Camp evolution and Israel's creation: Between 'state of emergency' and 'emergence of state'

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A B S T R A C T

This paper examines the central role of the camp in the early Israeli state period and its spatial and geopolitical evolution. Unlike official Israeli history, which presents the immigrant camps as an inevitable improvised response to the unexpected problem of mass immigration, I examine the camp as a strategic modern biopolitical instrument that allowed for the state's profound geopolitical changes and was itself altered according to them. The paper analyses the ways in which the camp facilitated the creation of Israel as a state formed by two seemingly contradictory, but in fact complementary, conditions: on one hand, a product of a chaotic 'state of emergency' and a form of 'ordered disorder' created by mass immigration, and on the other hand, a product of a comprehensive, tightly controlled modernist project combining physical planning and social engineering. This duality reveals the role of these immigrant camps, which were created both in Israel and abroad, as spatial 'black holes' which swallowed the contradiction between the radical geopolitical transformation and the rational self-image of the Israeli state-building project. The evolving and hybrid typologies of the camp in Israel's pre-state and early-state periods expose it as a versatile instrument, highlighting the need for informed spatial and geographical genealogies of the camp in order to illuminate its various transformations.

Let nothing be called natural

In an age of bloody confusion,

Ordered disorder, planned caprice,

And dehumanized humanity, lest all things

Be held unalterable!

Bertolt Brecht, *The Exception and the Rule* (1930)[1]

In the first few years after Israel was established, during the 'mass immigration' period (1948—1951), camps were widely used to concentrate, absorb, distribute and temporarily accommodate newly arrived immigrants. In formal Israeli history, the *machanot olim* (immigrant camps) and the later *ma'abarot* (transit camps) are referred to as an improvised response to the difficulties caused by mass immigration and as a makeshift yet resourceful solution to an almost '*force majeure*' problem (Be'in, 1982; Katchensky, 1986). This paper questions such an account, and with it, the perception of the

role of the camp during the state formation period, by examining it not as an inevitable response to an unexpected problem, but as a strategic modern architectural mechanism which was extensively used in different forms as an inseparable part of creating and populating the new state. I will investigate the establishment of Israel as a state formed by two allegedly contradictory conditions: on one hand, a product of a chaotic 'state of emergency' created by mass immigration, and on the other hand, a product of a comprehensive, tightly controlled modernist project combining modern physical planning and social engineering. This duality will enable a view of the *ma'abarot* and other immigrant camps as temporal and spatial 'black holes' that swallowed the contradiction between the rapid, radical historical transformation of population and territory and the utopian, rational and humanist self-image of the Zionist nation-building project. This historical geography will also allow a close examination of the camp as a multifaceted and versatile instrument which evolves according to changing territorial and political needs.

During and following the main historical period discussed in this paper — from the early 1940s to the mid-1950s, when these camps were conceived, established, populated and functioning — the notion of the camp in Jewish and Israeli minds was tied up with the Holocaust camps in Europe. While the paper only deals with the

role of the camp in relation to Israel/Palestine, it is important to acknowledge that the Nazi death camps sit firmly in the background as a modern technology which facilitated the Final Solution. The Nazi camps are also used as the core example in the seminal work of the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben on sovereign power and the camp (1998), and the theoretical work on the geographies of the camp which followed (Edkins, 2000; Giaccaria & Minca, 2011; Minca, 2007, 2015). While this paper is historically and theoretically linked to these camps and their meaning, it seeks to develop a new perspective for the camp as a space which does not only exclude and abandon specific populations outside the 'national body' (Minca, 2015, p. 77), but also as a space which is used to create a new national body and design for it a new political, territorial, spatial and social reality (see also Katz, 2015a, 2015b).

In addition, the subject of the camp in the context of Israel/ Palestine is usually discussed in relation to the Palestinian refugee camps created by UNRWA in neighbouring Arab countries following the *Nakba*, or the 'catastrophe', of the Palestinians' mass-displacement of the 1948 war (Martin, 2015; Ramadan, 2013; Sanyal, 2014). While the Palestinian disaster reappears throughout this paper, mainly through the absence of the Palestinians both physically and mentally from the civil reality created in Israel in the early years of the state, the paper focuses in illuminating the crucial role of the camp related to the geopolitical changes of the *Jewish* population in Israel during the same period. These camps facilitated the profound demographic and territorial changes which were part of the ambitious Zionist project, often on the expense of their inhabitants. As such, the immigrant camps discussed in this paper, mainly the *ma'abarot* transit camps, could be looked at as the distorted 'mirror image' of the Palestinian refugee camps: they appeared in the same years as the Israeli immigrant camps, their population was roughly the same size as that of their Israeli counterparts — 685,000 Jewish immigrants entered Israel in the three years following May 1948, while approximately 700,000 Palestinians became refugees (Kozlovsky, 2008, p. 159; Morris, 1987) — and for a few years they created very similar physical landscapes. However, it is important to highlight the opposing political roles of these camps, and therefore the difference in their duration and spatiality. While the Israeli state dismantled the temporary *ma'abara* camps after a few years and left no physical trace of them, as if the immigrants were always part of their new land, the Palestinian refugee camps which exist until present are a physical reminder of the Palestinians' suspended existence as people without a state.

The Hebrew term *ma'abara* (מַעְבָּרָה), *ma'abarot* in plural, is etymologically derived from the word *ma'avar* (מַעֲבָר), meaning 'transit'. The concept of the *ma'abara*, however, has long been expropriated from its original meaning, accumulating other connotations such as neglect, poverty, discrimination, degeneration and an experience of marginalisation in the Israeli society (Shimony, 2008, p. 10). The linguistic gap between the functional intention in the original concept and its acquired meaning indicates the difference between its initial spatial objectives and their social, economic and cultural outcome. This gap, I will argue, is inherent to the Zionist modernist project, that aimed to create a nation-state that necessitated radical alterations — presuming these could be done while maintaining its humanist values.

The *ma'abara* transit camps, which physically disappeared from the Israeli landscape once the immigrants were settled, are usually acknowledged by Israeli geographers as a brief transition stage, mainly in relation to the creation of the peripheral 'development towns' (Tzfadia & Yacobi, 2011, p. 17; Yiftachel & Meir 1998). These camps are often dismissed as an inevitable byproduct of an unexpected 'natural phenomenon': the unstoppable influx of Jewish people into their new homeland (Brutzkus, 1986, p. 127). The camps

abroad, which were used by Zionist organisations and later by Israel to concentrate immigrants before transportation to their new state, are also examined by others as a single isolated phenomenon related to specific sites and periods (Meir-Glizenstein, 2011; Picard, 1999, p. 355). By examining the extensive role of the camp and its evolution during the pre-state and early state period, this paper proposes a new analytical framework for the camp as a crucial modern mechanism which enabled the implementation of the Zionist and later Israel's national, demographic, territorial and spatial strategies. I will analyse the close relationship between the Zionist movement and modernity and its ideologies, practices and ordering devices, showing their inherent contradiction. Consequently, I will argue that the myth of messianic, uncontrolled mass immigration was actually a situation of 'ordered disorder' that created a chaotic 'state of emergency' which was much needed for the engineered 'emergence of state'. This situation allowed the state to use camps in order to bridge the gap between the masses of people brought to rapidly populate the emptied frontier territories and the completion and construction of the state's ambitious modern master plan and its 'new towns', assuming that the dehumanising negative effect of these temporary camp spaces would vanish together with their physical traces.

It is important to highlight that the significance of this paper is not only related to the camp's crucial geopolitical role in the creation of Israel, but also in tracing the evolution and spatial genealogy of the camp. The article examines the frontier *ma'abara* camps as a hybrid camp typology which developed from two different types of camps: the closed and controlled 'immigrant camps' and the frontier 'settler camps' which were used earlier by Zionist 'pioneers' to settle in remote areas. This typological evolution exposes the camp as a flexible, versatile instrument, which its various roles go much beyond its Agambenian perception. In doing so, the paper manifests the crucial need to thoroughly study the camp's spatial genealogies and geographical histories and develop a deeper understanding of its complex political geographies.

Camps and modernity: the Zionist realisation of utopia

Zionism has developed as a modern national movement with a theological context: the messianic myth of the Jewish 'return to Zion' (Kimmerling, 1999). The Zionist ideology appeared as part of the historical category of *modernity* at the same time as other nineteenth-century revolutionary ideologies, representing a secular universal attempt for redemption from a reality of an exiled minority in a rational effort to actively form a new Jewish collective identity. It was part of *modernism* as an aesthetic category, typified by the destruction of the past and the search for new cultural practices, and *modernisation*, as a scientific, economic and sociological category, was an inseparable aspect of its development (Barell & Ohana, 2014, pp. 4–5; Ohana, 2012, p. 1). This was expressed in all aspects of the Zionist enterprise from its political and economic institutions to its technological project. It was foremost exemplified in the concentration and transportation of masses of people and their subsequent resettlement in their new land according to a calculated plan. Using modern technologies to manipulate and reshape populations and territories, the camp was widely adopted by Zionist and later Israeli organisations in order to achieve this ambitious task.

The social and technological changes of modernity have led to the emergence of the genre of utopia, in which perfect modules of desirable communities are imagined. Social utopias, in which thinkers recruit science and technology for the realisation of their cultural vision, arguably represent what Zygmunt Bauman suggests in *Modernity and Ambivalence* (1991) as the essence of modernity: the struggle for order against chaos. Edward Bellamy's *Looking*