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Journeys to the Limits of First-hand Knowledge: Politicians' On-site Visits in Zones of Conflict and Intervention

Berit Bliesemann de Guevara

Abstract

This article explores the practice and political significance of politicians' journeys to conflict zones. It focuses on the German example looking at field trips to theatres of international intervention as a way of first-hand knowing in policymaking. Paying tribute to Lisa Smirl and her thought-provoking work on humanitarian spaces, objects and imaginaries and on liminality in aid worker biographies, two connected arguments are developed. First, through the exploration of the routinised practices of politicians' field trips I show how these journeys not only remain confined to the 'auxiliary space' of aid/intervention, but that it is furthermore a staged reality of this auxiliary space that most politicians experience on their journeys. Based on this, I then ask, second, what politicians actually do experience on their journeys and how their experiences relate to their policy knowledge about conflict and intervention. I show that political field trips enable sensory/affectual, liminoid and liminal

experiences, which have functions such as authority accumulation, agenda setting, community building, and civilisation in domestic politics, while at the same time reinforcing, in most cases, pre-existing conflict and intervention imaginaries.

Keywords: field trips, on-site visits, battlefield tourism, sensory experience, affect, conflict knowledge, first-hand knowledge, intervention, spaces of aid, liminality, German *Bundestag*, parliamentarians, German foreign policy, Lisa Smirl

Introduction

This article explores German politicians' journeys to conflict zones that have or may become theatres of international (diplomatic, military, aid) intervention with German contribution. More specifically, it looks at the ways the spaces, built environments, objects and personnel that structure and populate these zones of intervention influence or interact with the experiences and insights that such journeys provide the travellers with, and which ultimately feed into parliamentarians' policy knowledge on conflicts and interventions. Paying tribute to Lisa Smirl and her thought-provoking work on humanitarian spaces, objects and imaginaries (Smirl 2011a, 2011b, 2015) and on liminality in aid worker biographies (Smirl 2012), the article traces German members of parliament (MPs) on their journeys through the material and sensory/affectual landscapes of these 'spaces of aid' (Smirl 2015).

The German parliament, the *Bundestag*, has traditionally shown high levels of travel activity. With the active German participation in multilateral peace- and statebuilding interventions since the mid-1990s, this has increasingly included troop and field visits to zones of conflict and intervention. While the new German military engagement did not have a significant effect on the frequency or amount of travel activity, it did change to some extent

the travels destinations and purposes, with theatres of German military deployment and questions of security and peacebuilding nature now becoming more important. The main rationale given for political travels to zones of conflict and intervention is shared across all parties represented in the *Bundestag*: on-site visits, so the common narrative, allow MPs to ‘form their own picture of the situation on the ground’, and to get an ‘authentic’ or ‘unvarnished’ insight into (intervention) reality (Buchholz and van Aken 2010, 1; Gädechens 2012; Künast, Trittin and Nachtwei 2007; Lamers 2010). ‘[F]or such a mission cannot be decided based on paperwork alone’, as an MP of the conservative CSU stated with regard to a troop visit to Afghanistan (Hahn 2011).

What shines through, despite the obvious rhetoric character of these statements, is a certain longing for ‘authenticity’ or ‘reality’ and for ‘first-order knowledge’ and ‘truth’ among the MPs. This is perhaps surprising in view of the triumph that evidence-based policymaking (EBP) has started in international development aid and peacebuilding circles. According to the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), one of the concept’s main early advocates, the ‘pursuit of EBP is based on the premise that policy decisions should be better informed by available evidence and should include rational analysis. This is because policy which is based on systematic evidence is seen to produce better outcomes’ (Sutcliffe and Court 2005, iii). While German NGO and aid agency circles have as yet not adopted evidence-based policymaking to the same extent as their UK and US counterparts, they too aspire to scientifically grounded demands and programmes.¹ In a way this stands in odd contrast to the value that MPs attach to their occasional three- to five-day fleeting visits to Afghanistan, Kosovo or the DR Congo in order to ‘see for themselves’ – and yet, travel activity is burgeoning among MPs in Berlin.

A second trend that has been diagnosed with regard to conflict- and intervention-related policy-knowledge is a growing retreat from ‘the field’ and from case-specific, on-the-

ground knowledge. Conflict and development researchers have criticised the growing remoteness of researchers and practitioners' engagement with 'the field' due to increasing security thresholds and insurance/liability concerns, meaning that the 'evidence' produced for EBP only poorly reflects on-the-ground dynamics and logics (Andersson and Weigand 2015; Duffield 2010, 2014; Fisher Forthcoming; Sandstrom 2012). At first sight, German MPs' travel activities appear like a counter-trend to this retreat from the field, since these trips are specifically targeted at 'the situation on the ground' in zones of conflict and intervention. Yet, since these journeys tend to be limited to the auxiliary spaces and compounds of aid and are only allowed to take place under conditions of relative security, they usually have very limited material effects on the western intervention imaginary in the sense of 'fact-based evidence' or 'ground truth'. If at all influential, political travels rather tend to unfold their potential through the security-related affects they evoke in sensory experiences provided by the field trips, but whose causal connections with policymaking are anything but straightforward.

The article proceeds in two steps and through the development of two closely related arguments. In the first section, I start by giving a brief overview of German MPs' travel activity. I then show, through an exploration of their routinised practice, how these journeys not only remain confined to what Smirl has termed the 'auxiliary space' of aid/intervention, which is created by the built environment, objects and everyday life rituals of interveners and characterised by its insurmountable separation from the alleged beneficiaries of international involvement. What most politicians experience on their journeys is furthermore a staged reality of this auxiliary space, since programme points tend to be enactments of intervention routines by the different actors involved, serving purposes and following logics that are quite different from the quest for 'authenticity' and 'truth'. Obviously, such staged experiences of intervention have even less to do with the lives of 'local' aid beneficiaries than the practices

and imaginaries of the international civil servants, aid workers, soldiers and other practitioners implementing peacebuilding interventions ‘on the ground’. While the latter will inevitably have some contact with ‘the local’ through interactions with local partners, employees and during project work, travelling politicians’ exposure to ‘the situation on the ground’ is temporally and spatially limited to such an extent that it cannot be but highly superficial.

Therefore, rather than showing what politicians do not see/experience during their journeys, in the second part of the article I ask what it is that they *do* experience and how their experiences relate to policy knowledge about conflict and intervention. To answer this question, I draw on Smirl’s adoption of the works of Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner to analyse aid work as a rite of passage, where the actual presence ‘in the field’ can be seen as an unstructured, betwixt-and-between stage in aid workers’ biographies characterised by liminality. I argue that, in a similar albeit less pronounced way, politicians’ field trips can provide the travellers with sensory, liminoid (quasi-liminal) and liminal experiences, which fulfil a number of functions such as investing MPs with ‘country/issue expertise’, bringing problems and topics ‘to life’ and to the attention of politicians, creating ties of friendship among MPs across party boundaries, and civilising the political process in Berlin. As the empirical examples will show, these functions are based to a much greater extent on the sensory/affectual landscapes of spaces of aid and intervention than they are on the rational ways of knowing that dominate politicians’ travel justifications. Except for one case, a Bosnia journey of the Green Party in 1996, in which a field visit was part of a major transition in party politics, field trips tend to bolster MPs’ outlook on the world and reinforce the general ‘humanitarian imaginary’ of German intervention politics rather than questioning it. I conclude with some thoughts on what my two propositions mean for the current debate on conflict- and intervention-related policy knowledge and the study of intervention politics.

The insights and examples used in this article are taken from a number of sources collected over the last years. These include dozens of travel reports, press releases and travel programmes sourced from MPs' websites and through archival work in the German Green Party's archive (*Archiv Grünes Gedächtnis*) in Berlin in December 2014. I also conducted a number of formal and informal interviews with officers and lower ranks of the German armed forces (*Bundeswehr*) in 2011-12 in order to learn more about the other, organising side of official troop and field visits. I complemented this information with impressions from my own participation in an academic 10-day journey to international military camps under German command in Bosnia-Herzegovina (Rajlovac) and Kosovo (Prizren) in June 2004. The programme of this journey showed many of the characteristics of politicians' visits to these countries, since it was composed of modules prepared for official visitors, including briefings by the German embassy/representation, the German commander and other high-ranking officers, on-site visits at German reconstruction and aid projects, and talks with carefully selected local agencies and groups as well as with international organisations' representatives.

Finally, during fieldwork in Berlin in June 2015, I conducted in-depths interviews with four MPs and one parliamentary assistant who is responsible for planning the field trips of a party faction in the *Bundestag*. In order to explore the limits of first-hand knowing through politicians' field trips, I chose to talk with MPs commonly acknowledged to be among the most knowledgeable and/or committed in the area of German foreign and security politics and who have travelled to conflict zones with specific guiding, policy-related questions in mind, rather than for obvious (self-) representational purposes. Two of my interview partners principally supported German involvement in humanitarian and peacebuilding interventions, including military means, but had a critical stance on the ways this has been put into practice by German politics and governmental agencies; the other two

MPs objected to German military involvement on principle.² Methodologically speaking, these MPs are the least likely cases of superficial engagement with intervention contexts and are therefore the most convincing cases to explore the limits of first-hand knowing through on-site visits.

Journeys to ‘the field’: fleeting visits to the auxiliary space of intervention

The phenomenon of MPs’ field trips in German foreign and security politics

Despite the physical exertions attached to on-site visits in intervention theatres, the number of official trips by German MPs is high. For one, this suits the habitus and self-conception of German parliamentarians, among whom travelling has not only been a customary activity, but has indeed come to be seen as a kind of duty – as explained in the regular *Bundestag* reports on foreign travel activities and spending:

In order to satisfy [Germany’s] international responsibility, it is vital that the members of the German *Bundestag* cultivate an intensive cooperation with foreign politicians and institutions. This way the MPs can *collect on the ground the information and experiences necessary for their tasks* and react to the international state of affairs and emerging conflict situations in an appropriate way (Deutscher Bundestag 2013, 2, italics added).

Accordingly, for the years 1991-2009, the *Bundestag* archive recorded between 202 (1998) and 826 (2008) parliament-financed official travels to foreign countries per year,

amounting to annual costs of between €1.6 million and €3.6 million respectively (Feldkamp 2011, 1611-14). Not included in these figures, since not accountable to the parliament, are the numerous individual and group journeys financed by the different parties/parliamentary factions without *Bundestag* involvement.³ While only a fraction of the travels under the umbrella of the *Bundestag* are directed at (post-) conflict countries – a rough estimate based on *Bundestag* archive figures suggests that the share is around 10 per cent on average –, there is a steady stream of visitors travelling to the theatres of current, or possible future, military and civilian interventions.⁴

There are several types of politicians' on-site visits and field trips, which differ regarding their degree of travel programme flexibility.⁵ The most rigid type is official visits by ministers or secretaries of state, to which the members of parliamentary committees – usually one representative per party – are invited (*Obleute-Reisen*). My interviewees agreed that in order to find answers to one's questions about an intervention or an armed conflict these are the least productive journeys, since the programme is determined by the ministerial agenda and has mainly representational functions, as also the accompanying journalists suggest. Journeys organised by parliamentary committees (*Ausschussreisen*), such as the defence or human rights committees, offer MPs greater possibilities to influence the programme. The least other-directed journeys, however, are those organised by the parliamentary factions (*Fraktionsreisen*) or single MPs (*Individualreisen*), often financed by the parties themselves, since these trips allow them to tailor the visit to their specific questions and interests.

In addition to these differences in travel types, the motivation of individual MPs for on-site visits also differs considerably, ranging from symbolical politics directed at domestic voter constituencies, to personal interests in an organised or calculated 'adventure', to genuine fact-finding motives. In analogy to categories of modern mass tourism, the first two

types of MPs are usually to be found on ‘package tours’, while the ‘fact-finders’ show typical characteristics of the ‘independent traveller’, who strives to explore the destination off the beaten track as far as practically possible. What the ‘package’ and ‘individual’ types of journeys differ in most is the extent to which MPs are able to penetrate the layers of multiple social-theatrical performances that such visits necessarily entail, as I have discussed in more detail elsewhere (Bliesemann de Guevara 2012; Forthcoming). All my interviewees figured in the ‘independent traveller’ category, even though sometimes participating in the unavoidable ‘package tours’. Both the ‘package’ and the ‘independent’ types of political field trips, however, remain basically confined to the ‘auxiliary space’ of the intervention – with important effects on MPs’ intervention imaginary.

Adventures of the ‘battlefield tourist’ in the auxiliary space of intervention

The typical parliamentarians’ journey to places where the German *Bundeswehr* is/has been part of a military intervention – that is, the typical journey of what German soldiers tongue-in-cheek call ‘battlefield tourists’ (Baumann et al. 2011, 97) – is exclusively limited to, and mediated by, the ‘auxiliary space’ of intervention with its built environment, objects and rituals as described and analysed by Smirl (2015). She uses the term ‘auxiliary space’ to describe ‘the physical, material and spatial environments resulting from the everyday practices of the international community when performing an international intervention’ (Smirl 2015, 203) – for instance, the compounds where military and civilian interveners live and the secluded grand hotels where ‘the international community’ meets, the objects interveners use on a day-to-day basis, such as the typical white SUVs (Smirl 2011a), and even the war-zone souvenir (see Kühn in this special section). The auxiliary space is also

what ties ‘expats’ together while separating them from the supposed beneficiaries of the intervention: ‘Even when [aid workers in the field] are not explicitly a spatially constrained group, boundaries are formed which create and maintain divisions between various groups’ (Smirl 2015, 90).

In Smirl’s tripartite model of space in interventions, the auxiliary space is one element next to, second, the humanitarian imaginary – the ‘abstract, conceptual yet programmatic way the international community thinks about the so-called problem of underdevelopment’ (ibid, 203) – and third, the tactics of the beneficiaries of aid who experience and adapt international projects in their own way in the ‘lived project space’ (ibid, 204). Auxiliary space and humanitarian imaginary are closely intertwined and mutually constitutive; that is, where interveners live, how they travel, etc. influences what they think about conflict, development and intervention politics. The same can be said for MPs field visits to zones of conflict and intervention. When arriving in the capital of a country, MPs usually reside in the best hotel in town, the ‘grand hotels’ so aptly described and sharply analysed by Smirl (2011b; cf. also Follath 2005). As one MP reflected: ‘This is the usual “international island”, with very few differences between the different countries. That is to say, being there you have not really arrived in the country yet.’⁶ The likelihood that MPs on ‘package tours’ remain in this kind of ‘gilded cage’⁷ is high.

Andersson and Weigand (2015, 5-8) have graphically described what ‘life in the “Kabubble”’, the international space that separates the members of the ‘expat community’ from Afghans’ life in Kabul, looks like, and this is mainly the perspective that MPs take when visiting Afghanistan (or other places), since security requirements – dictated by the obligatory accompanying police forces of the German Federal Criminal Police Office – prohibit most movement or interaction outside of this very confined space. There are, of course, major differences between how MPs on a visit experience the auxiliary space of

intervention and how humanitarian aid workers and peacebuilders experience and inhabit it. While intervention agencies have been criticised for the high turnover of international staff (Smirl 2015, chap. 3), the temporalities of work in zones of conflict and intervention, even if limited to deployments of only a few months, still differ considerably from politicians' fleeting visits of a few days. Other major differences concern the practices and subjectivities that characterise the two groups. Intervention practitioners' work consists in project formulation, implementation and management, programme evaluation and reporting, and competition over information, funds and responsibilities on the ground (Veit and Schlichte 2012; Autesserre 2014). Most travelling politicians see their task in political representation and perhaps the collation of information; they are briefed by practitioners on the ground and visit projects, but they are not involved in any of the intervention tasks themselves. They also clearly see themselves as representatives of domestic politics and electorates, contrasting with the often cosmopolitan self-understanding of the staff of international intervention agencies. On all accounts, travelling politicians are only visitors, who are hosted, guided and mediated by – and thus dependent upon – the practitioners on the ground.

The typical MP visit is facilitated by German embassy personnel, who – in consultation with the MPs and ministries back home – organise meetings and on-site visits, and carried out in large parts by the *Bundeswehr*, who are in charge of transport and whose camps also constitute a typical programme point on the MPs' visit schedule. This is not surprising as such, given that MPs' journeys are usually focussed on 'Germany in Afghanistan' (Daxner 2014), that is, on the performance of German contributions to the intervention and the wellbeing of German military and civilian personnel. In addition to these practical and political reasons why *Bundeswehr* camps in North Afghanistan are at the top of the programme list, troop visits are also cherished by the average travelling MP due to the

perception that, ‘the *Bundeswehr* has the most attractive programme points – those which make great photos, which are interesting to journalists, especially the military vehicles’.⁸

There are some notable exceptions to the rule of routinised field trips, when MPs manage to travel to places classified as too dangerous or to talk to people who German state agencies would rather not have them talk to. For instance, in early 2010 two MPs of the Left Party and one Green Party MP travelled to Afghanistan together to find out about the view of Afghans, who were victims or bereaved of the infamous German ‘Kunduz bombing’ of 2009, an airstrike on two petrol tanks near Kunduz allegedly stolen by members of the Taliban, which killed a high number of civilians (Buchholz and van Aken 2010; Ströbele, 2009). Another delegation of four Left Party representatives went on a fact-finding mission to Sudan in 2011 to explore what effects military means would have on the different conflicts in Sudan and post-independence South Sudan (van Aken et al. 2011). These journeys were organised as fact-finding missions and aimed at the collection of information independent from, or critical of, official German government sources. While German state agencies were again involved in the logistics of these travels, which also involved elements of the routine itinerary, the MPs also managed to organise their own agenda items. Overall, however, such attempts to break out of the journey routines are far and few between.

From the perspective of ‘the visited’, parliamentarians’ field trips are just another obligatory task on their daily to-do list, and most intervention agencies develop routines of how to deal with official visitors. The *Bundeswehr*, for instance, prepares programme modules, which usually revolve around the respective focus of the mission and can be reeled off instantly. To give an example, in the case of the Afghanistan mission in 2009 one such focus concerned the Afghan police officer training in Mazar-e-Sharif, a task first implemented by the *Bundeswehr* and later taken over by international police forces. Visits to the police training centre were part of the standard visit programme at the time. ‘The

politicians were to see that’, a *Bundeswehr* soldier⁹ recalled, ‘but we felt uncomfortable. We were pulled out of our routine, and then everything was like a show of force. That was mere exhibition, meant to show: “This and that is what we do”.’ The training centre was situated in the vicinity of the field camp. The visitors inspected the training of the Afghan police officers ‘like visiting a school class.’ The various demonstrations included skills such as car searches and crime scene work. A soldier remembered: ‘All these were skills that were part of the training syllabus and would be taught at some stage, but up to that moment the Afghan policemen hadn’t learned them yet. Therefore everything was drilled a few days beforehand. – It was more a type of theatre performance.’

In view of the staged character of the auxiliary space that MPs witness on their journeys, I have suggested elsewhere to understand field and troop visits more generally as manifestations of social theatrical performance (Bliesemann de Guevara 2012; Forthcoming). These direct encounters between politically responsible persons of the sending state, the policy-implementing organisations on the ground and the so-called local partners in the intervened country are staged in many ways by these different actors. In this specific example, the performative character of troop visits on the part of the military grows out of the organisational necessity to routinise the visits and intra-organisational career logics. The *Bundeswehr* soldiers I interviewed judged the idea that troop visits could serve politicians to ‘form an accurate picture of the situation’, if only of the confined space in which the military operated, as unrealistic. They related that visitors were usually offered a tight programme and were often ‘bombarded with information’; they had little time to contemplate or ask. Additionally, ‘sugar-coating’ was the order of the day: problems were usually not addressed, probably out of fear to ‘get squashed’ by a superior, that is, to risk a disciplinary warning or, in the worst case, the end of one’s career, if deficiencies in their area of responsibility came

to light. Correspondingly, the visitors had few possibilities to ‘talk with normal soldiers’. If a politician explicitly wished to converse with soldiers, these were usually carefully chosen.

I would argue that the military’s enactment of ‘life in the camp’ is just another form of routinising and ritualising life in the ‘intervention bubble’ in general (for a polemical UN Head of Mission’s account of his perspective as ‘the visited’, see Koenigs 2014). The MPs I interviewed were aware of the highly staged character of their visits, agreeing that the standard visit does never leave this general level of enactment. They also shared the impression that there was not much to be learned about ‘the situation on the ground’ from such enacted encounters, or as one MP put it: ‘What is indeed right: one has experienced the sun, one has experienced the heat, in Kabul one has experienced the dirty air – that is, one has picked up on important micro-tesserae – but this is about all.’¹⁰ Nonetheless, all of them agreed that there were things to be learned or experienced on such travels, which were impossible to acquire in Berlin (cf. also Koenigs 2014). I will therefore now turn to the question what it is that travelling adds to the policymaking process.

‘Travel broadens the mind’: the sensory and liminal experiences of field visits

‘Travelling cultivates’ [*Reisen bildet*], since it ‘broadens the horizon’ or ‘the mind’, are oft-used sayings in the German educated middle class, and they seem to inform to some extent what the more committed or critical politicians I interviewed expect to achieve, in addition to targeted fact-finding, through their field trips. Against the background of the limits to first-hand experience posed by the confinedness of MPs’ field trips to the self-referential auxiliary spaces of aid and intervention, however, the inevitable question arises what it actually *is* that politicians ‘gain from’ or ‘cultivate’ through these journeys.

Based on an in-depth analysis of 26 travel reports and six press releases, I have argued elsewhere (Bliesemann de Guevara 2014) that ‘the field’, which politicians see/experience during their journeys, serves first and foremost as a canvas for domestic intervention imaginaries and narratives. Domestic intervention discourses, including cultural stereotypes, and MPs’ individual stances on (military) intervention are the filters through which places such as Afghanistan are looked at and experienced, resulting in a variety of different ‘Afghanistan’ images depending on the lens the travelling MPs use to ‘assess the situation on the ground’. In other words, not German intervention policies are the independent variable in this equation, but ‘Afghanistan’ itself oscillates in the eye of the beholder. And while some politicians have indeed found indicators for the overall success of the international ‘support mission’ in Afghanistan (e.g., Hahn 2011), others have brought evidence for intervention failures to the table, for instance, by showing that the military intervention has undermined what could have been a successful case of development cooperation (e.g., Buchholz and van Aken 2010; Schäfer 2012).

Zones of conflict and intervention, in their immense diversity in terms of localised conflict dynamics, lend themselves well to such self-referential and diverse interpretations, as the following quote from Green Party MP Winfried Nachtwei’s report on an Afghanistan journey in 2009 suggests:

I experience highly diverse risk/security levels during these days: the ‘high-security wing’ around the presidential palace, embassies etc. in the centre of Kabul; the vestiges of destruction of the suicide attacks in front of the ISAF headquarters und the German embassy; the lively traffic chaos and the astonishing survival capacity of pedestrians, bicyclists and disabled people, who cross the traffic stream against every rule; the normality of the metropolis with little police and military presence in other

urban districts; the unusual freedom of movement in Mazar[-e-Sharif] and Feyza[bad] without major protections, even after dark; in the two northern provinces lots of waving at the roadside, including at *Bundeswehr* vehicles; then the reports from the guerrilla zone around Kunduz (Nachtwei 2009, 3).

In view of this diversity of different localised conflict realities, it does not come as a surprise that MPs mainly find what they are looking for when forming *their* picture of the situation on the ground (in detail, Bliesemann de Guevara 2014). This self-referentiality is not surprising either, given that German MPs' main task is to shape German (not Afghan) politics, and it is obviously underpinned by the auxiliary spaces that confine what travellers actually see/experience, as I have argued above. Nonetheless, while hinting at a possible deeper layer of experience gained through such journeys, my previous studies have stopped short of exploring whether the travel experiences translate into anything beyond the confirmation of already existing political positions on questions of (military) intervention.

My re-reading of the collected research materials suggests two answers to this question, which I develop below. First, field visits bring politics and concepts 'to life' and 'to the attention' of MPs in a way that reports, experts, and even media images cannot achieve and which can only be traced back to the sensory experiences the parliamentarians are exposed to during their travels. So, while travels may not change in every case what specifically MPs think about a policy issue, they do put the issue on their personal agenda and create some sort of emotional bond with a country, topic and/or group of actors. Second, the extra-ordinary experience of a journey to a (post-) conflict zone removes politicians from the daily routine of their work and often also goes along with a certain kind of exceptionality in terms of weakening hierarchies and bridging ideological divides. In this sense, field trips show signs of liminal experiences, which reflect back on the individuals and/or the group

relationships among the travellers. As I will show, in one case the liminal experience of a journey even had transformative effects on travellers. In most cases, however, effects are rather partial and quasi-liminal (or liminoid) and ultimately contribute to the symbolical repertoire that serves to civilise domestic political conflict in German foreign and security politics.

Bringing 'problems', 'causes' and 'solutions' to life: sensory experiences in policymaking

When asked in my interviews what MPs can actually gain from travels to conflict zones, which they cannot gather from the media, ministerial briefings, think tanks reports, academic literatures or discussions with experts and practitioners from 'the field', all interviewees agreed that one effect of 'being in the field' was to bring things closer to them, as the following memory from an MP's journey to the DR Congo illustrates:

The graphicness, this powerfulness – for example in Kinshasa: landing in Kinshasa in the evening's darkness, and then you drive from the airport to the city, and to your right and your left lies a sea of dwellings which are completely dark, and the people have these dim lights in front of the dwellings, since there is no electricity. And then on the road, to see cars which are really old heaps and are completely overladen. One realises how far off this is from our orderly conditions. Such impressions, for instance – of course, they are only impressions, but anyway – they grip you in a different way, they interest you in a different way.¹¹

Some MPs also spoke about specific moments or events in ‘the field’ that helped them translate abstract concepts of the causes and nature of contemporary intra-state wars ‘into reality’, to visualise them. One parliamentarian recalled visiting the frontline in Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and being bewildered by the extent to which the houses were scarred – ‘Somebody had aimed for them over and over again’ – and how this was different from his childhood memories of post-WWII scenes of houses randomly hit by a single bomb. From another journey, during a visit to a hospital in the DR Congo, he remembered the overwhelming smell of putrefying human flesh emanating from the landmine injuries of a boy who had been admitted to the hospital only days after the landmine incident. ‘These moments visualised for me what “small wars” are’, he reflected.¹²

Similarly, in his report on the Green Party chairpersons’ joint journey to Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1996 (see in detail the next article section), Jürgen Trittin describes the following scene:

The atmosphere of Mostar is disconcerting. The surroundings of the famous demolished bridge contrast sharply in their picturesqueness with the shot-to-pieces houses at the frontline. This evening, on the hotel balcony, I look at the mountains, from which the Serbs fired into the city. At their foot newly renovated houses, electrically lighted. And directly in front of me, on the other side of the street by the river, completely destroyed buildings, with window cases and door bays like empty eye sockets, shelled by the Bosnian Croats. Almost terrified I step back from the balcony, when I realise that some two years ago I could not have stood on this illuminated balcony like this (Trittin 1996, 5).

Two observations are important here. First, it is clear that the MPs use concepts well known to them to make sense of what they see in a conflict/intervention zone. In this sense, again, the sensory experience of the journey is more of an ‘amplifier’ or perhaps a ‘developer’ in the photographic sense, bringing to consciousness politicians’ preconceived intellectual knowledge about violent conflict and war. At the same time, just like ‘[s]ecurity is encountered as specific devices, techniques, objects and personnel that oscillate between absence and presence as they fold with everyday lives’ (Anderson 2015, 273), war and intervention are not related to ‘per se’, but only through specific encounters with spaces, objects and people. Second, what is also evident from these examples is that it is not only the visual – what MPs see – that captures their imagination, but actually a more comprehensive sensory experience of seeing, smelling, feeling, and hearing that vaults individuals into a state of second-hand reliving of an experience, a kind of ‘caught-up own experience’¹³ (on visual practice and affectivity, see e.g. MacDonald 2010; MacDonald et al. 2010).

These observations bring this article into dialogue with the emergent literature on affect within critical geopolitics. Carter and McCormack (2010, 107-8) define affect ‘as a kind of turbulent background field of relational intensity, irreducible to and not containable by any single body or subject’. Feeling then is ‘understood as the registering of intensity in a sensing body before that intensity is recognised as a distinct emotion’, such as fear, pity or trust. A lot of what MPs describe in interviews and travel reports falls into the fuzzy sphere of affect or feelings, rather than distinct emotions, although emotions such as fear or mistrust/trust may well arise out of the second-hand reliving of a war experience or out of encounters with local leaders. In this sense, the experience of political field trips is perhaps more about ‘gut instincts’ than about clear-cut emotions.¹⁴

This form of sensory experience – experiences which are not (yet) emotions but rather fuzzily sensed affects or feelings – and the embodied knowing related to it are not limited to

places, objects or concepts, but also include the situational relationship with discussion partners such as national politicians or civil society representatives on these visits. One MP recalled the differences between meetings with two ‘warlords’, one in the DR Congo, the other in Afghanistan. While the Congolese leader gave the impression of a ‘muscular power machine’, living in a ‘fantastically equipped residence’, but did not interact on a non-verbal level with the visiting MPs – ‘it was like talking to a mask’ –, the Afghan leader was described as ‘a young guy, very alert, feisty’, who gave the ‘impression something sparked there and you can talk to him – of course, he also had his agenda, but nonetheless – you felt you could somehow talk to each other’.¹⁵

Such impressions and encounters, as patchy as they may be, are important elements of politics since they may influence the MPs’ voting behaviour in parliament or feed into discussions of who among the elite of the recipient country of intervention to work with and who to exclude in western attempts to build states and peace (Beswick 2011; critical: Hensell and Gerdes 2012). Non-cognitive or precognitive processes may raise/maintain MPs’ interest in a topic or their perspective on a national leader, but it also makes it harder for them to accept information or take decisions that run counter to their gut feeling – or as one MP put it, citing a word of advice referring to budgetary decisions he had received from an older colleague: ‘Ignorance protects from granting’, meaning that it is much harder to reject funding for a project once you have been on site, seen the project and met the people behind it.¹⁶ The causal relationship between affects and feelings, on the one hand, and the policy process, on the other, is not straightforward, however, because of the ‘indetermination of affect’ due to ‘the multiplicity of channels and forms of mediation’ of affectual life (Anderson 2015, 273). This means that rather than drawing general conclusions about the relationship between politicians’ journeys and their policymaking, research needs to look into specific situations and describe these relationships in their specific context.

'Betwixt and between': the political field trip as liminoid or liminal experience

The other aspect, which the MPs' descriptions of their sensory experiences during official journeys suggest, is that such field trips to conflict zones are in many ways characterised by liminality. That is, the MPs are to a certain extent taken out of the normal day-to-day rules, routines and ranks that characterise their work in Berlin or in their election district and catapulted into an environment where this normality is suspended, if only for a very brief time. We may therefore also interpret politicians' field trips as liminoid or liminal experiences.

Drawing on the work of Arnold van Gennep (1960) and its elaboration by Victor Turner (1967; 1974), Smirl has described aid work as a rite of passage, understood as 'a tripartite process consisting of, first, separation from an initial or equilibrium state, followed by a liminal or marginal state, and concluding by a re-aggregation (or re-incorporation) with the original society' (Smirl 2012, 231; cf. van Gennep 1960, chap. 1). In humanitarian work, Smirl argues, 'the field' constitutes the liminal or marginal space of this transition from the pre- to the postliminal state (Smirl 2012, 236-40; cf. also Heathershaw in this special section). Liminality is a stage marked by 'ambiguity, a sort of social limbo which has few [...] of the attributes of either the preceding or subsequent profane social statuses and cultural states' (Turner 1974, 57). It is a 'world of contingency where events and ideas, and "reality" itself, can be carried in different directions' (Thomassen 2009). The liminality implied in aid work, Smirl shows, is that of a temporal stage between 'the before and after of living a "normal life" in the so-called First World' (Smirl 2012, 241). The personal transition aid workers undergo in this process is inward-looking (e.g., personal maturing, changed social

status or relationships ‘at home’), and ‘being in the field’ – in the auxiliary spaces discussed above – has almost exclusively to do with the international ‘bubble’ and only very little with ‘the local’ (ibid.).

While I am wary to stretch the analogy too far due to the differences between visiting politicians and on-the-ground practitioners discussed above, I would still argue that there are elements of transition rites that allow thinking about politicians’ field trips as modern political rites of passage, too (cf. Horvath, Thomassen and Wydra 2015, on the transfer of the concept of liminality to different fields). Certainly, in traditional societies to undergo a rite of passage, such as an initiation rite in the passage from girl to woman or boy to man, is not an option but a social norm. In contrast, MPs’ field trips are in essence voluntary and in this sense have more in common with pilgrimages (Turner and Turner 1978) or with the liminoid experiences that Turner (1974) confines mostly to the realms of leisure and play (for a critique see Thomassen 2009; 2014). Nonetheless, there is a fair share of social expectation (from peers, the media, the public) underpinning the ‘travelling culture’ among German MPs, which makes political field trips quasi-obligatory in order to distinguish oneself as a country/issue expert. As one MP put it:

The pressure to travel is relatively high, for if you talk about a country [...] the question is practically inevitable and often slightly intimate: “So when was the last time that you’ve been to Azerbaijan?” As if to say: “Excuse me, do you also know a brothel from the inside?” It’s a bit of an awkward question because one fears that someone will say: “No, but I’ve read everything about Azerbaijan.”¹⁷

In this sense, politicians’ field visits to zones of conflict and intervention could be understood as a rite of passage in a transition from a preliminal state of non-expertise to a

postliminal ‘expert’ status among domestic peers. Given the changing nature of political situations, however, a single journey is usually not seen as sufficient; MPs have to engage in occasional but repetitive on-site visits in order to maintain the expert status.

There is a second element described by the literature on liminality that seems to apply to politicians’ field visits: the creation of strong friendship ties, or *communitas*, among those sharing the liminal state, despite their social differences in the pre- and post-liminal states (Turner 1967, 98-101; 1974, 76-83). The condition that enables close bonding during betwixt-and-between states of liminality is that a ‘characteristic of transitional beings is that they *have* nothing. They have no status, property, insignia, secular clothing, rank, kinship position, nothing to demarcate them structurally from their fellows’ (Turner 1967, 98-9). This allows for comradeship to emerge (ibid, 101). In a similar vein, Smirl (2012) describes how aid workers’ liminal state in the field leads to ‘close-knit emotional bonds that are created between members of the international community’ (Smirl 2012, 241).

Something similar can be described, although again only to a limited extent, for politicians’ journeys to zones of conflict and intervention. On the one hand, field trips seem to highlight the commonalities of ‘being human’, while toning down the social, ideological, status or other differences structuring the everyday political business in Berlin. One MP described, for instance, how members of a travel party would almost automatically start addressing each other with the familiar German ‘du’ [you] instead of the formal ‘Sie’, how they would eventually come to think about political opponents as essentially nice persons, and how learning about a colleague’s personal life trajectory would help understand why this person behaves in a certain way. Also the exertions of travelling as such seem to have a levelling effect on the participants, for instance, when collectively struggling against the sleep during the first on-site visit after a strenuous and sleepless night in an uncomfortable airplane seat.

Informal events and experiences during these journeys, such as a social evening involving drinks, can also contribute to bonding across party boundaries with the potential to create sustained relationships beyond the liminal period of the journey.¹⁸ As one MP formulated it: ‘There is something that emerges [on these joint journeys], an “other”; in this sublimation of the situation emerges something else, and this emerges outside the normal frame – out of the box, so to say.’¹⁹ Based on these observations, it may therefore be argued that the experience of travelling together has, to a certain extent, the potential of creating sustainable boundary-crossing relationships between MPs, which may not emerge in day-to-day work routines. The same MP accordingly suggested to see parliamentarians’ group journeys across party boundaries as a contribution to the range of symbolical acts that ‘subtilize political conflict in parliament in the direction of civilised forms’. Symbolical acts with similar functions include not least the official speech in parliament, which has gained considerably more academic attention from political scientists, however, than the practice of on-site visits.

This may also explain, among other reasons and functions, why field trips are regularly drawn upon as a rhetorical device in parliamentary debates (see in more detail, Bliesemann de Guevara 2012). In a debate on 3 December 2009 about the question of an extension of the *Bundeswehr* mandate in Afghanistan, for example, MP Reiner Arnold of the social-democratic SPD made the following reference to a journey:

[...] I only say: the two representatives that head your parliamentary group, those who deliver the loudest speeches on this topic, who reap the most superficial and cheap applause for this [...], who do everything to monopolise the followers of the peace movement [...], these two have never been to Afghanistan. It would be instructive, however, if Mr Lafontaine and Mr Gysi went to Afghanistan, talked to a range of

people there, asked around and learned from it. I adhere to this challenge. I've got the impression that this could at least change the tone of the debate in a sense. I think this is necessary (AG Friedensforschung 2009).²⁰

Earlier in the same speech Arnold had talked about the joint journey with parliamentarians from different parties and about the manifold impressions of 'Afghanistan' they had had on this journey. Challenging non-travelled MPs to join such journeys – 'to change the tone of the debate in a sense' – hints indeed at the potential 'civilising' function that joint travelling is perceived to have on domestic political conflict.

The transition from non-expert to expert and the *communitas*-building effects of travelling together are liminoid rather than liminal, I would argue, since they resemble rather than reproduce the status transitions that genuine rites of passage, as described by van Gennep and Turner, usually involve. Indeed, it is usually not a political journeys' outspoken aim to provide the traveller with a new status when re-aggregating with the 'society' of parliamentarians back home – the state change from non-expert to expert apart perhaps. There is one instance in German foreign and security politics since 1990, however, in which a journey to a zone of conflict and intervention can be interpreted as a more truly liminal stage in a transition from a preliminal state to a clearly different postliminal state – with far-reaching and long-lasting results.

This instance is the joint journey of the Green Party's boards (that is, the speakers of the party and of its parliamentary group in the *Bundestag*) to Bosnia and Herzegovina from 20-25 October 1996. The journey was the culmination and, at the same time, the turning point of an existential debate that had shaken the party for some time, namely over the question of pacifism. The Green Party had grown out of the peace and environmental movements of the 1970s and 1980s and had traditionally promoted the principle of pacifism, summarised in the

dictum ‘No more war!’ and held dear by the *Fundis*, the left wing within the party. Yet, this principle had been increasingly questioned by the *Realos*, the right wing of the party, in view of mass human rights violations in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda in the first half of the 1990s. In a nutshell, the question that arose was whether military interventions represented a legitimate means to protect human rights (reduced to the formula ‘No more Auschwitz!’), and whether Germany should participate in such multilateral humanitarian interventions. For a party built on the principle of pacifism, this was an existential question and one which at the time threatened to break the party apart. The decision to jointly travel to a site of war and mass violations of human rights was in this sense an essential step, since what was at stake was nothing less than the party’s future.²¹

The following is an excerpt from a published interview with MP Winfried Nachtwei, who participated in this journey and for whom the experience of the Bosnia journey was the clear turning point in the debate:

Winfried Nachtwei: [...] At some point, we were standing above Sarajevo and later I wrote in my journey diary: “From the slope above the street Serbian artillery, mortars, tanks fired as they pleased into the city. Sarajevo on the show, defenceless in the mousetrap – and that for three years! This is when it overwhelms me: pain, shame ... Joschka [Fischer] gives Kerstin [Müller] the needle: For sure, customs officers would have helped here, with yardsticks.... Later he tells me that he had felt ashamed here that he had not been in favour of intervening earlier. This should never happen to him again.” In this moment I realised clearly in mind and heart what had happened here. Completely inevitably, I perceived the victims’ perspective. The others felt the same. Later we were received in audience by the Catholic bishop of Banja Luka, Franjo Komarica. He took us to task in a way that even the most obstinate politicians had

tears in their eyes. He reproached us: “What did you let happen to a part of Europe again.”

[Interviewer]: And after this journey everything was different in the Green Party?

Winfried Nachtwei: The personal reports and experiences continued to have an effect in the party and the parliamentary group and changed our position fundamentally. For me it meant: Something of a kind of Srebrenica and Sarajevo shall never happen again in the sphere of influence of European politics. Later this also formed an important background for the decision on Kosovo [...]. (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen 2010, original italics).

Referring to Turner, Thomassen (2009) has suggested that there are instances when the idea of liminality helps ‘understand the human reactions to liminal experiences: the way in which personality was shaped by liminality, the sudden foregrounding of agency, and the sometimes dramatic tying together of thought and experience.’ Based on the description above, one can justifiably argue that the Green Party speakers’ joint journey was such a dramatic moment, or as Nachtwei put it in a personal conversation: ‘That was our Damascus experience!’, referring to the dramatic biblical conversion of Apostle Paul (named Saul at the time) to Christian faith, which happened on the road to Damascus. While some politicians were strengthened or confirmed in their pre-travel position pro humanitarian intervention, others underwent a dramatic change of their political perspective (especially Nachtwei and Müller).

Critics may argue that the ideological changes within the party might have taken place anyway, with or without the journey, or that they actually had already taken place, with the journey only providing a welcome excuse to justify an MP’s shift of political position in the middle of an electoral term (the newspaper *taz*, for instance, referring to Kerstin Müller’s

positional shift, titled at the time: ‘Is a politician allowed to do that?’). While the second objection cannot be totally ruled out, there are hints that the journey was indeed the catalyst for the fundamental change in the party’s stance on interventions. Most importantly, not even the shocking media representations and reports of the massacres of Srebrenica only one year earlier had achieved to bring a closure to the debate on the humanitarian use of military means. In contrast, through the ‘dramatic tying together of thought and experience’, the journey enabled, or set into motion, a transition within central individuals in the party that ultimately changed the power balance between *Fundis* and *Realos* permanently to the detriment of the former.

The Green Party’s experience is without doubt an exception to the routine of German MPs’ field visits. The majority of these visits take place against the background of stable party politics, and in situations when an intervention is already in place, that is, when the *Bundestag* has already decided about the whether and how of Germany’s involvement. Only in very few instances is a field trip actually meant to help prepare for such a decision.²² Nevertheless, the Green Party episode also hints at the powerful potential that the liminal experience of politicians’ field visits may unfold in times of political uncertainty.

Conclusions

German parliamentarians’ travel activities are plenty and manifold, and this is also true for other intervening states and organisations.²³ It may therefore seem surprising that policymakers’ on-site visits and the ways of knowing they entail have not been the subject of more studies to date, neither with regard to domestic policymaking processes nor international ones. This finding is not limited to intervention politics: works in interpretive

policy analysis, for instance, give some hints at the importance of on-site visits in a range of domestic policymaking processes (e.g. Hajer 2003, 293-4)²⁴, but to my knowledge no study has specifically focussed on them as yet. Inspired by the works of Lisa Smirl, this article has tried to shed some light on the practice of German politicians' field visits to zones of conflict and intervention and the effects such journeys have on the travelling MPs.

There are at least two lessons to be distilled from the findings and propositions of this article that may inspire the currently burgeoning research on knowledge production in and about conflict and intervention. The first one is that politicians are not just at the receiving end of expert knowledge on conflict/intervention at the science—expert—policy nexus (Leander 2014), and neither are they exclusively those actors who make use of expertise according to their needs (Boswell 2011; Waldman 2014). As valid as studies focussing on politicians as receivers, users, interpreters and/or manipulators of expert knowledge are, I would claim that politicians also need to be included into the analysis as producers of different forms of conflict/intervention knowledge. Politicians' field trips certainly constitute a form of knowledge production, involving different ways of knowing ranging from the intellectual (e.g. briefings) to the sensory/affectual. Politicians' experience 'intervention' not only or predominantly through the information provided to them during their journeys, but through the affectual effects that the personal encounters with a range of actors, places and objects have on them (Smirl 2015; Kraftl and Adey 2008). The more general question, illustratively exemplified by political field trips, of how abstract and embodied, second-hand and first-hand forms of knowing interact in the policymaking process is an area that certainly needs more attention.

Second, politicians' field visits have a range of different functions and effects, , which go well beyond the questions of what is known and how it is known to include processes such as symbolical exchange, emotional bonding, and the accumulation of symbolical capital, to

name but a few. The functions that different ways of knowing entail need further study, too. While they seem to be a constitutive part of everyday practices of foreign/intervention politics, theories of foreign policymaking, which range from discourse analyses to studies of political culture and national identity to theories which focus on state bureaucracies and decision processes, currently do not pay any attention to affect-based ways of knowing and their functions in everyday politics, a small emergent body of literature on affect and geopolitics apart (cf. Anderson 2014, 2015; Anderson and Adey 2011; Carter and McCormack 2010). What a study of the sensory and affectual side of policymaking may add to the study of international intervention politics is a way to account for the interaction of socio-cognitive and precognitive everyday processes that make policymakers relate to ‘intervention’ in certain ways and may help explain instances of policy inertia or change. A richer understanding of the dynamics of international interventionism may well be the reward.

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Notes

¹ Telephone interview, development NGO representative, Berlin, 1 September 2015.

² All interviews were held in June 2015, four in person in Berlin and one by telephone. Since all interviewees preferred to remain anonymous, I have refrained from providing any information which could help identify them. All quotes from German-language documents and interview transcripts have been translated by me.

³ These would need to be added to the above figures to get a more accurate picture of German MPs' official travel activities and spending, but due to access constraints it was impossible to collate this information.

⁴ The majority of foreign travels are directed at other European countries including Turkey. In 2012, among the total of 642 parliament-financed travels of a total cost of circa €3.9 million, were the following visits to zones of conflict or intervention: Afghanistan (12), Bosnia and Herzegovina (3), Colombia (6), Cyprus (9), Kosovo (9), Lebanon (3), Liberia (2), Libya (1), Israel (11), Myanmar (11), the Palestinian territories (8), Sierra Leone (4), and South Sudan (5) – roughly 13 per cent of total journeys (Deutscher Bundestag 2013, 46-52). This figure has to be taken with a pinch of salt, however, since it is not visible from the statistics whether the topic of the journey was violent conflict/intervention or another political issue. Overall, the great majority of official visits are individual journeys by single MPs.

⁵ Interview with parliamentary staff, Berlin, June 2015.

⁶ Personal interview with MP, Berlin, June 2015.

⁷ Personal interview with MP, Berlin, June 2015.

⁸ Personal interview with MP, Berlin, June 2015.

⁹ The following impressions are based on several personal and telephone interviews with *Bundeswehr* soldiers who had been on missions in Afghanistan, conducted in 2011-2012.

¹⁰ Personal interview with MP, Berlin, June 2015. The question of the authenticity of experience that journeys to conflict zones provide is also discussed in the literature on political tourism (see Belhassen et al. 2014; Clarke 2000).

¹¹ Personal interview with MP, Berlin, June 2015.

¹² Personal interview with MP, Berlin, June 2015.

¹³ Personal interview with MP, Berlin, June 2015.

¹⁴ In this sense, the major part of the literature of the ‘emotional turn’ in IR with its main focus on distinct emotions, while being very closely related to my argument here, does not exactly match the type of sensory experiences politicians seem to be going through on field visits and which may or may not crystallise in distinct and conscious emotions (for overviews, see e.g. Bleiker and Hutchison 2008; Crawford 2000; Wolf 2012). Rather, my findings speak more to the emergent strand in critical geopolitics concerned with the role of affects in security politics (see e.g. Anderson 2014, 2015; Anderson and Adey 2011; Carter and McCormack 2010).

¹⁵ Personal interview with MP, Berlin, June 2015.

¹⁶ Personal interview with MP, Berlin, June 2015.

¹⁷ Personal interview with MP, Berlin, June 2015.

¹⁸ According to an anecdote, a number of MPs from different parliamentary parties spent a nice evening on a famous train line and decided, as a sort of fun challenge, to refer to this joint train journey in their speeches back home (regardless of the topic talked about) – apparently to the annoyance of ‘uninitiated’ colleagues from their own parties, who lacked the insider knowledge and bonding experience of the train journey.

¹⁹ Personal interview with MP, Berlin, June 2015.

²⁰ This part of the speech was directed at the party DIE LINKE, which is the successor party of the GDR’s Socialist Unity Party and the ideologically most left-leaning party currently represented in the *Bundestag*. Due to its exceptional principled objection against German military involvement, it has become the home of many pacifists who were formerly members of other parties, especially the Green Party (BÜNDNIS 90/DIE GRÜNEN) and the Social-Democrat Party (SPD).

²¹ The Green Party stresses that it was also the first party in the history of the Federal Republic to organise such a joint journey for its party and faction boards.

²² For example, the field trip findings/report by van Aken et al. (2011) fostered the Left Party’s objection to any military involvement in South Sudan, which at the time had been decreasing in favour of some sort of humanitarian involvement (personal interview with MP, Berlin, June 2015).

²³ This claim is so far based on anecdotal evidence; a comprehensive comparative analysis of politicians’ travels to zones of conflict and intervention in different western (and perhaps non-western) states is yet to be conducted.

²⁴ Hajer gives the example of Dutch MPs whose attention to and understanding of the problem of forest dieback and acid rain was crucially influenced by an excursion to a dying forest. Symposia and personal meetings with academics and experts are seen to play a similar role in providing sensory experiences.

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