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The Ambiguous Encampment of the World

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by Lucas Oesch

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Michel Agier (ed.), *Un monde de camps (A World of Camps)*, (Paris: La Découverte, 2014).

The refugee camp is a topic of interest for many social scientists coming from different disciplines such as geography, urban studies, and anthropology. Literature on refugee camps has often been fragmented according to regions or to their particular dynamics (**Palestinian refugee camps in the Middle East, refugee camps of the past decade's wars in different parts of Africa, administrative detention centres for asylum seekers or "illegal" immigrants in Europe**). Edited by French anthropologist Michel Agier, the aim of this volume *Un monde de camps* (A world of camps) is to go beyond these specificities and regionalisms, analyzing them using the analytical framework of the "encampment" of the world. According to Agier, all these "camps" are part of a global *dispositif* of government of the "undesirables", where the camp is the dominant paradigm for keeping away those who are not needed in the globalized world (11-13). The book reports



an estimate of over 1,500 camps hosting, at least, twelve million refugees and displaced people. Other kinds of "camps", such as self-settled migrants' gatherings, migrant workers' camps, or administrative detention centres are not included in this figure (14). The locations of some of these camps are shown on several maps included in the book. One of these maps interestingly illustrates the differential distribution of encampment forms, showing how refugee camps are concentrated in parts of the global South, while administrative detention centres are distributed in the global North.

The book comprises twenty-five different stories of "encampment", and im/mobility situations, written in French (several are translations from English versions). The volume builds on field research conducted over the last fifteen years. The volume is the main outcome of a collaboration between an international and multidisciplinary team of researchers. The book will be of great interest to academics, and to a wider audience interested in the Arab world and in urban studies. The first, third, and fourth sections deal, respectively, with the lasting lifetime of several camps, displaced persons' camps, and migrant workers, asylum seekers and "illegal" immigrant' camps. The second section of the book is dedicated to the urbanization of refugee camps and places. Several case studies tackle countries of the Arab world.

This review focuses on how this volume contributes to the understanding of urban dynamics in camps, and particularly in camps located in the Arab world. It examines the tensions, explicitly or implicitly identified by the authors, inherent in the space of camps. I start by highlighting the ambiguous urbanization process of camps, moving on to shared features, and specificities of encampment forms in the Arab world. I conclude by suggesting alternative readings, and analytical tools for grasping the complex and ambiguous character of camps.

Camps and Urban Space

Many camps have become alternative urban centres. We can for example refer to Palestinian refugee camps in the Middle East that were established more than sixty years ago. They are equipped with physical infrastructure such as water, electricity, as well as services, including schools and health centres. They include commercial areas and activities. Different parts of camps evolved distinctively depending on a variety of factors such as, for example, the socio-economic profile of camp dwellers. Furthermore, some camps have also become quasi-neighbourhoods of larger cities. In the introduction to the book (11-28), which presents some of his earlier works (e.g. 2002, 2011), Agier argues that camps represent a form of centrality at the margin of the urban space and the state (26-27). While they are *hors-lieux* (non-places) situated at the edge of the “normal” order of things, they have nevertheless become living spaces—spaces of socialization, and/or of political action. Camps have also become nodes of urban attraction, where additional migrants and refugees arrive regularly to settle in or around them. They thus form the core of new poor, and cosmopolitan urban configurations. Even though they are transforming into “ordinary” (or banal) urban spaces, they often keep however their representation of a humanitarian exceptionality (145).

The book presents varied readings of this exceptionality of camps in relation to urban space. For example, Jansen suggests departing from the analysis of the camp as an exceptional space marked by a “naked” or emerging urbanity (164-177), and rather to consider urbanity as an idiosyncrasy—a specific form of urban installation. In his examination of Kakuma camp in Kenya—which hosts South Sudanese, Somali and Central and Eastern Africa refugees, he shows how the camp is both a symbol of inclusion and exclusion. This ambiguity is certainly constitutive of the urbanization process of many camps, as I will discuss further later on. Even though it is located in a remote semi-arid environment, Kakuma camp has become highly interconnected with surrounding cities and villages, and vastly integrated in the social and economic landscape of Kenya. And, while refugees are “politically” excluded from Kenyan society, they are benefiting from socio-economic integration. The camp is a well-equipped place, with many commercial and service areas, such as restaurants and bars. It offers job opportunities, not only for refugees, but for Kenyans living in the surroundings, as many Kenyan businesses invest in the camp. Goods coming from other cities in Kenya are brought in the camp through intermediaries. The camp thus participates to a space of circulation, as refugees move between their home country, Kenyan cities, and the camp.

The different stories of camps presented in the book are not only concerned with the organization of forced migration within bounded spaces—the camps—but also with patterns of mobility, and immobility. Agier underscores how the global *dispositif* of camps is also a network of circulation. It includes the movements of camp dwellers transiting between different forms of encampment (refugee camps, administrative detention centres), as well as the circulation of the employees of organizations that manage the camps, who are often regularly relocated in different “fields”. In addition, knowledge and techniques about how to manage camps are also circulating (21-23). Therefore, while some camps, such as Palestinian refugee camps, have become physically included within cities, and barely distinguishable from their urban surroundings, even remote camps are linked to the other urban spaces via these multiple circulatory processes. Thiollat analyzes this well through her study of the network of Eritreans refugee camps in east Sudan dating from the 1970s (203-217). She shows how camps and regional urban centres are intimately related. Together they constitute “crossroads” of circulation, and a social field of settlement, transit, and return.

Camps in the Arab World

Throughout the book, several contributions directly address Arab regions: Palestinian refugee camps of Shatila and Nahr al-Bared in Lebanon, as well as Dheisheh in the West Bank, the Sahrawi camp of Tindouf in Algeria, displaced person camps in Khartoum and Eritrean camps in east Sudan, Iraqi urban refugees in Damascus, migrant workers camps in Qatar, and ephemeral self-settled migrant sites in the Belyounech forest in Morocco. Several of these spaces share common features. For example, Herz discusses how camps in Tindouf (Algeria) were built instead of resolving the conflict in Western Sahara—thus architecture and planning were substituted to a political solution (111). Sahrawi have used the infrastructure of the camp to recreate a nation in exile. But, with the alleviation of the humanitarian emergency situation, this “encampment” has contributed to postpone the urgency of the political solution. This is also the case of Shatila (Abou-Zaki), Nahr al-Bared (Puig) and Dheisheh (Hilal, Petti & Weizman) Palestinian camps in the Middle East. In this region, where the presence of forced migrants is mostly materialized in urbanized camps, Dorai shows how migrants are concentrated in the peripheries of large cities, where an informal form of urbanization predominates (221-224). Moreover, Fawaz (2013) argues that informal settlements in the Middle East are often an outcome of cross border refugees’ movements, and that this represents a regional specificity of informal settlements. Therefore, these informal settlements should be added to the *dispositif* of encampment in the Middle East (Martin, 2015).

Alongside these contributions, case studies addressing other parts of the world open up the analysis, and bring in new frames for the study of camp situations in the Arab world—whether regarding the Palestinian case, or the more recent displacement of Syrians. Their reading helps debunking particularities of camps in the Arab world. For instance, Tassin analyzes Lampedusa as a “laboratory” of administrative detention in Europe where logics of control and assistance are intertwined (312-325). The aim of the centre is to immobilize “bodies” of migrants crossing from Africa while authorities examine their situation, awaiting a transfer to other locations in Italy. In addition, Lampedusa is a first aid and humanitarian centre for people who often have made perilous journey across the Mediterranean. The coexistence of administrative and relief objectives find striking resemblance with the earlier work of Peteet on Palestinian refugee camps (2005). The categorization of Palestinians as “refugees” allowed them to benefit from aid, but has also transformed them into governable subjects through classification and enumeration techniques. Tassin argues that rather than being contradictory, these aims represent a “constitutive ambivalence” of migrants’ confinement.

Throughout the volume, many contributions emphasize these types of tensions incorporated within the space of the camp. These tensions represent a very important entry point for the understanding of the complex nature of refugee camps, beyond regional specificities. For instance, the architecture of the Tindouf camp in Algeria reflects the tension between temporariness and permanency. Temporary clay shelters are starting to incorporate architectural features, such as pillars, arches, and parapets (105). Iyer Siddiqi shows also how the four camps of Dadaab in Kenya—often labelled the “biggest refugee camp in the world”—illustrate the tension between emergency and development (149-163). The planning history of their housing and transportation networks reveals how they were initially conceived to transcend the emergency situation that led to their creation. They were indeed envisioned as tools for long-term social control, and population management.

To grasp these tensions, Agier suggests a triadic analytical model for examining the “form of the camp” (19-20): extraterritoriality, exception, and exclusion. First, camps are extra-territorial in the sense that they are not integrated within the territory of the state. For example, they often do not appear on official maps. Second, another law governs their space, and they are thus in a “state of exception”. This concept is indirectly referring to Agamben’s work (1998), who argues that sovereign power in the camp could decide to suspend laws, and thus leave camp dwellers without a “politically qualified life”. Third, beyond this legal-political “inclusive exclusion”, camps are spaces of social exclusion, as their dwellers are marginalized, and differentiated from the wider society. However, Agier stresses that camp dwellers’ experiences vary, and that these three features are not the same everywhere and for everyone. Some camps can be impressively extraterritorial, exceptional, and exclusionary, and others, less so. Nevertheless, all dwellers of camps have to confront these constraints and, far from being mere passive victims, they often do develop two types of confrontational strategies: appropriating space using strategies of “dwelling” (*habiter*), and transforming space into place (*une cité*), where dwellers’ voices are heard and recognized—thus through politics (28).

Towards an Understanding of Camps as Spaces of Ambiguity

The volume’s identification of these processes is of great help to understand the government of camps, especially in the Arab world. As illustrated in the different contributions, they are spaces of constraint (spatially, politically, legally, and socially), and resistance. However, we are left to wonder whether camps are ambivalent, and evolving towards “living places”, only because the identified features of encampment (extraterritoriality, exception, and exclusion) are counter-balanced by the resistance of dwellers. Or, should we consider the “form of the camp” in itself as ambiguous—a place conceived according to (what appears as) contradictory mechanisms. This is the argument of a forthcoming special issue I am editing with Luigi Achilli for *A Contrario*: “*Les camps de réfugiés palestiniens au Proche-Orient: Un provisoire qui dure*” (“Palestinian refugee camps in the Middle East: A lasting temporariness”). In it, we introduce the concept of “spaces of ambiguity” as an analytical category apt to grasp the complexity of refugee camps. By referring to Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan, we demonstrate that authorities, and camp dwellers’ everyday practices fashion together the camp, both as an extraterritorial and integrated space, an exceptional and ordinary place, and a space of marginalization and inclusion. Camps have the status of temporary space, and abide by a specific management structure, but they are also integrated in the territory via urban development interventions provided by the state, and spatial practices of dwellers. Moreover, camp dwellers are registered refugees, but most of them hold Jordanian citizenship. They are marginalized, for example, regarding employment in the public sector, or political representation in Jordan, but they participate to the making of vibrant spaces including market areas in camps attracting many customers, whether of Palestinian origin or not. Conceptualizing camps as spaces of ambiguity therefore allows recognizing the mutual construction by authorities and camp dwellers of camps as paradoxical places, and to make better sense of the tensions within camps. In Jordan, for example, this ambiguity has allowed the preservation of a certain form of political stability.

This conceptual framework can also be applied beyond the Palestinian case, and the Middle East, and explain the complex character of many camps studied in *Un monde de camps*. For instance, in Kenya’s Kakuma, the restrictive regulations on the movement of refugees combined with their transgression by camp dwellers, and the tolerance of the camp’s management authorities created the needed conditions for the camp’s socio-economic development, and its articulation to the wider country’s economy. But, at the same time, it allowed the Kenyan government to maintain refugees under a humanitarian administration (164-177). For their part, Lampedusa, and other administrative centres, are places which serve to confine migrants at the borders of the European Union, while legitimizing their existence using humanitarian practices and discourses. In this case, the ambiguous character of Lampedusa both as an “identification centre”, and as a “humanitarian hosting centre” provides flexibility, as migrants are kept in, even after being identified. It also allows the centre to be represented either as a tool for fighting illegal immigration, or as a place embodying a hosting ideal (312-325). One could have hoped for a larger discussion of these ambiguous features of camps in the volume. However, this should not detract from underscoring the importance of this book, which is a timely contribution to the study of forced migration and urbanism in the Arab world, and beyond. At times when instability in the Middle East is forcing a lot of people to be on the move, either at regional or inter-regional scales, this work helps to better understand the functioning of the global dispositif associated to people’s displacements and mobilities.

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