

In Search of a Methodology of Forced Migration Studies

(Abstract)

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Our methodologies have been methodologies of truth – whether by serving as a means of verifying or refuting our conjectures with truth claims or by seeking to understand the intricacies of truth production. The multi-volume work of Walter Fernandes and his associates may be illustrative of the first. The work subjects all ‘official truths’ about forced migration – particularly the one induced by the commissioning of development projects - into scrutiny and verification. A new and unknown truth with much greater ‘truthfulness’ and perhaps hugely disastrous consequences for our social life is discovered through such scrutiny and verification. While the ‘Truth’, according to the Positivist framework, is assumed to be *one* with capital ‘T’ and researchers are urged to discover it tirelessly till it is discovered, a new awareness that truths are produced at multiple sites has developed particularly in recent decades. Since there is a plurality of truths, there is no way we can privilege one over the other. While the former is geared to the understanding of the possibilities of knowledge, the latter flags its limits. Yet for both of them, truth – whether single or plural – is potentially knowable. A series of Partition Studies brought out by ‘Kali for Women’ particularly since the 1990s and other feminist publishing houses seek to retrieve truths from the hitherto silenced voices. But both these methodologies institute a ‘metaphysic of presence’ of one who is displaced. Conventional methodologies of truth hardly help us understand the displaced who being displaced finds it impossible to register her ‘presence’ in both social life and our knowledge and whose presence is always marked by a ‘presence of absence’ or ‘absence of presence’. The problem with the displaced is that she not only is displaced but ‘disappears’ from the truth discourse. Displacement as it were turns against the discourse - eventually threatening to destroy it.

Critical forced migration studies (CFMS) makes it imperative to move beyond these methodologies of truth. It calls for not just a shift in our methodology of truth, but a shift in our *understanding* of methodology which posits the displaced not as presence but as absence, not as truth but as ‘exteriority’ of truth – an exteriority that is also constitutive of ‘truth’ by way of being ruled out by the truth regime and constantly interrupting it.

The new understanding of methodology – if one ever likes to describe it as one – therefore calls for a certain reorientation of such concepts as space, state and sovereignty. At a time when large masses of population move and there are mixed and massive flows of population without any home to return, the earth ‘deterritorializes’ itself in a way that provides the migrants with a space for such movement. The state is unhinged from the ‘sedentary metaphysic’ endowing it with a centre – an apparatus of capture spreading out towards the border and finally setting up the borders. Forced migration in today’s world implies movement without possession of territory. Sovereign power is least comfortable with this type of power that escapes it and keeps it perpetually fluid.

The researcher is caught as it were between two worlds: While more often than not she develops empathy with the displaced and becomes one with her at one level by way of discovering other 'truths', at another she is also required by the Positivist framework to be 'objective'. In case of conflict-induced displacement, for example, the researcher turns into a party to the conflict as much as the researcher's gaze constitutes the object of her research. In case of displacement induced by ethnic conflicts by contrast, ethical obligation runs the risk of becoming synonymous with ethnic obligation. Either of them does not help.

Ethics of social research obliges the researcher to focus on the 'absence' of the displaced beyond the truth regime, to see how she 'endures' with her resilience and thereby constantly destabilizes the 'sedentary metaphysic'. Ethics is about resilience not victimhood, about life not death, - a life that lives although dangerously.