The Insular Cosmopolitanism of Expatriate Staff

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One day in Kabul, Asha, a permanent UNHCR employee, and I were getting coffee in our guesthouse. She had just spent a night in Zaranj, on the Afghanistan-Iran border, followed by several hours waiting in the airport at Kabul and an afternoon at an Afghan ministry. She told me that previously, she used to like her coffee with milk and sugar, but over the course of her career with the UNHCR – which had led her to live in Tuzla (Bosnia), Dushanbe (Tajikistan), Colombo (Sri Lanka) and Geneva, among other places – she had made herself learn to drink it black. She now only took it that way, even when milk and sugar were available. And she loved it. This is one example of how the profession becomes the base around which a permanent UNHCR staffer's life is organised, and of the way in which mobility is gradually incorporated, to the point where it influences the development and alteration of tastes.

As their bureaucratic peregrinations continue, the culinary practices and tastes of UNHCR expatriate staff evolve and shift between lack and abundance, make-do and access to luxury, adaptation and the potential for discovery, often out of step with the place where they find themselves. Being constantly on the move, switching rapidly from one sociocultural context to another, not knowing where they will live in two years' time, they learn to be at ease everywhere. But UNHCR staff are also subject to often frenetic rhythms that do not always allow them to take their time; you need practical habits. Instant granules, hot water and you have coffee. And, indeed, almost everyone had instant coffee in their store cupboard in Kabul. And everyone said that after all, there would surely soon be an opportunity to enjoy a real proper latte.

Through their travels and the multicultural environment in which they work, UNHCR expatriates have access to a wide variety of foods. They appreciate cultural diversity and take pride in it. I tasted more different kinds of coffee in Kabul than I had anywhere else. The machine my flatmate had brought from Denmark enabled us to make large quantities of very weak, North American-style coffee. I liked to drop in at the office of Danail, a Bulgarian colleague who guarded his Turkish coffee pot jealously. He never ran out of coffee – he stocked up when he went back to Bulgaria or asked another colleague to bring it back from leave in Sarajevo. I myself bought him several packets in Istanbul when I stopped over there.

Some tastes accompanied us and helped us to feel at home in a hectic life. Our Representative could not do without Italian coffee. In the Executive Office's small kitchen the housekeeping staff took good care of a stove-top coffee machine and two small cups. I also drank Italian-style coffee with my Italian colleagues, who had equipped the office they shared with a stove-top machine and an electric hot plate. For a few months, coffee became a ritual that added an element of intimacy to our conversations in Italian. One had a baby a few months old in Italy, the others had partners in Indonesia and Australia, but together we generated a comfortable feeling of family.

Numbering around a thousand in the early 2000s, the UNHCR's international staff form part of a cosmopolitan elite located at the intersection of the UN and humanitarian fields. 'Expats', as they call themselves, move casually through the world and are at ease anywhere, in Geneva just as in Kabul. Their high degree of mobility and the humanitarian nature of their work characterise a life they experience as out of the ordinary, distinguishing them from those who, both in their countries of origin and the countries where they work, are caught up in local or national systems.

This chapter considers the cosmopolitan culture and practices of UNHCR expatriates. It first examines their habitus and their movements, before considering the space-time of a mission in Kabul. By describing the materiality of a cosmopolitan life that is certain to be partially deterritorialised, but nevertheless always anchored in specific physical and social spaces, I will show that UNHCR expatriates are far from the 'free electrons' suggested by some studies that highlight only their privileged status (Bauman 1998). I identify the institutions that shape the mobility, the cosmopolitan practices and the worldview of UNHCR expatriate staff – the UNHCR itself, the interstate system and the institutional world of international aid, institutions that on one level open doors to a multicultural, mobile way of life and support their claims to universalism and moral superiority, and on another level are powerful forces structuring their practices and their view of the world.

Mobility and the Field as Foundational Experiences

The habitus[1] of UNHCR international staff is strongly shaped by the experience of mobility on the one hand, and the field on the other. In addition to consolidating their esprit de corps, these two foundational experiences raise them above the ordinary and project them into the elevated, morally superior, encompassing dimension specific to the UN space (see Chapter 3). Working for the UNHCR means being able to 'make a difference', to use a recurrent expression – in other words, to have a real impact on the most destitute populations of the world, to influence the policies of states, while at the same time living a more interesting, fulfilling and adventurous life than ordinary people. Nazim, for example, told me how shocked he was to hear people around him enthusiastically discussing the cheeses they had just bought at the supermarket at a tram stop in Geneva when he had just returned from an African country where salt was being distributed to a malnourished population.

UNHCR expatriates develop a strong feeling of themselves as distinct from all those whose lives remain restricted to the scale of nation, who go about their individual lives without wanting, or being able, to take an interest in the world's most urgent problems. Mobility and the field define a unique group, professionals ready to travel to where they are needed, where it counts, despite the dangers and their family attachments. Indeed, working for the UNHCR is not for everybody: being this ready to travel and working in difficult locations while remaining efficient and professional requires many resources, both intellectual and physical: lucidity, a cool head and adaptability to work in emergency or stressful conditions; excellent physical fitness to be able to step off a long plane journey fresh and ready to work despite the time difference; inner stability and a high capacity for concentration to spend long periods away from family, and stay focused on one's goals without being destabilised by one's itinerant life; and resourcefulness to be able to adapt to any situation.

The experience of mobility and of the field also generates a feeling of standing apart from the staff of humanitarian NGOs and other UN agencies. NGO staff also travel frequently and are often in the field, but UNHCR staff see them as having fewer responsibilities and less influence over major strategic orientations and state policies. In the UNHCR, on the other hand, staff have the feeling of combining fervent commitment to the victims of crisis with the weight of the UN's financial resources and political authority, enabling them to 'hold in [their hands] a strand of some important political process', as Max Weber describes the 'inner pleasures' of a political career (Weber 2004: 76). This sense of distinctness is bolstered by UNHCR officers' higher salaries and more comfortable travel. NGO staff have less leave and fewer financial resources for travel, and spend more time in uninterrupted postings. The difference from staff of other UN agencies is even

greater: the latter carry out shorter missions in less arduous postings and mainly work in offices. Their high salaries allow them to live comfortably in the world's capitals.

I will consider these two foundational experiences in turn. Working for the UNHCR involves frequent travel, often on long-haul flights. This high level of mobility is not just due to the change of posting about every two years. There are very often internal missions – going off to meetings, or to visit the field. Some roles involve even more frequent travel, for example, in teams deployed in emergencies. The person sent by Headquarters in 2007 to oversee the development of a preventative strategy in case the camps in Pakistan were closed stayed in the region for three weeks, travelling between Kabul, Jalalabad, Islamabad and Peshawar, before writing his report in Kabul and returning to Geneva prior to taking on his next mission to Iraq. Then there is leave. Leave periods are more frequent for those posted to difficult locations, as compulsory Rest and Recuperation breaks are added to the annual leave entitlement. These compulsory holidays, every two months, are designed to enable expatriates to take a break from dangerous, isolated or stressful working conditions. In 2007 the organisation would fund travel as far as Dubai or Islamabad, which were considered safe and nearby destinations, but expatriates usually travelled onward, since their high salaries allowed them to go further even for just a few days.

The actual practice of mobility links expatriates to one another and creates common frames of reference. They share a familiarity with the airports, airlines and hotels they pass through on their journeys. 'Air miles' or the launch of a new airline are frequent topics of conversation, as are references to locations as geographically distant and distinct as a particular restaurant in New York, a hotel in Islamabad or a refugee camp in Sudan.

As they travel and stay for relatively long periods in countries with different cultures, expatriates accumulate references to expanded horizons linked together by their career trajectories rather than by national belonging. Thus, rather than acquiring familiarity with accents, physical features or the origin of family names on a national level, they accumulate much broader common points of reference – with 'skills' or 'regions of specialisation' that vary depending on each individual's career path. I developed the ability to detect a person's origin from their accent when they spoke English on the telephone – on the edge of the lips for French people, flat for Italians, the Germans' more withheld way of speaking, Afghans' open accent, the fluid accent of those from India and Pakistan, and so on. I began to notice the similarity between the accents of Azeri and Bulgarian colleagues, but still had trouble with Japanese and Thai accents. There were also those whose personal trajectory had given them a less obvious accent, if they had studied in an English-speaking country or married an English-speaker for example.

Mobility, coupled with professional responsibilities, is also part of constructing the elevated level to which expatriates feel they belong. Travelling over great distances, alternating between ground and air, they feel liberated from the scale of the nation, with its affiliations and institutions. They have a sense of transcending nation-states, of being above them. The national scale from which they have distanced themselves is first and foremost that of their country of nationality.

Indeed, the careers, affiliations and families of UNHCR staff are generally transnational. One example is Kanta: her family was Indian, but she held Malaysian nationality as she had been born in Kuala Lumpur, and she trained in the United Kingdom. Paradoxically, it was in her subsequent posting that she had the opportunity to live in India for the first time. Clara was an Italian national, but grew up in the Caribbean; she studied in the United States and was married to an Australian she had met in Afghanistan, and she wrote better in English and Spanish than in Italian. It is easy to see why the question 'Where are you from?' cannot be answered in terms of country of nationality. When asked this question, one permanent employee sighed before saying, in a brief summary she had repeated many times before, that on paper she was American, but that she had not lived in the United States for a long time.

Detachment from one's country of nationality plays out on both practical and moral levels. At the level of everyday practices, expatriates almost never live in their national territory (except for holidays). They often do not pay tax in their country; sometimes they do not vote in elections. On a moral level, working for the UNHCR implies adhering to – or at least being a spokesperson for – a moral community situated above states. The Code of Conduct with which every UNHCR employee must comply (UNHCR 2004c) stipulates that they must neither seek nor accept instructions regarding performance of their duties from any national government, including their own. Moreover, the 'refugee reason' championed by UNHCR staff is often in competition with the reason of state. Thus, refugees become a moral catalyst that can potentially replace nationality, even at the level of moral identification.

In addition, because state representatives are their principal interlocutors and because from a young age they are required to observe, critique and influence the action of states, state authorities and state power lose their aura. In Afghanistan the Italian embassy strove to consolidate an esprit de corps among Italians, for example, by holding receptions on Italy's national day. But notwithstanding the friendships that Italians might form among themselves, for us Italian UNHCR employees, the Italian embassy was primarily a funder. Thus, when it was pompously announced at the national unity celebration that a senior Italian official would shortly be arriving, for me it was simply a piece of information to be noted in the context of my work. Clara too remained unimpressed. However, she was deeply moved when Sadako

Ogata herself, the former High Commissioner, spent an afternoon at the Kabul Branch Office.

The field is the second foundational experience. First and foremost, it reinforces the sense of a unique profession and way of life. Having access, thanks to their status and by virtue of their responsibilities, to corners of the planet inaccessible to the majority, finding themselves at the heart of humanitarian crises where most people would prefer not to be, working in emergency situations, at a relentless, often addictive pace, the possibility of 'making a difference' for populations in distress that they come into contact with – all of this contributes to making theirs a unique profession.

The field is also a key point of initiation for the youngest, as Marion Fresia notes (2010). An employee's first experiences in the field allow them to prove their worth and show they have the capacities required to exercise this profession. My first stay in Kabul and my experience in a shanty town in Kenya certainly helped me obtain an internship with the UNHCR. Once I was in the field, I would often find myself admiring the ingeniousness of a colleague who could skilfully manipulate the cables of a dusty old computer and finally get it to work, or the cool head of another who managed to remain lucid and professional when confronted with scenes of suffering. The pressure to show I was up to the job stimulated me to work to develop these skills, so that I could be recognised as a member of the team in my own right and increase the chances of my contract being renewed.

Finally, the field also constitutes a matrix of socialisation. Whereas in Geneva the separation between private and work life is a block to socialisation, in the field this distraction fades away. Sharing an unusual daily routine and difficult moments, working side by side in out-of-the-way places, can create deep bonds and consolidate an esprit de corps that outweighs professional rivalries and hierarchies. Within the organisation, networks of this type override affinities based on national or cultural belonging, as evidenced by the network of 'Afghan' expatriates – that is, staff who have undertaken missions in Afghanistan.

During my stay in Kabul, in addition to the team based there, I met dozens of other colleagues. Because of its centrality in the bureaucratic machinery, the Kabul office was a major transit point.[2] Social interaction and familiarity with colleagues on mission or in transit were immediate, irrespective of hierarchies, because we had communicated by email or because we had heard about one another, or even if we had never come across one another before. During my internship at Headquarters, Janet, a member of the administrative staff at the Desk, had been cordial but fairly reserved and distant; when she came on mission to Kabul, her attitude was more relaxed and our conversations were more personal. On meeting a colleague for the first time, you always asked where they undertook their previous missions and who they

had worked with. When you met someone who worked in a mission or with colleagues you knew well, there was even greater familiarity: is this or that person still posted there? How is that programme going, which wasn't working at all at that time? Say hello to so-and-so. In any case, there is never any shortage of subjects of conversation: the frequency of 'recuperation leave' in a given posting, the colleagues you work or have worked with, flight connections and so on. Familiarity is quickly reinforced by a shared meal that generally unleashes more edgy exchanges. It is then that conflictual relationships within offices emerge, long discussions on the size of the cockroaches in UNHCR apartments around the world, or on the High Commissioner's pulling techniques when on mission.

The UNHCR as a Pivot of a Rotating Life

Focusing purely on the frequent and multidirectional mobility of the UNHCR's international staff neglects the role of the organisation. At the same time as making this mobility possible and necessary, the organisation frames it. Moreover, in setting itself up as the base of an itinerant life, the organisation becomes an important point of reference for its staff, and also shapes their identity and their view of the world.

The career trajectories of expatriate staff are inevitably shaped by staff rotation, both in space (within the framework of UNHCR postings throughout the world) and in time (depending on the length of missions and leave). It is primarily owing to this mobility, with its fixed stages, that a career in the UNHCR becomes a life project. Rotation determines the way in which UNHCR staff see the spatiality of the world. All roads, for example, lead to Geneva. New York remains an important centre, but in the context of the decentralisation process under way throughout the UN, Bangkok and Nairobi are becoming equally important hubs. The emergence of crises, and the setting-up and withdrawal of programmes, punctuate both the history of the organisation and the lives of its employees.

Trajectories are strongly linked to the progress of the employee's career within the organisation. International staff apply for a number of vacant posts, stating their order of preference. Each person makes up their list in line with their own priorities, weighing up the advantages and disadvantages of each posting and estimating their chance of obtaining the post requested. As noted above, experience in the field is essential for all staff and can be very helpful in building networks. But anyone who stays for too long in an out-of-the-way posting risks being marginalised. From this point of view, in late 2001 Afghanistan was an attractive posting: well funded and well staffed, it offered the opportunity to demonstrate one's capacities and get oneself noticed. At

a dinner in Kabul, Arnold remembered it as the first major mission that his network had helped him secure, following which he had risen meteorically up the hierarchy. Nazim, on the other hand, recalled his frustration when he had been asked to join the team. He would desperately have liked to join straight away, but his line manager had kept him 'stuck in Bosnia'.

Living conditions and security measures in the field can become oppressive sooner or later. A mission to Headquarters then represents an ideal breathing space: the temperate climate and nearby ski slopes make it an oasis of tranquillity. Since living conditions in Geneva are so good, many employees have bought houses there. When they are on mission, their partner and children, who are enrolled in school, wait for them in Switzerland. Time spent in Geneva, or in another key centre, is also essential to create contacts or update one's network. Because of the principle of equity applied in assignment of postings, those who seek a transfer to Geneva or a similar posting have a better chance of obtaining it after a mission in a difficult posting.

Staff rotation clashes with employees' need to reconcile private and professional life, career imperatives and family needs. The relatively high number of single people and divorce rates among UNHCR staff offer telling evidence of this (Wigley 2005: 76). Postings are classified either as 'family duty station' or 'non-family duty station', to which the employee may not bring their family. In any case, school-age children are difficult to reconcile with staff rotation. All the postings in Afghanistan were 'non-family duty stations'. Separation, palliated by Skype and Interflora, was particularly hard for mothers. In order to stay in the organisation and in the hope of obtaining an easier posting before too long, Christine, a mother of four, had left her family in Nairobi to work in Kabul. Fatma, who had returned to Geneva after a year in the field in a 'non-family duty station', was struggling to recover a stable relationship with her teenage son.[3]

The most stable couples often consist of partners who work in the same international milieu, sometimes both in the UNHCR. Couples and families are thus founded on periods of distance alternating with periods of proximity, like Danail, who had reunited his family in Kabul between two separations. In Geneva, I met couples where one partner had expressly given up a career in order to follow their partner or provide a stable home life for their children.

The compromises inherent in a career with the UNHCR mean that the profession is also often experienced as a sacrifice. Sacrifice, associated particularly with staff rotation and postings to 'non-family duty stations', is one element of the esprit de corps of UNHCR staff, which places devotion to the refugee cause above all else. The commitment of staff is always highlighted and presented by senior managers as one of the organisation's great strengths, the crucial element that enables it to achieve concrete results.[4] This notion of

sacrifice is also apparent in the administrative jargon relating to the compensations designed to reward staff, such as 'hardship allowances', 'compensation' and 'rest and recuperation leave'.

While the UNHCR's mode of operation undermines family structure, the organisation becomes a fundamental point of reference for its permanent staff. Since the employee's entire life literally revolves around the UNHCR, the organisation is not just an employer, but also represents a source of stability and a vital anchor for social life and identity. The employee's relationship with the organisation is the most constant element in an itinerant life, giving coherence to their experience and lifestyle. Significantly, Headquarters is known as 'the House', and some UNHCR staff often describe themselves as members of one 'family'. Although they are scattered through the world, permanent UNHCR staff almost all know one another either personally or by reputation. Thus, when you arrive at an office, you immediately have the sense of being in a familiar place, among your peers. Clara told me that when she arrived in Geneva, she not only renewed deep friendships formed during postings in the field, but was also surrounded by a multitude of familiar faces she had encountered at one point or another in her career.

I also observed a process of collective identification with the organisation's mandate and the refugee paradigm. This is revealed, for example, in frequent plays on words that establish a parallel between the mobility of refugees and that of UNHCR employees. Thus, when he came on a visit, the former Representative in Afghanistan described himself as a 'returnee', while expatriates in Afghanistan often joked about being 'displaced'. The refugee paradigm underpins this world of shared meanings and constitutes expatriate UNHCR staff as an epistemic community. This phenomenon is analysed by Marion Fresia (2010), who sees adherence to the common refugee cause as one of the principal elements structuring the close interconnectedness and forming UNHCR expatriate staff into a solid community despite their geographical dispersion.

As employees accumulate years of work with the UNHCR, it becomes more difficult to separate from it. Once they have come to terms with staff rotation, the organisation becomes a pivot that provides stable employment and other benefits and privileges, which increase substantially with promotion. On a pragmatic level, salary levels are higher than those of any other NGO, making the UNHCR, along with the International Committee of the Red Cross, the most financially attractive employer in the humanitarian sphere. Moreover, the status of UN official comes with benefits and preferential treatment, such as immunity or exemption from taxes. The organisation looks after its employees and their families, becoming the prime provider of social services: health insurance, medical services, psychological support and so on. The medical department at Headquarters even takes care

of vaccinations. In the field, the organisation sometimes takes charge of the entire life of expatriates and their families, including their physical security.[5]

In return, personal commitment may generate substantial expectations of the institution, or indeed be a source of resentment and frustration if it is not acknowledged or valued. Before she secured the long-desired posting in Geneva, Clara had been offered one in Central Asia. But even though it would come with a promotion, she did not want to accept a non-European post. After missions in East Timor, Ethiopia, Ivory Coast, Iran and Afghanistan, she was no longer prepared to take a posting in the field; she was physically exhausted and also wanted to start a family. The fact that the organisation did not understand her situation and refused to offer a compromise provoked a crisis in her relationship with it. How was it possible that after all she had given the UNHCR, it was not prepared to make an effort to retain her? When she was finally allocated a posting in Geneva, she heard through a call from a colleague, for it was already late in Kabul when the list was posted by Human Resources in Geneva. She received other congratulatory calls from colleagues posted throughout the world, who were delighted that she would be staying in the organisation.

This strong bond with the organisation distinguishes UNHCR staff from the elusive elites and multiple affiliations analysed by Wedel (2009). The latter, and the networks they form, cross between institutions (universities, state bodies, international organisations, think tanks, etc.), and their allegiance is to their networks, not to the institutions to which they are attached. Only a minority of UNHCR staff can be likened to these elites: some of the influential senior staff, such as António Guterres (President of Portugal who became High Commissioner and then UN Secretary-General) or Mr Gortani, who after directing another UN agency was appointed to the UNHCR as a member of the 'troika'. Consultants too, like Eric, circulate between institutions, as do those who do not manage to join the organisation and construct an alternative career for themselves instead. But those who succeed in securing a permanent contract develop a strong bond with the organisation, which becomes a catalyst in their lives. Once they have obtained this post, they establish an allegiance with the UNHCR and the 'refugee reason'. They want the UNHCR to prosper, if only because it is a guarantee they will always be needed. Leaving the organisation is often experienced as a disappointment, and joining government bodies or NGOs as a fallback solution.

The International Backstage and the National Stage

There is a second institution that shapes the mobility and habitus of UNHCR expatriates – the interstate system. As noted above, this habitus is defined

partly by the idea of detachment and indeed emancipation from the national scale on material, spatial and moral levels. Yet even though this cosmopolitan elite claims to be beyond national particularisms, its professional culture and modalities of travel remain enmeshed in the system of states: they are defined in relation to this system and ultimately reassert the national order they are supposed to supersede. Distance from the state serves less to define a world in opposition to states than to mark an 'international' dimension located 'behind the scenes' with respect to states and enmeshed with them. The same tension can be observed between emancipation and affiliation, a contrast and a confirmation of the tension noted in the relation between UN institutions and the system of states. Ultimately, the state sphere represents not an obstacle to be overcome, but the driving force behind the UN sphere. I will now examine some aspects of this enmeshment.

It is the principle of state sovereignty that defines external and internal, above and below, categories on the basis of which expatriates see their position as one of distance and superiority. The spatiality of UNHCR expatriate staff is anchored in the national order: the state field is the stage, while they see themselves as working behind the scenes. The term 'expatriate' also relates to the idea of a country of origin from which the person has departed: as Hindman notes (2007: 157), expatriates move around the world as an embodiment of their country of origin.

Nationality influences the modes and criteria for recruitment to the UNHCR. A certain number of posts are directly funded by donor states, with the aim of promoting access to UN institutions for their nationals, potentially circumventing the nationality quotas. In the recruitment programme for Junior Professional Officers, for example, candidates are selected by national committees. Having a large number of nationals among permanent UN staff is a source of prestige for the country and may offer the possibility of exerting some influence on these institutions. From this point of view, the tension between reason of state and refugee reason lessens. The refugee cause is no longer a moral cause defined in opposition to states, but rather an international field of expertise within which states conduct a struggle for influence. It also becomes clear how interstate strategies and power relations shape the composition of UNHCR staff. For example, there are more nationals of Western countries, especially in the most senior positions. Citizens of the United States, the organisation's principal funder, are particularly well represented, and it is customary for one of the two Deputy High Commissioners to be a US national.

Moreover, in order to have a career with the UN, one needs cultural and linguistic skills and aptitudes that are essentially a matter of inherited social and cultural capital – what Anne-Catherine Wagner, in her studies of social classes under globalisation, calls 'international capital' (Wagner 2007). Citizens of

rich countries, or those with the most internationally prestigious education pathways, have the advantage. Conversely, it is often only the members of elites in the less wealthy countries who have the opportunity to develop these skills. Kanta and Clara, for example, the two colleagues mentioned above, each had three native languages and studied at prestigious universities, in the United Kingdom and the United States respectively. The hierarchies that are apparent on the national scale thus influence access to UN jobs and contribute to erecting the barrier that makes the interstate sphere inaccessible and opaque to all those without the aptitudes required to access it.[6]

It is worth noting too that within the UNHCR, nationality is the main criterion of classification of employees. When I arrived in Geneva, I was immediately introduced to several Italians. Before I arrived in Kabul, I was told I would be working with 'a very strong Danish woman'. The first evening, someone offered to put me in touch with a 'very nice Italian colleague' to help me acclimatise. Nationality is also a factor in internal groupings and socialisation, offering the pleasure of speaking one's mother tongue and coming back to shared points of reference that would otherwise be passed over, such as places, food or national politics. National stereotypes are often the source of jokes – for example, about the 'Italian mafia' in the Afghan Operation.

Finally, the mobility of UNHCR expatriates fully respects state sovereignty. While state authorities that wish to obstruct an international organisation's activities sometimes impose restrictions, UN officials are usually able to move smoothly between states, which recognise their right to travel and facilitate their passage across international borders. When I lost my passport during a week's leave in Spain, I went anxiously to the Italian consulate. Initially it seemed that it would be impossible to get a new one in less than a week. When the person I was talking to understood that I worked for the UN and my flight for Kabul was leaving in three days, his attitude changed completely and I had a new passport two days later.

In return, UN officials' mobility conforms rigorously with interstate regulations. UN institutions provide their staff with an additional travel and identity document that supplements the national passport: the UN Laissez-Passer. For senior staff, this is a genuine permit that confers diplomatic immunity and privileges. When they show their documents at borders, when they queue at airports – in short, when they submit to the discipline of interstate regulation of movement – international officials reassert the national order. Although their lives are marked by expatriation, they rely on a territorial and national conception of identity and politics, in which mobility and the lack of a strong link with one's country of nationality are perceived as 'abnormal', an exception. Thus, the backdrop to the mobility of expatriates and that of refugees is the same. We can therefore consider refugees' and UNHCR expatriates' mobility as opposite mobilities within the national order – the *problematic*

mobility of refugees, and the *exceptional* mobility of expatriates that is necessary to the normalisation of refugees' situation. In both cases, the norm is a sedentary national order.

The Cloistered World of Expatriates in Kabul

Having considered the cosmopolitan life led by the UNHCR's expatriate staff, I now turn to the space-time of a mission in Kabul. In the Afghan capital, as in most other postings in Afghanistan, UN expatriates lived in a situation of acute segregation, removed from the local context. Although the particularly strict security regulations made Afghanistan an extreme case, their mode of presence was similar to that of humanitarian workers in other cities or countries: Banda Aceh (Smirl 2008), La Paz (Eyben 2011), Kathmandu (Harper 2011; Hindman 2007), Dhaka and Ho Chi Minh City (Rajak and Stirrat 2011), northern Kenya (Hyndman 2000), postings in Sudan (Duffield 2010), Burundi (Redfield 2012) and other African countries (Pouligny 2004). Examining the spaces frequented by expatriates, the social life that took place there and the professional culture of the work in Afghanistan reveals the extent to which the UNHCR and the institutional world of international aid shape their expatriates' way of life and view of the world.

UNHCR expatriates' smooth movement through the world contrasted with the confinement to which they were subject in Afghanistan. Their travels were channelled and minutely regulated by the organisation, which also managed the organisation of the spaces where they lived and worked down to the last detail. The organisation took care of all aspects of their life in Kabul and was by their side day and night. It thus represents a total institution, exerting a disciplinary power over its employees who must demonstrate their 'willingness to obey' (Weber 1968: 338; Foucault 1995) so that the organisation can protect them against kidnapping and attack. Like the disciplinary power analysed by Foucault (1995), the security rules and detailed monitoring of all daily activity created a relationship of docility-utility between employees and institution that provided it with a labour force in the country. While expatriates might find this confinement burdensome, they experienced it as one of the ordeals of the field, or as the price to be paid for working in a war-torn country.

The channelling of UNHCR expatriates' mobility began even before they arrived in the country. Since Afghan airlines were not considered sufficiently secure by UN standards, the last part of the journey was made on UN planes, leaving from Terminal 2 at Dubai Airport. In the departure lounge, you began to recognise a few faces and see some blue laissez-passer. After flying over the Persian Gulf, the plane continued over the Iranian desert and a good part of Afghanistan. The desert changed to mountains. Little cultivated rectangles

could be seen in the valleys, following winding grey rivers. Before descending into Kabul, the plane almost grazed the Hindu Kush. For most passengers, these were the only moments when they could see the country with their own eyes. In the plane I often tried to overlay the landscape unfolding beneath me on the maps of the country that I already knew by heart. But seen from above, international and administrative borders disappear in the physical continuity of the terrain. I therefore found myself systematically disoriented.

Within the country, the life of UN expatriates was regulated by security measures centralised at the UN level, and implemented in the UNHCR by the Security and Administration departments, sometimes with the assistance of local private companies. The rules tightened between 2007 and 2008, with the rise in the number of suicide attacks, including in central Kabul. Breaking the rules was subject to heavy sanctions, which could go as far as dismissal. These security measures governed expatriates' relationship with the country: they constituted a substantial barrier, with staff living shut away in 'bunkerised' spaces,[7] limiting their interactions with the surrounding context to a minimum.

The centre of Kabul was radically altered by the arrival en masse of military personnel and staff from embassies, international organisations and NGOs between the end of 2001 and 2002. These institutions enlarged, re-established or established their offices and rented housing for their staff, creating a sort of enclave in the city centre to which access was controlled and regulated by a series of checkpoints. Within this perimeter, officers travelled from one office to another in UN or diplomatic vehicles. Many expatriates lived in the Wazir Akbar Khan district, between the airport and the city centre, in marble-floored villas endowed with *bukhari*[8] and gardens, which belonged to the Kabul middle class during the 1960s and 1970s and were now rented out for thousands of dollars.

Any house occupied by expatriate staff had to meet the UN security criteria. These included the height of enclosing walls, the presence of barbed wire, anti-blast window film, bars on the windows and an underground bunker. All houses had a watchman, who lived in a small lodge within the compound, and at least one armed guard stationed outside, near the entrance. As the place where staff spent most of their time when they were not at work, houses were designed as self-sufficient spaces. They were provided with cable TV (often connected to the BBC or Al Jazeera), computers, books and DVDs; in one of the compounds, a gym had been installed in the basement. Expatriates often employed a chef who took care of the shopping and the evening meal. The office was also fortified: it had only one entrance monitored by armed guards. In order to enter the office compound, you had to go through a barrier and wait for the guard to open the gate. You then entered an antechamber surrounded by blast walls where guards checked underneath the vehicle for hidden explosives, using a mirror. There was a special entrance for pedestrians, who had to pass through an X-ray scanner. It was rare for people to go out on nonwork-related

trips: lunch was usually taken at the office, prepared by the housekeeping staff or delivered.

Since they were not allowed to walk in the city, expatriates always travelled by car, in UNHCR 4x4s, in permanent radio contact with base. At the same time each morning, a shuttle circulated around the compounds to bring staff to work. The journey took five to ten minutes, depending on the traffic. You passed the NGO emergency hospital and the DHL office, and in front of the Iranian embassy. The journey was always the same, every day, summer and winter – and I therefore felt euphoric each time a meeting or a field mission enabled me to glimpse other streets in the city, albeit still through the windows of the 4x4. In the evening, the same shuttle took staff back to the residences. After 7 pm armoured vehicles were used. The curfew was 11 pm, which was also the time for a radio check-in.

UN expatriate staff were not authorised to enter any establishment that did not meet UN security criteria, severely restricting the public places they went to. Sometimes at the weekend, collective expeditions were organised to shop at the large stores designed for expatriates, which sold a vast range of imported products, from cornflakes to gorgonzola. Otherwise the public places that UN expatriates went to outside of work were limited to a dozen or so restaurants. Since 2002, following the influx of hundreds of expatriates, several restaurants serving an international clientele had opened in Kabul. The Security section regularly visited them to check security standards. Thus, after work, you could choose between a plate of assorted French cheeses served at l'Atmosphère (which had a swimming pool and Wi-Fi), a pizza at Vila Velebita (opened by a Croatian who cooked Italian food), an enchilada at La Cantina, the Mexican restaurant, gazpacho at Gandamak and so on. None of the restaurants that were accessible to expatriates was Afghan.

Set up and run by expatriates, with exorbitant prices in a country where you could eat for two dollars, these restaurants catered specifically to expatriates. Access to some of them was explicitly forbidden to any person of Afghan nationality. Consumption of alcohol also marked them out in a country where the law forbade serving it to Afghans, and gave rise to disputes between the restaurants and the Afghan government. The condition 'Foreign passport only' was displayed at the entrance to l'Atmosphère. At one point, the UNHCR Representative had organised a relaxed work dinner with donor representatives. Mahmoud was one of those invited, but as he had come in *shalwar kameez* and with his long beard, he was asked for his documents. As an Afghan, he was not allowed to enter, despite Saverio's insistence to the restaurant owner. After a few shocked remarks, the evening continued as if nothing had happened.

At the weekend, the other favoured destination for UNHCR staff was the Hotel Serena. Located right in the city centre, the capital's luxury hotel had a modern gym, a restaurant and a bakery serving renowned cakes. In summer

the main attraction was the open-air swimming pool. A few hours spent at the Serena were an opportunity to break out of confinement, to relax and to release stress. The mismatch between the spaces frequented by expatriates and the surrounding reality was particularly striking from the Serena swimming pool. Located right at the heart of Kabul, it was separated from the noisy, teeming capital by a single wall. The pool was enveloped by the noise of traffic and the smell of the city. Women in swimsuits sipped their cocktails while on the other side, women in *chadari*[9] did their shopping.

Relations with the Afghan population were extremely limited, being restricted to interactions with Afghans who provided services (drivers, housekeeping staff and restaurant employees) and a few traders (carpet sellers and grocers in the Wazir Akbar Khan district), for whom expatriates constituted a particularly profitable clientele. But socialisation remained very limited, even with Afghan colleagues. The possibilities of meeting outside of work hours were restricted by the security measures. At the office, relationships were largely structured by professional hierarchies and hampered by the language barrier. Within the office compound, there were spaces used exclusively by Afghans, like the mosque and the cafeteria. As Peter Redfield (2012) notes in relation to MSF expatriates in Burundi, they are 'materially heavy and socially light': they have substantial financial resources (what they earn and what they spend there), but develop only very weak links there.

Linked to one another by 4x4 journeys, all the spaces in which expatriates lived and travelled were protected enclaves. As expatriates themselves remarked from time to time, it was as if they lived permanently in a bubble, a closed vessel without access to local life. Distances were paradoxically redefined: the Sri Lankan coast, with its tropical climate, and even New York – despite the long hours of travel, there was only one stop – were easier to get to than an Afghan colleague's house. Expatriates were conscious of this gulf between them and the Afghan context. Their way of life in Kabul also sometimes made them ill at ease. But at the same time, they believed they deserved the escape offered by the restaurants and luxury hotels. The sacrifices of the job and the pace of work justified the need to relax, to have a social life, even if it did not fully respect local customs or led them to show off their privileged situation.

Social Life in a Closed Circle

The segregation of the spaces frequented by UNHCR expatriates went hand in hand with an intense social life. As they shared the same residences and these were located close to one another, they spent most evenings and weekends together. When colleagues passed through on mission, large dinners were organised to welcome them. These occasions, as noted above, consolidated

the esprit de corps and made the field a place of intense sociality. But social life extended beyond bonds between UNHCR colleagues.

In the mid-2000s, the expatriate community in Kabul numbered several thousand, including staff from the UN, NGOs, embassies, private companies, journalists and intelligence agents. There were always opportunities to party, hook up and flirt over drinks and music: in addition to the restaurants, which were always very busy, there were salsa nights on Wednesdays in a large UN complex, and the embassies regularly sent out invitations to events you could slip into with the help of a colleague of the right nationality. There were also the goodbye parties for friends leaving the country, and colleagues from the Red Cross often organised all-night parties in the basement spaces of their residences. An electronic newsletter, to which everyone was automatically signed up on arrival, announced the forthcoming events and published photos of past parties.

Spatial concentration made the expatriates in Kabul a tight social group: after a few months, you began to know everybody; when you ate at a restaurant, you observed others and knew that you were being observed; rumours spread rapidly. The boundary between private and professional life became blurred. Institutional relations were often bound up in highly personalised relationships. My colleagues and I spent a lot of time with the representatives of the European Commission Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO), including playing sports together in the garden of the UNHCR offices. Susanne from ECHO and Mitch from the Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (BPRM) had become very close to colleagues with whom I was sharing a house. Because of this, I often had dinner with the partners I was mostly working with, and I was regularly invited to gatherings they organised. In this way, you might spend an evening together and see one another again the next morning at a meeting. This proximity greatly facilitated professional relationships: a simple phone call could resolve administrative conundrums – for example, we could decide together how to arrange matters to satisfy both our respective headquarters.

At moments when the support of donors was particularly important, or when Saverio wanted to explain to them what was going on behind the scenes in negotiations with the Iranian and Pakistani authorities, or to find out informally how much money could be released for emergencies, he would ask me to summon the 'club'[10] to a restaurant or organise a dinner at his apartment. These dinners allowed them to talk in a relaxed atmosphere. Questions linked to programmes and funding were interspersed with personal exchanges. These situations consolidated bonds within the club, for each person felt less subject to the oversight of their own institution.

In addition to their shared involvement in the field in Kabul, the bonds between the members of the 'club' were also strengthened by the fact that they

had long belonged to the same professional networks. Eric and Éloïse, from the European Commission, had known one another for a long time, having worked at the Commission together. Saverio and Susanne, from ECHO, had never met before they got to know one another in Kabul, but had undertaken missions in Congo at roughly the same time, and had thereby developed similar knowledge and experience. At one dinner at Saverio's apartment, a batik hanging on the wall, which Susanne immediately recognised as Congolese, sparked a lively conversation about furniture and decorative items brought back from missions. The BPRM representative impressed everybody when he told us he had decorated each room of his Washington DC home in the style of a different Asian or African country.

The meetings of the Kabul 'club' closely resemble those of the 'upper spheres' of the institutional world of aid (the directors of the major UN agencies and embassy staff) described by Rosalind Eyben (2011). Eyben argues that this sociability has an important function in reproducing and consolidating the now globalised institutional culture of the world of international aid, of which the community in La Paz that she analyses constitutes a local cell. Through this intense social life, policies deemed appropriate are reproduced, and social life bulwarks this culture against the contradictions and disruptive elements that might be introduced by the local context (see also Harper 2011). A similar analysis can be applied to the way in which sociability functions in the closed community of expatriates in Kabul to create and reproduce a shared vision of the international intervention in Afghanistan.

A Depoliticised Understanding of the Afghan Context

At the start of my mission, I was always woken by the *muezzin* at the Wazir Akbar Khan mosque, and I was curious to know what he was saying in his impassioned sermons. I said to myself: when I've learned Dari, I will understand. Similarly, I would jump any time I heard the rumble of a plane – military exercises, a visiting head of state, Karzai leaving his palace? I said to myself: once I have got to know more about the political life of Kabul, I will understand. I had also brought with me several books to help me gain a better understanding of the country in which I was to live. But all my attempts to acquire a broader perspective came to nothing: overtaken by deadlines to meet and the need for rest, I had to resign myself to the impossibility of learning more about anything that did not relate directly to my professional tasks, which demanded all my concentration and energy. After some time, my failure to understand the surrounding context became ordinary and my forced estrangement normal.

Expatriates move in a social and cognitive world that is unreceptive or even impermeable to the local context. Interactions with it are structured and

codified exclusively by work. Work provides ready-to-use frames of understanding that help aid professionals to stabilise their perspective, give a coherent meaning to their mission in Afghanistan and endow each officer with a specific place in the enterprise – perceived as urgent, huge and important – of reconstruction in Afghanistan. The intense sociality among expatriates helps to protect and reproduce this shared interventionist professional culture. For UNHCR expatriates, two interlocking institutional layers frame the perception of time and of the Afghan context: the UNHCR Operation, and the UN reconstruction project in Afghanistan.

For any UNHCR expatriate, the dominant world of reference is the organisation's mission in the country, of which they are a part. Grasping its multiple dimensions (programmes, internal organisation, partners, etc.) is essential and takes time. Thus, everything that happens outside the organisation often remains beyond their purview. The temporal frame is dictated partly by administrative timescales and the short timeframes of projects, which are funded on an annual basis, and partly by the rhythm of staff rotation. A mission in Afghanistan is generally considered an unattractive posting, for which its benefits (potential interest of the work, higher salary, frequent leave, potential positive repercussions for one's career) nevertheless compensate. At the beginning, you have to familiarise yourself quickly with your role. Subsequently, expatriates are often completely absorbed by the relentless pace of work, which they must strive to complete as well as possible, since their manager's evaluation is a determining factor in future promotions. Time, patterned by meetings and deadlines, passes in constant tension and with the challenges of being efficient and holding course day after day. As the end of the mission nears, departure must be prepared in advance.

The second frame of reference is that of the reconstruction project launched by the UN in late 2001. In order to contextualise our presence in the country, we would refer to the 'legal framework', citing the Afghanistan Compact – the international agreement that renewed the Bonn Agreement – and the Afghan National Development Strategy, the national development plan put together by donors, international organisations and the Afghan government. In this larger context, the domain and responsibilities of the UNHCR are restricted to the displaced persons' sector. The speed with which information and new reports circulate, the multiplicity of sectors into which international activity is divided, the number of bodies involved, the innumerable abbreviations and acronyms create an impenetrable bureaucratic forest, making it impossible to gain an overview of the project's institutional apparatus, its evolution and its effects. This is even more true of trends and developments on the military-political level, on which less information is available. The density of this institutional world also adds weight to the impression of being part of a huge, legitimate world, engaged in an urgent and important work, and the feeling of

participating in a crucial moment in the history of Afghanistan, in which the future of the country is being played out (see Chapter 9).

There are at least two myths that are maintained at the heart of these two institutional worlds and underpin the professional culture of expatriates in Afghanistan. Both are solidly anchored in the paradigm of modernisation. The first myth is the need for international intervention in a backward Afghanistan. Work documents and the discourse of expatriates reveal a mechanism of dehistoricisation and exoticisation of Afghanistan, made possible by expatriates' lack of knowledge of the sociopolitical reality and of the country's history.[11] Afghanistan is abstracted from contemporaneity and relegated to a past conceived along the lines of the history of Western countries. In a process similar to those described in the case of the 'South' (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012), the 'Orient' (Saïd 2003 [1978]) and 'Africa' (Ferguson 2006), Afghanistan is read through the prism of the West and seen as a country that needs to be transformed in order to catch up, to overcome its shortcomings. The year 2001 is therefore considered a sort of Year Zero, inaugurating Afghanistan into the modernity of which expatriates are the messengers and benevolent agents.

Thus, expatriates would say that Afghanistan had 'remained in the Middle Ages', that here things did not 'yet' work as they should: the country had not 'yet' experienced industrialisation, the sexual revolution, etc. This attitude could take a negative tone: Afghanistan is a country that exhausts expatriates, dominated by corruption, where male-female relations are extremely unequal. Conversely, it could take the positive form of fascination for a different world, primitive and unindustrialised, where the beauty and power of nature were intact, where both the sense of hospitality and tribal solidarities were very strong, and it was possible to relive the age of explorers and adventurers. Even danger could be idealised in this way: war is something that no longer happens in 'civilised' countries.

The second myth is that intervention works. Senior managers always emphasised progress and results achieved, and the importance of the UNHCR and the UN's activity in the country. In 2007 the Kabul Branch Office became an important regional coordinating centre, and the Afghan mission was revitalised. This was completely out of step with the development of the conflict, in which the power of the Taliban was rising, there was growing distrust of international organisations and reduced access to the field. The work of the senior staff in Security, which is conducted in great secrecy, plays an important role in producing the illusion that 'everything is going well'. Both the statistics regularly emailed to all UN staff and the updates to security measures reinforced the idea that there was no need to worry, as the security issue was 'sorted' by other colleagues so that we could work. The process of staff rotation also stopped people from imagining that the international project might

fail in the long term, making it difficult, for example, to gauge how much more restrictive the confinement conditions had become over the years.

As well as giving meaning to their presence in the country, these two myths helped to normalise the mismatch between expatriates' living conditions (with electricity, hot showers and water to keep a garden in bloom) and those of Afghans. The UNHCR's mandate and the reconstruction project provided an interpretative framework based on a differentiation of roles (the 'beneficiary' and the 'aid worker') that reified the unequal relationship, while at the same time rendering it acceptable and normal. Comparison with their own conditions was beside the point, because expatriates were there to help, liberate and ultimately improve the living conditions of Afghans. The energy they devoted to their work, the sacrifices they made and the risks they ran were the proof of their goodwill and their commitment to justice. Moreover, revealing themselves to be too affected or subject to feelings of guilt would not be appropriate: in order to do this job, you need to demonstrate cool-headedness and know how to manage your emotions. Thus, in the eyes of expatriates, Afghans, despite the fact they shared their same locality, lived relegated to another world characterised by a lack of modernity that expatriates were there to remedy.

Even so, from time to time, an event would shake up expatriates' depoliticised everyday life. For a few moments the myths teetered, the contradictions surfaced and the constructed normality wobbled. But the way in which these episodes were managed – as 'incidents' – exposes the mechanisms of depoliticisation that quickly re-established routine, rebuilt the walls of the bubble and resubstantiated the myths.

In winter, ice or snow could lead to the cancellation of flights, and there was nothing to be done: the chain of stopovers was broken and the hope of spending Christmas with the family crumbled all of a sudden. Electricity blackouts regularly threatened to erase 'urgent' emails, 'important' documents that you were in the middle of writing. The alarm that announced the start-up of the generator accompanied the anger and despair of those who had lost their documents. 'Welcome to Afghanistan,' would be the remark on these occasions: such inconveniences were ascribed to the backwardness of the country, which required staff to show patience and flexibility, or indeed a spirit of sacrifice. The generator and substitute flights were considered our due, because of our own priorities and those of the organisation. The fact that most Afghans could not legally leave their country or saw a few hours of electricity as a luxury did not even cross our minds.

Yet it was the episodes associated with the conflict that revealed most strikingly the fragility of the bubble within which we lived. It would happen when we least expected it. It is 7.30 am, I am writing up my field notes in the dining room, someone is making tea in the kitchen, someone else is taking a shower, and the others are preparing to board the next shuttle. A dry, deep explosion

booms, very close by. It is followed by several moments of complete silence. Then the sound of sirens. Everything stops, the routine is broken.

We get together in the dining room. One of us is in radio contact with base at the office. We are told that there has been a car bomb in the district. The shuttle service is suspended. We are asked to stay in the residence and await further instructions. It is the first time that a suicide attack has taken place in the expatriate district.

James, who arrived a few days earlier, has a spike of adrenalin and paces up and down with the radio in his hand. Beatrice stays seated on the sofa, her cup of tea in her hands, staring into space. Mary has seized the moment, taking a photo of the cloud of smoke above the roofs.

Such episodes expose the contradictions underpinning the presence of UN expatriates in Afghanistan. That presence is embedded in power relations that go well beyond the efforts to coordinate and competition between international organisations that absorbed our attention in the everyday. These episodes reminded us that we were working in a situation of immanence, not exteriority, with regard to the Afghan context. Not only were we renting houses from people we described as 'commander' in UN reports, but above all we were also involved parties in the ongoing conflict. Aligned with NATO policy, we thereby expressed a specific opinion as to who might legitimately govern the country. When the Taliban targeted us, they were genuine *attacks* and not simply 'incidents', as colleagues from Security termed them. This violence laid bare the question of the legitimacy of our presence and the way in which we and the reconstruction project were perceived by the local population (Donini 2006). Furthermore, suicide attacks forced us to place ourselves on the same level as all those who shared this locality – in other words, the Afghans who were or could have been at the site of the attack. Such episodes also led us to radically review our sense of the supposed centrality of the reconstruction project.

After an hour, the Security division informs us that order has been restored and the shuttle service is resumed. Although they were sometimes experienced as irksome, observing the security rules structured our everyday routine. While they were the most obvious indicator of the paradoxes and contradictions of our position, the rules became reassuring points of reference and encouraged us not to question the legitimacy of our presence. And then, you could not allow yourself to be too disturbed, you had to measure up to the situation.

Thus, such episodes paradoxically helped to reinforce rather than challenge the myths outlined above. The belief in the need for segregation was reinforced, as was the idea of a dangerous and unpredictable outside that contrasted with the secure and predictable spaces in which we lived. The organisation came to seem like an institution that protected and ensured the safety

of its staff and to which you could quietly yield. As such, these episodes were quickly absorbed and became part of the routine as 'incidents', on a par with everyday annoying events. Deadlines and diaries were the best allies for reimmersing yourself in the rhythm of work. As soon as we are told that order has been restored, I get on the first shuttle. At the office at last, I hurriedly switch on my computer to make up for lost time.

An Insular Interstate Cosmopolitanism

The standard representations of UNHCR expatriates often emphasise their privileges, their bravery and the power they exercise, while the weight of the UN bureaucracy of which they are part – what makes them bureaucrats, ultimately – is generally obscured. My aim here is, on the contrary, to understand the institutions (the UNHCR, the interstate system and the international aid system) that shape their mobile way of life and the modes of their presence in the field. I have noted that even though these institutions foster their high level of mobility, give them responsibilities and support their universalist claims to moral superiority, they also powerfully shape their practices and their view of the world.

The UNHCR as an organisation emerges as a powerful disciplinary device that provides a base, in terms of life paths, social belonging and prism of understanding of life. We sawhow much the interstate system shapes the mobility of UNHCR expatriates and supports their claim to occupy a morally superior, encompassing sphere. We also realised the extent to which their relation to the contexts in which they intervene can be restricted and codified by a professional culture of international aid, underpinned by the paradigm of modernisation. While UNHCR expatriates undeniably belong to an economically and politically privileged group that moves easily around the world, as professionals they also have to demonstrate docility towards the institutions to which they have chosen to belong, accepting the resulting material constraints, and make the cognitive frameworks of these institutions their own.

Some researchers argue that international aid professionals cannot be considered cosmopolitan, owing to the ghettoised spaces in which they live and work as well as to their monoculturalism, closed to new epistemologies (Rajak and Stirrat 2011). Or they describe this cosmopolitanism as provincial (Eyben 2011) and contrast it with other social groups more open to other cultures (Harper 2011). My own view is that UNHCR expatriates can be called cosmopolitan. According to Ulf Hannerz's definition (2004), they embody a cosmopolitanism that is both cultural (if only because of the diversity of their geographical origins, the products they consume and the places they travel through) and political (to the extent that 'refugee reason' is anchored in UN

cosmopolitanism). They also have the feeling of being at home anywhere in the world.

Nevertheless, this cosmopolitanism needs to be situated and qualified. Here I follow approaches that suggest there are multiple 'vernacular cosmopolitanisms', that is, many ways to be cosmopolitan, that can be reconstructed by studying practices, trajectories, belongings, views of the world and the potential political projects that underpin them (Hannerz 2004; Rajak and Stirrat 2011; Tsing 2000). From the Nepali health professionals described by Ian Harper (2011) to the rich Chinese families involved in the 'Pacific shuttle' described by Aihwa Ong (1999), from the North Africans in Southern Europe studied by Alain Tarrius (2002) to Janine Wedel's 'shadow elites' (2009), each of these groups is, in its own way, cosmopolitan.

Identifying the institutions that shape the cosmopolitanism of UNHCR expatriates suggests at least two ways in which it can be qualified. First, this is an 'interstate' cosmopolitanism. Despite the fact that it is characterised by opposition to the system of states and the national order, this cosmopolitanism is strongly anchored in that system. Second, it can be described as insular. This oxymoron articulates the institutional processes that give rise to frequent movement in many directions, but traced along imposed trajectories and temporalities, to time spent in many different countries, but inside a bubble, and to a professional culture of humanitarian intervention that claims to have universalist values, but remains self-referential and closed to other worldviews.

Notes

1. I use the term 'habitus' to designate a set of lasting dispositions, norms, categories and structures. Born of a specific apprenticeship associated with a group to which one belongs, they are internalised to the point where they become a component of personal identity and matrices through which individuals interpret the world and act in it (Bourdieu 1977).

2. In March 2008 alone, the Travel Section made seventy flight reservations to or from Kabul. Directors of Sub-Offices travelled to Kabul once every three months to meet with the Operation's senior staff, submit their reports and receive instructions; staff posted to Sub-Offices had to travel via the capital in order to enter and leave the country for training or holidays. Colleagues from Headquarters also came to Kabul on mission.

3. The difficulty of maintaining family life in the field is one of the reasons why, although the field is highly valued in the organisation, posts in Sub-Offices are often occupied by 'juniors' on short-term contracts who hope to join the organisation and do not yet have family ties.

4. For example, in his end-of-year message to staff in his office, one senior manager wrote: 'I thank ... each and every one of you personally for your tenacious work, your incredible commitment and dedication, which have enabled us to achieve so much over the course of this year.'

5. In the field, UN staff are integrated into the UN's security system rather than that of their embassy. In the event of an evacuation, these staff are evacuated by the UN, whereas other expatriates depend on their national systems.

6. This subject merits a study of its own, which might draw on Yves Dezalay's writings (2004) on the internationalisation of elites and the articulation between the national and international fields. In Delazay's work, the 'international' field is loosely defined as any space that extends beyond the national field, whereas in my work the 'international' (in the sense of 'interstate') field does not exhaust the range of fields that extend beyond the national field.

7. While in Kabul this segregation corresponded to a genuine danger of attack and kidnapping, Mark Duffield (2010) observes very similar living arrangements in countries where no such risk exists. He describes a phenomenon of 'bunkerisation' of aid actors that aligns with a distance from the field. According to Duffield, this phenomenon results in part from internal changes in the aid sector (central offices taking over, the development of communications technologies), and in part from changes brought about by globalisation (the spread of risk culture and ghettoisation of the privileged classes).

8. A wood-burning stove.

9. Or *burqa*, a garment that covers the woman from head to toe.

10. Set up by Saverio when he arrived in Kabul, the 'club' brought together the senior UNHCR staff and representatives of the main funders of the Afghan Operation.

11. The UN's welcoming Briefing Kit included a timeline that began in 1979, the year of the Soviet invasion, which was generally perceived as the moment when the 'problem' began. There were books that circulated, such as Barnett Rubin's study (1995), which the head of mission gave one new arrival, for example, and could also be consulted in the library at the residence. But in general they were not read.