Can camp life create a common world?

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This paper addresses the question "Can camp life create a common world?" It considers camps as places of socialisation and politics, or what anthropology terms "common life" ("*vie commune*"). I will attempt to clarify this phrase throughout the text.

Various processes of urban formation take root nowadays in informal migrants' encampments, refugee camps and all kinds of *out-places* (places outside, on the margins), which initially function as places of refuge, when they are created. The empirical starting point of my reflection, then, is the urban encampment – that is to say the encampment insofar as it has an urban future ("*devenir urbain*") – which is also a social world for the individuals who are casually gathered there. I will first identify three dualisms – or ambiguities – that explain the dynamics of these places.

First, as they are on borders – or kinds of borderlands – can these spaces be considered as *heterotopias* or places of refuge that are internally or externally produced? Or can they be a mixture of both a *heterotopia* and a place of refuge?

According to Foucault, *heterotopias* are "places of this kind that are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality."[1] They are any kind of "other" space – places of death, illness, deviation or crisis. They create a real or fictional entity, which allows us to locate an otherness that we may contrast with own self or "us." In this mirror effect, *heterotopia* is the term for an "outside" of thought, reason or society. But in the same process, there is also a "duality," and we can identify the emergence and later consolidation of an urban form (camp-city or ghetto, for example) as it is directly linked to this outside or *heterotopia* in its concrete form – as self-settlement, encampment and camp.

The second duality or ambiguity relates to the relationship – and sometimes the confusion – between securitarian and humanitarian logics. Our knowledge and understanding of contemporary camps developed significantly at the end of the 1990s, and the relative importance of this field of study today reflects not only the significance of encampment around the world but also the political concerns it raises. Two

1 See Michel Foucault, "Des Espaces autres. Hétérotopies" (1967), in Dits et écrits 1954–1988, vol. 4: 1980–1988 (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 752–762, at 755.

themes have been central to academic research into camps and related controversies: a *securitarian* theme that links the general concept of encampment to the colonial era; and a *humanitarian* theme that encompasses moral denunciation as well as political or biopolitical analysis.

It is important to mention here the trailblazing work of sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Abdelmalek Sayad in Algeria in the 1960s, even though their book was written and published after Algeria's independence in 1962. *Le Déracinement* (or "Uprooting") focuses on the displacement of rural populations by the French colonial administration in Algeria between 1957 and 1960 – "one of the most brutal [displacements] ever to take place in history," according to the authors.[2] The aim of this strategy was to diminish the "rebels' influence" by removing people from their traditional social settings by dispersing and resettling them in "regroupment camps" near military strongholds. Bourdieu and Sayad's study shows how encampment introduces the totalitarian model (including confinement and discipline) within the colonial rationale. It also highlights the social and economic dislocations that rural agricultural areas suffer following the eviction of their inhabitants. Finally, it demonstrates how humanitarian intervention – traditionally aimed at regrouping and controlling populations – can become "a weapon of war."[3] The colonial and post-colonial dimension of camps has since been one of the major focuses of mainly political and socio-historical approaches to camps, which in Europe are tackled from the angle of immigrant control policies.[4]

In the early 1980s the anthropologist Barbara Harrell-Bond was the first to take an interest in this type of confinement and the violence that occurred within so-called "humanitarian" camps: that is, those established and managed by the UNHCR.[5] According to Harrell-Bond, such camps were characterised by a "deprivation of liberty" even though they were ostensibly established in the name of emergency and rescue.

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2 Pierre Bourdieu and Abdelmalek Sayad, Le Déracinement. La Crise de l'agriculture traditionnelle en Algérie (Paris: Editions de minuit, 1964), back cover. Translated and republished as: Uprooting: The Crisis of Traditional Agriculture in Algeria (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020).

3 Ibid., 25.

4 See Emile Temime and Nathalie Deguigné, Le Camp du Grand Arénas, Marseille, 1944–1966 (Paris: Éditions Autrement, 2001); Marc Bernardot, Camps d'étrangers (Bellecombe-en-Bauges: Éditions du Croquant, 2008); Jérôme Valluy (ed.), "L'Europe des camps : La Mise à l'écart des étrangers," special issue of Cultures & Conflits 57 (2005); Olivier Le Cour Grandmaison et al. (eds), Le Retour des camps? Sangatte, Lampedusa, Guantanamo ... (Paris: Autrement, 2007); Carolina Kobelinsky and Chowra Makaremi, Enfermés dehors. Enquêtes sur le confinement des étrangers (Paris: Editions du Croquant, collection Terra, 2009).

5 Barbara Harrell-Bond, Imposing Aid: Emergency Assistance to Refugees (Oxford – New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Barbara Harrell-Bond and Guglielmo Verdirame, Rights in Exile: Janus-Faced Humanitarianism (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005).

Therefore, camps are political places, and even sites of enduring "biopolitics." Analysis of the contradictions, ambiguities and limits of humanitarian confinement developed considerably from the 1980s onwards through a critique of the separate management of bodies, spaces and populations by ambiguous systems that can be jointly or alternatively securitarian and humanitarian – be they governmental or non-governmental, national or global, public or private – through approaches where a dialogue was established between philosophy, social sciences and (sometimes) law.[6] In this way, as I have argued elsewhere, the management of the vulnerable is simultaneously a government of undesirables.[7]

Ethnographic enquiry is a tool that helps to criticize the philosophical conception of camps as "exceptional" (as developed in Giorgio Agamben's view and by followers).[8] Ethnography denaturalises and recontextualises the camp in all its forms. It uncovers capacities for transformations in the humanitarian or securitarian situation of the camp. Even if the ambiguity persists, one can observe in these situations and places what is usually called "agency" in English – a term that corresponds to what the French anthropologist George Balandier referred to as "*reprise d'initiative*" ("regaining initiative") in the 1950s in the context of the end of the colonial era and the struggle for independence in Africa.[9] Basically, this is the issue of the formation and the manifestation of a subject, or more precisely that of a subjectivation that can be tackled from a social science perspective in relation to the questions of power and social relations as they exist in places of encampment.

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6 Hannah Arendt, Les Origines du totalitarisme. L'Impérialisme (Paris: Fayard, 1951); Michel Foucault, "Des espaces autres. Hétérotopies"; Giorgio Agamben, Homo Sacer, I: Le Pouvoir souverain et la vie nue (Paris: Seuil, 1997); Mariella Pandolfi, "Une Souveraineté mouvante et supracoloniale," Multitudes 3 (2000): 97–105; Marie-Claire Caloz-Tschopp, Les Étrangers aux frontières de l'Europe et le spectre des camps (Paris: La Dispute, 2004); Bulent Diken and Carsten B. Laustsen, The Culture of Exception: Sociology Facing the Camp (London – New York: Routledge, 2005); Peter Nyers, Rethinking Refugees: Beyond States of Emergency (London – New York: Routledge, 2006); Federico Rahola, "La Forme-camp. Pour une généalogie des lieux de transit et d'internement du présent," Cultures and Conflits 68 (2007): 32–50; Didier Fassin and Mariella Pandolfi (eds), Contemporary States of Emergency: The Politics of Military and Humanitarian Interventions (New York: Zone Books, 2010); Illana Feldman and Miriam Ticktin (eds), In the Name of Humanity: The Government of Threat and Care (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Eyal Weizman, The Least of All Possible Evils: Humanitarian Violence from Arendt to Gaza (London: Verso, 2011); Maja Janmir, Protecting Civilians in Refugee Camps: Issues of Responsibility and Lessons from Uganda (Bergen: University of Bergen, 2012).

7 Michel Agier, Managing the Undesirables: Refugee Camps and Humanitarian Government (Cambridge – Malden, MA: Polity, 2011).

8 See Giorgio Agamben, Means without End: Notes on Politics (Minneapolis: University of Minesotta Press, 2000) and, among others, Diken and Laustsen, The Culture of Exception.

9 George Balandier, Sociologie actuelle de l'Afrique noire (Paris: PUF, 1955).

Liisa Malkki's fieldwork in the 1980s with Hutu refugees from Burundi who had settled fifteen years earlier in the Mishamo camp or the small town of Kigoma, Tanzania, shed unprecedented light on the subject of political socialisation in refugee camps.[10] Malkki demonstrated that such camps are political places where identities are reconstructed, partly because regrouping facilitates the rehashing – and sometimes even the strengthening – of national memory. She highlighted the main benchmarks for questioning the relation of refugees in their representations, and of scholars in their analysis, to the norm of the "national order of things" as well as, more generally, the cultural implications of social life in the context of camps and forced displacements. I have previously discussed the distinction she established between refugees in camps (imprisoned in a memory of national identity) and those in cities (described as open, nomadic).[11] These places are actually hybrid and often cosmopolitan living environments, as is typical of many other border landscapes in the contemporary world.[12]

It is now possible to discuss the different kinds of camps – not only refugee camps and internally Displaced Persons' settlements but also makeshift migrant camps and, to a certain extent, detention centres, accommodation centres, transit shelters and so on – and to focus on the relations between mobility and immobility without denying the immobilising power of relative confinement: that is, without forgetting that camps, including humanitarian ones, generally and effectively represent a form of deprivation of liberty, as Barbara Harrell-Bond explained decades ago. Many investigations, Ph.D. theses, detailed monographs and collective works have been published over the last fifteen years.[13] I am unable to comment on all of

10 Liisa H. Malkki, Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania (London – Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Liisa H. Malkki, "Refugees and Exile: From 'Refugee Studies' to the National Order of Things," Annual Review of Anthropology 24 (1995): 495–523.

11 See Michel Agier, "Between War and City. Towards an Urban Anthropology of Refugee Camps" (followed by a discussion with Liisa H. Malkki and Zygmunt Bauman), Ethnography 3 (2002) 3: 317–41.

12 See Michel Agier, Borderlands: Towards an Anthropology of the Cosmopolitan Condition (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016).

13 Cindy Horst, Transnational Nomads: How Somalis Cope with Refugee Life in the Dadaab Camps of Kenya (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006); Simon Turner, Politics of Innocence: Hutu Identity, Conflict and Camp Life (Oxford – New York: Berghahn, 2010); Amanda S. A. Dias, Aux Marges de la ville et de l'état. Camps palestiniens au Liban et favelas cariocas, preface by Michel Agier (Paris: Karthala/IFPO, 2013); Alexander Horstmann, "Ethical Dilemmas and Identifications of Faith-Based Humanitarian Organizations in the Karen Refugee Crisis," Journal of Refugee Studies 24 (2011) 3: 513–32; Bram J. Jansen, Kakuma Refugee Camp: Humanitarian Urbanism in Kenya's Accidental City, Zed Books, 2018; Tristan Bruslé, "What Kind of Place is This? Daily Life, Privacy and the Inmate Metaphor in a Nepalese Workers' Labour Camp (Qatar)," in South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal 6 (2012), <https://journals.o

these often brilliant and rich works here, but it is worth mentioning that they focus on the many inherent tensions of camps, which are described as violent and possibly political, cultural and urban spaces, conceptualising hybridity, resilience or agency. Camps for refugees, internally Displaced Persons and so-called "illegal aliens" all bear witness to a strong and relentless tension between two theoretical designs: that of "confinement outside," defined from the perspective of an analysis focused on state power (as we have just seen when discussing the outside *heterotopia*); and that of cultural, ethnic, national and social diversity (that is, the camp viewed as a global crossroads and a place for banal cosmopolitanism, as ethnographic fieldwork conducted at the heart of everyday life within the camp environment has shown). Mobility and immobility intersect within the very places of confinement that act as borders – state or city borders that can act as either "airlocks" (e.g., the camps for Displaced Persons on the outskirts of Monrovia and Khartoum) or "ghettos" (e.g., the numerous Palestinian camps that keep growing vertically because of the lack of space to expand horizontally).

The third duality or ambiguity that I wish to address relates to the conception of time in camps. The refuge is a shelter created by people moving in a hostile context, whether embodied in war, violence or xenophobic or racist rejection. It takes the form of an urban encampment that can be described in several ways – camp-city, clandestine encampment or *invasione* (shanty town). As time goes by, and under certain circumstances, it may become another type of urban form: a ghetto.

Faced with precarious lives and situations, the sensitive measure of reality takes as its main criterion the possibility of duration. In this context, the lives of refugees and the situations in camps comprise a model of uncertainty. These are spaces and populations that are administered as strictly urgent and exceptional situations (*urgentiste* and *exceptionnaliste*), and time may stand still within them for indefinite periods. In theory, a camp is an emergency intervention that can be placed on "standby" for months or even years: ten to fifteen years for Sudanese, Liberian and Guinean camps; thirty years in the case of Somali refugees in Kenya; nearly forty years for the Sahrawi refugee camps in Algeria and Angolan refugees in Zambia; and more than seventy years for the Palestinian refugees living in city-camps in the Middle East, on the margins of which other refugees – including Iraqis, Syrians and Sudanese – have recently settled. Waiting becomes an endless present. All of these spaces could be characterised as "waiting zones."

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penedition.org/samaj/3446> (19 October 2021); Hala Abou Zaki, "Revisiting Politics in Spaces 'Beyond the Center': The Shātīlā Palestinian Refugee Camp in Lebanon," in Malika Bouziane et al. (eds), Local Politics and Contemporary Transformations in the Arab World: Revisiting Governance beyond the Center (London and New York: Palgrave, 2014), 178–95. See also the collection of articles in Humanity 7 (2016) 3 on camps as "hybrid spaces." (Are Knudsen and Maja Janmyr eds.).

There are two opposing attitudes with regard to the temporality of refugee camps. According to the first, the refugees are awaiting some sort of return. Time seems configured by waiting to return to a lost place whose memory their exile maintains, even if each refugee's biography makes any return to the past impossible. In this framework, what is experienced in the camp has no personal or common, general meaning, if not as a suffering which is the justification to ask for the return – like a personal complaint or a collective demand. From this perspective, the refugee is entirely "absent" from both the lost land and the present.[14] Expectation and absence fill the imagination in the current reality of the camp, where all of this happens.

The second conception of the camp's temporality is more pragmatic: it supposes that the exiles live, survive, meet and organise their existence. Real time sets in when the present grows longer, even more so without a sense of the past or a clear expectation of the future – come back home, stay or go to another place. It is a concrete presence, as opposed to the imaginary of the absence felt in exile, but a presence of bodies and material installations that has none of its own spatio-temporal marks to situate what this space means for the duration. Thereby, the camp is a model for ephemeral architecture, with temporary constructions built out of light, plastic materials that can be swiftly dismantled and rebuilt somewhere else, much like the 1960s notion of "instant cities," which advocated urban areas that could be relocated from one place to another. To some extent, camps may be considered as displaceable cities. In some recent camps, the caravan, the container and/or the mobile home have started to take the place of the tent or the rudimentary shelter with a plastic roof. For instance, many of those left homeless by Hurricane Katrina formed regroupment camps of caravans and mobile homes, and shipping containers provide accommodation for Syrian refugees in Jordan's Zaatari camp, asylum-seekers in Calais and the residents of a number of UNHCR camps. The so-called "emergency architecture" – or "architecture without borders"[15] – of these places is becoming ever more complex, substantial, professional and permanent. There is a certain stability in the materiality of these camps, even if the people are in a state of permanent temporariness. As technology and competence develop, new ephemeral, disposable and/or transposable shelters, construction materials, roads, supplies, sanitary systems and medical equipment will continue to emerge and confirm the expansion of the humanitarian logistics market.

The two temporalities that intersect in the daily life of the camps illustrate the ambiguous nature of these spaces. The first requires international NGO workers always to have something urgent to do: 4×4s crisscross the few drivable thoroughfares; walkie-talkies are always crackling; and "expat" volunteers bemoan their inability to

14 See Elias Sanbar, Le Bien des absents (Arles: Actes Sud, 2001).

15 A French NGO called Architectes sans frontières (ASF) was created in 1979.

linger longer in conversation with the refugees. All of this hectic activity contrasts with the slowness that characterises the second temporality – the rhythm of the encamped people themselves. Thus, in a single space, humanitarian workers who are busy tackling an emergency for the duration of their "mission" (usually three to six months) intersect with refugees who are trying to find their way in these hybrid places, and in the inevitable slowness, over the course of years.

The pragmatism that is born in this situation – a temporal and spatial border in the refugees' lives – is characterised by new and "other" learning experiences. Life on the border encourages coping strategies, muddling through, self-transformation, mastering the art of "making do" and "living with it," as people deal with middlemen and smugglers, adversity, resilience and rebirth. Can this everyday pragmatism help to transform these places of confinement into places of mobility by making them more liveable and open, by scratching at their walls until they crumble, by drilling through doors or putting up ladders? We may well think so if we look at how some camp inhabitants have managed to cope: Karen refugees in Thailand; Sudanese and Somali refugees in Kenya; Palestinian refugees on the West Bank; migrants in northern Morocco and on the fringes of Europe. All of these examples demonstrate the vitality as well as the tensions and conflicts that characterise contemporary camps.

How to live a long and even a "good" life in a camp is a significant political question that has come to the fore due to the contemporary policy of excluding undesirables. Camps are created by a policy of humanitarian and securitarian confinement and sidelining, and although the encamped people are in a waiting zone, in a waiting condition, they are able to reorganise their lives, change the space and their shelters, turn those shelters into houses and even lead good lives. For instance, Palestinian refugees are often very attached to their camps, in much the same way as anyone else can be attached to their neighbourhood. Indeed, the most well-established Palestinian camps, as well as a number of African and Asian camps for refugees and internally Displaced Persons, have been urbanised to such an extent that they have become attractive urban hubs. This has led other migrants and refugees to settle either within the camps or on their peripheries, creating new urban configurations that are both poor and cosmopolitan, so that some of them now illustrate what has been termed a "centrality of the margins."[16] Furthermore, the fact that the Palestinian settlements retain their original categorisation as "camps" in the eyes of both the authorities and the inhabitants, even though they now more closely resemble densely populated, working-class suburbs, sheds light on the relationship between urbanisation and political marginality in a whole array of *heterotopias* – such as fave-

16 Mohamed Kamel Doraï and Nicolas Puig, L'Urbanité des marges. Migrants et réfugiés dans les villes du Proche-Orient (Paris: Téraèdre/IFPO, 2012).

las, *barrios*, slums, ghettos and townships – around the world today.[17] As all of these settlements develop and urbanise, they never completely lose the characteristics of the camp because they remain exceptional, extra-territorial, places of exclusion.

Camps continue to be characterised by uncertainty, undesirability and precariousness – three traits that must inform any speculation about their future. With that in mind, three possible scenarios may be considered. The first of these is eradication, as happened with the destruction of the migrant settlements in Patras in 2009 and Calais in 2009 and 2016. However, removing well-established camps is a much more difficult task, as the Zambian authorities discovered with regard to the Meheba camp, which was established in 1971 to house refugees fleeing from the civil war in neighbouring Angola. The first attempts to close the camp were made in 2002, following the signing of a peace accord in Angola, but these failed, and it was still home to more than 20,000 people in 2018. By then, the population included some of the original Angolan refugees and two generations of their descendants who had been born and raised in the camp, but also refugees from other central African countries, such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda and Burundi. The arrival of these newcomers resulted in a reorganisation of the camp within the regional context, as a hybrid but stabilised space.

This case leads us to the second possible scenario – the gradual, long-term transformation of refugee camps, which can go as far as granting them recognition and what Henri Lefebvre termed a "right to the city."[18] This is evident in the slow integration of internally Displaced Persons from South Sudan on the periphery of Khartoum and the transformation of their camps into permanent neighbourhoods.

The third potential scenario is simply waiting, which is particularly widespread at the moment. This results from compromises reached between the various forces acting with roles to play in each camp's present and future: the inhabitants, international organisations and their agents, and representatives of the national state.

Neither monstrous nor pitiful, these separate places will be perceived in a new light once they have been contextualized in the perspective of the world space and society to come. In this respect, we can observe what happens when refugees oppose the closure of their camp and refuse to move, or when communities of peasants or forest-dwellers are expelled from their land and establish a new camp in a nearby city. For instance, camps in Colombia or in Paraguay in the middle of the capital city

17 Loïc Wacquant, "Designing Urban Seclusion in the 21st Century," *Perspecta: The Yale Architectural Journal* 43 (2010): 165–78; Agnès de Geoffroy, "Fleeing War and Relocating to the Urban Fringe – Issues and Actors: The Cases of Khartoum and Bogotá," International Review of the Red Cross 91 (2009) 875: 509–26; Michel Agier, "Camps, Encampments, and Occupations: From the Heterotopia to the Urban Subject," Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology 84 (2019) 1: 14–26.

18 Henri Lefebvre, Le Droit à la ville (Paris: Anthropos, 1968).

Asuncion, have persisted for years as both a survival strategy and a form of political protest.

Something similar developed in the so-called "Jungle of Calais" between April 2015 and October 2016 as its number of residents increased to some 10,000 occupants. Relegated to the outskirts of the town, the Jungle emerged, in the end, as a political fact. Many organisations and individuals from all over Europe supported the inhabitants as they gradually organised themselves and established a form of autonomous governance over their own space – the Jungle – which therefore faced the control of the local and national authorities and even the NGOs, associations and concerned individuals who provided aid and professed solidarity. It is my contention that this was the real reason why the camp, which had become a political subject, was violently destroyed and the residents dispersed by force.[19]

The history of camps and encampments can therefore be considered not only as the banishment and consequent invisibility of "undesirables" but also as the presence and agency of urban, political subjects in a common world, local as well as global – a response to the demand for a place for politics beyond existing national frameworks.

19 See M. Agier et al., The Jungle: Calais's Camps and Migrants (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018).