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Representations of displacement in Colombia: Humanity, bodies, moralities

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This talk is going to be somewhat experimental. Almost 20 years ago, the French sociologist Philippe Corcuff reappraised the legacy of the Enlightenment in the social sciences (namely through an examination of what he called 'the new sociologies', of Michel Callon, Bruno Latour, Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot respectively). His was an attempt at salvaging some of the key concepts that once enabled the development of an autonomous field of science –hard and soft–, namely the notions of humanity, reason, and progress. Through this conceptual network whose meaning became stabilised during the Enlightenment period, Corcuff argued (2001: 161), 'there emerges the perspective of greater individual and collective control over human destiny in the sense of a betterment, against hierarchies and injustices'. What he took away from this legacy is the fundamental importance of the notion of 'human' and 'shared humanity', where each human being is considered human on the same basis as another ('au même titre').

Later in his discussion, Corcuff borrows from well-known anthropologist Lévi-Strauss who, in his reflection on ethnocentrism criticised Universalist pretensions masking the domination of a culture upon others. Now, Levi-Strauss's support of cultural relativism was propped up against a background of common dignity for human cultures to exist as cultures rather than just natures (2001: 166). Corcuff argues that constructivist approaches in the social sciences have at times operated according to this 'articulated tilting' ('balancement articulé'), which shifts the optimistic humanism of the Enlightenment into a 'dimmed' ('tamisé') one underscoring a *troubled and fragile humanism* ('un humanisme inquiet et fragile').

It would seem that this restless and fragile humanism has come to characterise our times more so than ever. With this troubled humanism in mind, I would like to propose today a multi-layered ethnographic, theoretical and methodological approach to address some aspects of the daily life of those who migrate in the context of forced displacement in Colombia. This approach is twofold. On the one hand, it consists of approaching bodies as an object of observation and investigation through postures and non-verbal language. These give (another) account of migration situations. On the other hand, this approach of bodies is meant as a tool to understand these situations empathetically from a bodily resonance between researcher and people met in the course of research. Here I argue that we need to think further about the research relationship that is built over time with the people whose situation one is researching. To the extent that our tools are ethnographic - as anthropologists - the human part at stake in daily sharing other humans' reality acquires even greater importance (and begets implications and responsibilities on the part of the researcher). Arguably, it is through this recognition that new vocabularies of morality may emerge in our very academic practices to possibly better capture and address the many shifting ethical registers that have been unfolding in our world today.

This human part that we have in common with our 'research subjects' has tended to be kept invisible. It has at times been negated or relegated out of the box of sociological tools, those same tools that we have received within our own training and that we have in turn transmitted to our students. The sacrosanct principle of objectivity, this ever-unreachable ideal, has obfuscated other ways of looking at, understanding and practising

the ethnographic relationship. In seeking such objectivity, we have forgotten a primary truth: the most obvious and immediate way of communicating among human beings is through our senses of feeling, hearing, seeing, tasting, touching smelling, in a word, living.[1] Words come much later. Nevertheless, our own bodies and emotions, in general, have not been invited to take part in the adventure of scientific inquiry. I say 'adventure' because scientific inquiry, even if planned with the utmost care, always turns out to be the fruit of chance: chance of unforeseen circumstances; randomness of immediate interaction surrounding the survey or questionnaire at the time of the interview, not to mention all the elements of a 'participant observation' or, as Sophie Caratini would suggest, an 'observant participation' that by nature follows the thread of moments and events left unplanned by the researcher; and, finally, randomness of encounters that may take place out of the ordinary, with all the richness, complexities and implications these may entail.

Today, then, I want to invite our bodies and emotions as essential protagonists in the adventure. Not only those of our 'informants' as objects of investigation, but as means to conduct an investigation. I propose to demonstrate how this multi-sited attention to bodies and emotions allow us to sharpen our perceptions in the field and capture information, which, in turn, illuminates complex situations of migration that are more difficult to understand otherwise.

[What followed was a 10-to-15-minute invitation to members of the audience to either come standing or remain seated while moving their bodies, consciously connecting body, heart and mind and asking themselves the following questions: 'When are these different parts of me connected in my academic work? When do I consciously draw on the various types of intelligence made available to me by these different parts? How can I connect these different intelligences? What difference(s), if any, would it make to my work and the way I approach it? This was followed with setting the context for the research in Colombia.]

Violence in Colombia: National Beginnings, Dissent and Displacement

The history of Colombia and its national construction, as it is known, is premised on a long experience of social, political, cultural, racial and economic violence. From the beginning, opposing conceptions of the nation and the South American region saw the light of day, the consequences of which have rippled down to this day. Today's armed conflict is in many ways a legacy from this historic violence, in which different groups such as guerrillas, the State and paramilitaries have been opposing each other. Of course, there are various forms of violence in other parts of the world. However, it should be noted that to date, Colombia is the only country with an academic speciality in 'violentology'. This in itself merits a separate epistemological study. Suffice it to note here that while most studies of violentology have referred to its political dimension, sociologists,

[1] Of course, anthropologists such as Paul Stoller had already in the 1990s extended an invitation to consider these crucial methodological issues as integral to our epistemologies; yet his voice has remained remarkably singular.

historians, and economists have also contributed to this body of work since the late 1980s. In the foreground of violentologists' concerns, are the confrontations brought about by the armed conflict. This same conflict has generated massive displacements within the country. According to the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in 2018, Colombia had 7.4 million internally displaced persons, while Syria has 6.3 million and Iraq 3.6 million.

To date, guerrillas as well as paramilitaries have been involved in massacres and the displacement of entire populations in the rural areas of the Caribbean - to name just this part - often for economic reasons. There is a fundamental link to those large, intensive farming programmes dedicated to a global economy that I cannot address in this paper (See Romero 2007 and especially Zúñiga 2007). The confrontation between rival paramilitary groups, on the one hand, and between paramilitaries and guerrillas on the other, has in recent decades been at the core of forced migration known as 'displacement'. In the face of public killings and acts of unspeakable cruelty and barbarity, entire families have been decimated while others have sometimes fled at night, leaving all their belongings behind. Many have turned to coastal cities in search of a safer life. For many rural people in Colombia's coastal areas, one of the commonest destinations has become Santa Marta, on the Caribbean coast, northwest of Colombia. In 2008, according to official figures, the district of Santa Marta was one of those that most welcomed displaced people but also one of those that most displaced farmers.

In the last decades and until recently, the city of Santa Marta and its surroundings were under the unofficial power of the paramilitaries, while parts of the Sierra Nevada were occupied by various guerrilla groups and, progressively, by paramilitary factions. In 2007, according to Sidonia Gallardo, head of the local official humanitarian assistance programme, FARC and ELN groups dominated the cities of Ciénaga (south) and Riohacha (north) respectively, while paramilitaries were concentrated mainly in the Sierra. All these armed groups fought for control of the territory, achieving and losing portions alternately. As a result, peasant communities living in the surrounding areas and other parts of the Magdalena Grande and César where similar events have taken place were forcibly displaced. A large part of those people came to find refuge in the city of Santa Marta, followed by other displaced populations further along the western Atlantic Coast and beyond (e.g., the Pacific Coast). In 2007, Santa Marta ranked fourth in the reception of displaced populations (ICRC 2007); Sidonia nevertheless claimed at that time that the city was second and even first at the national level (which is unlikely). More recent official figures give Santa Marta as the third city, although it is known that not all displaced families are registered, since only over a half are registered there.

My paper today is primarily based on research work carried out between the end of 2007 and 2010. Thereafter and until 2016, I regularly, although informally continued visiting some of the people I had worked with before. Although the situation at the official national level has changed with former President Santos working towards civil peace, which earned him the Nobel Prize at the end of 2016, the main representative of the guerrilla, the FARC, signed a peace agreement and the paramilitaries have also disarmed in several regions), the agreements reached between various actors in the conflict were not unanimously approved and other actors, 'bacrim'

(criminal gangs of all kinds), came to occupy a space that the official authority of the state had left vacant. They are now in conflict with the other guerrilla movement still in dispute, the ELN (Ejército de Liberación Nacional) and FARC dissidents for control of much of the territory (especially in the departments of Nariño, Córdoba, Antioquia and Boyacá). The area of the Caribbean coast in which I investigated is no longer affected as much as it used to. However, massive population displacements continue to occur in many parts of the country. During the first half of 2018, nearly 18,000 people were displaced in eleven of the 32 departments, according to the Defensoría del Pueblo, one of the institutions responsible for protecting victims of displacement.

Displacement, Everyday Survival, and Expectations

When I returned to Santa Marta at the end of 2007, I was invited to accompany a municipal official in charge of the programme for displaced people to various neighbourhood meetings. This allowed me to meet new members, living in different parts of the city. Although introduced by an official who later became very unpopular because she was accused of fraud, my first contacts with the beneficiaries of the programme were unexpectedly positive and welcoming. A number of them promptly invited me to visit them in their homes so I could 'see for myself' their living conditions, which no representative of the officially entrusted entities had seen until then.

During the meetings and visits to the families, it seemed increasingly clear that most of the participants were concentrating their energies and interests on the present and the immediate future. The will to succeed and the dynamism of some were inversely proportional to the little economic opportunities that came their way. Through the arbitrariness of a lottery system, some lucky ones were selected to participate in training programmes designed to help them create their own micro-enterprises according to the neo-liberal rhetoric (supported by USAID) that dominated reinsertion projects: making and selling confectionery or empanadas, hairdressing, manicure, etc. Some heads of families expressed their expectations to take part in these programmes in terms of 'due' ('nos lo deben'). Many denounced the lackadaisical attitude with which institutions dealt with the daily subsidies meant for them. The aid sent by the government and other non-governmental agencies often did not reach its recipients. Corruption was often mentioned. Many families verbally shared their anger and showed their frustration and obstinacy in the face of bureaucratic delays and the increasingly ever-deferred postponement of aid and official visits.

Bodies and emotions: entering into resonance while doing fieldwork

The fact of the official visits being constantly postponed is one such instance that allowed me to see another aspect of the daily lives of many of those with whom I shared moments in the course of fieldwork. In spite of displaced people's repeated visits to the institutions in charge of protecting their welfare, in spite of their actions, inquiries, procedures and 'tutela', their efforts often did not achieve the intended effects. As I discussed

in the colloquium we had in France in September 2018, all correspondence from these institutions was formulated with extreme and often pompous courtesy, often inversely commensurate to the unfulfilled promises of imminent visits these letters contained. In this context, the visits I became accustomed to making to the families with whom I worked over almost a decade came to occupy a privileged space, not only for me as a tool of ethnographic inquiry, but also for the relationship that was formed with the people I visited. As I was sometimes told:

> 'you are the only one who has cared about our fate, you have come to visit us, but look at all these promises from them, and they have not kept a single one of them, and look where we are living' (
>
> 'usted es la única persona que se ha preocupado por nuestra suerte, usted nos ha venido a visitar, pero mire todas estas promesas de ellos, y nos han cumplido ni una, nada, y mire donde estamos viviendo').

It is within these visits that it occurred to me that something was going on there that could not be documented other than through this very interaction between emotions and bodies of both 'informants' and researchers'. I am not only referring to the spaces where many of these families lived, often in precarious and dangerous areas of the city, such as the immediate periphery of the port. Nor am I referring to the restricted space of daily living, often in temporary and makeshift houses, with walls made of disjointed wooden panels and corrugated iron roofs, without windows nor air circulation, with mattresses sometimes thrown onto a dirt floor where they would take turns to sleep.

Additionally, I am referring to the ways in which bodies, postures (sometimes diseases), indicated lassitude, weariness, suffering and pain that words were too scant to express. This non-verbal language was communicated through bodily postures, facial expressions, ways of dragging or shuffling feet whilst walking, of collapsing with a sigh into one of the plastic chairs that constituted the scarce furniture of the home, etc. Already at an early age, children adopted forms of walking with shoulders sloping as if loaded with an unspeakable burden. All these expressions were much more in evidence in the intimacy of the home. They told of a pain that could not be named in any other way, but which was nevertheless seen by the researcher who came from outside, perhaps, granted, because she stood so far away from this pain.

Of course, from both sides it was always clear: no matter how empathetic I might be, no matter how engaged I was in their struggles, no matter the gifts (ranging from clothes to sweets and school supplies) I'd bring to their children year after year, I was not the one who suffered the daily and almost permanent pain of having had to flee from their village, of having arrived in the city with nothing in their pockets, of having had to undertake all these institutional procedures in order, in the best of cases, to obtain emergency resources. I was not the one either, who, throughout the months that became years, had to continue enduring a daily life in conditions of misery with the awareness and feeling that the little dignity that remained theirs was being continuously trampled upon in official dealings and daily interactions with the 'city people'.

However, I would like to suggest here that as a relationship developed with particular families, a relationship of tacit trust also developed through which I became a witness of their conditions. Beyond potentially serving and fulfilling a 'scientific enquiry', this witnessing also fed into the constitution of the institutional case they sometimes made for their own benefit. It also shifted the methodological and epistemological focus beyond what could be named and quantified more 'objectively', onto the acuteness of a transient state of being that was becoming a permanent one. Here I want to suggest that, it was all the richness of this body language that I was capturing by means of a resonance with an awareness of the dynamics of our bodies (theirs and mine) interacting. In addition, it is precisely because I was no longer a researcher only but also a kind of 'in-between' (rather than 'go-between') through my personal practice of movement meditation that I was able to enter into resonance through my body, mind, emotions, heart and soul all at once. That is the central point of my presentation today: far from affecting or damaging the precision and the critical and 'scientific' value of the research conducted, it made it possible in the first place. Today, this is also what I want to bring to the discussion table. That is, the need to investigate by means of all of what makes us human, including 'our guts', and also to transform this bodily and emotional resonance into a methodological tool. In the face of structural violence and cruelty –whether perpetrated by the State or a whole range of (non)governmental agencies– the bodily resources that we all have as humans sharing humanity in our investigative work, to return to Corcuff's words in the beginning of this paper, have become our best ever tools. These, arguably, may provide new vocabularies of morality. Moralities that would testify to at least the meaningfulness of even a *troubled and fragile humanism*.

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