



The right to the camp: Spatial politics of protracted encampment in the West Bank



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ABSTRACT

Most theoretical models of refugee camps draw on the work of Giorgio Agamben and regard them as sites of exception set outside the normal juridical order, designed to strip refugees of their citizenship and reduce them to bare life. Yet, the complex realities of protracted camps challenge the distinctions between camp and city, and exception and citizenship. To contend with this complexity, it is necessary to move away from essentialized models and address the material, social, and political realities of protracted camps. I draw on the concept of 'the right to the city' to engage in discussion about civil rights of camp communities within the physical and political spaces of their prolonged residence. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in a Palestinian refugee camp in the West Bank, I investigate (1) the articulations of exception that have shaped the means, conditions and character of its spatial development; and (2) bottom-up responses by which the residents address the reality of multifaceted neglect and political struggles around camp space. In particular, I focus on the camp leadership's efforts to claim their community's right to development, agency over the production and governance of camp space, and recognition of their political autonomy and camp character - a set of claims that can be called, 'the right to the camp'.

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1. Introduction

Refugee camps, and other shelter solutions for displaced populations, are designed and erected to deal with crises expected to last only a short period of time. Yet, the conditions for refugee return often fail to materialize and their camps turn into places of long-term residency. By the end of 2015, nearly half of the world's refugees lived in protracted situations that, on average, lasted for over twenty-five years (UNHCR, 2016). The traditional discourse on refugee rights has been based on expected short-term residency and focused on immediate protection and basic human rights. This discourse has marginalized discussion of other, civil rights of refugees living in protracted exile. To address this urgent, yet under-addressed problem accurately and responsibly requires a 'radical re-conceptualization of what constitutes a "refugee camp"' (Misselwitz & Hanafi, 2009, p. 360). This acknowledges that refugees' right to live full lives in the spaces of exile is not a substitute to their rights under international law, such as the right to return or for compensation.

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The idea that protracted camps are by definition incomplete urbanization projects (e.g. Agier, 2011; De Montclos & Kagwanja, 2000) placed somewhere between the city as a norm and the camp as an exception has critical shortcomings (Sanyal, 2011). It invites an unwelcome logic of continuum and progress from what the camps were designed to be - sites of care and control - to what they *should* become - i.e. cities. It risks oversimplification of dynamics behind camps' spatial development and disregard to refugees' agency in shaping the character and future of their communities. Translated into the language of rights, the continuum is spread between the poles of 'bare life' produced by most coercive forms of encampment (Agamben, 1998) and the 'expectations of citizenship' entailed by the city (Malkki, 2002, p. 355). A growing body of work on protracted encampment has challenged the essentialized and clear-cut distinctions between camp, city, and citizenship. They showed how under different regimes of control the camps may become more privileged sites for political action than marginalized communities of the urban poor (Pasquetti, 2015) or offer their residents 'a layer of protection that the poor do not have' (Sanyal, 2012, p. 641). They indicated that formal citizenship may go in hand with administrative exclusion of camp communities (Oesch, 2017) or in some context may be considered a threat

to refugee rights rather than as a preferred solution (Allan, 2014).

To overcome these shortcomings, we need to contend with the material, social, and political realities of protracted camps, in all their complexity and ambiguity (Oesch, 2017), and combine analyses of the mechanisms of sociological control and exception imposed on protracted camps (Pasquetti, 2015) with an inquiry into bottom-up responses through which residents address the condition of protracted encampment. This article adopts such an approach to explore the spatial politics in and around al-Am'ari, a Palestinian refugee camp established in 1949 in the West Bank. I analyze articulations of exception that have shaped the means, conditions and character of its spatial development and show how al-Am'ari residents have tackled the resultant reality of multifaceted neglect and the political struggles around camp space. I draw on Lefebvre's famous concept of 'the right to the city,' to engage in discussion about civil rights of camp communities in the here and now of their exile and, importantly, their right to self-determination within the physical and political spaces of their prolonged residence. In particular, I focus on camp leadership's efforts to claim their community's right for agency over the production and governance of camp space, and recognition of their political autonomy and camp character - a set of claims that can be called 'the right to the camp'.

The article draws on eighteen months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted at intervals between 2010 and 2016 in al-Am'ari Refugee Camp. In the course of fieldwork, I conducted sixty-eight in-depth interviews, the vast majority in Arabic, with current and former camp residents (55), employees of UNRWA - a UN Agency providing assistance to Palestinian refugees (3), Palestinian academics (7), employees of al-Bireh municipality where al-Am'ari is located (2) and one employee of the Palestinian Authorities (PA). During all my visits to al-Am'ari, I lived in or at the border of the camp and worked in al-Am'ari Youth Center as a fencing coach for their male and female fencing teams. I was welcomed to be part of community life; this allowed me to conduct participant observation and informal conversations on a daily basis. I enjoyed access to all institutions in al-Am'ari and to al-Bireh municipality. My discussion with PA officials of the matters of state strategy vis-à-vis the camp was very limited, mostly due to political sensitivity of the issue and lack of personal connections to that elite circle. I also gathered and analyzed various documents and statistical data produced by UNRWA, local camp organizations, al-Bireh municipality, and the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics.

The article is divided into three sections. The first section presents theoretical discussion of the proposed approach that aims to combine critical reflection on the camp as a site of exception with literature on 'the right to the city'. In the sections that follow I apply the proposed approach to the empirical study of al-Am'ari. The second section investigates the politics of exception in and around camp space that shaped al-Am'ari's development and gave ground to the claim for the right to the camp. The third section analyzes what the right to the camp stands for in the context of camp politics.

2. Camp, exception and the right to the city

2.1. The camp as a site of exception: Agamben and beyond

Giorgio Agamben famously captured the logic behind the camp as 'the space that is opened when the state of exception begins to become the rule and gains a permanent spatial form' (Agamben, 1998, p. 37). Here, the camp is a radical form of biopolitical governance set outside the normal juridical order by a single sovereign power, by which the inmate is stripped of their rights, reduced to 'bare life' and cordoned off from the rest of the society.

In the literature inspired by Agamben's work the exception is understood mostly as a legal condition (Martin, 2015) that allows biopolitical power to 'bypass the legal subject and operate directly on the body' (Diken & Laustsen, 2005, p. 56), what reduces camp inmates to a condition of 'social nakedness' (Bauman, 2002). As Abourahme pointed out (2015), it seems that Agamben meant to diagnose 'the new biopolitical *nomos* of the planet' (Agamben, 1998, p. 176) rather than provide a model to study contemporary refugee camps. Yet, the space of exception, biopolitical governance, and Foucauldian understandings of disciplinary powers have become the main theoretical lenses for studies on refugee camps (Minca, 2015).

Recently, a growing body of empirical literature has challenged the totality of Agambian theoretical model and showed that whereas it may prove adequate for analyses of 'coercive camp spaces' (e.g. Giaccaria & Minca, 2011) the complex realities of informal or long-established camps need different analytical framework (Katz, 2015). Much of the critical reading of Agamben's work draws on studies of Palestinian camps. The condition of protracted encampment - the Palestinian case dates back to the late 1940s - challenges the rigidity of theoretical models and opens a critical window to explore mechanisms, dynamics, and contradictions behind the production and sustenance of camp spaces. Studies on Palestinian camps have shown that, rather than an exercise of single sovereign power, complex power struggles between multiple actors such as host governments, humanitarian organizations, NGOs and refugees themselves, produce, contest, and negotiate the camp (e.g. Martin, 2015; Ramadan, 2013; Sanyal, 2011). The exception is then a multifaceted construct that takes on various spatial, socioeconomic, and political aspects and reflects the different identity projects and political agendas of the actors involved (Feldman, 2014; Oesch, 2017). Rather than a predetermined outcome, the legal status is an entry-point (Martin, 2015) from which a complex social condition may develop, shaped by 'the specific lived circumstances' of exile (Malkki, 1996, p. 380).

The proliferation of the 'jargon of exception' (Huysmans, 2008) and the limitations it brought to the study on camps, led Sigona (2015) to advocate for the 'de-exceptionalization' of the camp that would make way to more agent-oriented approaches to encampment. I would argue that instead of 'de-exceptionalizing' the camp, we should rather de-essentialize exception empirically. In place of the ahistorical, total and overpowering paradigm that haunts the field of camp studies (Abourahme, 2015), we should approach the exception as an analytical category. We should ask the following critical questions: How is exception produced and negotiated, imposed and challenged in the camp context? Who are the actors involved and what are their roles and interests in the production of camp's exceptionality? In what ways do these roles and interests intersect in camp spaces? What results does the politics of exception produce on the ground? No matter the theoretical considerations, the condition of exception has tangible consequences for the wellbeing and rights of camp populations, their relations with the outside world, and the urban development of camp spaces (Misselwitz & Hanafi, 2009).

2.2. From right to the city to right to the camp

This article applies the exception as an analytical category and poses the above questions to investigate materiality and governance of a protracted refugee camp. Unlike the majority of scholarship that tends to portray the exception solely as a source of marginalization, disenfranchisement and exclusion, it may also become a carefully managed resource through which camp residents claim their rights and defend their political identity. Here, I

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