



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Political Geography

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/polgeo

Geographies of the camp

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online xxx

Keywords:
Camp
Biopolitics
Agamben
Geographies of exception

ABSTRACT

Facing the current growing global archipelago of encampments – including concentration, detention, transit, identification, refugee, military and training camps, this article is a geographical reflection on ‘the camp’, as a modern institution and as a spatial bio-political technology. In particular, it is about the past and present camp geographies and the apparatus of dispositifs that make them an ever-present spatial formation in the management of custody and care characterizing many authoritarian regimes as well as many contemporary democracies. I especially focus on the works of Paul Gilroy, Giorgio Agamben and Reviel Netz to discuss camp spatialities, the normalization of camp geographies, and related biopolitics. In doing so, I advance the argument to resist on present-day proliferating manifestations of camp and ‘camp thinking’, calling for the incorporation of ‘camp studies’ into the broader field of political geography to considering the geographies of the camp as constitutive hubs of much broader, modern geopolitical economies.

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This article is a geographical reflection on ‘the camp’, as a modern institution and as a spatial biopolitical technology. In particular, it is about the past and present camp geographies and the apparatus of *dispositifs* that make them an ever-present spatial formation in the management of custody and care characterizing many authoritarian regimes as well as contemporary democracies. It is also about the normalization of these very geographies, and the related need to incorporate ‘camp studies’ into the broader field of political geography, not merely as spaces of exception, but rather as constitutive hubs of much broader geo-political economies or, as Reviel Netz would put it, as part of specific ecologies of modernity based on the attempt to realize forms of total space and total mobility control (Netz, 2004).

In the summer of 2014, in preparation for this article, I was re-reading once again Primo Levi’s *If this is a man* (1991). While doing so, I was surrounded by a crowd of people at the beach simply enjoying their holidays on a Croatian island, like every summer. A sense of banal and reassuring normality was pervading that quiet landscape of leisure. My first thoughts went to the Mediterranean island of Lampedusa, in Southern Italy, where desperate asylum seekers often land on a beach populated by tourists serenely bathing in the sun, before being brought into the infamous identification camp on that same island, or being dispersed to other camps across Italy (see, for examples, Cuttitta, 2012; Di Benedetto, 2007; Dino, 2006). Sometimes these floating bodies reach the shore

to die namelessly, other times they try to escape the police to avoid being interned, in both cases provoking a momentary disruption in the routinized slow pace of the holiday goers (Kitagawa, 2011). In any case, the overall normalization of ‘the camp geographies’ into and by the banal spatialities of vacationing, in Lampedusa, as in many other locations in Europe and elsewhere, is testimony to the almost invisible but real incorporation of the camp into our everyday practices, leading to the difficulties we encounter in relating the experience of the camp to the political landscapes of normality that regulate our daily practices.

There is a passage of Levi’s narrative that struck me particularly at that moment. It is where he refers to the memory of the camp and the impossibility of recounting the experience to his friends and family back home:

“It is my sister here with some unidentified friends, and many other people. They are listening to me and it is this very story that I am telling... I also speak diffusely of our hunger, and of the lice-control, and of the kapo who hit me on the nose... It is an intense pleasure, physical, inexpressible, to be at home, among friendly people, and to have so many things to recount: but I cannot help noticing that my listeners do not follow me. In fact, they are completely indifferent: they speak confusedly of other things among themselves, as if I was not there” (Levi, 1991: p. 64).

This brief observation, almost a philosophical one in Levi’s otherwise very factual account, struck me for two reasons, both

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related to the main argument of this paper: first, the fact that the camp, its experience, somehow seems to belong to the realm of the unspeakable, and therefore brings up questions about the possibility of testimony and especially about what, literally, ‘remains of Auschwitz’ (to use Agamben’s expression, 1998); second, it made me wonder: how are we, after Auschwitz, still able to metabolize the camps and remain fundamentally indifferent to their presence, implicitly rendering them as part of our everyday geographies? Or, to put in another way, what sort of mechanism is in place that allows ‘the camp’ to be normalized, to operate in some cases just next door to where we live?

Nazi and Soviet camps, but also first and foremost colonial camps, were clearly experimental laboratories for the new (bio) political technologies of control and exploitation implemented by those regimes. What was experimented in those enclavic spaces is still at the core of important debates in the humanities and the social sciences today. However, the most urgent question that inevitably emerges from those debates is the following: what is being experimented and produced in the contemporary camps proliferating around us? What is the current growing global archipelago of encampments – including concentration, detention, transit, identification, refugee, military, training but also leisure and recreation camps? (On contemporary detention and transit camp geographies in Europe see Migreurop’s website: <http://www.migreurop.org/>). These seem to be fundamental questions about the relationship between biopower and camps of all sorts and nature, which I believe geography and geographers cannot easily avoid.

In this paper I would like to reflect in particular on the biopolitical imperative that seems to be at the core of all camps. I also intend to interrogate the relation between these camp spatialities and broader contemporary geopolitical issues, by asking whether the camp, as a spatial formation, may indeed be considered the global nomos of our age. If so, what could actually be the theoretical (and urgently political) implications for our discipline facing the actual geographies of exception imposed precisely by the proliferation of new camps globally? I will try to do so first by briefly discussing the most recent developments in what I tentatively describe as ‘camp studies’. I will then draw on the work of three authors who have discussed the camp and its spatialities in important ways, offering arguably some of the most pertinent responses to the questions at the core of the present paper: (1) Paul Gilroy and his post-racial approach to camp thinking; (2) Giorgio Agamben and his conceptualization of the camp as a paradigmatic space of sovereign exception; and (3) Reviel Netz and his ‘environmental ecology of Auschwitz’ based on the history of the barbed wire.

I will look at how their work speaks to the urgency of a geographical understanding of the camp and the related need to develop a tentative spatial theory of the camp, which is one of the objectives of a much larger project about the bio-geo-politics of modernity that I have been engaging with in the past decade or so (Giaccaria & Minca, 2015a, 2015b). This will lead to my concluding remarks, and to a few considerations about the meaning of the camp in order to reflect on the *Arcanum imperii* of modernity (as suggested famously by Agamben) and its historical spatial formations of biopower, but also, perhaps more importantly, about today’s biopolitics and its consequences for geography ‘facing the camp’.

Camps, today

During the International Geographical Union (IGU) Regional Conference held in Krakow in August 2014, where the argument here developed was presented in the form of a *Political Geography*

Plenary Lecture, I had the opportunity to visit the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp complex once again, this time with a guided tour available to the conference participants. During these ‘tours’ one is never sure whether the rather disturbing display of material remnants to which the visitor is exposed is a way to enable reflection on the horrific threshold of modernity that was passed with no return in that site, or, instead, a way to somehow remove the experience of the camp, subtly isolating in an aura of exceptionality the ‘evil’ political economy rotating around what is considered the ultimate camp, the ‘capital’ of the Holocaust (Hayes, 2003). I intend to discuss the Auschwitz-Birkenau guided walk and the related tourist and heritage industry machinery elsewhere. Here, I would rather recall Auschwitz-Birkenau as the largest and most comprehensive camp complex realized by the Nazi mind, conceived to represent not only the engine of an entire industrial region but also the core of an entire continental geography. Nazi Europe was indeed planned and built around a true archipelago of camps:

“the entire geography of Jewish Europe [...] revolved around the death camps [...] as killing institutions, [and] the geographical reach of the death camps (in particular that of Auschwitz) was remarkable. The death camps killed people coming from the entire continent—all the way from Greece to Norway, from France to the Soviet Union. This was based on a geography of concentration and transportation spread across the continent” (Netz, 2004: p. 219).

Netz, in his path-breaking description of the environmental history of the barbed wire, dedicates many pages to examine the rationale behind the political and economic geography of the Nazi and the Soviet Gulag archipelagos. He recounts that when Stalin died in 1953, 2.5 million detainees were still interned in camps, in a system that some calculate may have claimed the life of about 12 million individuals since its inception (Netz, 2004). Nazism and Stalinism were indeed murderous totalitarian regimes, but camps were also created and implemented in most Western democracies all through the entire 20th century, and even today.

According to ethnologist Orvar Löfgren:

“It is tempting to name the twentieth century the era of camps: summer camps, auto camps, nudist camps, wilderness camps, fitness camps, trailer camps, baseball camps, holiday camps all proliferated. And other, more menacing, kinds of camps appeared: correction camps, military camps, refugee camps... although these two categories of camp belong to very different spheres, they have elements of a common structure – the idea of large scale, detailed planning and control, self-sufficient communities with clear boundaries. Management experiences, as well as blueprints of Tayloristic planning, are in constant circulation between the different kinds of camps” (2003: p. 245).

Detention camps, transit camps, concentration camps, refugee camps, training camps and tourist camps are to be found everywhere (for a discussion on leisure camps in relation to contemporary biopolitics see, Diken, 2004; Diken & Laustsen, 2004a, 2004b; Edensor, 2006; Minca, 2009, 2011). They all seem to be driven by a variable mix of custody, care and control, at times involving explicit and/or implicit forms of violence. All around Europe, we are for example faced with the proliferation of identification or transit centers for asylum seekers which often turn into real detention centers. The present day archipelago of such camps is powerfully illustrated by the maps produced by the *Migreurop* network (see <http://www.migreurop.org/>). The striking similarity between these cartographies of ‘schengenized’ Europe punctuated by endless

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