. The primary means to do this have been the application of a series of techniques and technologies that make the evacuee visible, and then sort, order and manage that subject physically and within complex and multi-scalar systems of records and databases, accordingly. Given this could we subject evacuation mobilities to what Mimi Sheller calls a 'mobilities justice', a politics that attempts to develop the "capability of all […] [to] access mobility in order to meet their own basic needs" (Sheller, 2012). What this particularly recognises is that mobility capabilities are highly and unevenly distributed across different spaces, subjects, and bodies.

1: New uses grafted on mobility infrastructures

Let me develop 2 related lines of enquiry although there is much more to be said. Evacuation illustrates the ways our mobility infrastructures can have dual purposes, or other uses which are grafted and retrofitted onto them in certain emergency conditions. Highways become evacu-lanes, to take people out of the path of a hurricane. New routes are found through buildings to escape from emergency exits. Holding areas in tall buildings provide refuge or invacuation through vertical evacuation policies. Individuals and Households are moved through networks of distribution and rest shelters. During Hurricane Katrina, in 2005, the international airport was reopened deliberately for evacuation. 24 hours after the storm hit, the airport became a main evacuation node to house patients from 23 of the 26 hospitals in the city under water, and air- lift 2,700 patients to safety and 25,000 people to shelters. At its peak, a helicopter arrived every 15-45 seconds. The store-forward logistical logic of this processing was spatially articulated, terminal space redefined. For the first 6 hrs the upper departure level became a treatment area, the baggage claim was quickly used as a staging area. As the pictures illustrate, people became objects that needed to be moved and triaged, using the infrastructure of the airport – runways, apron, baggage conveyors, baggage carts, the baggage area – to do so. Bodies become baggage, baggage becomes beds

2: The Dividing line between managing people out and letting them in

We could also address evacuation through what Jennifer Hyndman has called a "a geo-politics of mobility", that is how could we 'juxtapose the speed and dexterity of states and intergovernmental organizations' to manage people out of place with their own capacity and resources to flee danger and seek safety elsewhere. A week from the February protests in Libya, 2011 in a deteriorating situation as rebel groups and

militia's challenged the government; foreign nationals were soon demanding that their states take responsibility because the local one could not. Evacuation is always too slow. Public opinion at home, in Britain and elsewhere, vocalised that their governments were not acting, that their decisions were inept and paralysed. Why were they not moving people to safety? The UN Security Council's No-fly zone resolution in late March would offer provision for evacuation, but until that point other governments and interested corporates, flirted with a variety of territorial incursions, which drew Libya's – and surrounding country's - ports, airports, airfields and landing strips into a network of evacuation processes. A Non-combatant evacuation operations coordination cell was established in the UK High Commission there, supported by a cell in Crete (thousands of Chinese workers would be ferried to Crete from Benghazi, on Greek charter ferries) and a team in London, coordinating the response between 16 different nations on a mix of different military aircraft. The Maltese government setup their own evacuee processing hub, sorting over 8,000 people from over 50 countries in 7 days arriving by hopping aircraft or ferry, to be flown elsewhere. Which countries have planned to hook their populations out of harms way, is a crucial dividing line in this kind of evacuation, as Tripoli's main terminal became a camping ground for thousands of Tunisians, Eritreans and Egyptian's trying to leave but they couldn't. Those lucky enough to be airlifted out were embassy and consulate officials and their families, journalists, and a large proportion of Turkish, Italian and Chinese construction workers, electrical engineers, geologists and lenders and of course oil workers placed in more remote parts of the country. In many ways they were liquid workers – in Bauman and Urry's terms - highly mobile, and whisked away by the fluid resource they extract, leaving the rest to make their way to land borders or wait. So in short, evacuation is a crucial if highly inequitable form of protection that deserves far more scrutiny that it currently has. It can do much good and it can also do a lot of harm. And until we can begin to excavate these practices, and policies, to distinguish from but also bring evacuees in relation to other sets of mobile subject, how can we subject it to proper scrutiny and critique. Indeed, whilst it might seem to be about the exceptional. It is not. Evacuation is always around us, in one form or another, sometimes in plain sight, waiting to happen.

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