

The Refugee as not Homo Sacer:

Generating personas of 21,000 Palestinian Refugees living in Camps in Lebanon

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INTRODUCTION

Refugee condition and spaces in the past have been analysed and observed through Italian philosopher, Giorgio Agamben's observation of 'bare life' and refugee camps by political geographers, anthropologists and architects, to name a few. state of exception begins to become the rule and gains a permanent spatial form' thus rendering the inhabitants to suffer 'bare-life' whereby they are stripped off their identity, independence and all rights that would be granted to one residing outside a space of exception¹. Dating back since the late 1940s, Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon are a credible model to challenge this view.

My research focuses on three camps, Shatila, Ein El Hilweh and Nahr El Bared and are used to examine despite a supposed authority of a single sovereign power there are 'complex power struggles'² between various parties from host governments to humanitarian agencies such as the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), NGOs and also refugees themselves whom personalise, organise and 'contest' the camp³.



Lebanon is known to being the host of the highest number of Palestinian refugees (449,957, twelve camps forming 10% of the population) up to year 2018⁴,

there are various signs of the intention to exist perpetually, which is referred to as "quasi-permanency"⁵

METHODOLOGY

By deploying a constructivist approach, three case studies were qualitatively analysed, accessing secondary material of interviews, conversations with the inhabitants (in total 22 transcriptions) dated in 2006, 2009, and 2015. This is followed by dimensional analysis (clustering analysis) creating refugee personas and dissociation as the "homo sacer".

This exploration of the materiality and social and spatial development of these camps advocates for a more personal and less statistical perception of camps, thus providing critical insights on how refugees are merging within the community and becoming part of the urban fabric.

CONCLUSIONS

Palestinian camps are truly "the background model for research on present-day camps" and a way for us to look further from the Agamben's totalitarian observation of refugee camps and grant us to realise that one cannot overlook the social and cultural activity that erupts in these spaces of exception¹².

Upon taking this contemporary observation one can see how due to location of the camp and unforeseen events, a camp can evolve to an "multi-ethnic slum"¹³ whereby an increased social mobility within the camp influences the urban fabric of the camp and its surrounding areas thus leading to a leakage into a city. Due to the interdisciplinary nature of this worldwide problem, the research outcomes should benefit peacemakers, NGOs, governmental authorities, and urban planners.

'Agamben's concept of bare life indeed are fruitful but need anchoring empirically' as through an exploration of these long existing refugee camps we can 'demonstrate that refugees and others exposed to the camp are at once excluded and marginalised while simultaneously being able to create new identities, communities and political projects'¹⁴

SPATIAL VIOLATIONS

The dismantling of the camp from its "relief scale" by the refugees stimulated the re-appropriation of the camp to a truly Palestinian one; granting one's distant memory of their home reintroduced in a foreign land⁶. This practice of evolving transgressions evoked a symbol of resistance as we discover that this self-governing discipline, "supplanted the language of subordination with that of agreement and created a common area of synchronic relationships, negotiations between governing and governed"⁷

DEVELOPMENT OF AN INFORMAL ECONOMY

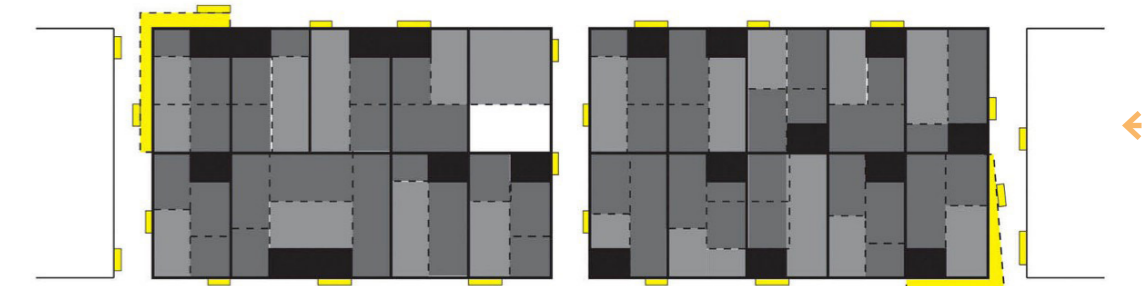
Despite being confined within the camp's boundaries the refugees develop their own informal economy. A new inhabitant of the camp interested in building a home would need to "seek approval from the owner of the top flat whose permission costs between 2000 and 3000 US dollars"⁸. This therefore supports the view that Shatila has developed to become "a space in abjection to the Agambenian understanding"⁸ that we can no longer describe Palestinian refugees as the "Homo sacer" - "an outcast, one whom it was pollution to associate, who dared to take no part in any of the institutions of the state"⁹.

SOFTENING CAMP BOUNDARIES: MERGING WITH THE CITY

Palestinian refugees etch the landscape they live in and their social relations and practices shape the camps physical and social environment, distinguishing it from the exterior, and thus imposes symbolic meaning¹⁰. This reforms our view of camps as possibly "the genesis of unexpected cities, new social environment, relationships and identification"¹¹



The seamless boundaries and paths of Shatila Refugee Camp¹⁵



Spatial violations through the formation of thresholds¹⁶

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