The protracted refugee camp and the consolidation of a 'humanitarian urbanism'

In long-term and large-scale refugee camps in Kenya, Jordan, Thailand and other places, a particular form of humanitarian urbanism has evolved as the product of socio-spatial negotiation processes between the humanitarian regime and refugees. This makes for an intriguing ambiguity: on the one hand, camps exist under an increasingly permanent humanitarian bio-political governance, and on the other hand, inhabitants organise themselves in such ways that they create room for manoeuvre to build their lives and livelihoods inside them.

In the past few years, academics have increasingly associated the development of long term refugee camps with urbanization (Oka 2011, Turner 2011, Herz 2012, Agier 2014, Dalal 2015, Jansen 2015, Picker and Pasquetti 2015). This perspective brought forward how in camps, although envisaged as temporary humanitarian constructions, a particular socio-spatial organization materialized that bears resemblance to forms of urban life (Montclos and Kagwanja 2000, Agier 2002), as a response to approaches to the camp as anomalies, exceptions and violations (Bauman 2004, Verdirame and Pobjoy 2013).

This modest 'urban turn' in refugee camp studies, not only highlights the emergence of vibrant and diverse markets, cosmopolitanism and self-management, in places deemed bleak and dependent. It also showed how the academic gaze has moved beyond emergency *epistemes* and humanitarian and normative discourses, to recognize a 'normalization of the geography of the camp' (Minca 2015), in which people settle down, engage in economic lives and re-form a political body.

However, the analogy between the camp and urban space is ambiguous. It acknowledges social and ethnic diversity, economic stratification, creative entrepreneurship, and forms of institutional multiplicity and hybrid governance, but it fails to come to terms with the routines of regulation and control that characterize the temporary permanence of the camp. As the camps remain structurally embraced, organized, and maintained by that humanitarian bureaucracy or rationale, they inhabit a curious mix of 'custody, care and control' (Minca 2015), and as a result, the language of urbanism fails to grab the ambiguities of the socio-economic and material development beyond bureaucratic or humanitarian discourse. I propose a conceptual approach that embraces this ambiguity by suggesting that these camps inhabit a particular reference to urbanization, that can be understood as 'humanitarian urbanism.'

The ambiguity of the camp

I recently visited Al Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan, home to about 85.000 people and located some 15 kilometres from the Syrian border. My guide referred to it as an 'organic camp,' and highlighted how people adapted and challenged the bureaucratic humanitarian grid in many ways, turning it into a refugee city in a matter of years, visibly, by adapting the spatial arrangements of their plots and caravans, but also in terms of social and economic organization and governance. Earlier, I studied the protracted refugee camps in Kenya that have existed since the early 1990s, and contain a combined population of roughly 600.000 people. Both show remarkable similarities in terms of the regulation of space, the concentration of facilities such as schools and leisure, but also a vibrant economic life that displays the creativity and active negotiation of space, and routines of everyday life (Jansen 2011).[1]

What characterizes these places is the coming together of the governmentality of humanitarian regimes including public service delivery, the politics and regulations of host countries, and the gradual assertion of refugee communities, that challenge the official camp leadership and its laws, norms and practices. This convergence allows for the negotiation of legal, practical and informal space to build and maintain livelihoods and lifestyles (Turner 2006, Jansen 2011, Oka 2011, Feldman 2014, Jansen 2015).

These camps are not isolated, fenced-off sites of desperation, or human warehouses, but simultaneously places of remarkable creativity, resilience and political resistance, that are connected to the wider world via social and economic networks and modern media. In these sites a distinctive architecture emerges that starts as a practical aid landscape but is inhabited by peoples' routines, strategies and actions over time that contest, alter and change these initial bureaucratic spaces into lived spaces, or what Martin refers to as 'campscapes' (2015). The result is a unique environment that is familiar in terms of a modern and cosmopolitan rationality of governance, leisure, and economy, but which is both enabled *and* constrained by humanitarian bio-political care. Lifestyles that emerge as a result of, and in response to, this ambiguous duality of care and control, signify the routinization of alternative forms of settlement that become increasingly permanent.

Temporary permanence and humanitarian urbanism

In many ways, these 'accidental cities' (Jansen 2011), are characterized by the proliferation of a temporary permanence, or permanent temporariness (Picker and Pasquetti 2015), notions that come to terms with the ambivalence, and the limits, of the urbanizing camp. Agier earlier addressed this as an unfinished urbanization by referring to the camp-city as a 'naked city' (2002), arguing that the camp urbanizes but not completely, as it always remains a technology of control (Hyndman 2000) or a mechanism of temporary care. However, as time passes we could argue that these camps do not display an unfinished or even problematic urbanization in a general sense, but rather that they urbanize in a particular way under a powerful and effective humanitarian rationale and management. It is

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[1] See for an interesting visualisation of humanitarian urbanism this interactive online documentary of Dohuk camp in Northern Iraq: http://refugeerepublic.submarinechannel.com/

thus not an urbanism *per se*, or an unfinished urbanism, but rather a *particular* urbanism that that is produced in these camps, as people living in close relation to each other and to services and facilities, that engage and are confronted with a diversity of lifestyles, networks, arrangements and processes of change and empowerment in close proximity. To understand the possible forms of urban life, that are so rooted in the increasingly permanent and normalizing humanitarian character, these camps should not be understood as something unfinished or exceptional but rather as shaped by a form of humanitarian urbanism in its own terms.

The protracted camp is a prime symptom of a form of humanitarian governance that shows how the large-scale and long-term bio-political management of populations is becoming routine in many regions with chronic conflicts in the neighbourhood, such as East Africa, the Horn of Africa and the Middle East. This presents us with, and legitimizes, an entirely different form of human settlement, in which an alternative sort of belonging emerges, which others have compared to a new sort of citizenship (Turner 2011), or 'campzenship' (Sigona 2015). Humanitarian regimes reign over and empower refugees as subjects, with entitlements and other forms of inclusion and public service delivery based on human and refugee rights, and aspirations of democracy, development, education and empowerment. These camps have been cast as experiments, as places where humanitarian governance is tested, and where new and innovative measures and technological novities are trialed and errored, as forms of humanitarian governance that are structural and increasingly permanent.

The future of the camp

What does this image of the camp and the notion of humanitarian urbanism signify in a broader perspective? The development of camps, and as such the development of more humane and elaborate sites of humanitarian governance, is symptomatic not for phenomena occurring in the camps *per se*. Rather, we can understand camps as attempts to curtail human mobility, in which humanitarian aspirations merge with bordering processes (Walters 2011, Williams 2015). The elaborate camp *is* the elaborate border where the failures of human mobility find ethical care and consideration.

The management and particularities of camps then drift away from a strict humanitarian necessity to one of urban management, which adds to the normalization of the camp, and makes urban migrants out of refugees, who stay for some time and then may move on. The elaborate camp that allows for a humanitarian urbanism to emerge, then, mitigates the camp as a longer-term technology of control, and the surprising forms of urban life that spring from it, legitimize and 'sweeten' the experience of encampment.

As a response to the current era of unprecedented refugee flows, largely as a result of the Syrian and Iraq crises, but also of much more chronic conflicts such as those in South Sudan, Somalia, Afghanistan and Myanmar, 'solutions in the region' have become in vogue. As a sign of the times, migrants escaping poverty and the effects of climate change increasingly mix with the more classic refugee category, in a process referred to as mixed-migration. In this context, solutions in the region are imagined by policy makers and politicians as a way to manage unregulated migration into Europe.

Recently, the Turkish president was quoted as planning refugee cities on the Turkish-Syrian border,[2] while others advocate a 'refugee nation,' to allow refugees to settle indefinitely in non-inhabited spaces anywhere in the world.[3] Although some of these ideas seem to come out of the blue, with hindsight and in a practical sense, they have been preceded by the examples from long term camps that embody these ideas in practice. Long-term refugee camps have been associated with a fourth durable solution, in addition to the usual three durable solutions for refugees used by UNHCR such as repatriation, local integration and third country resettlement (Napier-Moore 2005, Verdirame and Harrell-Bond 2005).

The question is whether humanitarian urbanism indeed becomes something like a solution in itself. Do these places show us a future of new patterns of settlement in a broader spectrum of mobility, in which camps are nodal points for the many stemming from enduring and chronic crisis environments and impoverished, under-resourced marginal lands, where people build their lives for unknown durations? The ways camps have developed, in combination with current (forced) migration stresses, indicate that humanitarian urbanism may be with us for some time to come.

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[2] http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkish-president-suggest-construction-refugee-city-northern-syria-502388492

[3] See for instance, http://www.refugeenation.org/

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