Come Fly with Me: Airports and Geographies of Rendition

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A recent Senate intelligence committee report on the use of torture concluded that the CIA has mislead the American public and by implication the wider world. Although fiercely contested by former members of the George W Bush administration, the report served as a reminder about the extensiveness of torture – or specifically the geographies of torture. The process of finding, transporting, imprisoning, questioning, torturing and archiving the treatment of suspects/illegal combatants/terrorists involved a great deal of labor.

Calling it a torture assemblage is by no means to under-estimate the seriousness of the matter in hand. Rather it is to draw into sharper focus the extraordinary movement and arrangement of bodies, objects, knowledge, sites and the like. Certain objects and sites were critical to this assemblage; namely airports and planes such as Shannon Airport and the Gulf Stream Executive Jet respectively. Notably, these sites and vectors of mobility do not feature very highly in the summary of the report, but we find them in the investigations, academic research and journalism that have circulated around this issue. The report does go as so far to confirm much of the testimony heard about the process. Although little of this appears to have been documented, the review drew on CIA photographs to tell us, so far, much of what we already knew: that the process was incredibly inhumane. Detainees were hooded and shackled and deprived of their hearing with headsets taped to their head. They were denied access to a toilet and placed in nappies or diapers. And they were strapped into their seats or the floor of the aircraft for the duration of the flights.

Some of the maps available to us, often the product of the careful scholarship of geographers such as Trevor Paglen (not to mention James Sidaway, and the articulation of rendition practices by other political geographers and IR scholars such as Matthew Sparke) and investigations carried out by official agencies and journalists, reveal quite how extensive these networks were at their height. Many airports were implicated in the transplantation of suspects and many governments came under pressure in the last decade or so to explain what they did or did not know about suspected extraordinary rendition flights. The Irish government, for example, was urged to clarify whether Shannon airport had wittingly or unwittingly been used as a stopover for such activity. The Irish Department of Foreign Affairs released a statement denying that any such activity occurred with a spokesperson noting, “no information or evidence has previously been provided to substantiate any assertion that Ireland has permitted such activity or that any person has ever been subjected to extraordinary rendition through Irish airspace and airports”.

The ongoing controversies relating to extraordinary rendition have continued relevance to students of geopolitics and IR. For one thing, as others have noted, the airport has been a key site for investigating how and with what consequences the war on terror has manifested itself in terms of security and surveillance with ever greater attention given to monitoring and evaluating the body and behavior. But as the rendition flights seemed to suggest, security and surveillance vary in scope and intensity. Some planes, some bodies, some flights get greater scrutiny than others. Profiling and preference are co-related to one another.

The airport as a point of arrival and departure is also significant. It sounds obvious but airports remind us about the manner in which mobilities and immobilities matter for international politics. As the Danish television programme Borgen demonstrated in the 2012 episode ‘Hundrede dage’ the presence of rendition flights can be politically damaging, especially when a fictional Danish government is embarrassed to learn that such flights have been leaving

to and from the US airbase (Thule) in North West Greenland. Foreign military airports in places like Greenland and the British overseas territory of Diego Garcia are powerful manifestations of long-standing colonial and Cold War entanglements.

It is, however, not as if these aircraft are required to land for their mobility to become significant. Many of the rendition transports took advantage of over-flight agreements between states (especially NATO alliance members which agreed to blanket clearances) which allowed the transits to take place within a portion of sovereign territory under a limited amount of state and public scrutiny. Within a poorly understood and overtly technical domain of airspace, over-flight relationships demand much more considered research. We might be reminded of their historical evolution in this context, as Paul K. Saint Amour's alerts us to a 1955 summit held in Geneva when President Eisenhower proposed an open skies agreement with the Soviet Union, France and Britain, that would permit aerial reconnaissance into each other's territory for 'photographic reassurance' of each country's weapons arsenal. The Soviet's refusal would lead to the deployment of high-altitude spy planes like the U2.

Planes not only come and go but their registered presence can also be fleeting. One of the things we learnt about rendition flights is that flights could disappear and reappear. Registering mobility can be just as important as mobility itself. Plane spotters, it turns out, were rather important in confirming or denying whether particular planes had taken off or landed often at odd hours in the night. Thus, as many of us have come to realize since the loss of flight MH370, our notions of universal locatability and addressability are not as perfect as we thought they were. Things can go missing; there are blank spots on the map.

In that context we might consider the work of the remarkable Forensic Architecture project based out of Goldsmiths, and an excellent presentation by Lorenzo Pezzani delivered during a workshop at Westminster a few weeks ago, which revealed the extent of the so-called 'left-do-die boat case', within a wider case-study on the many migrant deaths in the Central Mediterranean. What this might tell us is not really about how easy it is to go missing, but that missingness and the departure of accountability requires an active un-seeing, perhaps an inattention; to go quite deliberately and purposively about looking the other way.

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