

# Corridors of exile: A worldwide web of camps

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**Urban anthropologist Michel Agier describes how Europe controls migrant populations, keeping them “locked out” of our cities. He also shows how a new, quasi-urban realm is painfully emerging inside the camps themselves.**

The topography of migrants in the world at large and in Europe in particular forms a network of what I call “corridors of exile”. In the following, I focus on a few aspects thereof: viz. European migration control policies; the worldwide web of camps for refugees, illegal immigrants and internally displaced persons; and the formation of a new world on the borders, a social, political and increasingly urban world of “outsiders” or “aliens”. [1]

## Migrant flow control

“The problem of illegal migrants is one of the 21st century’s global challenges,” writes Giannis Valinakis, former Greek deputy minister of foreign affairs, in the Athens daily *Kathimerini* on 24 June 2009. “Europe and our country are at the heart of this global problem due to their geographical position as a gateway to Europe from Asia, the Middle East, and Africa and we are exposed to these migratory pressures. This problem is particularly acute for our country’s border regions and, more specifically, our eastern border in the Aegean Sea.”

Mr Valinakis then proceeds to propose an integrated European scheme involving substantial human and financial resources, the reinforcement of FRONTEX (European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders) and readmission agreements between the countries of Europe, the European Union and Turkey. But one of his propositions, the first of a six-point plan, is particularly worthy of note:

“1) A ship of sufficient tonnage to be used as a first reception and transport center. This ship will sail near the islands of the Aegean where illegal migrants have been arrested, it will take them on board and carry them to the reception centers already in, or due to be put into, operation. The ship must be equipped with the necessary logistics infrastructure so as to ensure a complete health check of illegal migrants and to cross-check their identification data in order to ascertain their country of origin reliably and in a timely manner.” [2]

In this proposal, the high-ranking Greek official conjures up, presumably without knowing it, two of Michel Foucault’s concepts: the state of being “locked out” and that of the “heterotopia” (literally, “other place”). It was with regard to the “boat people”, the Vietnamese refugees packed onto boats adrift on the high seas, that Michel Foucault declared in the early 1980s, “The refugees are the first locked-out people.” And a few years earlier he had said, “The ship is the heterotopia par excellence” (Foucault 2009: 36). Nauru and Christmas Island, two little islands in the Pacific, are also “floating bits of space” (Foucault 2009: 35), used by the Australian government as huge detention centers (the one on Christmas Island, opened in late 2007, can hold 1400 people).

And yet the Australian detention centers were used for Afghan asylum seekers from 2001–2005, and now for Afghans and Sri-Lankans. Moreover, the proposals made by the Greek deputy foreign minister concern migrants, as he says himself, from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and Somalia, i.e. countries clearly submerged in a prolonged state of war, violence and terror. What the establishment of these boat camps and detention islands shows is that, once the centrality of the right of asylum has been shrugged off, a technocratic policy of “migration flow control” can be implemented with a whole logistics, in which security policy may be combined with humanitarian intervention and a language of care.

## Camps for undesirables

In 2008 the UNHCR was running over 300 refugee camps the world over, half of which were located in Africa and a third in Asia. Several dozen of them held more than 25,000 people, and a few as many as 100,000. All told, about six million statutory refugees were kept in the UNHCR camps. In the Middle East, the UNRWA (UN agency for Palestinians created after the 1948 exodus) was running 60 refugee camps that held a million and a half Palestinians. But the most numerous – and most informal – camps are those for internally displaced persons (IDPs). There are an estimated 600 of them in the world: the Darfur region of the Sudan alone has 65 camps, inhabited by close to two million displaced persons in 2008, and the one in Gereida (pop. 120,000) is known for being the biggest displaced persons camp on the planet. After Sudan, four other countries – Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Afghanistan and Iraq – had the highest concentrations of IDPs living in dozens, even hundreds, of camps in 2008/2009.

All told, there are over a thousand camps worldwide holding at least 12 million refugees or displaced persons (UNHCR 2007, Amnesty International 2008, Agier 2008). This figure does not include the very large number of self-built camps (the most transient and least visible variant) or the 250 detention centers and "waiting areas" in Europe, with a constantly fluctuating population of tens of thousands. Since December 2008 the EU has authorized a prolonged detention period of up to 18 months (instead of 30 or 60 days depending on the country): this is a radical change because it presupposes, or rather establishes, a logistical approach, which entails building more centers and waiting areas, but also guaranteeing minimum humanitarian aid.

The organization of the camps is becoming more complete, structured and complex: as more and more logistical know-how is acquired, a whole technical toolkit culture is developing to meet the vital requirements for an adequate water supply (wells, pipelines, plastic water tanks, tank trucks), refuse collection and sewage systems. The emergency shelters are arranged according to "urban planning" blueprints drawn up by HCR technical units. Over the past few years, NGOs and UN agencies have been studying and improving the handling of certain areas in particular: ensuring faster, safer collection and transport of groups of refugees (or asylum seekers, or "repatriated" aliens as the case may be) as well as monitoring convoys and their step-by-step progress (relocation camps => way stations => transit camps) and the painstaking task of counting transportees; improving the quality of the plastic tarpaulins covering the emergency shelters (testing mosquito repellents on the tarps to check the spread of malaria); and downsizing the camps, ideally to 5,000 occupants and not more than 10,000, to improve control over the area as a whole, to make it more liveable and manageable, and to provide against any explosive situations, riots or overflows. The fear of riots is omnipresent, and that fuels the camp directors' authoritarian attitude whenever a refusal or collective demand runs contrary to the consensus, at once humanitarian and technical, underlying the very existence of the camp for those sponsoring and running it. What I mean by "technical" here is the day-to-day biopolitical management of the camps, which is dominated by the organization of screenings, categorizing and dividing up the residents, and sharing out operational tasks between the NGOs on location.

## **Four types of camps**

Given the contemporaneity, comparability and connections between the various forms of present-day camps, four different types emerge. The self-constructed and self-organized camp, by dint of its very principle, constitutes the quintessential form of the refuge: a shelter set up in a hostile setting, for want of any other offers of hospitality, and with no reception policy. These self-established shelters remain under observation of one sort or another, whether it be the attention of humanitarian organizations that occasionally provide aid, the control of regional or international administrations, or that of law enforcement organizations, which monitor them, destroy them or transfer their inhabitants to other types of camps.

The second variety, typified by detention centers in Europe, forms a network of "screening centers": camps located right on the borders that serve as sluices to regulate the traffic of different categories of migrants and refugees, whom they are supposed to channel, detain or redirect. They serve as transit points, way stations, detention centers, immigrant camps, waiting areas. These border camps have certain characteristics in common: the immobilization, the waiting and the restriction of daily life to a confined area subject to multiple constraints; the legal vacuum that makes them places where the exception is the rule; the documentation of individuals on forms, index cards, fingerprint files; restricted access to the remote, isolated premises, which are policed by public or private services; acts of violence committed inside the facilities and passed over in silence.

A third variety is that of the refugee camp proper (run by UNHCR or UNRWA), which are the most standardized, organized and official type of camp. They vary in size and shape, however. There are camps with individual or group tents, permanent camps with clay or breeze block buildings, refugee villages and rural facilities. The current trend is toward "miniaturizing" camps to make them more controllable and malleable. But camps of this type seem to be heading more towards becoming veritable "camp cities". The Palestinian camp, an unofficial urban core kept in a state of precarious limbo for several decades now, represents the living epitome thereof.

The fourth and last variant is a camp for internally displaced persons, which forms a sort of unprotected reservation. These are the most abundant camps, and their numbers are steadily growing due to tightening restrictions on international mobility. Some form agglomerations on the outskirts of big cities (such as Monrovia, Freetown, Khartoum).

Whether it is a detention center covering 40 square feet or a refugee village that runs on for 40 miles, a camp is a heterotopian realm, an area of exile stuck between two elsewheres, two absences. As an enlarged and tightened border, a camp is literally the twofold absence experienced

by one who no longer has a place in the world, having lost his place in the country he left and unable to find his place in an inhospitable country.

## **Camps as border areas**

How is it that refugee camps, unanimously regarded as humanitarian facilities for keeping "vulnerable" people alive, bear comparison with the various other types of camps, centers and waiting areas that are developing into elements of an administrative and police apparatus for the detention, screening and expulsion of undesirable aliens?

Know-how and practices circulate within the network of camps just as people do. Depending on their official status (IDPs, refugees, asylum seekers, illegal immigrants) and the country they happen to be in, people move from one camp to another, but so do those working for UN and humanitarian organizations (International Committee of the Red Cross (CICR), Doctors Without Borders (MSF), Doctors of the World (MDM)). The acts of violence that occur behind closed doors at a detention center can also occur elsewhere, e.g. in transit areas abutting the more stable and controlled facilities of HCR camps. Conversely, the administration of humanitarian care to undesirable populations finds its ideal (even overblown) expression in a refugee camp, but the European governments most advanced in the control and rejection of undesirable aliens also seek to avoid scandal and "humanitarian crises". More generally, in the context of refugee camps and in the control of aliens, the humanitarian system is always deployed in an ambiguous manner, tasked as it is with lead-managing or providing auxiliary support in handling special situations. Those situations may be due to an emergency, a disaster, a state of war, the arrival en masse of a population in distress, but they may also be caused by efforts to expel undesirable aliens, police "manhunts" for illegal immigrants, or the confinement or detention of asylum seekers.

When kept in a camp long after the emergency in question, refugees see their lives gradually re-created in a new skin: that of undesirables cloistered or "contained" in a camp, as enemy movements are "contained" in a theatre of war. Containment, originally a military strategy aimed at pinning down the enemy, is a localized form of expulsion, according to Judith Butler, a way of drawing the border between the inside and the outside of a nation-state (Butler and Chakravorty Spivak 2007). Present-day camps are essentially the spaces of that border, and as such they are involved in staging a fiction in which the alien, tucked away on national soil, is ostensibly barred entry into the country. The violence of present-day camps is, in the first place, that of containment, the forced immobilization of the other.

## **The city and politics at their limits**

The violence of the camp, of every type of camp as a deprivation of freedom, eventually gives way over time to a hybrid social form, at once nebulous and troubling, composed of concessions and wangling, circumventions and corruption, survival tactics and stratagems that attest to a certain resilience. For those who go through the various types of camps scattered across the world, the model of these camps that are now lasting is not the "death camp", [3] but the resilience of life (and that of the city), the recalcitrant presence of the excluded alien, who stakes out a survival space for himself where he has been stuck and can no longer get out. [4]

The fire at the administrative detention center in Vincennes [a suburb of Paris] in June 2008 marked the end of a confrontation that had begun six months earlier and pitted the occupants (whose numbers came to as many as 250) against the French police (Libertalia 2008). The detainees' list of grievances was long, a mix of complaints about specific practical matters (stale food, humiliating sanitary conditions, prolonged detention beyond the legal limit, police harassment and manhunts) and heartfelt grievances concerning the expulsions (e.g. the violent and inhumane treatment of expellees during transfers to the airport).

They were in revolt against being ostracized to the point of deprivation of liberty ("we're in prison on account of papers"). For several months, the revolt took the form of a hunger strike and a refusal to be counted. Then they finally set fire to the detention center itself, which was the climax of the uprising: "To present the events as a tragedy or to blame the fire on outside elements is to deny the detainees' ability to revolt and to dispossess them of the impact of their action," inveighs the association supporting the movement (Libertalia 2008: 138). In fact, the fire at the Vincennes detention center had an immediate impact: "The expulsion machine was brought to a standstill: 280 fewer slots in detention, that means significantly fewer undocumented migrants locked up every month." In the months following the fire, fewer roundups took place in Paris, fewer aliens were brought to court for a pre-trial detention hearing. A policy of refusal and passive resistance (such as the expellees' refusal to board the planes) is precisely the technical response to the technocratic camp system, as it directly undermines the functioning thereof.

A high degree of social (and, in the sense above, political) tension pervades all the detention centers and shelters for aliens in Europe. Acts of revolt – riots, hunger strikes, arson – regularly occur in most of these facilities in protest against the conditions in which they are detained and kept waiting: e.g. in Luxembourg (January 2006), the UK (November 2006), France (December 2007–June 2008), then in The Netherlands (second half of 2008).

The camp is ultimately an urban and political ghetto of sorts, of which Palestinian refugee camps are a graphic illustration. In the city of Nablus, for example, there are four refugee camps set up between the late 1940s and early 1960s. There, as in working-class suburbs on other continents, some refugees leave the camp to settle in an urban neighbourhood as soon as their resources permit. Consequently, being a refugee in Balata Camp means living in the biggest refugee camp (pop. 25,000) in the West Bank, but it also means living in Nablus in an inferior, stigmatized condition, albeit very much present and alive. In the West Bank, and in the Middle East in general, the term “refugee” has become synonymous with the inferior status of the Palestinian urban condition. The camps of Nablus are the negative pole of a form of segregation which, in turn, leads to “ghettoization” and impels refugees to leave the camps if they want to rise in society – or else to change the camps from the inside by developing an informal economy, by changing their habitat. In the final analysis, the most radical manifestations of Palestinian political identity in our day can also be seen as falling within the framework of ghettoization.

## A corridor of exile

In conclusion, there are two parallel ways of viewing the treatment of aliens in Europe and in the world and the configuration of the border areas of exile. Viewed from one angle, the camps form the border between nation-states, a border that is expanding into a huge borderless system that takes the form of a corridor of exile. It is based on a whole complex logistics, a flexible network involving hundreds of NGOs funded by the UN, ECHO (European Commission’s Humanitarian Aid department) and millions of private donors in the First World; a compassionate and yet authoritarian technocratic administration, a special regime that has no room or time for democracy. The camps form a global landscape ranging from self-built camps of the peri-urban “jungle” in Calais or Patras to the old HCR refugee camps in Africa: in-between there are the Palestinian ghetto camps and the detention centers in Europe. These are the geographic landmarks that mark the trajectories of those who move from one place to another, often changing category in the process: from internally displaced person to refugee, from asylum seeker to illegal immigrant.

Viewed from a second angle, the camps are, at the same time, realms of socialization in an ordinary exception and, in radical and sometimes unprecedented forms, political realms. In the final analysis, something like a different world elsewhere is being built and reproduced in this reticular system, a heterotopia possessed of a social, and potentially urban, living form.

So it is that the impassable border itself becomes a locus of human and social attachment – and sometimes that of an urban and political genesis on the fringes.

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## Footnotes

[1] This question is also discussed in *Le couloir des exilés. Être étranger dans un monde commun*, éditions Le Croquant, forthcoming January 2011

[2] Greek government's "six-point plan" for the war on immigrants in the Aegean: <http://clandestinenglish.wordpress.com>. (Migreurop, 24 June 2009).

[3] I feel it necessary to second Alain Brossat's critique (2008: 17-19) of the exclusively "thanatopolitical" angle of Agamben's analyses (1997) of camps as places of death in the wake of the Holocaust.

[4] A paradoxical phenomenon that Agier already described in 1999, in *L'Invention de la ville (The Invention of the City)*, Paris: Editions des archives contemporaines