

Spatialising the refugee camp

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While the repressive geographies of asylum and refuge in Europe have been the focus of academic attention in recent years, much less work in geography has focused on the refugee camp as a distinctive political space. This paper sets out an analytical strategy for refugee camp space, focusing on the particular case of Palestinian camps in Lebanon. It takes three analytical cuts into the space of the camp: a critical take on Agamben's 'space of exception' that accounts for the complex, multiple and hybrid sovereignties of the camp; an analysis of the camp as an assemblage of people, institutions, organisations, the built environment and the relations between them that produce particular values and practices; and an analysis of the constrained temporality of the camp, its enduring liminality and the particular time-space from which it draws meaning. This spatial analysis of the camp offers a way of grounding geopolitics, seeing its manifestations and negotiations in the everyday lives and practices of ordinary people. The camp is much more than an anonymous terrain of conflict or a tool of international agencies, and understanding its spatiality is essential for seeing the everyday politics and material practices of refugees.

Key words refugee camp; Agamben; sovereignty; assemblage; everyday geopolitics; Palestinian refugees

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Introduction

Since the United States set up the prison camp at Guantanamo Bay to detain terror suspects in the early days of the 'war on terror', much has been written by political geographers about 'the return of the camp' (Minca 2005) into contemporary geopolitical orderings and biopolitical strategies. US and British practices of extraordinary rendition, and incarceration at (non-)places like Abu Ghraib and Bagram Air Base, have added weight to these claims. But if the prison camp has 'returned', the refugee camp never went away. In this age of conflict, mass migrations and climate change, the refugee camp has been and remains a crucial spatial formation in the struggles over territories, borders and identities. Indeed, if Hannah Arendt was right to propose the refugee as the paradigm of a new historical consciousness, then perhaps the camp is the paradigm for future human settlements and communities (Agamben 1994; Arendt 1946).

Refugees, asylum seekers and undocumented migrants are often represented as a 'dark side of globalisation', a security threat to nation-states that must be restricted by a violent and repressive geography of walls, coastguard patrols, detention camps and offshore processing (Lui 2002; Perera 2002). While these geographies of asylum and refuge in Europe have received attention in recent years (Darling 2009; Hyndman and Mountz 2007; Puggioni 2006; Samers 2004), much less work in geography has focused on

refugee camps as distinctive political, social, cultural, humanitarian and disciplinary spaces (but see Black 1998; Black and Koser 1999; Hyndman 2000). This paper sets out to spatialise the refugee camp, and understand how the camp is constituted and functions within geopolitical orderings.

The refugee camp is a temporary space in which refugees may receive humanitarian relief and protection until a durable solution can be found to their situation. Refugee camps are (always or sometimes) spaces of hospitality (Ramadan 2008), identity (Malkki 1992 1996), exception (Redfield 2005; Turner 2005), insecurity and violence (Loescher and Milner 2004). A geographical approach sensitive to the construction of space and place and the constitution of subaltern subjectivities has much to offer studies of refugee camps and camp-societies (Brun 2001). Jennifer Hyndman's work (2000) on the politics of humanitarianism demonstrates how refugee camps become spaces of discipline and governmentality. Other recent work has drawn on Giorgio Agamben's writings on refugees, camps and the state of exception. In this paper, I build on and go beyond these approaches, offering an analytical strategy for understanding refugee camp space, illustrated by the particular case of Palestinian camps in Lebanon.

The Palestinian situation challenges conventional understandings of both refugees and camps. Palestinians are the largest (and oldest) refugee population in the world, their refugee status has now lasted more than 60 years, and that status is governed by a

separate international regime from that of all other refugees.¹ Consequently, an orthodoxy has prevailed in refugee studies and policy that sees the Palestinian case as unique and not comparable to other refugee situations (Kagan 2009). This orthodoxy is challenged by Dumper (2006 2007), who argues that talk of exceptionalism has constrained policy debates, and lessons should be drawn from other refugee situations – all of which are in some ways unique (see also Benvenisti *et al.* 2007; Chatty 2010). While particular circumstances render the Palestinian case unique, it seems unconvincing to claim that Palestinians should inhabit a different policy – or indeed moral – domain from other refugees. The three traditional durable solutions to refugee status (see Black and Koser 1999) are inaccessible to Palestinian refugees: voluntary repatriation to the country of origin (rejected by Israel), local integration in the country of displacement (rejected by those countries and by most Palestinians themselves), and resettlement in a third country (a *de facto* strategy pursued by many Palestinians, often illegally). Refugee status has become a permanent-temporary reality for millions of Palestinians awaiting resolution of their situation. Refugee camps have become permanent-temporary landscapes of exile, spaces of Palestine in liminality, drawing meaning from Palestine of the past and future.

While the peace process of the 1990s framed the Israeli–Palestinian conflict as a territorial dispute over the West Bank and Gaza, occupied by Israel since 1967, most Palestinian refugees trace their situation to the events of 1948, when Israel fought its war for independence (see Aruri 2001; Tamari 1996). Three-quarters of a million Palestinians fled or were expelled from their homes and villages into the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and the surrounding countries of Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. With the creation of Israel, the heartland of Palestine was lost, Palestinian national self-determination was denied, Palestinian society was shattered and displaced. These events are known in Palestinian discourse as the *Nakba* or ‘catastrophe’ (see Abu-Lughod and Sa’di 2007). During the *Nakba*, 104 000 Palestinian refugees crossed into Lebanon (Sayigh 1997b, 100). The descendants of these original migrants have inherited their refugee status, so that today there are about 455 000 Palestinian refugees registered with the United Nations in Lebanon, of whom about half live in 12 official refugee camps. In total, more than 4.9 million Palestinian refugees are now registered with United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) across its area of operations.²

Exile in Lebanon has been an unpredictable and frequently violent experience for Palestinians, through the political oppression by the state security services in the 1950s and 1960s, the rise and fall of the Pales-

tine Liberation Organisation (PLO) between 1969 and 1982, the long civil war from 1975 to 1990 in which Palestinian armed factions were heavily involved, and the years of intense marginalisation since 1990 (see Fisk 2001; Khalidi 1986; Sayigh 1994). The summers of 2006 and 2007 saw conflict return to Lebanon in the most severe and sustained violence since the end of the civil war in 1990. A 34-day conflict between Israel and the Lebanese armed resistance movement Hizbullah resulted in the deaths of over 1000 Lebanese and the displacement of almost a million. Less than a year later, a 4-month conflict between the Lebanese military and an extremist insurgent group called Fateh al-Islam resulted in hundreds of dead on both sides, and the almost complete destruction of Nahr el-Bared refugee camp. These two episodes presented severe challenges to Lebanon and to the post-civil war political consensus, revealing starkly the limits of the state’s sovereign control over its own territory (Elden 2009; Ramadan 2008 2009b), and reinforcing the immediacy of violent regional geopolitics in the everyday lives of ordinary Palestinian refugees living in Lebanon.

My own research in Lebanon has focused on five camps in the north and south of the country. This has been based on five-and-a-half months of fieldwork in North and South Lebanon between February 2007 and October 2008, as well as earlier research encounters in the summers of 2003, 2004 and 2005. In all, the 2007–8 fieldwork included 178 semi-structured qualitative interviews that focused variously on the 2006 war, the 2007 conflict in Nahr el-Bared camp, life in the camps, the symbolic landscape of the camps, identity and meanings of home. My work attempts to understand how the geopolitics of the Middle East conflict are manifested, negotiated and understood by ordinary Palestinians in their everyday lives.

Pain and Smith (2008, 7) argue against a conceptualisation of geopolitics and the everyday as separate spheres and scales fixed in a top–down hierarchical relationship. Rather, the geopolitical and the everyday should be seen as two equivalent strands wound together like a double helix and linked by numerous fragile connections. Such an approach, an embodied everyday geopolitics focused on practice and grounded in place through ethnographic fieldwork (see Hyndman 2004; Megoran 2006), contributes to an understanding of the Arab–Israeli conflict as comprising far more than periodic outbreaks of state/non-state violence. The Palestinian refugee question is not simply an abstract arithmetic subject to negotiation between Palestinian and Israeli elites, but a lived, embodied experience of displacement and placelessness, insecurity and violence, marginalisation and otherness.

In the course of my work, I have drawn on and advanced a number of ideas of space in relation to refugee camps: camps as spaces of hospitality, in which refugee guests are hosted until the time of their return home (Ramadan 2008); as spaces of identity formation and preservation, in which Palestinians survive and reproduce both themselves as a people and their central ambition, to return to Palestine (Ramadan 2009a); as temporary spaces of refuge that draw meaning from a separate Palestinian time-space, but over time have accumulated important meanings of their own (Ramadan 2010); as 'security islands' and 'spaces of exception' in which the law is suspended and state sovereignty is ruptured (Ramadan 2009b). These camps are under-protected, vilified and hated by some, always at risk of attack and erasure. They are marginalised, poor, overcrowded, often filthy and unhealthy places to live. At the same time, they have become tremendously important and meaningful places for several generations of Palestinians who have known no other place to call home. Spatialising the camp, understanding how it is constituted and functions spatially, is a way of grounding geopolitics in the everyday: understanding the small moments and acts that negotiate and constitute broader geopolitical architectures in the spaces of the camp and beyond.

In this paper, I set out a three-part analysis of refugee camp space, a primarily theoretical and conceptual account informed by my research on the everyday realities of particular camps in Lebanon. The camps are characterised in many ways, positive and negative, by supporters and opponents of the Palestinian cause. No simple explanation is sufficient, and a geographical approach sensitive to the complexities of space is required. I take three analytical cuts into the space of the camp: a critical take on Agamben's 'space of exception' that accounts for the complex, multiple and hybrid sovereignties of the camp; an analysis of the camp as an assemblage of people, institutions, organisations, the built environment and the relations between them that produce particular Palestinian values and practices; finally, an analysis of the constrained temporality of the camp, its enduring liminality, and the Palestinian time-space from which it draws meaning. Through this three-part analysis of how refugee camp spaces are assembled temporarily, outside the sovereign control of the state, I argue that the politics and material practices of refugees in the camp *must* be understood as a form of political agency, not the silent expressions of 'bare life'. While this paper focuses on the Palestinian case, which in certain ways is unique among refugee situations, I offer observations and an analytical strategy relevant to other refugee camps and refugee studies more broadly.

Beyond Agamben

Much recent work on refugees and asylum seekers, detention camps and refugee camps, has drawn in different ways on Giorgio Agamben's writings on sovereignty, bare life and the state of exception. Studies of refugees and camps now seem to be linked automatically to Agamben's work in some way: at a double session on spatialising refugee camps at the 2010 Conference of the Association of American Geographers, almost every presentation began with or mentioned Agamben in some way (one presenter even suggested feeling 'obliged' to do so). As Owens (2009, 567) suggests, Agamben is perhaps taking over from Hannah Arendt as the 'charismatic legitimator' for critical studies of refugees (the term is from Jay 1993, 168).

Part of the reason for this is that Agamben offers a political philosophy that places the camp and the figure of *homo sacer* (a person banned from society and denied all rights) at the centre of the workings of modern politics: a space and a body included in the political order by being *excluded*. Agamben (1998) sees the foundation of modern nation-state sovereignty in the incorporation of bare biological life into the political realm: two realms of *zoe* (biological life) and *bios* (political life) that since classical times had been kept separate. This follows Michel Foucault's (2007) insights into biopower and the emergence of a modern rationality of government focused on the management of the life, well-being and productivity of the population, but moves beyond this through a reading of Carl Schmitt's notion of the sovereign as 'he who decides the exception'.

The suspension of the rule of law in the state of exception is fundamental to the modern legal and political order. It defines the sovereign who is simultaneously 'outside and inside the juridical order' (Agamben 1998, 15; also 2005, 35), belonging to that order and able to step outside and suspend it. Originally intended as an emergency procedure for the protection of the state, the state of exception has 'tend[ed] increasingly to appear as the dominant paradigm of government in contemporary politics' (Agamben 2005, 2). The concentration camp is a physical manifestation of this suspension of the law, for Agamben, a space *ex-cepted*, taken outside (*ex-capere*) the legal order and 'included through its own exclusion' (1998, 18, 170). The camp is a 'zone of indistinction' between fact and law, norm and exception, integral to the constitution of the political order of modernity. Rather than the *polis* of classical times, the camp has become 'the fundamental biopolitical paradigm of the West' for Agamben (1998, 181). Those interned by the sovereign in the concentration camp are excluded from the rights and

protections of the law, stripped of their political existence and reduced to 'bare life'.

The refugee camp has a different function from the Nazi concentration camps Agamben discusses at length – its biopolitical role is to sustain life, not extinguish it. However, both kinds of camp exist on a continuum, and in both, 'the figure of the human emerges from behind that of the citizen' (Redfield 2005, 341). This appearance of refugees as bare natural life is profoundly troubling for the nation-state system. Drawing heavily on the work of Hannah Arendt, Agamben addresses the question of refugees directly in a 1994 article and in section 3, chapter 2, of *Homo sacer*. The international community of nation-states has proven incapable of dealing adequately with the problem of refugees, because the refugee represents such a 'disquieting element' to the normal order of states, nations and citizens. The refugee possesses only biological life and not politically qualified life, and thus exposes the original fiction of national sovereignty and conventional categories of citizenship and rights in Western liberal democracy (Agamben 1994). By appearing as a human life without citizenship, the refugee disrupts the assumed continuities between 'birth and nationality' and 'man and citizen' through which bare natural life is inscribed in the political order of modern state sovereignty. Therefore, 'precisely the figure that should have incarnated the rights of *man par excellence*, the refugee, constitutes instead the radical crisis of this concept' (Agamben 1994, 3). Within the nation-state system, the supposedly 'sacred and inalienable' rights of man [*sic*] prove in fact to be 'attributable to man only in the degree to which he is ... the citizen' (Agamben 1994, 4).

There cannot, then, be any autonomous space within the nation-state system for a 'pure man', a permanent refugee or non-citizen. Excluded from political status and 'the normal identities and ordered spaces of the sovereign state' (Nyers 2006, xiii–xv), refugees are subject to a separate international humanitarian regime (and Palestinians are excluded from that regime) that manages their bare life. This echoes the Foucauldian approaches of Randy Lippert (1999) and Jennifer Hyndman (2000), for whom the refugee camp amounts to 'a technology of "care and control"' (Malkki 1992, 34) that, through techniques of vision, headcounts, situation reports and the management of space and movement, coerces, disciplines and produces appropriate refugee subjects and behaviours. Refugee status is fixed as a temporary condition that should lead to some form of citizenship, through naturalisation or repatriation (Agamben 1994). Refugees are included in the political order of the nation-state system only through their exclusion, and 'regulated and governed at the level of population in a

permanent "state of exception" outside the normal legal framework – the camp' (Owens 2009, 568).

Agamben's point here is a much wider one. While the refugee appears as the *sacred man* stripped of all political life, we are *all* potentially thus before the sovereign. Despite all the modern treaties and declarations of universal human rights, the structure of modern sovereignty means that any and every person, citizen or refugee can be excluded from the political order. We are all, therefore, potentially *homines sacri* in the modern state for which the state of exception has become the rule and achieved a permanent spatial arrangement in the camp. The Nazi regime that constructed extermination camps was just the most extreme form of our modern politics. It existed on a continuum with liberal democracies, Agamben argues: 'both reduce populations to 'bare life': one to govern and manage people on grounds of nationality, the other to exterminate on grounds of race' (Owens 2009, 574).

This language of camps and figures reduced to bare life seems to speak to the landscapes and experiences of refugees (for example, see Edkins (2000) on famine relief camps in Ethiopia and refugee camps in Kosovo in which people are produced as 'bare life', and Turner (2005) on the various sovereign spaces in and around a refugee camp in Tanzania). These ideas are useful and can be productive as a starting point for understanding the exceptional nature of refugees and of the spaces of refugee camps, but there is much that can be and has been critiqued (see Belcher *et al.* 2008; Mitchell 2006; Mountz 2011; Owens 2009; Pratt 2005). A generalised model of the space of exception falls short of an effective analysis of the refugee camp. Studies of real-world refugee camps cannot be reduced to a formulaic reading of spaces of exception filled with silenced and disempowered *homines sacri*. Such readings risk losing sight of the complex sovereignties of refugee camps, and the possibilities of agency on the part of refugees themselves. As I shall argue, these two elements are very much related.

The camps discussed by Agamben are sites of intensified sovereign power in which the normal legal order is suspended by the sovereign (see Minca 2005 2006). This reading might work for an asylum-seeker detention camp like Woomera, which is operated and controlled by the Australian state (on this, and the value and limitations of Agamben's analysis with respect to contemporary hostility towards refugees, see Papastergiadis (2006); on Agamben and asylum seeker detention, see also Darling (2009), Diken (2004), Puggioni (2006) and Tyler (2006)). However, refugee camps often have more complex and multiple sovereignties. If sovereignty, following Agamben, is about the ability to declare the exception, then we

must understand what actors, relations and practices contribute to the suspension of the legal order.

In the first instance, the refugee camp is a kind of 'humanitarian space', an attempt by the international community to institutionalise a state of protection and relief for refugees in an enduring but ultimately temporary way (see Edkins 2000; Elden 2009, 57–9; McQueen 2005; Yamashita 2004). The camp is part of 'a tacit and unsatisfactory policy of containment', spatially and institutionally, that relieves the host state of its obligations towards refugees *within its territory* (Hyndman 2000, 140). As such, it represents an 'intervention from beyond', a 'space of exception' declared by an outside sovereign power (e.g. the United Nations) that operates within the existing state without challenging its territorial extent, but also represents a limit to the sovereign power of that state (Elden 2009, 58).

At the same time, these complicated and exceptional sovereignties of camps, enclaves beyond the direct rule of the host state, along with the protected status of refugees, the humanitarian assistance provided by international organisations and the political grievances of refugees displaced from their normal lives and livelihoods, have long made camps attractive bases for militant groups and national liberation movements. These movements may become part of the ensemble of institutions that exercise power and governance in camps, disciplining and producing particular refugee subjects. The Palestinians are perhaps the most famous example of a 'refugee-warrior community', and Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan, Salvadoran and Nicaraguan refugee camps in Honduras, and Cambodian refugee camps in Thailand are all examples of militarised refugee camps (Terry 2002). What is crucial here is that *both* international humanitarian organisations *and* political movements may coexist and cooperate in governing camps beyond the control of the host state.

This is clearly the case in Lebanon where, for decades, Lebanese police and military forces have not conventionally entered the camps to enforce the rule of law. Under the terms of the 1969 Cairo Agreement³ between the Lebanese state and the PLO, which legitimised the presence and activities of Palestinian guerrilla movements in Lebanon, the camps were placed under PLO authority. Although this authority was supposed to function 'within the framework of Lebanese sovereignty', in reality the PLO was able to build up a huge power base, exercising power well beyond the boundaries of the camps and constituting at times a 'state within a state' in Lebanon before and during the Lebanese civil war until its defeat in the Israeli invasion of 1982 (Khalidi 1986; Sayigh 1997a, 21). The Lebanese government abrogated the Cairo Agreement in May 1987, but while

this meant no longer recognising the PLO as the legitimate authority in the camps, the Lebanese authorities have been reluctant since to exercise direct rule.

In place of sovereign state control, power and governance are exercised in the camps by a plethora of institutions and organisations. One of the most important is the international humanitarian agency UNRWA, which has many state-like biopolitical functions including the registration of all refugees, births and deaths, and the provision of welfare and services. Alongside, Palestinian political factions form the political leaderships of each camp and provide security and policing, although in some cases competing factions appoint competing political and security committees. Other important actors within the camps include Islamist groups, committees of notable people, religious leaders and local and international NGOs. None of these actors can be called the sovereign of the camps, but all exercise power within the camps in important and often conflicting ways (see Suleiman 1999, 67). The camps are spaces not of one sovereign who can suspend the rule of law, in Agamben's terms, but of multiple partially sovereign actors – including the Lebanese state and those groups within the camps – who all contribute to the suspension of the laws and the state of exception (Hanafi and Long 2010).

Importantly, the Palestinian camps are far from the only such 'islands of extraterritoriality' (Weizman 2005) in which the Lebanese state cannot exercise conventional forms of sovereignty. Areas of South Beirut and South Lebanon are controlled by Hizbullah, while various paramilitary groups control pockets of the Bekaa Valley in the east of the country. By accepting rather than challenging the *de facto* rule of these groups over certain territories, in other words by sharing sovereignty over these spaces, the Lebanese state has been better able to preserve itself in both pre- and post-civil war eras. The Palestinian camps are part of a wider reality of 'hybrid' sovereignties that have prevailed in Lebanon for decades (Fregonese forthcoming), and the lack of proper security has had violent consequences both for Palestinians and for Lebanon (Ramadan 2009b).

To conclude this section, the analytical value of a generalised model of camps along the lines of Agamben's 'spaces of exception' is limited (see Elden 2009, 61). Camps in Lebanon are complex, exceptional through an 'absence or weakness' rather than an intensification of sovereign state power (Elden 2009, 61; Weizman 2005), enclaves in which state, non-state and international actors all exercise power and contribute to the suspension of the law. While Agamben's notion of the camp as a 'space of exception' is useful, understanding how, why and by whom the law is suspended requires a nuanced and empirically

informed approach, sensitive to the particular characteristics of real camps, the politics, people, relations and practices that constitute camps on an everyday basis. To this end, in the next two sections I offer an analysis of the relational sociomaterialities and constrained temporalities of refugee-camp space.

Assembling camp space

Doreen Massey has advanced a conceptualisation of space as ‘the product of interrelations’ (2005, 9). Space, she argues, ‘does not exist prior to identities/entities and their relations’, rather these ‘identities/entities, the “relations” between them, and the spatiality which is part of them, are all co-constitutive’ (2005, 10). A related idea of relational space comes from scholars, including Bennett (2005), De Landa (2006), Deleuze and Guattari (1988) and Ong and Collier (2005), who invoke the notion of ‘assemblage’ to describe ‘[t]he process by which a collective entity (thing or meaning) is created from the connection of a range of heterogeneous components’ (Bingham 2009, 38). Such sociomaterial systems mix technology, politics and actors in diverse configurations that create their own spaces and values (Ong 2005, 338). As McFarlane explains, assemblage is ‘not simply a spatial category, output, or resultant formation, but signif[ies] doing, performance, and events’ (2011, 655; 2009). It therefore represents space as always in process, a ‘simultaneity of stories-so-far’ in Massey’s words (2005, 9).

This has important implications for how the space of the refugee camp might be theorised beyond a formulaic reading of Agamben’s ‘space of exception’. The camp is much more than a void of law and political life; it is who and what is in the camp, how they interrelate and interact. Camp space is produced out of the relations between and the practices of people (as individuals, families, institutions and organisations), and those subjectivities of refugee Palestinians in turn are produced by these interrelations and the space they are simultaneously constructing. This triad of camp, refugees and the relations between them continue to reproduce each other over time.

The notion of assemblage evokes the piecemeal and gradual *assembling* of the camps in Lebanon over the course of 64 years, as people replaced tents first with corrugated iron and then brick and concrete, and the slow accumulation of experiences and memories, births and deaths, buildings and capital. In the camp, people, their legal statuses and identity documents (or lack of such things), their relations, institutions, technologies, infrastructure and the built environment combine to create a particular kind of space in which specifically Palestinian values, identities and practices are produced and reproduced. The

camp is the people within it and the relations between them: the space and the society are one formation, a ‘camp-society’.

This camp-society is not a monolithic body with a single pure identity, but a diverse, dynamic and at times divided assemblage in constant motion. My intention is not to obscure the unequal power relations and the many divisions within Palestinian society, nor to preclude the possibility (indeed they definitely exist) of multiple, divergent and dissident identities and subjectivities. In absence of a single sovereign, different actors and organisations in the camps compete for power and influence among the population through force of arms, provision of services and resources, or the power of political ideas (see Ramadan 2009a). And while the camps function socially, culturally and politically as Palestinian not Lebanese spaces, they do not exist in perfect isolation from their surroundings. Rather, the camps are penetrated constantly and in multiple ways by the outside: by the many interactions between Palestinians and Lebanese in day-to-day life, by Lebanese political dynamics, policies and decisions, by non-Palestinians moving into especially the Beirut camps (see Dorai 2010), and by geographies of violence and conflict in Lebanon and the wider region. The relationship with the host state is always present, with government restrictions on Palestinian rights and mobility negotiated constantly. The camp assemblage is a hybrid space of Palestinian existence situated on Lebanese territory, within and constituted by multiple transnational and international networks and relationships.

Firstly, each camp-society is part of a wider Palestinian diaspora, across Lebanon (including Palestinians living outside the official camps), the Middle East and beyond. The exodus of Palestinians from their homeland in 1948 was an inevitably messy affair, with many families and kinship networks split between camps and across borders. Emigration – often illegal – has long been an important survival strategy for Lebanon’s Palestinians, and as many as half of Palestinians registered as refugees in Lebanon are believed no longer to be in the country. Almost four out of five Palestinian households in Lebanon report having relatives living abroad (Ugland 2003, 58), and these overseas relatives send substantial remittances to their families back in the camps (Dorai 2003). In the absence of a durable solution to refugee status, migration and transnational networks may represent an ‘enduring’ and effective livelihood strategy (Van Hear 2003). These extensive transnational links constitute a wider diasporic assemblage of which the camp is a part. In recent years, new communications technologies have facilitated this formation of a diaspora consciousness (Khalili 2005), overcoming the isolation of camps by situating them within a wider Palestinian story.

Secondly, the operations of UNRWA are an important international dimension of the camps' everyday existence. In the camps (but not outside), Palestinian refugees receive formal relief, welfare and social services from UNRWA. UNRWA is the only United Nations agency dedicated to a specific group of refugees, and is the largest agency of the United Nations, with an approved budget of \$541.8 million for 2008. UNRWA employs over 24 000 staff, of whom more than 99 per cent are locally recruited Palestinian refugees; it is therefore an international agency that is overwhelmingly Palestinian, and very much part of the camps. As Ghada Talhami remarks in clearly biopolitical terms:

UNRWA has been placed in charge of keeping alive the bulk of the dismembered Palestinian nation as if it were a quasi-state, or a state within a state, with a budget that at times matched those of the host country. (2003, 147)

Although these figures of expenditure are significantly higher than for other refugee groups dealt with by UNHCR, in the view of Marie-Louise Weighill,

assistance has been presented to Palestinians as a substitute for their rights and in the process has been inextricably linked with their continual and progressive disempowerment. (1997, 294–5)

The international politics of UNRWA's aid and services provision continually affects ordinary people, with budget stagnation since the 1990s resulting in overstretched resources and substandard services. The Agency is funded almost entirely by voluntary contributions by states, and had a budget shortfall of some \$39.1 million as of 31 May 2008.

Thirdly, the violent geopolitics of the Arab–Israeli conflict are never far away. These geopolitical dynamics and events operate at and encompass wider scales than that of the camp, but nevertheless are manifested in the camp and must be negotiated every day by ordinary people. The Israel–Hizbullah war of 2006 (Ramadan 2008) and the Lebanese assault against Fateh al-Islam in Nahr el-Bared camp in 2007 (Ramadan 2009b) are two spectacular recent examples. But the geopolitics are much more mundane too, in the form of refugee identity documents, ration cards and the daily negotiations of dispossession and marginalisation. The camps exist in the first place because of the events of 1948, the displacement and exile of Palestinians from their homeland. At the same time, the camps and the ways they are constructed and operate are a response to and means of coping with those geopolitical dynamics (Ramadan 2010). In the camps, over six decades, Palestinians have organised institutionally, socially, culturally, politically and sometimes militarily to ensure their survival and reproduction in exile, and to demand a just resolution of their situation.

The PLO operated in the refugee camps, first in Jordan, then from 1970 in Lebanon, coming to dominate the Lebanese political arena until its defeat and expulsion by Israel in 1982. The Palestinian national movement was an important catalyst for the revalorisation of Palestinian culture and traditions and the organisation of Palestinian society. Affiliated to the main political factions were paramilitary forces, social and cultural institutions and unions. These contributed to an institutional richness that bound together Palestinian society and provided means for all Palestinians to organise and participate in the national movement. The man armed with a Kalashnikov and the woman embroidering traditional Palestinian dresses were on the same side and working for the same goals: to reaffirm and reproduce the existence of the Palestinian people and to fight for their rights. Since the defeat of the PLO in 1982, the resources and capabilities of the political organisations have declined, but they still retain important roles in maintaining security and the provision of welfare within the camps. Their ongoing political activities, particularly through affiliated cultural institutions, continue to disseminate ideas of 'Palestinianism' as a nationalist cause (Sayigh 1997b, 666). These institutions, people and materialities relate and combine in ways that create and reproduce Palestinian values and practices.

Far from producing silenced and disempowered *homines sacri* in Agamben's terms, the camps have proven to be active arenas of agency in which refugees organise and resist their marginalisation, in military and far more mundane ways. As Puggioni (2006) argues, contrary to Agamben, the camp may become a space of dissent and contestation in which refugee *subjects* speak and act for themselves in politically qualified ways that resist their dehumanisation. The camp may be a space in which bare life rises up and resists the conditions that make it such. And while Hyndman sees in the camp 'not a self-identified community ... [but] a noncommunity of the excluded' (2000, 137–8), a sense of community *can* be forged through organisation and mobilisation against that exclusion (see Ramadan 2010). Crucially, a straight Agambenian reading of the camp would cast doubt on the political meaning of such activities. If the camp is a zone of indistinction where political life is suspended, then acts of resistance and agency by those in the camp can only be the silent expressions of bare life (e.g. Edkins and Pin-Fat 2005) *not* forms of political agency. If the sovereign state is the sole source of political life and legitimacy, then this is something Palestinians and other stateless peoples must always lack.

Of course in the case of the Palestinian national movement, agency has had very real effects, both in

mobilising international support for the Palestinian cause and for the victims of acts of violence perpetrated in the name of that cause. For Lebanon, where throughout the 1970s the PLO became a dominant political actor well beyond the boundaries of the camps, the reality of Palestinian agency is undisputed. What is disputed is the *legitimacy* of such agency. This is reflected in the ways opponents of the Palestinian cause have long labelled Palestinian liberation movements as ‘terrorists’. If terrorism is by definition a form of illegitimate violence, then ‘terrorist’ is an illegitimate political actor (see Bhungalia 2010). Such labelling and delegitimising of Palestinian agency has very real consequences (see Fisk 2001, chapter 11 ‘Terrorists’; Said 1999, 72–5). If the camp is, according to Agamben, a space of blurring between law and fact, then perhaps we might say that Palestinian agency has achieved the status of fact if not legal legitimacy.

I want to make a more subtle claim, however. Where Palestinian people, organisations and leaders *become* in some way sovereign, by contributing to the suspension of the law in the camps or controlling its conditions, then they also come to define or shape the conditions in which political life can exist. This is especially clear in Lebanon, where the notion of a singular sovereign state bears little relation to the reality of fractured, hybrid sovereignty practices (Fregonese 2009 forthcoming). The refugee camps are not spaces of intensified sovereign power that produces bare life, but spaces of sovereign *abandonment* filled with an alternative order (sometimes *disorder*) that can have the capacity to produce its own political life. This alternative order is something more than the depoliticised humanitarianism of international agencies, and something less than a state.

It is only when this assemblage of institutions that constitute the order of the camp is dismantled that Palestinians are reduced to something more like bare life. This happened in September 1982, when the PLO was defeated and evacuated from Beirut, leaving thousands of unarmed Palestinian men, women and children to be slaughtered in Sabra and Shatila camps (Fisk 2001). And it happened in the summer of 2007, when Nahr el-Bared was evacuated and the camp was destroyed by uricide (Ramadan 2009b). While this refugee camp assemblage can nurture forms of refugee life, both biological *and* political, these will always be more fragile, transient and temporary than those of citizens of states.

Transience and liminality

The third dimension of refugee camp spatiality is its dislocated temporality. My intention is not to separate arbitrarily the analysis of space and time; as Massey

emphasises, ‘time and space must be thought together ... the imagination of one will have repercussions ... for the imagination of the other ... space and time are implicated in each other’ (2005, 18). To discuss assemblage is to deal with a process of *assembling* that is always ongoing, never complete and necessarily temporal. In this section, I want to draw attention to the particular temporalities that characterise refugee camps.

The space of the camp assemblage is intimately bound up with a temporality of *liminality* and enduring temporariness (cf. Bailey *et al.* 2002). The camp exists, in Agamben’s terms, in a ‘zone of indistinction’ between permanence and transience: ‘a temporary suspension of the rule of law ... is now given a permanent spatial arrangement’ (Agamben 1998, 169). Unlike ‘normal’ settlements like cities and towns, a refugee camp is never intended to be a permanent home. Just as ‘refugee’ is a temporary status for those denied the ‘normal’ status of citizens, so is the camp a temporary place of refuge. The camp is a time-space of dislocation: a space of displacement and exile, and a time of interruption, waiting, stasis (see Sanbar 2001).

This suspended temporality is reproduced in two registers: the external formal juridical–political order of states, international agencies and international law, and the internal cultural, social and political order of the camp-society. Within the first, the camps are temporary features of a geopolitical landscape that awaits final resolution through the indefinitely postponed negotiations between Israeli and Palestinian political leaderships. Palestinian refugee status, bound into the exceptional international regime of UNRWA and the defunct UNCCP (see note 1), is to be resolved not by informed refugee choice but by the outcome of this political process over which they have no control.

In the context of the host state, Lebanese government policies towards Palestinian refugees have consistently aimed to prevent *tawteen*, the permanent resettlement of Palestinians in Lebanon. The transience of the Palestinian presence has been enforced by Lebanese restrictions on Palestinian rights and access to services in the country. Refugees do not have access to Lebanese educational, healthcare or social services: these are provided in the camps by the parallel international regime of UNRWA. The transience of the camps is also enforced by government attempts to restrict building, infrastructure and development. Building permanent infrastructure is intensely controversial, both to Palestinians and Lebanese, as it appears to signal an acceptance and normalisation of the status quo. There is therefore a constant trade-off between the political need to prevent the permanent implantation of Palestinians in Lebanon,

and the everyday needs of ordinary people for development, sanitation and a healthy environment.

The second register in which the camp is constructed as temporary is that internal to the camp-society itself. A theme that came through strongly in many of my interviews in the camps is how life there is a temporary phase in Palestinian existence. As a 42-year-old man in Rashidieh camp told me: 'This is a temporary city, the camps are temporary cities ... where we stay until we can return to Palestine.' In this discourse, home and a truly meaningful life are located elsewhere in both space and time. The refugee camps are *in* Lebanon but not *of* Lebanon, located on Lebanese territory in the present day, but drawing meaning from a separate Palestinian time-space. It is difficult to underestimate the importance to Palestinian identities of the loss of the homeland and the desire to restore it by returning to that place and time. For Edward Said, Palestine is 'the missing foundation of our existence, the lost ground of our origin, the broken link with our land and our past' (1999, 26). This loss of place and history in 1948 is the shared root of Palestinian lives, an experience shared by all Palestinians past, present and future, the effects of which continue to spread out through space and time, and manifest themselves in Palestinians' statelessness, refugee status and ongoing crises (see Abu-Lughod and Sa'di 2007).

The camp is a space and a time of dislocation, an enduring moment of rupture from the space and time of Palestine. Its temporality amounts to 'life in liminality', the present as a temporary transition period between two planes of meaningful existence, the golden past and glorious future in Palestine (Lindholm Schulz 2003, 94–8). Liminality is life at a threshold, a time-space of betweenness, of passage. Without understanding how Palestinian space and time are implicated in each other, we cannot make sense of the 72-year-old Palestinian man in Rashidieh camp who told me: 'we are from '48, and we want to go there'. The camp is therefore not a permanent home but 'permanently impermanent' (Sayigh 2005; see Harker 2009). Refugee status is an embodiment of this liminal temporality, not a normal life to be lived but an enduring struggle for survival and return to a time and place of meaning.

The cultural and political activities of Palestinians in the camps stress that liminality and struggle are better than defeat and accepting the present as permanent. The symbolic landscape of the camp constantly references places and symbols of Palestine: the flag, the map, the Dome of the Rock mosque in Jerusalem, the key and the *kuffiyeh* (scarf) of the peasant farmer working the land (Ramadan 2009a). Libraries in the camps contain whole archives of information about every different area of Palestine, with detailed

maps and books about individual villages and towns. In these 'village memorial books', 'local spaces become canvases for the enactment of nationalistic visions of the pre-1948 past' (Davis 2007, 55). The books, flags, posters and wall paintings are functional parts of the assembled time-space of the camp, non-human objects that nevertheless have the potential (indeed they are designed so) to affect human behaviour and identification.

Palestine and Palestinian-ness are also lived, embodied and performed within the camps. The camps are places where Palestinians displaced from northern Palestine congregated in 1948, where families and villages reassembled (see Peteet 2005, 49; Sayigh 1994, 35–7). Families grouped together by their villages of origin, and different sections of the camps retain until today the names of those villages. This was most poignantly illustrated to me in late 2007, looking out across the destroyed Nahr el-Bared camp from an adjacent rooftop, when a camp resident swept his hand across the scene before us and told me the names of the different areas of rubble that had once been the camp (Ramadan 2010). In imperfect and symbolic ways, Palestine had been recreated in exile as the social relations and geographies shattered by the Nakba were reconstituted in the camps. In subsequent decades, old Palestinian cultures and traditions were recreated and revalorised. Elements of everyday life in the homeland, such as the *kuffiyeh* (the chequered headscarf of Palestinian peasants adopted by the revolutionary liberation movements), gained new importance and significance in exile. These reinvented and revalorised traditions helped keep alive memories of Palestine as time passed, maintaining a connection with a place and time that are increasingly distant (cf. Harker 2009). For generations of Palestinians born in exile, these traditions put flesh on the bones of the otherwise abstract idea of living in Palestine, providing a means of performing the life of a Palestinian, embodying the role of the Palestinian who will return. As a shopkeeper in Rashidieh camp told me in October 2008, the camp is like 'a Palestinian village, like in our own land of Palestine, the same traditions, accents, families know each other, we live here in the camp like we lived there in Palestine'. Being an active Palestinian instead of a passive and placeless refugee therefore becomes a source of strength, and makes people part of a political constituency that is concentrated and reproduced in the camps.

Like a slum or shanty town, the camp assemblage is always contingent, in process, held within a status of liminality, semi-formality and semi-legality. Superficially, the refugee camp might seem similar to other unofficial settlements that also lack formal legality, but even the slum belongs and is part of the story of

the city. The camp simultaneously is part of the city and divergent, an enclave of exceptional sovereignty impinging upon but never truly integrated with the city, existing both in the here and now and simultaneously within another spatial-temporal dimension. While the camp endures in Lebanon, its trajectory diverges from that of Lebanon, and it never truly belongs there. It is a social formation that emerges from elsewhere, draws meaning from a separate social, political and cultural register, another time-space: of Palestine. The camp's temporality remains always constrained, permanently temporary, awaiting resolution through dissolution – of the camp and of refugee status.

Conclusion

The refugee camp is more than just a humanitarian space of physical relief and welfare, more than a space of exception and intensified biopolitical control. For Palestinians in Lebanon, it is also a space of refuge from the bewildering disorientation, insecurity and marginality of exile. It is an assemblage of buildings, homes, people, institutions, social relations and practices that have grown up from a gathering of destitute refugees sheltering in tents. The camps are spaces in which social formations from Palestine are reassembled and sustained in exile, and in which cultures and traditions from Palestine are recreated and performed. They are spaces in which a Palestinian national identity might be produced, reproduced, mobilised and organised, so that a national movement can be sustained. The camps were not officially planned and organised spaces but grew organically with the exiled Palestinian society, each making, sustaining and perpetuating the other. The camps are spaces of agency and struggle, not complete disempowerment and bare life.

This final point is crucial. If we accept a formulaic Agambenian reading of the camp as a space of exception in which political life is suspended, then such acts of resistance and struggle might be rendered outside politics, as silent expressions of bare life or illegitimate acts of terrorism. Such a reading risks complicity with those discourses and practices of delegitimation that render Palestine and Palestinians *in general* as outside any legitimate political realm (see Bhungalia 2010; Gregory 2004). This cannot be adequate.

In the camps in Lebanon, the suspension of the law is not achieved by the state but in the *absence* of the state. The state cannot be the sole source of political life and legitimacy when its sovereignty is fractured, shared, hybrid. A diverse assemblage of political actors, organisations, agencies, religious leaders and the built environment fill the void abandoned by the state, producing particular Palestinian values,

knowledges, rationalities and practices, shaping Palestinian subjectivities, contributing to the suspension of the law, controlling its conditions, sharing in practices of sovereignty and governance. This assemblage can create and make possible a form of political life in the camps, something more than a depoliticised humanitarianism but less than citizenship. This political life defines itself as temporary because it seeks to restore permanent political life elsewhere, through national liberation. As Palestinian political leaders seek recognition of statehood at the United Nations, the liminality of Palestinian politics both in the camp and in Palestine itself is clear: not (yet) a state, but not without forms of sovereignty and political life. Palestinians cannot be reduced to mute bearers of bare life, nor to terrorists, security threats or a humanitarian problem. Palestinians are a people that must be dealt with in *political* terms.

In the geopolitical context of the Arab–Israeli conflict, every act of survival in the camps is potentially imbued with significance. Even the most mundane functions of social reproduction – collecting food rations, cooking meals, washing clothes, going to school – serve to reproduce a Palestinian people in exile who demand the right to return to their homeland, and maintain a stake in the future of that homeland. This does not mean replacing the Agambenian vision of refugees cast out of the political realm with a vision of the camp where everything is political. Rather, drawing on the perspective of Pain and Smith (2008), we must see the camp as an arena in which the geopolitical and the everyday are intertwined, shape and manifest each other. We must see the Arab–Israeli conflict as far more than periodic violent clashes between armies, militias, terrorists and resistance movements, more than a dispute over the fate of particular territories, the final status of borders, or a dry demographic arithmetic to be negotiated between Israeli and Palestinian elites. The geopolitics are manifested and made material in the camp: in the ruptured, hybrid and exceptional sovereignties that render the camp a 'security island'; the presence and operations of UNRWA and other international agencies; the activities of Palestinian political and military factions; the armed guards patrolling the streets in the name of national liberation movements; the murals, flags, library books and dance troops that reproduce a sense of Palestinian identity; the refugee status and identity documents of those in the camp. To study the refugee camp, to understand its spatiality, is to study *everyday* geopolitics.

In this paper, I have presented a three-part strategy for spatialising the refugee camp, analysing and understanding how the camp functions as a space. I have made three analytical cuts into the camp: it is a space of exception in which the host state's sovereign

rule is at best partial and conditional, it is an assemblage of social, institutional and diasporic relations and practices, and it is a space of enduring liminality circumscribed by a particular temporality that limits development and insists refugees seek home elsewhere. No single approach is adequate, but together, these three layers of analysis offer a convincing account of the political and cultural terrain of exile, within which ordinary Palestinians as a refugee camp-society negotiate the geopolitics of their situation every day.

My argument is not intended to end here, however. Notwithstanding the limits of generalisability of the Palestinian case, there are connections to be made with studies of other transnational diaspora populations, stateless peoples and deterritorialised national movements. There are parallels, comparisons and lessons to be drawn from Palestinian refugee camps elsewhere, with Tibetan autonomous settlements in India (see McConnell 2009), and Saharawi refugee camps in Algeria (see Farah 2009) for example. I am certainly not proposing in this paper a model of all refugee camp spaces based on the Palestinian case, but rather a series of critical analytical approaches to interrogate the spatialities of camps. How do the sovereignties of camps work out? How are camps assembled and how do they function? How are camps constrained within a liminal temporality? Directing attention towards camps as social, cultural and political spaces, not merely as tools of international agencies, spaces of biopolitical domination or anonymous terrains of conflict, is essential for understanding the everyday politics and material practices of refugees. This is research that geographers are well placed to pursue, combining an instinctively spatial approach with critical theoretical perspectives to illuminate some of the most urgent problems in this violent world.

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Notes

- 1 Palestinian refugee status pre-dates the international refugee regime of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (1949), the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951) and the Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees (1967). Palestinians were excluded from this regime from the start and fall under the man-

dates of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA, created in 1949) and the now defunct United Nations Conciliation Commission for Palestine (UNCCP, created in 1948). See Akram (2002) and Takkenberg (1998).

- 2 Figures for 1 January 2011, at <http://www.unrwa.org> Accessed 10 February 2012.
- 3 Full text of the 1969 Cairo Agreement can be found at: <http://www.lebanese-forces.org/lebanon/agreements/cairo.htm> Accessed 10 February 2012.

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