In the lowly nowherevilles of liquid modernity
Comments on and around Agier

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The plight and problems of the refugees – perhaps the most rapidly swelling of all the categories of world population – is usually narrated in terms of human suffering caused by innumerable wars and inter-tribal conflicts, or in terms of the humanitarian assistance brought (or neglected to be offered) by contractual or voluntary international agencies. In the first case, the concept of refugees is an artifact of the victimization discourse; in the second, of the humanitarian discourse. In both cases, the focus is on other categories – on the perpetrators and culprits of the massive uprooting that condemned the settled populations to the fate of refugees, or alternatively on the benefactors, mostly on the ethically inspired volunteers, who at a great expense to their own careers and safety bring food to the famished and shelter to the homeless.[1] In both cases, refugees enter the discourse as objects and emerge from it with their status of objects uncompromised; they are, so to speak, the *sediments of other people's actions* and it is from other people's actions that they derive their social characteristics and their identity is composed.

The great merit of Michel Agier's study (this issue) is to extricate the phenomenon of refugees from the two discourses in which they have been, by common habit, enclosed. Agier returns to the refugees their human subjectivity, of which they have been expropriated by the dominant discourses. He restores to the refugees their status of *auctori* – the authors of

their life-trajectories. They are fully fledged actors in the life-drama; people, like all of us, endowed with motives that reach beyond the instinct of survival and purposes that transcend the breadline, and who engage in inter-action or decline interaction, weave networks of social bonds or tear them apart – thereby construing, in the course of all that, their own routines, doxa and webs of relationships. The structure of the emergent routines and common sense are volatile at first, yet like all structures show the tendency to fixation and turn gradually into a frame in which the ranges of options are designated and the strategies of action conceived.

Such a new and illuminating look at the ostensibly thoroughly researched and adequately understood 'refugee phenomenon' has been possible thanks to Agier's decision to investigate the refugee camps through the prism of urban studies. Once the city, a self-constituting form of human cohabitation, has been selected as a metaphor organizing the experience of the camp settle-ment, questions could be addressed to refugee life that are ordinary in urban studies but have not been addressed thus far to the assemblies of the refugees, partly because of their tight entanglement in the victimization and humanitarianism discourses, but also because of the counterfactually assumed transitional nature of the settlements. The status of refugee was misleadingly deemed to be too brief and too evidently transitory to generate processes natural in the history of cities with their usually extensive past and expectation of an infinite future.

To the novelty of Agier's approach we owe the unravelling and the expo-sition of the inner, self-propelling and to a large extent self-assertive logic of the refugee camps, originating as a totally artificial creation located in a social void – in what, sociologically speaking, could be seen as a desert, not meant for human habitation, seldom if at all visited by those settled outside and figuring in the mental maps of other people's *Lebenswelte* as blank spots, or inscribed, in the fashion of the cartographers of ancient Rome, with the warning sign *ubi leones.* Following the common agenda of urban eth-nology, Agier interrogated the camp on three accounts: the production and reproduction of spatial symbolics, the outlining of social stratification and the construction/negotiation of identities – three functions that all cities are known to perform. Once posited, the questions, expectedly, commandeered answers; but they had to be asked first – and this is what Michel Agier did. What follows are a few comments that his accomplishment has provoked.

The proliferation of refugee camps is as an integral product/manifestation of globalization as is the dense archipelago of the stop-over 'nowherevilles' through which the new globe-trotting elite moves. What they share is *extra-territoriality*, their not-truly-belonging-to-the-place, being 'in' but not 'of' the space they physically occupy. For all we know, they may be bridgeheads of the advancing extra-territoriality, or (in a longer perspective) the laboratories in which the de-semantization of place, disposability of

meanings, plasticity of identities and the new permanence of transience (all constitutive tendencies of what I have called the 'liquid' phase of modernity, see Bauman, 2000) are experimented with under extreme conditions and tested in a similar way to which the limits of human pliability and submissiveness and the ways of reaching such limits were tested in the concentration camps of the 'solid' stage of modern history.

Refugee camps and the 'nowherevilles' share the intended, in-built, preprogrammed transience. Both installations are conceived and planned as a hole in time as much as in space, a temporary suspension of territorial ascription and the time sequence. But the faces they show to their respective users/inmates differ sharply. The two kinds of extra-territoriality are sedimented, so to speak, on the opposite poles of globalization. The first offers transience as a facility chosen at will; the second makes it permanent and irrevocable, an ineluctable fate; a difference not unlike the one that separates the two outfits of secure permanence – the gated communities of the discriminating rich and the ghettos of the discriminated poor (see, for contrast, Caldeira, 1995 and Drake and Cayton, 1993 [1945]). The immediate causes of difference are also similar: closely guarded and watched entries and wide open exits on one side of the opposition – and largely indiscriminate entry but tightly sealed exits on the other. It is the locking of the exits in particular that perpetuates the state of transience without replacing it with permanence. In refugee camps time is suspended; it is time, but not history.

Refugee camps boast a new quality, judging from Agier's field report: a 'frozen transience', an ongoing, lasting state of temporariness, a duration patched together by moments none of which is lived through as an element of, and a contribution to, perpetuity. For the inmates of a refugee camp, the prospect of long-term sequels and consequences is not part of the experience. The inmates of refugee camps live, literally, from day to day – and the contents of life are unaffected by the knowledge that days combine into months and years. As in the prisons and 'hyperghettos' scrutinized by Loïc Wacquant (2001), camped refugees 'learn to live, or rather survive, in the here-and-now, bathed in the concentrate of violence and hopelessness brewing within its walls'.

The rope fixing the refugees to their camp is plaited of push and pull.

The powers ruling over the land around the camp do whatever they can to prevent the inmates from leaking out and spilling over the adjacent territory. The outside of the camp is, essentially, off limits for the camp's insiders. At the very best it is inhospitable, populated with wary and suspicious people eager to note and to hold against the inmates any genuine or putative error and every stumbling or wrong step the refugees, having been chased out of their element, are only too likely to take. In the land where their temporary/permanent tents have been pitched, refugees remain blatantly the 'outsiders', a threat to security the 'established' draw from their heretofore

unquestioned daily routine, a challenge to the up to now universally shared world-view and a source of dangers not yet confronted, ill fitting into the familiar slots and evading the habitual ways of problem solving.[2]

The 'established', using their power to define the situation and impose the definition on all those involved, tend to enclose the newcomers in an iron cage of stereotype, 'a highly simplified representation of social realities'. Stereotyping creates 'a black and white design' that leaves 'no room for diversities' (Elias and Scotson, 1965: esp. 81 and 95). The outsiders are guilty until proved innocent, but since it is the established who combine the roles of prosecutors, examining magistrates and judges and so simultaneously make the charges, pronounce on their truth and sit in judgement, the chances of acquittal are slim, if not non-existent. As Elias and Scotson found out, the more threatened the established population feels, the more their beliefs are likely to be driven 'towards extremes of illusion and doctrinaire rigidity'. Faced with an influx of refugees, the established population has every reason to feel threatened. In addition to representing the 'great unknown' all strangers embody, the refugees bring home distant noises of war and the stench of scorched towns and villages that cannot but remind the established how easily the cocoon of safe and familiar (safe because familiar) routine may be pierced or crushed.

Venturing from the camp to a nearby township, the refugees expose themselves to a kind of uncertainty difficult to bear after the stagnant and frozen, day-in, day-out routine of camp life. But a few steps beyond the perimeter of the camp, they find themselves in a hostile environment. Their right of entry into 'the outside' is unclear at best and may be challenged by any passer-by. The inside of the camp seems a safe haven by comparison. Only the adventurous would wish to leave it for any considerable time, and fewer yet would dare to act on their wishes.

Using the terms derived from Loïc Wacquant's analyses of the transformation of the black American ghetto in the second half of the 20th century,[3] we may say that the refugee camps mix, blend and gel together the distinctive features of both the 'communal ghetto' of the Fordist-Keynesian era and the 'hyperghetto' of our own post-Fordist times. If 'communal ghettos' were relatively self-sustained and self-reproducing social totalities complete with miniature replicas of the wider society's stratification, functional divisions and the institutions required to serve the needs of communal life, 'hyperghettos' are truncated, artificial and blatantly incomplete aggregates unable to survive on their own. Once the elites had moved out of the ghetto and stopped feeding the network of economic ventures sustaining (however precariously) the livelihood of the ghetto population – the agencies of state care and control (the two functions, as a rule, closely intertwined) moved in. 'Hyperghetto' is suspended on strings that originate beyond its boundaries and most certainly beyond its control.

In the refugee camps, Agier found the features of 'community ghettos' intertwined in a tight network of mutual dependency with the attributes of a 'hyperghetto'. We may surmise that such a combination tightens even more strongly the bond tying the inmates to the camp. The pull of the 'community ghetto' and the push of the 'hyperghetto', however powerful they may be each in their own right, superimpose and mutually reinforce. When confronted with the hostility of the outside environment, they jointly generate an overwhelming, difficult to resist centripetal force, making all but redundant the techniques of enclosure and isolation developed by the managers and supervisors of Auschwitz or Gulag. More than any other contrived social micro-worlds, refugee camps come close to Erving Goffman's (1964) ideal type of the 'total institution': they offer, by commission or by omission, a 'total life' from which there is no escape.

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. Even the most comfortable, prestigious and coveted among old identities turn into handicaps: they cramp the search for new identities better fitted to the new milieu, prevent coming to grips with the new reality and delay the recognition of the permanence of the new condition. For all practical intents and purposes, the refugees have been cast in the intermediate, 'betwixt and between' stage of Van Gennep's and Victor Turner's three-stage status passage,[4] without, however, this casting having been recognized for what it is, without setting the time for its duration, and above all without awareness that the return to the condition that preceded the present casting is all but cut out, and without any inkling of the nature of the new setting that may loom ahead.

In the tri-partite scheme of 'passage', the de-robing of the former role-carriers of the social attributes of the now withdrawn status – the social, power-assisted production of 'bare body', as Giorgio Agamben (1995) would say – was but a necessary preliminary stage for re-robing of the 'socially naked' in the paraphernalia of their new social role; a brief intermezzo separating the two dramatically distinct movements of the life opera, marking the separation between the two successively assumed sets of social rights and obligations. But in the case of the refugees, their condition bears all the traits (and the consequences) of the social nakedness characteristic of the intermediate, transitory stage of the passage (lack of social definition and codified rights and duties) – without this passage being either intermediate or transitory or leading to some other specific, socially defined 'steady state'. The ostensibly intermediate condition extends indefinitely. Whatever 'steady state' may eventually emerge can be only a *side effect of the suspended or arrested development* – of the fluid, admittedly temporary

and experimental attempts at sociation freezing into stiff, no more nego-
tiable structures.

The permanence of transitoriness; the durability of the transient; the
objective determination un-reflected in the subjective consequentiality of
actions; the perpetually under-defined social role, or more correctly inser-
tion in the life-flow without the anchor of a social role: all such and related
features of liquid-modern life have been exposed and documented in Agier's
findings. In the refugee camp's territorially fixed extra-territoriality they
appear in a form much more extreme, undiluted and so better visible, than
they are in any other segment of contemporary society.

The value of Agier's study gains further, then, if read as a probe into the
local/communal consequences of the new global figuration concerning not
only the refugees of 'dirty wars' but potentially all of us.

Notes

1 The point made forcefully by Luc Boltanski (1993) in *La Souffrance à
distance*.
2 The study of refugee camps has much to gain here from seeing them as a
particular case of the broader problem of the relations between *The Estab-
lished and the Outsiders* as analysed by Norbert Elias and John L. Scotson
(1965).
3 See in particular Wacquant's (1994) 'The New Urban Color line: The State and
Fate of the Ghetto in Postfordist America' and Wacquant (1997), which takes
'Elias in the Dark Ghetto' to link the transformation of the state, violence, and
the (im)possibility of community. For further discussion of the similarities of
ghettos and camps as community and 'anti-community', read Bauman (2001).
4 The first stage consists in the dismantling of the old identity, the third and
last in assembling the new one; see the classic works of Arnold van Gennep
(1960) and Victor Turner (1969).

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Erratum

In Sherry Ortner's article, ' "Burned like a tatoo": high school social categories and "American culture" ' (Vol. 3, No. 2, June 2002), the headings on the charts on pages 131 and 133 have been reversed. In both cases the left column should be headed 'Tame' and the right column 'Wild'.