

What Is a Refugee Camp? Explorations of the Limits and Effects of the Camp

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On a global scale, millions of refugees are contained in camps of one sort or another. This special issue and this introductory article explore what characterizes a camp and how camps affect the lives of those who are placed in them. It argues that the camp is an exceptional space that is put in place to deal with populations that disturb the national order of things. While being exceptional, the camp does not, however, produce bare life in an Agambenian sense. Life goes on in camps—albeit a life that is affected by the camp. Camps are defined along two dimensions: spatially and temporally. Spatially, camps always have boundaries, while in practice refugees and locals cross these boundaries for trade, employment, etc. Temporally, refugee camps are meant to be temporary, while in practice this temporariness may become permanent. The article proposes that camps may be explored along three dimensions. First, analyses of refugee camps must be attentive to the fact that a camp is at once a place of social dissolution and a place of new beginnings where sociality is remoulded in new ways. Second, we must explore the precarity of life in the camp by exploring relations to the future in this temporary space. Finally, the depoliticization of life that takes place in refugee camps due to humanitarian government, paradoxically also produces a hyper-politicized space where nothing is taken for granted and everything is contested.

Keywords: camp, refugee, humanity, exception

Introduction

Camps are preferred means of containing displaced people. From Syria to Afghanistan, from Colombia to Malta, people who have been forced to leave their homes due to violence, war and natural disasters are contained in Internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, refugee camps, detention centres, transit camps, deportation camps, prisons and ghettos. They are put there by states, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or United Nations (UN) agencies. But how can we define a camp and what does it mean to be in a camp? The articles in this special issue grapple with these questions by empirically exploring very diverse cases of refugee encampment.

Taking her cues from Mary Douglas (1966), Liisa Malkki argues that refugees are ‘matter out of place’ like the *initians* in *rites de passage* that need secluding in order not to pollute what she so aptly terms ‘the national order of things’ (Malkki 1992). If refugees, Agamben argues,

represent such a disquieting element in the order of the nation-state, this is above all because by breaking the continuity between man and citizen, *nativity* and *nationality*, they put the originary fiction of modern sovereignty in crisis (Agamben 1998: 131, emphasis).

By belonging neither here nor there, refugees challenge the assumed link between nation, state and citizen. As Nevzat Soguk convincingly argues, the refugee is constructed by nation states as the ‘necessary other’—a kind of constitutive outside. Not only does the refugee lack a home, a nation and citizenship; she is also ‘lacking proper agency, proper voice, proper face’ (Soguk 1999: 243). By producing the refugee as someone marginal and lacking, the normalcy of the ‘citizen/nation/state constellation’ is also produced. In other words, while the figure of the refugee threatens the nation state, it also stabilizes it by being the ‘constitutive outside’ of the national order of things (Soguk 1999: 51).

This can, however, only happen if refugees are somehow contained within the order of the nation state. A first step to do so is to problematize them as refugees, thereby constituting the flow of bodies across borders as a specific problem with a specific name: refugees. Refugees are framed within what Peter Nyers has termed a ‘problem-solving discourse’ (Nyers 1998, 2006). In this discourse, refugees are seen as an anomaly that needs a solution. Furthermore, due to the perception that refugees are the product of exceptional situations—natural disasters, war and violence—refugee situations are also coined in the language of emergencies; expressions such as ‘refugee crisis’ and ‘complex emergencies’ lend urgency to the cause. By coining refugees in terms of an emergency, humanitarian and state responses are also often perceived as ‘emergency measures’; they are exceptional, temporary and often in legal grey zones.

One such emergency measure is the refugee camp. At the highest level, refugee camps are means to attempt to contain the ‘matter out of place’ that refugees constitute and re-stabilize the national order or things. ‘The increasingly widening between birth (naked life) and the nation-state is the new fact of the politics of our time and what we are calling “camp” is this disparity’ (Agamben 2000: 43–44). The camp is in other words both the symptom and the proposed cure.¹

The Exceptional Character of the Camp

Being created as a response to a state of emergency, refugee camps are perceived as exceptional and hence temporary measures to be taken before

normality is restored once again in the future. Agamben makes a similar point when calling the camp the *nomos* of our time because it incarnates a permanent exception (Agamben 1998). In a recent book on refugee camps, Agier elaborates and concretizes this by arguing that camps may be defined in three ways: extraterritoriality, exception and exclusion (Agier 2014: 20). First, there is a spatial dimension, where we may argue that camps are extra-territorial. They are often placed in secluded areas and rarely marked on official maps, despite the fact that a camp in Northern Kenya for instance may be the biggest concentration of people, trade and exchange in the whole region. Second, they may in legal terms be characterized as exceptional, since usually the refugee camps are governed by other legal instruments than the surrounding areas. They are legally under the jurisdiction of the host society but also exempted from it (Turner 2005). Finally, Agier argues, refugee camps are subject to social exclusion, as the inhabitants are treated as not belonging to host culture and society. While these forms of exception and exclusion are certainly formative of refugee camps, we must keep in mind that these camps are not simply islands unto themselves. They are transgressed by both those who are destined to live in them and the surrounding communities. Refugees leave the camps in search of livelihoods just like host communities may enter the camps for trade, entertainment or to enjoy the services (such as health) that may be of higher standards in the camp than in the surrounding communities. I elaborate on how this may be explored later. First, we may explore the particular space and time of camps.

The Temporality and Spatiality of the Camp

The term ‘camp’ comes from the Latin term *campus* meaning ‘open field, level space’ and was originally associated with open spaces for military exercise, defined spatially as a field that is set apart from other space. These were areas that were at once open and closed (Hailey 2009: 3), enclosed and transgressed (Diken 2004). Camps are often located far from cities and other centres, and are clearly demarcated—often fenced—defining a distinction between the inside and the outside. Even in cases where camps are unfenced and located in cities, the distinction between the inside and the outside persists. Although the camp is thus exceptional and ambiguous, it is still possible to understand the camp as spatial practice: ‘(T)he camp can be understood as an engraved field, etched, layered, and ordered by diverse objects and programs’ (Hailey 2009: 3).

Being established to prevent the contamination of the nation and its citizens by outsiders, it is important for refugee camps to establish and maintain this distinction between the inside and the outside. In practice, however, as the cases in this issue illustrate, the limits of the camp are porous, allowing goods, people and ideas to move in and out of the camp (Jansen and Lecadet, this issue). Despite these transgressions of the limits of the camp, the perimeter remains an important defining characteristic and shapes the lives of those

who remain inside. Living inside a refugee camp—however invisible the line between the camp and its surroundings and despite ongoing contact between the inside and the outside—marks one's life and defines one's position: a position that is simultaneously excluded from and included into host society, excluded spatially and legally while simultaneously being defined and contained by the surrounding society.

Apart from being defined spatially, the camp has a specific temporality as well:

Just as they are lodged spatially between the open and the closed, camps exist between the temporary and the permanent. From the outset, camps are understood as having a limited, although sometimes indeterminate, duration (Hailey 2009: 4).

Refugee camps are, by definition, temporary; they are never meant to remain where they are indeterminably. In practice, however, camps may become quasi-permanent, as the Peteet and Kublitz articles on the Palestinian cases in this special issue show—and more importantly their temporary nature remains undecided in the sense that neither those in charge of establishing the camps nor those who inhabit them know how long the camp will remain or for how long the individual refugee will stay in the camp.

While large numbers of refugees reside in camps, none of the three durable solutions favoured by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)—repatriation, resettlement and local integration—mentions camps. This paradox between intentions and practices means that millions of displaced persons live in situations that are deemed non-viable by those who are in charge of them. Refugee camps are in other words meant to be temporary measures until another solution is found. Meanwhile, the length of this temporary stay is unknown. This is the second defining characteristic of the temporality of the refugee camp: its indeterminate temporariness. UNHCR defines this paradoxical situation as a 'protracted refugee crisis', thus acknowledging that crises—that, by definition, are temporary—may become 'protracted'.² Refugees in camps thus find themselves in a doubly paradoxical situation: first, they cannot settle where they are because they are supposedly 'on the move', on their way home or somewhere else in the future; second, they cannot remain 'on the move' as they possibly are not going anywhere, either now or in the near future. The result is that they experience living in a time pocket where time grinds to a halt inside the camp while normal time continues outside the camp. Not only is the limbo that they live in, a time pocket in relation to lives that are lived outside the camps; it is also a limbo with no promise of an ending.

Subjects of the Refugee Camp

The temporal and spatial dimensions of the camp make us wonder what kinds of lives and identities exist—if at all—inside the camp. Agamben's

concept of ‘bare life’ or ‘naked life’ comes easily to mind, and the concept does indeed gain a lot of traction in understanding the refugee situation in camps (Diken and Laustsen 2006; Turner 2010; Agier 2011). Popular discourse and humanitarian policies often portray refugees as innocent victims of war, violence and ethnic conflict, appealing to humanitarian compassion and a philanthropic will to help fellow human beings in need (Feldman and Ticktin 2010). By virtue of their perceived position as victims of history, refugees are cared for in terms of their security and their biological needs, while they are assumed to be without agency and are deprived of political agency by camp authorities (Turner 2010; Agier 2011; Lecadet, this issue). They are provided with shelter, food and health treatment but they are expected not to make political demands. To be worthy of humanitarian assistance, the receiver must be purely human—that is someone without a past, without political will, without agency. As Nyers argues—inspired by Ranciere—the human victim has no way of uttering political voice; he can only groan in pain (Nyers 2006: 38). In the words of Didier Fassin, the refugee can no longer voice his political rights but rather appeal to a common humanity by showing his wounds (Fassin 2005). This appeal to compassion, in other words, reduces the refugee to his wounded body—to biological life rather than political subjectivity.

The picture we have painted so far is a rather bleak one where the possibilities of making a life or creating some kind of meaningful identity seem barred by the structures of the camp. However, we will argue throughout this special issue that refugee camps are ambiguous places where life on the one hand is reduced to bare, biological, temporary survival, while on the other hand offering possibilities to create new identities. In the words of Agier, ‘the camps are places of relative closure but they are also cosmopolitan crossroads’ (Agier 2014: 19, my translation).

While it is easy to focus of camps as places of confinement, seclusion and stagnation, Agier argues that they may equally be places where diverse norms, language and forms of social organization meet at the crossroads. In other words, if we move our point of view from the bird’s-eye perspective of nation states and UNHCR to the pedestrian perspective of those who inhabit the camp, we discover a different reality where sociality is (re-)created, social hierarchies are produced and politics continues to have significance—indeed it may intensify (Peteet 2005; see also Lecadet in this issue). The space and the time of the camp are appropriated and made meaningful, albeit within the spatial and temporal peculiarities of the camp. Refugees adapt to the life of the camp, which in some cases may lead to social paralysis, as Peteet (this issue) demonstrates in relation to the Palestinian enclaves in the occupied territories, or even disintegration, as Kublitz (this issue) shows in relation to Palestinians in Danish housing projects. Adaptation may, however, also lead to new social forms and opportunities, as Corbet, Jansen and Lecadet demonstrate in their contributions to this issue. The purpose of this special issue is precisely to scrutinize empirically

the everyday practices that unfold and the identities that emerge in the camp and explore concretely and contextually what makes life in the camp different from life elsewhere. In other words, rather than assuming a universal effect of the camps, we wish to explore different camps from the inside out—without losing sight of the particularity of the camp. For, as much as refugees do not merely reproduce their assigned roles as passive victims, and as much as social life is created in the camps, the particular spatiality and temporality of the camps and their ambiguous relation to the national order of things create very particular modes of being and becoming in the camps.

What emerges is a contradictory space. On the one hand, the camp is a means of maintaining order and removing impurity in society, rendering refugees invisible. On the other hand, refugees become highly visible by being placed in the camps and becoming the objects of state of the art humanitarian programmes. While one might argue that camps are places to warehouse the undesirables (Agier 2011) or places of abandonment, the refugees in the camps remain included in fine-grained modes of government. Refugees in camps may be living in confined spaces, deprived of the political rights of citizens, but they enjoy the protection of UNHCR and are subjected to international regimes of care. Inspired by Foucault, Agier talks of refugee camps as a global ‘dispositif’ or what we in English may term a ‘device’ (Agier 2014: 21–23). By this, he is referring to the global circulation of staff and modes of organizing camps in the global UN and NGO system. One might also perceive of the camps as arenas of particular types of governmentality that produce certain effects (Turner 2010). One of these effects is the ambiguous position as being at once abandoned and the objects of government and improvement. The result, we argue, is that the new identities that emerge are not simply acts of agency or resistance. Rather, it is the ‘device’ itself that creates ambiguity and spaces for new subjectivities (see also Fresia and Von Känel, this issue).

Social Change, Life Projects and Politics

From the debates above, we draw three lessons that will guide our analyses in this special issue. First, the temporary nature of the camp creates not only a place of dissolution and disillusion; it may also become a place of new beginnings. The very fact that the camp abruptly disrupts any pre-given social order not only breaks down social order and renders the inhabitants as biological beings without any sense of direction. Rather, in this space where old habits and structures no longer make much sense, new identity positions are made possible. The camp may create new possibilities for women, youth and other groups that once were marginalized (Schrijvers 1999; Turner 2004; see also Janssen, Lecadet and Corbet, this issue). It may equally reinforce old power structures, however. In any case, social life, power relations, hierarchies and sociality are remoulded in the camp.

The second dimension that stands out when exploring the camps from the inside concerns the relationship between the present in the camp and the future. In the permanently temporary time of the camp, imagining a future, planning one's life trajectory and acting accordingly in the present become seriously challenged (Turner 2014; Kublitz, this issue).

Susan Whyte terms this acting in the present in relation to an unknown future for being in the 'subjunctive mode' (Whyte 2005). Henrik Vigh uses the term 'social navigation' to explore how individuals relate to a future in a constantly moving and indeterminate terrain (Vigh 2006, 2009). Ghassan Hage explains that a situation with the 'quasi-complete absence of possibilities of a worthy life' may lead to 'a generalized form of premature social ageing, even of social death' (Hage 2003: 78). In other words, for individuals to remain socially alive, they need to be able to imagine a meaningful future for themselves—however miserable their present-day situation is. This might be the case for people living precarious lives in abject poverty or during political crises, as in the cases that Whyte, Vigh and Hage allude to. However, what is common for camp life is the fact that the present is temporary and that life is lived only in preparation for another—hopefully fuller—life in the future, beyond the camp.

This leads us to the last dimension that emerges in our exploration of life in the camps—namely that the camps are simultaneously depoliticized and hyper-politicized. By this, I do not simply mean that politics takes place in the camp despite the attempts by host states and humanitarian actors to void the camps of politics. Rather, it is exactly this 'forced' depoliticization that creates a gap in the social and symbolic order of life in the camp, which in turn creates room for the creation of new competing orders and identities. One might say that everything is up in the air in the camp and that what used to be taken for granted no longer can be taken for granted, due in part to flight and disruption and in part to the temporary nature of the camp, which does not allow meanings to become fixed. In this situation, every action and every event is new and has no logical space in a symbolic order and is therefore up for interpretation, contention and hence politicization. In other words, depoliticization creates its own opposite: hyper-politicization.

The articles in this special issue explore the camp from different angles—all trying to narrow in on what characterizes the camp. One way to explore this is to uncover the limits of the refugee camp through cases that at first glance are not camps but that at closer scrutiny share many of the characteristics of the refugee camp.

Kublitz makes a case of showing the experiential continuities between the refugee camps in Lebanon and the housing estates, or ghettos, in Denmark. The Palestinian refugees themselves call the ghettos camps and describe a trajectory of lives that do not end in death but merely cease to be real lives in the ghettos.

In her study of enclaves in the occupied Palestinian territories, Peteet invokes the concept of the camp while arguing that we must go beyond

Agamben's abstract theory and ground it empirically to see the nuances in different types of 'included exclusion'. 'Enclaves,' she argues 'compel us to think beyond the "bare life" sometimes associated with refugee camps and to explore other ways of being simultaneously inside and outside a state.' She concludes that the new policies of enclaves in the occupied Palestinian territories in fact create a far more efficient means of 'suffocating' a population than the refugee camps created in 1948. While the camps were visible and caught the eye of the international community—ultimately becoming zones of intense politicization—the present policies of population dilution simply create a sense of hopelessness.

While the remaining articles in this collection are about more obvious refugee camp situations, they also challenge the limits of the camp. Alice Corbet's study of IDP camps in Haiti after the earthquake explores the effects of the presence of relief agencies on the social and political organization of displaced persons. She argues that a 'community of misfortune' emerged in the camp that had been created by internally displaced people themselves without the organizational help of relief agencies. In other camps, however, such a community had not emerged. She concludes that

the camp should therefore be analysed beyond the logistics of its creation and its pure material existence. It is a place that evolves over time, constantly being reshaped, whose inhabitants try to build a future for themselves rather than staying in a temporary state that is particular to camps.

Like Peteet, she is calling for empirically grounded studies of the camp that challenge the easy conclusions given by grand theories.

Even though Jansen's case is the well-established and well-known camps in Kakuma, Kenya, his poignant ethnography challenges the concept of the camp. The camp limits are constantly transgressed by Kenyans seeking opportunities inside the camp in terms of business, health care, etc. Similarly, camp refugees temporarily reside in South Sudan or in Nairobi, engaging in circular migration patterns and linking the camp to places far afield, belying the idea of the camp as isolated and exceptional. The camps are also challenged conceptually, as in practice they are not simply spaces of protection and of relief of pain for helpless victims. On the contrary, the camps become places of opportunity—for Kenyans and Sudanese alike.

In a similar critique of the idea of refugee camps as creating 'bare life' or pure victims without any form of political subjectivity, Lecadet shows how politics is always present in Agamé camp in Benin. She argues that 'camps may equally well be seen as the last place for politics as well as the first'. This politicization of the refugee camps is in constant tension with UNHCR's humanitarian imperative. However, Lecadet shows how UNHCR *de facto* acknowledges the political aspirations of the refugees and attempts pragmatically to accommodate their demands. The tension, however, remains and in certain cases UNHCR withdraws its support.

Finally, Fresia and Von Känel demonstrate that we should go beyond the tempting binary of seeing the camp from ‘above’ as a bureaucratic logic or from ‘below’ as a DeCerteauan everyday tactic of resistance. Rather, through a thick ethnographic account of schooling in a camp in Tanzania, they explore the ways in which teachers, parents, children and NGO workers manoeuvre the tensions between various demands. In this way, they show that the humanitarian refugee regime itself is not monolithic and is full of contradictions that make space for the emergence of new subjectivities and socialities.

The contributions to this special issue seek to explore the concept of the camp by pushing it to its limits and seeing whether it may help understand other situations as well. They conclude that the concept of the camp and Agamben’s concept of bare life indeed are fruitful but need anchoring empirically. They demonstrate that refugees and others exposed to the camp are at once excluded and marginalized while simultaneously being able to create new identities, communities and political projects.

1. For debates on Agamben’s thoughts on the camp as the *nomos* of our time, see Diken and Laustsen (2006), Diken (2004), Turner (2005) and Owens (2009).
2. Henrik Vigh elaborates on the idea of chronic crisis, explaining that for a large number of people in the real world—whether exposed to poverty or violent conflict—crisis is not a passing phenomenon. It becomes ‘endemic rather than episodic’ (Vigh 2008: 7).

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