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Evacuation Mobilities

In this issue, prof. Peter Adey from Royal Holloway University of London – who recently gave an inspiring talk at CMR – shares his reflections on the meaning and practices of ‘evacuation’, especially in the context of the war in Ukraine.

We would also like to remind you that the deadline for the [JoannaMatejko competition for best MA / PhD thesis on migrations to/from Poland](#) is November 30, and the deadline for papers, panels, and workshops at the [@IMISCOE Annual Conference](#), which will be held at University of Warsaw in July 2023 is December 5.



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Evacuation Mobilities: emergency governance, aesthetics, and (mis)use in Ukraine

Peter Adey

Introduction

It is not unusual to hear of 'evacuations' all of the time. The war in Ukraine has brought a multitude of stories of evacuations in advance of and directly due to Russia's military bombing of cities, apartment blocks, towns and villages. Elsewhere wildfires, flooding, landslides, cyclones and tsunamis are routinely conjuring vast population movements which are rising in a time of climate emergency. Despite associations of the term with crisis, disaster and, of course, emergency, evacuations subsist with some of us in routinised forms of preparation or 'preparedness'. For the global majority, they are forms of escape of people's own volition, and only sometimes are they well supported and managed. While we can think of evacuation as a kind of 'emergency mobility' then, the 'emergency' itself does not have to mean such a clearly defined moment or shift of state power, governance or systems of welfare, or humanitarian assistance, (Agamben 1998; Anderson 2017), but a more ordinary state of affairs.

In this contribution to the CMR Spotlight series, I want to present a more conceptual approach to evacuation as a way to trouble it as a thing and an idea, and suggest why it is important to think about evacuation aesthetically, drawing briefly from the context of the current war in Ukraine where a multitude of evacuations and emergency mobilities are taking place. I turn particular attention to how the Russian forces have named and performed 'evacuation'. This has a lot to do with the apparently slippery nature of evacuation as a kind of emergency mobility. In my wider work, I draw on approaches to evacuation as a 'political technology', drawing from Stuart Elden's (Elden 2013) framing of 'territory' as a word, concept and practice; and equally, Ann Laura Stoler's (Stoler 2016) approaches to the 'imperial remains' of a political formation like the 'colony'. I follow how evacuation is reinvented and rearticulated, recombined, dispersed, and remade in different contexts across time and space. The point is not to take evacuation for granted, but rather to interrogate how it has emerged and been deployed.

1. Placing evacuation

It is important to recognise the difficulty with which evacuation subsists in relation to other categories of movement and also protection, many of which are far more politically visible and deliberated. Indeed, it is evacuation's capacity to hide in plain sight, and to simultaneously enact different kinds of withdrawal from scrutiny, from sense, from clarity, from understanding, that I think makes it such an interesting and invidious thing of mobility.

For example, evacuations work at multiple scales. We might be talking about evacuations across borders between countries, or within regions, or even within cities and buildings. Some at speed. Others more slowly. Some evacuations are temporary and imply return. Others do not and are more permanent. An evacuation might involve walking purposefully, running, driving, being driven, taking a ferry.

For Zelinsky and Kosinski (Zelinsky and Kosinski 1991) writing in the context of their monograph on urban evacuations, which is the only work of synthesis on the topic in 30 years to be published in English, evacuation had a difficult 'polymorphous character', often moving over the ground of the concern of transport geographers or migration scholars, blurring neat categorization with other domains or categories of mobility such as transport, tourism, travel and migration. It could involve all of those things. It is very hard then to place.

2. Aesthetics

Evacuation is often seen in functional, technical terms, as an abstract instrumental process. As Tim Cresswell remarked in relation to the denials of racism in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina's failed evacuations of New Orleans and Louisiana in 2005, this 'emptied' mobility of its social content, separating, he writes, 'mobility from race (and class and age, in particular)' (Cresswell 2006, 261).

Evacuation, I want to suggest, is bound up in aesthetics. In other words, it is related to what is sensed, experienced and what is judged. Who is recognised in, or deserving of, an evacuation? Political and aesthetic judgements can work with priori but constructed delimitations over what belongs and what should be ejected. Aesthetic judgements are bound up in simultaneously normative, discursive-evaluative and affective moves.

Both negation and ambivalence are very important to evacuation. On the one hand we can recognise that it is a lived and highly political process. And yet, on the other, it is often treated as a technical process of managing people's mobility in advance of and during emergency, and often the preserve of experts like engineers or emergency planners. This presumes some separation from judgement and from the political as Bonnie Honig has explained (Honig 2009). My wider argument is that this has really mattered to the different ways evacuation has been deployed. Evacuation can appear at once empty, and

can be constructed as so, while also emptying. In other words, it literally can be about moving or being moved away - withdrawing or emptying a space. Yet at the level of sense or meaning it may lack substance beyond a very abstract sense of a process it describes or names, and when that process itself can be quite ambiguous: to *be* moved by someone or something, or *having* moved or moving on one's own steam, infers extremely different realities and practices. Evacuation seems able to withdraw the relations of other things and events to a technical and ambivalent register.

3. Evacuation and Euphemism

There are countless examples where evacuation – perhaps in its more traditional meaning of moving people away from harm – does not protect but does harm. Where evacuation of people in the face of emergency *is* the emergency. And, in part because of its aesthetic and political duplicities, when evacuation has been disguised in order to exclude, displace, eradicate, even for the protection of another – such as an ethnic group, a state, an ideology (Adey 2020). Across different contexts and spaces evacuation's recursions demonstrate a euphemistic, misnomer-like usage of evacuation where it is deliberately, and unpredictably used in order to silence and side-step a more complicated relationship with protection.

In some contexts, evacuations bear a more sinister relationship with other forced movements associated with practices of incarceration, internment, and detention, and even ethnic cleansing and death. Evacuation's clothing seems to mean it is easy to wield it, to name a process which may have nothing to do with the protection of the subject we might think it is meant to benefit. The rhetorical moves around forced displacement can sometimes use evacuation as a way to call something it was not, holding together double and contradictory meanings. For Japanese Americans during the Second World War incarcerated at 'relocation' camps and centres in remote desert locations, such as Manzanar in California, evacuation was part of another grotesque argument that internment/incarceration was for their own benefit, and to blur the process with one of a response to a natural disaster. Central to the movement of redress in the US context has been a reclamation of terms such as 'evacuation' from the Japanese-American experience, where evacuation's technicality even buried it from more sustained examination. One guide to the lexicon of Japanese-American incarceration makes clear how evacuation encapsulated a political struggle over the meaning of the word and the determination of the events. The guide suggests that the use of euphemisms, such as 'evacuation and assembly centers, made the government actions seem benign and acceptable in the context of wartime' (JAACL 2013, 3).

The use of evacuation impresses the belief of 'being rescued from some kind of disaster (like an earthquake)' (JACL 2013, 17), imputing the natural causality that often goes hand in hand with emergency and disaster (Hata and Hata 2011; Smith 2006). Similarly, Ariella Azoulay's examination of a photographic archive of the expulsion of Palestinians during the formation of the State of Israel, determines the problematic way evacuation, and its technical and neutralizing language, were represented within the archive and photographic captions and labels.

4. Evacuation and Russian aggression against Ukraine

There have been many ways evacuation has been used as a name for Ukraine's civilian population leaving at speed to get ahead of the Russian invasion and its bombs and bullets, missiles and drones, by using trains, buses and cars. Certainly, these evacuations have become forms of migration, temporary and permanent. And while they have been called evacuations, they trouble more state-centric ways of imagining and practicing emergency mobility, given that they have been minimally organized but more orchestrated at the level of state borders, free travel passes, and temporary working visas in the European Union.

More controversial and outrageous has been the terminology the Russian authorities and newly installed Russian authorities of the occupied and illegally-

annexed areas of Ukraine, have used to describe forced and coerced population, military, and government personnel movements, all under the dubious terminology of evacuation. Indeed, the Ukrainian government and news organizations have been at pains to locate these evacuations within scare quotes, to see 'evacuation' as a cloak or cover for something else. And this has been spelled out literally in numerous directions at different stages of the war.

For instance, in October 2022, Russia's state media had communicated imagery of civilians being evacuated from Kherson – picturing crowds waiting for boats to take them across the Dnipro river as a defensive maneuvered to escape imminent Ukrainian shelling. The evacuations are not seen as evacuations, but 'deportations', taking place in a sham emergency mobility of protection. The 'deportations theatre' is seen to be 'acting as cover for a much bigger Russian move: a complete military evacuation from the west bank of the river' (Kirby and Adams 2022; BBC News). There are double maneuvers being proposed here. For Ukrainian officials such as Serhiy Klan, the evacuations are not evacuations but deportations. And the deportations may divert attention away from the actual evacuation of banks, shops and services, and military personnel, in front of a Ukrainian advancing frontline. 'We understand that there can be no evacuation, this is nothing more than deportation'

suggested Serhiy Klan to the press (Hunder 2022).

For some, the use of evacuation as a kind of 'humanitarian' language is seen as a 'façade of humanitarian necessity' (Lawlor et al. 2022), to justify deportation, which itself is understood in complex directions: to damage Ukrainian labour power and therefore its long term recovery. It is also seen in relation to more biological notions of cleansing and emptying, evacuation becoming one means to pursue what they call 'Russia's ethnic cleansing campaign, which is attempting to eradicate the Ukrainian ethnicity and culture'. And finally, to push or 'press' Ukrainian deportees into drafted recruits to fulfill the labour shortages within Russia's army. Refusals to see the *evacuations as evacuations* compares the practices more with deportation, and moreover, interprets Russia's strategic language around evacuation as forms of propaganda. Russia is accused of trying to 'create a kind of panic in Kherson' so as to confuse and sow-discord when it is Russia's invasion. Moreover, undermining other conceptualizations of evacuation as akin to circular forms of migration, the Ukrainian deputy head of the Kherson region was quoted saying that 'the recommended list of things to pack for the evacuees 'is a one-way trip list' (AFP 2022). This is significant. Given that the evacuees were to be taken to Russia and not to annexed Crimea, the spokesperson doubts an eventual easy return back to Ukraine.

Even earlier than the October 'evacuations' from Kherson, both Russia and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) had been accused of euphemistic evacuations by organisations such as the UK-based human rights organisation Liberty. This saw Liberty file a formal grievance with the ICRC for 'enabling and legitimizing forced deportation of Ukrainian civilians to Russia under the guise of "humanitarian evacuation"' (Liberty 2022), given the hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian civilians who had been forcibly moved and deported to Russia during the course of the war. Many had been taken to so-called 'filtration' camps for further scrutiny, interrogation and surveillance. For Liberty, 'Russia has attempted to propagandize its forced deportations as a humanitarian "evacuation"' (Liberty 2022), while the ICRC were portrayed by Liberty as providing another 'cover' for Russia's 'cynical portrayal of the forced deportations of Ukrainian citizens as a humanitarian evacuation'. Liberty hotly contests the apparent neutral language of humanitarianism coded evacuations, pointing blame at the ICRC for lacking neutrality and instead performing a form of 'willful ignorance'.

Conclusion

What we see in the Ukrainian context is a kind of tussle of evacuation that draws upon the political meaning of the term within 'humanitarian' and protective terms and assumptions: that evacuation is for the

protection of the mobile subject being or being forced to move by dangerous conditions, sometimes equated with 'natural' disasters. Instead, we see forms of evacuation which are not necessarily about the protection of the civilian populations potentially moved, nor are their mobilities forced simply by circumstances, but by design. Attempts to draw historical parallels are broadly very fair. Evacuation in Europe and other contexts has been used and wielded for these purposes before. This becomes possible when the conditions for political discourse mean one can call something it plainly is not.

But evacuation, understood as a term, concept and a practice, shows that this is more than strategic euphemism. Understanding evacuation in relation to aesthetics, and its troubled relationship to logics of protection, shows us that evacuation seems to bear special properties that are broadly about negation. While evacuation is meant to be about moving away from harm, it has always had more complex meanings than such a positive and 'humanitarian' definition. Where movement might be more about expulsion for another's security. Where, from its different technical registers, precisely who or what is being moved can be very unclear and fall outside of political deliberation, but to experts. And, conversely, where evacuation can be so written into the unseen structures and practices of everyday life, it may not be brought into view until it is too late.

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