



From spaces of exception to ‘campscape’: Palestinian refugee camps and informal settlements in Beirut



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ABSTRACT

The recent literature on the refugee condition and spaces has heavily drawn on Agamben's reflection on 'bare life' and the 'camp'. As refugees are cast out the normal juridical order, their lives are confined to refugee camps, biopolitical spaces that allow for the separation of the alien from the nation. But is the camp the only spatial device that separates qualified and expendable lives? What happens when the space of the camp overlaps with the space of the city? Taking the Palestinian refugee camp of Shatila in Beirut as a case, this study problematises the utilisation of legal prisms and clear-cut distinctions for the understanding of the production of bare life and spaces of exception. Isolated at the time of its establishment, Shatila is today part of the so-called 'misery belt'. Physical continuities are also reflected by the distribution of the population as both Palestinians and non-Palestinians, including Lebanese, live in Shatila and the surrounding informal settlements. As physical and symbolic boundaries separating the refugee and the citizen blur, I argue that the exception is not only produced through law and its suspension. While legal exceptions place the Palestinians outside the juridical order, other exclusions run along sectarian and socio-economic lines cutting through the Lebanese body. As Shatila and the informal settlements are entangled, a new spatial model of analysis defined as the 'campscape' is proposed. Once the exception leaks out of the space of the camp, the campscape becomes the threshold where the refugee, the citizen and other outcasts meet.

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One of the essential characteristics of modern biopolitics [...] is its constant need to redefine the threshold in life that distinguishes and separates what is inside from what is outside. [...] And when natural life is wholly included in the polis – and this much has, by now, already happened – these thresholds pass, as we will see, beyond the dark boundaries separating life from death in order to identify a new living dead man, a new sacred man.

Agamben, 1998:131

Introduction

As a result of the first Arab-Israeli conflict between 1947 and 1948, more than 750,000 Palestinians were expelled or fled from their homes and villages (UNRWA, 2014a). About 100,000 found refuge in Lebanon where, after an initial welcome, they have faced

multifaceted forms of marginalisation. This is due to the peculiar sectarian character of Lebanese politics. It registers the highest percentage of Christians among all Middle Eastern countries and a power-sharing formula between different sects characterises political life. The presence of a mostly Muslim refugee community constituting about ten percent of the total population in Lebanon, therefore, has always been perceived as a threat to the country's delicate political order and stability (Haddad, 2000: 30).

The Lebanese government's concerns over its population are manifested institutionally through the issue of laws, decrees and orders that prevent the Palestinians from enjoying the most basic rights such as the right to work and access to educational and health services; and spatially through the establishment of refugee camps. As laws, decrees and orders dictate the conceptual separation of the Palestinian refugee from the Lebanese citizen, refugee camps complete such distinction geographically preventing the Palestinians' integration.

As philosopher Giorgio Agamben (1998) would put it, the production of refugees' 'bare life' – a life stripped of any right and value – and its spatialisation through the establishment of camps is not new to our times. Drawing a controversial parallel between the

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Nazi concentration camps and temporary structures such as refugee camps and detention centres, Agamben urges us to recognise the logic of exception pervading our societies. Conceived as 'a piece of land that is placed outside the normal juridical order', the camp has become the 'hidden matrix' of the modern political space and the technique of government to exclude, enclose and/or even eliminate those who threaten the security of the state (Agamben, 1998: 170).

Recognising the invaluable contribution of Agamben in the understanding of biopolitics and exception in situations of refugeeness, this paper aims to further the reflection on the ways in which biopolitics may operate today and the ways in which the exception may be conceived and spatialised.

While Agamben's conceptualisation of the camp grounds this study, the spatialisation of exclusion is more nuanced because, of the 444,480 Palestinian refugees registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) in Lebanon, only 241,322 live in the twelve official refugee camps (UNRWA, 2014b). These figures are also reflected globally as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that often refugees live in urban areas and that only one third of the 10.4 million refugees worldwide, excluding the Palestinians, live in refugee camps (UNHCR, 2013: 6, 8). It seems that the refugee population is more dispersed than sociologists or biopolitics theorists would expect them to be. Life in the camp for refugees does not constitute the norm.

In investigating the refugee condition and spaces, this paper focuses on Shatila refugee camp. Established far from the city centre in 1949, Shatila is now part of the urban texture of metropolitan Beirut and the city's 'misery belt', an axis of low-income and informal settlements surrounding Beirut's city centre. This urban condition is shared by other Palestinian camps in Lebanon and the Middle East and, as I suggest below, this complicates their construction as 'exceptional' spaces. Additionally, the high presence of non-Palestinians in Shatila, which includes Lebanese, Syrians, Turks, Egyptians, and Bangladeshis, problematises the clear-cut production and separation of bare and qualified lives, respectively and allegedly embodied by the figures of the refugee and the citizen. In light of the entanglement of the camp with the city and the lives of different outcasts, is it entirely true that the camp and the camp only could be the paradigmatic spatial device that divides the life worth living from the expendable life? What happens when the space of the camp begins overlapping with the space of the city? In contrast with the literature that looks at the camp in its isolation, this paper investigates the camp's relation to the city and its informal settlements. While I do not suggest that the camp is fully integrated into the dynamics of the city, I argue that the camp inhabits an expanded version of the exception which includes non-refugees too.

This paper, part of a broader research project on Palestinian refugees' lives and spaces in Lebanon, is based on a combination of different qualitative methods. Fieldwork was undertaken between October 2008 and January 2009 and included ethnographic practices of observation and more than twenty semi-structured and in-depth interviews with Palestinian refugees and Lebanese citizens living in Shatila camp and the surrounding areas. The research also included archive and desktop research on the condition and status of refugee camps and informal settlements in Beirut. These literatures are pivotal for the understanding of the population that inhabits Beirut's 'misery belt' and the development of informal settlements in the periphery and proximity of refugee camps. While research in the field started with a focus on the refugee camp only and the lives of the Palestinian refugees there, the field challenged research questions and assumptions. Encounters in the camp with Palestinians and Lebanese as well as

the difficulty in identifying the limits of the camp revealed blurred physical and conceptual boundaries that allegedly would separate citizens and non-citizens, and here the focus is on these blurred boundaries.

Examining the complexities of the exception produced in Lebanon, this paper is divided into three sections. The first section provides the theoretical background. It explores the concepts of bare life and the space of exception and their applicability in situations of refugeeness with a glimpse into Palestinian refugees' lives and spaces in Lebanon. The second part investigates the kind of biopolitics produced in Lebanon and examines the treatment of Palestinian refugees as well as Lebanese citizens. In the third section, the paper explores the exception spatially. From the establishment of Shatila refugee camp to the uncontrolled urbanisation of the 1950s and 1960s, it discusses the production of Beirut's 'misery belt' and the merging of refugee spaces and informal urban settlements.

In these sections, I argue that bare life is not only produced in legal terms as Palestinians are excluded from the benefits of citizenship, but is also rendered such through social and economic discourses and practices cutting through the Lebanese population and separating Lebanese lives that are worth living from those deserving the sovereign's abandonment. While Agamben's contribution to the understanding of the interactions between law, politics and life is indisputable, a partial disengagement from law is crucial if we are to explain the physical and symbolic proximity of refugees and citizens. Embracing processes and transformation occurring beyond the realm of law, Foucault (1997: 300) argued that:

If you try to analyse power not on the basis of freedom, strategies and governmentality, but on the basis of the political institution, you can only conceive of the subject as a subject of law. One then has a subject who has or does not have rights, who has had these rights either granted or removed by the institution of political society; and all this brings us back to a legal concept of the subject.

Legal distinctions alone cannot fully capture the complexities of life, forms of lives and their spatialisations. While the paper draws heavily on the theory of exception and exclusion, the discussion of biopolitics and the ways in which it operates is also inspired by Foucault's understanding of biopower and the abandonment of models of analysis exclusively based on law and rights (Foucault, 1998, 2003).

To describe the increasing propinquity of the refugees and some citizens, as well as the impossibility of identifying the space of exception solely within the camp boundaries, such blurred distinctions are conceptualised through a new spatial model of exception. Borrowing from Appadurai's (1996) understanding of modernity that focuses on continuities, the paper argues that bare life and the exception exceed the boundaries of the refugees' bodies and spaces to include the citizens and other outcasts in the formation of what I term the 'campscape'. The case of Shatila and other Palestinian refugee camps in the Middle East show how the model of the camp as proposed by Agamben cannot capture the complexities of the exception and its spatialities.

While refugee spaces are established as temporary measures to prevent integration and to wait for a solution to refugeeness to be found, they are increasingly becoming permanent solutions. Born as spaces that freeze their inhabitants' status and condition, camps turn their temporariness into a 'transient permanency' in which camps may evolve over time, expand or even turn into city-like structures and in which life continues and where refugees and inhabitants reproduce their own normality (Agier, 2002, 2011).

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