News from nowhere
Mass displacement and globalized 'problems of organization'

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Michel Agier opens his reflections on the 'city-camp' by observing that the settlement of tens of thousands of refugees in camps run by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other organizations is much more common in Africa and Asia than in Europe, and that this approach to the care and control of refugees seems to be a 'speciality of poor countries'.

The 'dominant, even massive, use of the camp formula in the most dispossessed regions of the world' forms the basis of Agier's two principal hypotheses. First, he argues that the camps as a prominent institutional means of dealing with massive displacements of people stand for a larger phenomenon:

> that of the formation of a global space for the 'humanitarian' management of the most unthinkable and undesirable populations of the planet. The camps are both the emblem of the social condition created by the coupling of war with humanitarian action, the site where it is constructed in the most elaborate manner, as a life kept at a distance from the ordinary social and political world, and *the experimentation of the large-scale segregations that are being established on a planetary scale*. (p. 320, emphasis added)

Indeed, impoverished countries in Africa, Asia and elsewhere are today vast zones of asylum. Agier goes on to write that 'while some want to protect refugees, others want to protect themselves against refugees' (p. 319). His examples of the latter case include Zaire (now Congo), Rwanda, and Turkey.

The pattern that strikes me as significant here is that rich countries, and especially the European Union, are *not* such zones of asylum. While some 8 percent of the people living in Europe are immigrants there, the Union is most concerned with the mapping of principles of membership and exclusion, and the politics of a growing xenophobia is hotly debated (see, for example, Balibar, 1996: 361). Indeed, at first glance, such vast camps in contemporary Europe seem unthinkable in this political moment. This apparently self-evident truth is (or should be) related to others. While capital and commodities, ideas and technologies, move ever more fluidly through or above the system of nation-states, people and their labour do not move freely across the globe.

Agier's focus on refugee camps as a selectively generalized technology of power – or one might say, biopower – is interesting, but I would add other possible directions of thought.

Recent histories

My first direction would be to historicize the phenomenon. Not very long ago, at the end of the Second World War, there emerged camps for vast numbers of refugees and displaced persons. The refugee camp as a generalizable technology of power, as standard equipment for dealing with mass displacement, is not peculiarly symptomatic of the current moment but was rather developed as a specifically humanitarian/international 'solution' in Europe at the close of the Second World War (Malkki, 1995b). As I have suggested elsewhere, it is at this moment that refugees and displaced persons first became a problem of specifically international humanitarian action. Prior to that, displacements of people were not managed through *standardized* legal or administrative practices conceived explicitly as international and humanitarian. (Specific displacements were dealt with on a more case-specific basis by the precursors to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (see Proudfoot, 1957).) It is in this post-war moment, too, that the international legal instruments and United Nations organizations concerning political refugees emerged. It is significant for understanding current refugee regimes that this context was a European one. Beyond emergency measures, the priority in the post-war camps might accurately be described as order-making. The Allied military who were initially in charge saw the care and control of mass displacement as 'a problem of organization'. The orderly segregation of nationalities was an important part of this. This categorical logic is still operative in most refugee camps today. In the camp in which I worked in Tanzania, the inhabitants were from Burundi, and identified moreover as Hutu. This camp was located well away from national borders and, indeed, other human habitation. It was not a space with easily traversable boundaries. In this regard, the ethnic

heterogeneity in the Dadaab case, as described by Agier, seems relatively unusual. This is important to consider, as will become apparent below, because Agier's second hypothesis rests on his experience of a refugee camp in Kenya where people of different national, ethnic, and other social categories lived together.

In sum, making historicizing connections would allow Agier to observe with greater force that contemporary practices of disciplining movement and segregating people are not newly emergent phenomena, but something much older and established. These 'problems of organization', in the managerial voice of the Allied military, are conjugations of a still robustly national logic. The very notion of displacement implies emplacement, a 'proper place' of belonging, and this place has long been assumed to be a home in a territorial, sovereign nation-state. The specific device of the refugee camp also operates in intimate relation to the logic of the national order of things. The camp presents itself, socially and juridically, as a 'space of exception', and as an emergency measure, and is yet startlingly routine and familiar. As Giorgio Agamben notes, citing Carl Schmitt, the exception 'thinks the general with intense passion' (Agamben, 1998: 16). 'Through the state of exception, the sovereign "creates and guarantees the situation" that the law needs for its own validity' (Agamben, 1998: 17).

Global segregations and the control of the movement of people

The second direction I would pursue is one of critical comparisons. Agier maintains that camps are socio-spatial sites of power that exist 'nowhere else'. I would maintain that it is here, on the contrary, that generalization becomes possible and analytically productive. As Ferguson (1994) has shown in *The Anti-Politics Machine*, development projects all over Africa are interventions comparable to large refugee camps. Both forms of intervention are planned as temporary, and yet both often enable the long-term rooting of bureaucratic power in social landscapes in intended as well as unintended ways. Much more broadly, refugee camps are devices of care and control in much the same way as are transit centres, internment camps, 'reception centres' run by national immigration officials, and countless other social technologies that discipline space and the movement of people, all the while producing knowledge for specific administrative, therapeutic, and other ends. These devices of power do not seem to me new; rather, they are by now analytically visible as a very ordinary, systematic product or effect of the operations of territorial, sovereign nation-states. This national order of things depends on disciplining (selectively enabling or preventing) the movement of people across borders, for a variety of reasons. Seen in another way: while commodities, raw materials, technologies, ideas, and capital flow

rather freely cross borders in a globalizing world, labour does not. Labour cannot freely move to seek its price, and global capitalism depends on this fact. The devices of power listed above index varieties of unfreedom on which sovereign states and their globalized economies depend, and which we tend to accept as the natural order of things. The division of labour under global capitalism requires specific, selective sedentarisms such as the keeping of cheap labour in poor regions of the world. An idealistic (principled?) international refugee lawyer might also advance a related argument. State sovereignty needs these devices for the control of the movement of people. States depend, too, on the effective discursive conversion of technical illegalities into the hard currency of 'practical reason'. They are, most of them, signatories to post-war legal instruments like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the United Nations Convention on Refugees (1951). These documents guarantee 'freedom of movement' and the 'right to asylum' as fundamental rights, but their implementation is not considered 'rationally possible', given geopolitical 'realities'.

The camp and the city

Agier's second and principal hypothesis is that refugee camps are comparable to, and even productive of, cities.

> On the other hand, this survival system that is the camp, its organization and above all the fact that it constitutes a 'relatively large, dense, and permanent settlement of socially heterogeneous individuals', creates opportunities for encounters, exchanges and reworkings of identity among all who live there. In this sense, the humanitarian device of the camps *produces cities*, '*de la ville*', if one considers the city from the point of view of its essential complexity. 'The very being of the city', Bernard Lepetit stresses, is a heterogeneous ensemble of identity resources whose confrontation defines 'the space of action for city-dwellers' and determines 'the transforming capacities of the urban' (1996: 32). (p. 322, emphasis in original)

The bulk of Agier's evidence from the Dadaab case seems to be marshalled to show that refugee camps can and do become spaces of 'urban sociability', cities or 'city-maps'. Yet, in the end, Agier himself seems to conclude that the camp he visited in Kenya was not a city, not urban, after all.

> The camp, then, is comparable to the city, and yet it cannot 'reach it'. [. . .] [E]verything is potential, yet nothing develops, in contrast to the townships of South-African apartheid or the native encampments of the colonial cities, these other models with which the refugee camp shares an incomplete, unfinished, form of urbanity. Even when stabilized, *the camp remains a stunted*

city-to-be-made by definition naked. Why does it not manage to turn into a genuine space of urban sociability, an *urbs*, and from there to realize itself as a political space, a *polis*? (p. 336, emphasis added)

Conceiving the city as a 'stage' that the camp cannot reach introduces a surprising developmentalism to Agier's argument. This leads me to ask: what are the analytical reasons and stakes in trying to conceptualize a refugee camp as a city? Why is this analytically productive? Many social researchers working in Africa might approach this sceptically. In his *Struggle for the City: Migrant Labor, Capital, and the State in Urban Africa*, Frederick Cooper writes: 'The concept of urbanization, as Castells (1977) argues, is less powerful as an analytic tool than as ideology: It defines a certain kind of social structure as inherently modern, inevitable, and superior' (Cooper, 1983: 13). Cooper goes on to say that scholars are now less sure than they used to be about what urban means. Rather than seeing 'urbanization' as an answer or explanation for given arrangements of space and movement, Cooper suggests a more open question: 'What is the relationship of particular kinds of space to particular social processes?' (Cooper, 1983: 13).

Leaving aside the vexing question of the city as a developmental 'stage' marked by 'complexity', I would like to make an argument here that parallels in form the comments I made regarding Agier's first hypothesis. I suggested, in other words, that refugee camps are not 'test beds' of global segregations yet to come, but, rather, part and parcel of well-established *inter*-national technologies of power for the control of space and movement. In those technologies, the refugee camp is 'standard equipment', along with transit centres, reception centres, holding cells, prisons, labour compounds, ghettoes, and other familiar features of the modern sociopolitical landscape.

My argument here also involves critical comparisons and analytical linkages. Like the nation-state, the city entails expectations of citizenship. The refugee camp does not encourage such expectations, although formal refugee status can function as a socially salient legal status.

James Holston and Arjun Appadurai write in a special issue of *Public Culture* on 'Cities and Citizenship' that much of the contemporary

turmoil of citizenship derives from the following problem: although in theory full access to rights depends on membership, in practice that which constitutes citizenship substantively is often independent of its formal status. In other words, formal membership in the nation-state is increasingly neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for substantive citizenship. That it is not sufficient is obvious for many poor citizens who have formal membership in the state but who are excluded in fact or law from enjoying the rights of citizenship and participating effectively in its organization. [. . .] [I]t is now evident that a condition of *formal membership* without much *substantive*

citizenship characterizes many of the societies which have experienced recent transitions to democracy and market capitalism in Latin America, Asia, and Eastern Europe. (1996: 190; emphases added)

Holston and Appadurai also make a link that is crucial to the present context: refugee-ness is negotiated (by persons who are refugees and the institutions whose mandate they are) in a world in which immigration and the complexities of immigrant status are ever more acutely politicized and economically consequential. Taking as a key starting point Foucault's argument about how politics has become biopolitics, writing in a similar vein, Agamben writes that 'the development and triumph of capitalism would not have been possible [. . .] without the disciplinary control achieved by the new bio-power, which, through a series of appropriate technologies, so to speak created the "docile bodies" that it needed' (Agamben, 1998: 3).

As Holston and Appadurai argue, there are more and less rigid categories of limited membership and non-membership that co-exist with the idealized full citizenship of legal theory. 'Immigration is a central link between classical issues of citizenship – imaged as a right-bearing form of membership in the territorial nation-state – and the city as this dense and heterogeneous lived space.' (Holston and Appadurai, 1996: 195–6)

> The social and even legal distinctions between immigrants and refugees are blurred in practice by such categories as 'economic refugees', victims of famine and 'natural' disasters, 'undocumented aliens', legal 'resident aliens', 'guest workers', etc. The new legal cocktail tends to give special privileges to the managers of global capital [. . .]. [I]t renders significant segments of the transnational low-income labor force illegal by using the system of national boundaries to criminalize the immigrants it attracts for low-wage work. (Holston and Appadurai, 1996: 199)

We can say, then, that the figure of the refugee does not exist in a 'social void' (Agier, this issue). People who find themselves refugees have now become, precisely, thinkable as a ('problematic') social category in the national order of things, an exception made familiar through the media and through humanitarian appeals on behalf of their 'bare humanity'.

Voids and crises of identity

Agier describes refugees and displaced persons as 'a new category of the world's population', a 'new component of the human condition'. But what is meant by 'the human condition'? The term does not seem to index Hannah Arendt or other possible links. It signals, for me, an analytically problematic conflation between refugee-ness as a legal and social category,

on the one hand, and as a form of subjectivity or a psychic and psychologized condition, on the other. At the same time, 'the refugee' appears in Agier's thought here as a generic, ideal-typical figure about whom generalizations can be made. This leads us straight back into the immediate post-Second World War years in Europe when much was written about 'the refugee mentality' and 'the refugee' as a recognizable social 'type' carrying specific attributes. This typological approach is present in both Agier's and Bauman's essays. Bauman writes:

> Having abandoned or been forced out of their former milieu, refugees tend to be stripped of the identities that milieu defined, sustained and reproduced. *Socially, they are 'zombies'*: their old identities survive mostly as ghosts – haunting the nights all the more painfully for being all but invisible in the camp's daylight. (p. 347; emphasis added)

Bauman goes on to say that 'the refugees have been cast in the intermediate, "betwixt and between" stage of van Gennep's and Victor Turner's three-stage status passage'. I myself have found that van Gennep's, Turner's, and Mary Douglas's work on liminality and interstitiality enables a conceptualization of mass displacement in the national order of things (Malkki, 1992, 1995a, 1995b). However, I find Bauman's articulation of Agier's argument troubling and therefore helpful to analytic clarity. First, there is the problem of 'the refugee' or 'the refugees' as an ideal-typical, generalizable figure. The historical emergence of 'the refugee' as an epistemic object can be traced with some accuracy, but I do not find 'the refugee' helpful as an analytical, explanatory category (Malkki, 1995b: 497 ff.). It is, rather, a historically specific discursive figure whose social uses have been many since the end of the Second World War. The years following the war saw a rapid documentary accumulation on this emerging epistemic object, whether as an object of humanitarian concern, of psychological profiling of 'the refugee mentality' or other therapeutic interventions, of law enforcement or social policy, etc. One of those studies in particular comes to mind here because it so closely parallels Bauman's formulation of the refugee as a zombie: K.C. Cirtautas's 1963 book, *The Refugee*. Based on his own long years as a refugee, Cirtautas set out to study 'homelessness as a psychological, social, and religious phenomenon' (1963: 6).

> Homelessness is a serious threat to moral behavior. Theoretically, the moral principles of a man, once they are firmly grounded in his character, should be inviolate, no matter what happens to the individual. Actually this is little more than a pious wish [. . .]. The conduct of displaced persons in a disorganized social setting proves it to be an unrealistic assumption. At the moment the refugee crosses the frontiers of his own world, this whole moral outlook, his attitude toward the divine order of life, changes. (Cirtautas, 1963: 62–3)

Writing about the extreme social and psychic challenges of marking time in a refugee camp, Cirtautas discusses the constant danger of 'personality disintegration' among displaced people (1963: 48). 'In an alien world he has become estranged from himself' (1963: 62). Refugees often have the look of 'shadows from the netherworld' (1963: 49). Bauman writes about the 'lowly nowherevilles of liquid modernity' that refugees inhabit. Both Bauman and Agier, like Cirtautas, place 'the refugees' in a social void. Bauman thinks of refugee camps as 'originating as a totally artificial creation located in a social void' (p. 344). Agier uses the trope of the desert. I am not convinced that 'the refugee' or 'the refugee camp' can be usefully generalized or typologized in this way because these theoretical moves involve conflations of legal status and subjectivity. The transformations of subjectivity that people may or may not experience as refugees are extremely difficult to study. Depending on specific social contexts and political conjunctures, refugee status may be experienced as a protection or a constraint or something else. Refugee status as a legal status functions socially in complex ways. Its meaning as an experiential category can differ radically from context to context, from person to person, and this requires empirical research. Moreover, refugeeness exists, not in a desert, but in an often unstable social world of other statuses like that of citizenship in a nation-state, and various amalgams of formal and substantive citizenship.

Following an account of his impressions from the Kenyan refugee camp where he spent two months, Agier concludes that his findings are 'absolutely not specific to this context', that they are, I take it, generalizable to all refugee camps. The fieldwork done in other camps in other countries by Gaim Kibreab and others, however, does not fit the ideal type developed by Agier. This shows very clearly the analytical dangers of constructing ideal-typical figures such as 'the refugee camp' and 'the refugee', and then generalizing them.

My work with Burundian Hutu refugees living in a camp in western Tanzania suggested that this specific camp as a technology of power had the social effect of 'purifying' and essentializing Hutu-ness, of hardening differences into species-like differences and categorical oppositions. I argued that the socio-spatial organization of the camp itself and the fact that it was a settlement specifically for Hutu refugees from the 1972 genocide in Burundi – and not just for any victims, any refugees – demonstrably enabled transformations of politics and subjectivity that produced a collective, categorical Hutu-ness as a moral and essential opposite to Tutsi-ness. Control of the movement of people and goods in and out of the camp was strictly monitored by the Tanzanian authorities. According to Agier this was not a site of 'hybrid socialization'. It was a 'city' neither for me nor for the tens of thousands of refugees who were enclosed by it. I would not argue, of course, that no refugee camp can be city-like, but I do

know that I did not conduct field research in a city. This camp, named Mishamo, was geographically, spatially in the middle of nowhere, but it was not a social void. The people in Mishamo lived in complex *systems of relationship.* These systems of relationship were social, political, juridical, mythico-historical, economic, etc. Their lives in the camp were also marked by a chronic tension between their presence there as 'bare life' (following Benjamin, Agamben, Foucault, and Arendt) and as political actors, subjects of history. The camp administrators wanted to see docile bodies busied in agricultural production, and the visiting United Nations and other officials wanted to see the docility proper to objects of humanitarian and development assistance. In both cases, the refugees' presence as 'bare life' was more manageable than their politics and their (very widely shared) passion for history. Most people with whom I worked there knew well how to negotiate these various expectations and constraints. If I have understood correctly, many also knew that the facts of their blackness and their Africanness were in themselves enough to make them visible to the outside world simply as 'bare life'. In this regard, at least, they shared in the broader circumstances of a great many dispossessed and immiserated people around the world.

> [T]oday's democratico-capitalist project of eliminating the poor classes through development not only reproduces within itself the people that is excluded but also transforms the entire population of the Third World into bare life. (Agamben, 1998: 180)

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