Ethnography

Still stuck between war and city
A response to Bauman and Malkki

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     translated by Richard Nice and Loïc Wacquant

I am very grateful to Liisa Malkki and Zygmunt Bauman for their close reading and stimulating comments on my article. Malkki's critique of the limitations of my case study and the conceptual insights suggested by Bauman both open up some fascinating questions and directions. There are many ways of going beyond my article, constrained as it was by the limits of scale and scope, and by its focus on describing a local situation in terms of one overriding question, that of the *urbanity of, and in, the camps.* I shall here point to some of the further possible developments that strike me as particularly fruitful by running through the two themes juxtaposed in the initial article, that of the urban study of the camps and that of their embeddedness in a global context of rising segregation of social outcasts.

   I return first to the hypothesis of *camps as cities*: my earlier research experience in the poor neighbourhoods and urban peripheries in Black Africa and Latin America (Agier, 1999) and the fact that I initially discovered the question of forced displacements in an urban periphery – that of the district of Agua Blanca, in Cali, Colombia – led me to approach the question of the city-camps along a twofold track, at once practical and theoretical. In practice, I asked myself, upon returning from Colombia in 1999, what connections and differences are there between the least assisted and the most assisted among the people displaced by war – for instance, between Colombia's internally displaced persons arriving, in large numbers but generally very discreetly and in small groups, in the dispossessed peripheries of cities where they form as it were the margin of the margin,[1]

and the African refugees, amongst whom figure those who are most impacted by the 'total' humanitarian response, that of the camps? After all, to paraphrase a question the existentialists used to ask, isn't something (a camp) better than nothing? I acknowledge that I have no firm and definite answer to this question, because the issue of emergency (and of its 'best possible' treatment) is itself difficult to frame (when does a humanitarian emergency start and when does it end?), and because it is nowadays over-determined, even perverted, by the various forms of politicization of the humanitarian (Brauman, 1996). For instance, the Belgian section of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF-Belgique) is currently debating whether it is appropriate to continue its activities in the Dadaab camps in Kenya, where I conducted my fieldwork, given that the emergency there is largely over. Besides, the operational aspect of the camps, especially in medical terms, is called into question by experts in large-scale humanitarian intervention (see, for example, Van Damme, 1995). This intensifies the problematic of the camps from the standpoint of the socio-spatial organization they represent and of their political ends. What makes Dadaab interesting is therefore that it was a relatively well-established, tried and tested apparatus for the provision of *care, cure and control*. This site had been chosen precisely owing to its exemplary sedimentation, because it could be a fully-realized if not paradigmatic case of the 'permanence of transitoriness' and 'durability of the transient', as Zygmunt Bauman (this issue, p. 347) puts it so well.

At the theoretical level, my previous fieldwork in poor neighbourhoods on *invasiones* and peripheries had enabled me to see how destitute city-dwellers 'invent' and at the same time define their city in essentially relational, cultural and political terms, in spite of the precarious material conditions of their urban existence. On the basis of this experience, going against the currents that reproach the city for no longer 'making a society',[2] I structured my research around a question which, as I see it, is more universal or anthropological than normative or evolutionist (as Liisa Malkki concludes from her reading of my article): how are individuals, however ethnically diverse and economically impoverished they may be, able, once they are brought together, to *faire ville*, that is, to construct a 'city' in the relational sense (*urbs*) and in the political sense (*polis*)? This question makes it possible to rethink the city in terms of some essential and generic principles (complexity, distance, exchanges) in the global, and extensively observed, context of the 'end of cities'.[3] But above all, in the case of the refugee camps, it enabled me to problematize the observation of a situation which presents itself initially as pertaining to 'bio-power', pure power over the 'bare life' of the beings cared for, controlled, and arrived there as nameless victims after losing their own social mediations (Agamben, 1998).

This is a deliberately strong and even committed hypothesis: in a sense,

urban ethnography, in the terms that I have just restated, was intended to make it possible to go further than can by done with a philosophy of camps, no doubt a critical philosophy but a philosophy *without subject*. As much as Agamben and his analyses of the camp as model of power,[4] the provocative arguments of Hannah Arendt (1993), for whom politics arises in an intermediate social space (which she calls the 'world' in the sense of the common space connecting all humans) and of Jacques Rancière, who aims to put at the centre of our reflection the question of subjectivation considered as the appropriation and condition of existence of politics,[5] provided me with a broad framework within which, by means of this 'urbanization' of the research, I could seek to understand the forms and sites of the subjectivation of the encamped refugees. I think that, at bottom, there is a fairly similar preoccupation in what Liisa Malkki writes about the Mishamo camp in Tanzania, where she focused on the 'chronic tension between their presence there as "bare life" . . . and as political actors, subjects of history' (p. 359). The particularities of the ethnographic site and/or the theoretical paradigms of the researchers and the questions they pose may lead them to attribute more or less significance to innovations or to invariant elements, to exchange or closure into established identities, and so on.

My own recent observation of the settlement in a rural milieu of 57,000 refugees, mainly Angolan but also Congolese, Rwandan and Burundi, at the UNHCR (United Nations High Commission on Refugees) site at Maheba in northwest Zambia, presented me with a space, one could say an 'agglomeration of refugees' probably intermediate between that described by Liisa Malkki (1995a) in *Purity and Exile* and the Dadaab camps which I have described in 'Between War and City': a very dispersed habitat (with allotted plots of land) on the older part of the site (opened in 1971), the formation of 'villages' resembling small urban nodes for those who arrived in the late 1990s, a regrouping in transit camps and transfer into empty spaces in groups of about one thousand people, in 'villages' without access to land for the Angolans driven from their homes by the current phase of the war. If they are all refugees and are therefore experiencing, to varying degrees, an exceptional situation as their norm (namely, exclusion from the general *law* as a norm circumscribed within a given space), there are still differences. They do not all suffer in the same way; they do not depend in the same way on humanitarian aid or have the same relation to their country of origin.

This diversity of the places, histories and trajectories of refugees and the displaced, which I fully acknowledge, shows how important it is to know the precise context of the situations observed. In this particular case (and this is what makes the worldwide dimension of the refugee phenomenon decisive), everything suggests that the present context is one of a vast and systematic global segregation, in which undesirable populations are kept aside and subjected to special regimes, while 'on the other side' the

privileged withdraw and enclose themselves for protection (according to the pattern disclosed by Caldeira, 2001). The latter form 'gated communities' whereas the former (refugees, IDPs – internally displaced persons – AIDS victims, prisoners, the homeless and those displaced by hunger) form *gated identities*: sullied, spoiled, stigmatized identities, of which, all the same, it seems to me, it needs to be said that they are without a specific place or culture corresponding to those identities – without community and the safety it offers (Bauman, 2001). In the Dadaab camps, untreated tuberculosis victims spontaneously arrive to seek treatment in the bush hospitals of Médecins Sans Frontières: they pretend to be refugees, but, because they have no ration cards, they have to beg in the market, sleep in the mosques made of planks and plastic sheets, and become thus the refugees of the refugees.[6]

More generally, I believe, with Liisa Malkki (1995b), that *em*-placement and *dis*-placement have to be grasped and analysed together. There is a shared problematic, in the present-day world, between all those whose loss of 'anthropological places' (Augé, 1992) should make us reflect on the fact that, in a general way, far from being self-evident, the structuring locality was the result of local investments, an effect of the deployment of 'techniques for the production of locality' (Appadurai, 1996: 182). It seems to me important now to direct attention to the reconstructions of identity which are not associated with the same 'production of locality' as before – undoubtedly one form of the 'liquidity' combined with 'extra-territoriality' to which Zygmunt Bauman refers and which some refugees experiment with, more than anyone else, whether they are in camps or in urban peripheries, or yet whether they alternate between the two in the course of their wanderings – as the Somalians since 1991 (see Farah, 2000) and the Hutus on the march since 1994. Suspended between war and city, refugees are erecting identities with no fixed locale, no inherited ground, no safe place, *exile identities* in the process of which the imaginary takes on a place and an 'autonomy' of a whole novel kind.

Notes

1 See in particular Agier (2000); on the forms of reorganization of the *desplazados* in the urban peripheries of Colombia, and especially the decisive role of the women in them, read Meertens (2000).

2 These approaches have given rise to numerous interdisciplinary debates which can only be mentioned here cursorily: see, for example, the recent debates in France in the two journals *Revue du MAUSS* (1999) and *Esprit* (1999).

3 For an overview of the varied approaches to the 'non-city', the end of the city and its replacement by an amorphous 'urban', see Mongin (1995).

4   I am more critical of the idea of the camp as a model of politics (and polity).

5   With reference to Foucault as well as Agamben, Jacques Rancière shows well that one can conflate bio-power with bio-politics only if one has 'never taken a theoretical interest in the question of political subjectivation' (Rancière, 2000: 90; see also Rancière, 1998).

6   For an in-depth analysis of this development, I refer the reader to my latest book, *Aux bords du monde, les réfugiés* (Agier, 2002).

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