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# Espacialidades precárias dos refugiados no Brasil

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# Precarious spaciality of refugees in Brazil

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## Abstract

This article aims to explore the importance of the different types of displacement in constituting the differences of two collective of refugees. Influenced by Ingold (2007) and the importance he gives to the paths, trajectories and lines in phenomenological terms, now intending to investigate how the different migratory paths, established in conjunction by groups of people, imply the production of differences. This spatial dimension is especially evident in the case of refugees we have begun to study: varied paths of space routes caused by reasons unrelated to the will of the refugees. We have analyzed two cases of refugees/immigrants: Haitians<sup>2</sup> and women refugees in São Paulo (mainly Congolese).<sup>3</sup> These cases are linked to distinct spatial trajectories in the present.

Key-words: refuge, Brazil, spacialities, Congolese, Haitians

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<sup>2</sup> The situation of Haitians in Brazil in general is considered similar to that of refugees. But they are usually holders of a special residence permit, created specifically for their situation (humanitarian visa). See Machado and Etecheberre (2013).

<sup>3</sup> Machado and Almeida (2016).

## Introduction

The issue of space and spatialities is a relevant topic for refugee studies. The assumption that refugees are deprived of identity, culture, inheritance and the idea that they have lost something essential to define themselves presides over many studies on the subject. State territorialization appears as an index of loss to refugees, as if displacement always resulted in a negative fact. Clifford (1994) already noted this tendency to the fixity of the anthropological theory in general and even more in that one dedicated to understand exactly the displacement. This "sedentarization" of analysis is accompanied by an uncritical use of concepts of adaptation and acculturation, to which anthropology has already devoted much critical attention in the first half of the twentieth century.

An effective study of the refuge phenomenon should therefore consider, according to Kallius et al. (2016), the reflections on the immobility policies. States try to establish policies to contain mobility, either by avoiding the entrance or by preventing the internal movement of refugee contingents (the refugee camp would be the fundamental instrument of demobilization policy). The desire to stabilize their borders and to avoid the flow of several (diverse) "others" (immigrants, refugees) implies to constitute forms of immobilizing people, with policies often violent, or even "protofascist", as the authors say in the case of Hungary and other European countries. Following Appadurai (1988), the authors indicate how the analyses about immobility, as well as about mobility and various processes of political activism, highlight the complex interconnections between space, place and political voice.

The state centrism and its inevitable connection with space results in an idea that refugees are always losing space, place, identity and everything else. In the view of Agamben (2002) and Rancière (2004), for example, the refugee camp can be seen as a technology of power, as a biopolitical control device

(Foucault 2010), as a producer of stateless individuals and therefore, naked in their humanity, since they stripped of the protection of the nation state (and of its regulated space). Agamben (2002) compares the Nazi concentration camps with the present refugee camps to claim that they are producers of individuals stripped of any political power, naked in their statelessness.<sup>4</sup> The refugee camp is a state of exception where the refugee is not and cannot be a citizen. Rancière (2004) highlights the production of individuals without power in the name of the defense of humanitarian rights, just as Agier (2010) highlights how humanitarianism has become a form of contemporary totalitarianism. In these perspectives, the refugees appear as victims of a system that depoliticizes and oppresses them.

If these analyses of power and oppression relations present in the institutional constellation which regulates and manages the refugee internationally are powerful and important, according to Williams (2014) and Malkki (2002) they, however, end up reifying a refugee dispossessed of any political action and of any capacity to produce space and place. The same argument is used by Holmes and Castañeda (2016), in a very recent text, indicating the topicality of the question. There is something like an essentialization of the refugee as a subject with no voice and no place that functions as another tool of exclusion. Without disregarding the biopolitical power of these institutions, the authors intend to treat the refugee political subjectivities as capable of producing answers and alternatives to systematic oppression. Fassin (2007), for example, analyzes how refugees are constantly engaged in a policy of life, as emerging as the situation in which they find themselves. Kallius et alii (2016), in turn, analyze a political case of Syrian refugees (mostly) in transit across Hungary, highlighting the effective agency of the subjects.

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<sup>4</sup> On this concept, see Goris et alii (2009).

The connection between the production of xenophobic, racist and excluding nationalisms and displacements (forced or not) is already accentuated by Hannah Arendt (2013), for whom the symbolic logics of exclusion end up pathologizing and discriminating the refugees (like other displaced persons). From Arendt's text (originally from 1951) to this day, her statements have proven increasingly accurate and precise: the place of the "crisis" of refuge in contemporary European politics is an example of this<sup>5</sup>. Butler and Spivak (2007), on the other hand, produce an analysis of the refuge that carries Arendt's perspective forward: for them there is the concurrence of various powers in defining the refuge as an abnormal state, producing, therefore, subjects that can be expelled, precisely because they are outside the normal order of things and, above all, outside the international state logic. This perspective allows us to understand the logic of arguments such as those of Piscitelli (2013) when reflecting on how even the instruments of protection to the displaced people who displace end up imposing on them forms of immobility and restraint.

### **Experiences in Brazil**

Moving on to works produced on the subject within the research group of Migration Studies Laboratory, we see that these issues also affect the experiences of refugees and immigrants in Brazil. In Etecheberre's work (2013), we see different flows of Haitians to Brazil: from those who arrive as immigrants in search of work to students benefiting from certain agreements between Brazil and Haiti. Between the two profiles of Haitians, the author found identifications and differences, but the similarities indicate a similar spatial perception and definitely marked by the experience of recent displacement.

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<sup>5</sup> See Holmes 2016 and Valenta 2016.

The group of workers established in Limeira (Brazil, SP) was "gathered/sought" in the Amazon State of Acre by a local construction business owner, who offered jobs to those who came. All were housed in the same house, rented by the businessman, since it is very difficult to rent real estate in Brazil without guarantors, something complicated to handle among newcomers. The spatial geography of Haitians is made up of recent experiences of mobility: in the case of Limeira workers, this spatiality is related to housing in the extreme periphery of the city, with work-religion-leisure circuits and latent labor conflicts

All these phenomena above constitute the spatial geography of this group. Firstly, we have recent experiences of displacement, marking the perspective of this collective, which announce the sharing of experiences and the weighting and comparison between places, lives and work possibilities. Some of the residents are already long time immigrants, that is, they were already immigrants in either the Dominican Republic or Haiti, which makes Brazil a progressive continuity in a trajectory of displacements. This indicates the great transitoriness of the insertions of this group in the Brazilian social fabric, since one is always in search of the best option of life articulated by the always next chance of a new displacement. There is a political positioning in this perspective of intense mobility: the refusal to accept degrading conditions and the impossibility of developing a more dignified relationship with the place of migration leads to new movements.

This explains the intensity of conflicts in the labor market, very unfavorable to Haitians. We see in Limeira's case the evident exploitation from the idea that the Haitians, coming from a "miserable" place, would be satisfied with the little that is offered, with the wages far below what the Brazilians receive. But the Haitian spatiality of the transience and the imminence of new displacements places them in a critical position, of questioning and charging

related to the rights of any worker in Brazil. They are ready to seek a new place where there is no such level of exploitation. This imposes a fleeting and transitory geography with the places of "settlement" in Brazil.

In order to deal with this transience and still build some networks of sociability, the strategies seem consolidated: church and soccer are the links with Brazilian society in this changing geography. In Etecheberre's work, both students and workers find support and sociability in evangelical churches, which welcome them and support their life experiences in various places in Brazil. As a sort of "sociability kit" that can be found anywhere they are in Brazil. One element of the kit is football, which for students and workers is a fundamental part of sociability, where contacts and friendships are negotiated and implemented, either in the outskirts of Limeira or in the university environment of São Carlos.

Football and Church are fields of relations and constitute the geographies of Haitians, whether they are students or workers, but there is a fundamental difference between the two groups: the hypermobility of workers is opposed to the relative immobility of the students. The former are constituting a spatial geography always close to a new displacement. The group studied by Etecheberre had already moved from Limeira to Santa Bárbara do Oeste (Brazil, SP) while the research took place, and in the new works the author has already mapped new displacements to the city of Socorro (Brazil, SP) and from this to other countries (Chile and the United States). We see that this group of people establishes a mobile geography, intense and always subject to new displacements. This has implications in the relations that the Haitians establish between themselves and between the Brazilians. The networks arising from these displacements end up generating new possibilities of displacements, but at the same time make difficult the production of more systematic relations with Brazilians, for example.

In the case of the students, the stay is longer, obviously, because of the university curricula. This generates a different experience in the construction of spatialities, which in their case passes through football and church, but it progresses to a production of friendship and kinship (relatedness) with Brazilians, other foreigners and even other Haitians. The tendency toward permanence leads them to an insertion mostly mediated by affective relationships with Brazilians, as we see in the author's descriptions, producing an affective geography that, to a certain extent, replaces the extreme mobility of working Haitians. Of course, these boundaries are blurred and students can become workers if they want to remain in Brazil, moving between various spatial geographies of Haitian migrant experience.

When we turn to the issue of refugees in the city of São Paulo, Almeida (2016) gives us a detailed account of the specific situation of refugee women, especially African women. We see that this situation is very comparable to that of the Haitians, described by Etecheberre, but with a fundamental distinction: the very category of refuge itself brings with it a whole bureaucracy and, we could say, a sociological ecosystem that affects all the dimensions of these women's lives.

The first concern, after the displacement and the request for refuge, essentially spatial, is where to live. In this sense, the ecosystem has its temporary support points, which regulate the lives of women for periods ranging from six months to a year and a half. In houses of support, they live under State supervision, even indirectly, since these houses usually belong to religious institutions, which receive resources to act as initial support for the life of refugees in Brazil.

But these women face many difficulties when it comes to job placement since, besides having young children, they articulate other notions of work and kinship, which defy the understanding of the Brazilian labor market and its

difficulties. In addition, they suffer from all the stigmas that hinder the life of workers in Brazil: they are women, black, foreign, lacking Portuguese language, living in peripheries, they are single parents. All these factors reduce the ability to get jobs and, when they do obtain some kind of work, the chances of being exploited increase in the highly racialized labor market. Even those with higher academic education in their countries face great difficulties in obtaining any kind of job.

This limits them to a geography of assistance, articulated by government-funded NGOs, which inaugurate a complex game of commercialization of refugees' culture which, as a commodity, underpins the very existence of these NGOs. In return, refugees gain welfare, informal jobs and the chance to earn some money irregularly. But the ecosystem that surrounds the bureaucracy of the refuge has given rise to a "welfareist ecology" of NGOs, financing more the agents and bureaucrats of the system and less the refugees themselves. The spatiality resulting from this situation is a limited appropriation of the possibilities of life in São Paulo, restricted to the peripheries, with little chance of a financially fair life.

The precarious situation of great difficulty in job placement, whether due to the intrinsic difficulty of the market or due to the cultural differences that make Brazilian labor regimes meaningless for refugees, leads to a spatiality dependent on this institutional ecosystem, which results in a kind of perpetuation of this situation of vulnerability. A spatiality broken into living conditions, difficulty in getting day care for the children, impossibility of displacement due to lack of money. This bond of dependence is broken only by family assistance, when a relative arrives and helps to face the situation, or when, finally, these women move again to other countries, just like the Haitians. Here again the political action of women is in the production of new

displacements, a form of refusal of the conditions that are imposed by the refuge ecosystem in Brazil.

Thus, the immediate situation prevents an appropriation of the city and its spaces, indicates spatial confinement, circumscribed to the extreme periphery and institutions of the refuge ecosystem. One escape option from this limited and dependent spatiality is when some (often evangelical) churches act to produce new socialities and other possibilities for assistentialism, sometimes producing work options within a community of faith. We see that this dependent spatiality needs to be broken into a less bitter experience in Brazil, but often this disruption means a quest for another displacement in search of new spatialities.

### **Final considerations**

Considering the space/place in the production of everyday life of people in their individual and collective experiences, we come to certain considerations, having the produced ethnographies as background. Considering that space exists only in itself or gains some real significance from the experiences of the individuals, we consider it is, therefore, contingent on life trajectories, appearing as a practical effect of people's lives, gaining meaning as ways of sustaining forms of individual and collective experience. In the case of people in displacement, for various reasons, the spatial issue gains new dimensions, since it indicates the potentiality of connections to be gradually assembled with new realities.

In the case of moving groups, for whatever reason, space is also contingent on the displacement itself, being produced in relation to the variable trajectories of the groups, to the lines they draw throughout their life histories. This means that the space in the experiences of displacement takes different forms, different meanings, all related to the sense that the individuals produce of their own movements. This largely explains the

frightened trajectories of refugees in constant displacement. The examples here show how space is a function of the production of differences, a precipitator of differentialities.

The refugee and Haitian spatialities are evidently urgent, intense and always about to commence another displacement. The issue of spatiality does not yet have the depth we see among other immigrants and we can safely infer that this is due to the short time of arrival in Brazil. The difficulty of insertion and the complex life, dependent of the refuge ecosystem in Brazil, is the most evident symptom of this urgency, of the impossibility of constructing spatialities that interconnect with the cities and the country, of this restriction to the delimited sphere of the refuge ecosystem. To escape from this limitation to constitute freer spatiality is a great difficulty, sometimes only solved with new movements and the beginning of new relation processes in new spaces. We see that, in Brazil, the recent forced displacements prompt an insecurity in the daily experience, an uncertainty about the capacity of insertion in the labor market and an extreme dependence on the refuge ecosystem. This leads them to urgent spatialities, restraints, almost always pushing them to new displacements, as we have seen among Haitians and Africans.

Refugee and Haitian pressing, urgent, recent spatialities are processes in full construction within the heart of an ecosystem that hinders any stability and that continuously generates an unstable dependence, constituting a geography that the refugees feel as restrictive. The spatialities there appear as restraints, as obstacles to a life that somehow conforms to (fits in) the Brazilian Society. This restricting spatiality generates new displacements or the constant urgency of its possibility. Spatial instability is the everyday life of refugees and Haitians and their forced displacements, an instability that seems to be carefully maintained by the refuge ecosystem in Brazil and by the

general immigration laws, almost as a strategy for not integrating effectively into Brazilian society. Captured by the ecosystem, refugees are always about to escape with new movements and attempts to produce more comfortable and less unstable spatialities.

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