Reinventing the Refugee Camp as the City: Theoretical Considerations about Unaccompanied Minors

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The visible presence of migrant children (including unaccompanied minors) in current migratory flows manifestly requires some form of state attention in migrant destination states. In recent decades, the question of who is entitled to rights has become ever more discussed. At the same time, immigration regulations have tightened with increasing punitive measures taken against those labelled 'undeserved and undocumented'. This paper seeks to connect a critical discussion of camp urbanization with the discourse on child rights within the context of the refugee camp space. Considering the urban not simply as a physical space, but also as a particular form of political community and the exercise of citizenship space, the paper explores the question: how does the reinvention of the camp as an urban space contribute to a new and better understanding of experiences and resources that unaccompanied minors arrive with? The article uses the analyses of the reference literature and provides an overview of some concepts to get a broader picture of spatial childhood within the camp. The conclusion is that children do not feature in the discussion of camp urbanization as individual subjects of concern. They are considered as possessions of adults. Moreover, they are trapped in a liminal situation of permanent temporariness. To spend one's life in such a limbo of disenfranchised destitute has particularly devastating consequences for children.

Keywords: camps, urbanity, children/minors, unaccompanied, irregular migration

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Introduction

At the beginning of the 21st century, refugee camps constituted an increasingly conspicuous feature of social landscapes across the world. Although justified as an emergency measure, camps and centers for migrants demonstrate their exceptional durability whose logics positions them as spaces of paradox. On the one hand, camps are built as temporary devices for the management of displaced and undesirable populations, and are situated on the margins of society. On the other hand, camps are viewed as contested spaces of identity formation, empowerment and resistance. In the process of conceptualizing camps as spaces of paradox, the current literature in social sciences often juxtaposes the camp and the city in order to show a relationship between them. The focus is on the urbanity of the camp space, but the urban is not simply conceptualized as a physical space, but also as a form of political community and the exercise of citizenship rights.

The role of space in the production of marginal subjects has been largely discussed in the literature on camps, border technologies and migrant detention. For instance, camps are defined as exceptional sites of the suspension of ordinary law (Agamben 1998), as well as state apparatuses of discipline, governmentality and security (Hyndman 2000). The special interest is in border technologies and migrant detention with the discourse on the rights within the contexts of undocumented migration (Fassin 2011). Most recently, however, there has been a turn into the investigation of the spatial in the field of critical citizenship studies (Agier et al. 2019, Maestri, Hughes 2017, Redcliff 2013). Critical citizenship studies put a strong emphasis on the relationship between citizenship and space by examining the places and the scale of emerging solidarities and strategies for claiming and enacting rights. According to critical citizenship studies, it is vital to look at the camp beyond assumptions of victimization, passivity and hopelessness. The space of the camp is a strategic property by which different groups of camp inhabitants look for new political subjectivities.

One of the prominent supporters of critical studies on camps is Marc Agier. With his call for an urban ethnography of the camp, Agier (2002) has been essentially concerned with the process of the transformation of the refugee camp into a space of urban sociability. In particular, there are many analogies between what takes place in urban debates about 'the right to the city' and the claims that refugees make about the places they inhabit. According to Agier (2011, 2019), camp spaces are constituted by political struggles and forms of citizenship, affecting the ways in which old political subjectivities get to rethink and new political subjects come to emerge. In his view, the camp can become a city in both the space of urban sociability (*urbs*) and the space of political community (*polis*).

As camp spaces keep increasing in numbers across the world, from camps for refugees to migrant detention centers, various authors try to approach the space of the camp differently, from spaces of transit, and of sanctuary, to protest camps. However,

the discussion about camp spaces usually omits childhood (Albański 2020b, Bhabha 2014), even though migrant childhood seems inextricably spatial, and therefore tied up with the material and discursive dimensions of places such as camps and borders. Unaccompanied and undocumented minors are mute categories. Meanwhile, there is an urgent need for the focus on the issue of how marginalized political subjects such as migrant minors claim their rights through space, because unaccompanied and undocumented minors live in a state of limbo that can persist indefinitely (Gonzales 2016). It means that in many cases they live as unaccompanied or undocumented minors across borders without full legal recognition, experiencing permanent temporariness and uncertainty (Albański 2018a). This tenuous life in the shadows is marked as fully ambiguous and too often not leading to durable solutions towards permanent legal status (Albański 2018b). That is it, for migrant children, no distance is sometimes more awesome than the few feet across borders or frontiers (Gonzales 2009). As state policies shift towards increased restriction and control of immigration, a general lowering of protections for unaccompanied and undocumented children follows. The tensions between protecting children and enforcing immigration laws illustrates serious ambiguities and inconsistencies in general concepts of children as being and becoming (Albański 2020a). The paper offers insights into the discussion about migrating children in a broad context of camps as urban spaces.

Camps: frontiers and cities

Traditionally camps have been defined as demarcated places which have an unusual legal status and where migrant populations are more or less voluntarily confined. Camps are thus clearly connected to borders. A focus on camps offers not only a basic insight into the process of policing the borders, but also a sharp look at how the production of borders is intertwined at different levels. While global and state levels seem particularly relevant to the issue of international migration, the making and unmaking of borders at the local level, especially within cities, have a rich history concerned in spatial-racial formations (Yuval-Davis et al. 2019). Some scholars have forcibly argued that camps, like urban ghettos, are permeated by the logic of race as a socio-spatial ordering principle (Agier 2012, Picker, Pasquetti 2015). Both camps and ghettoes are able to reduce their inhabitants to deprived subjectivity, because they lump people together into one category. In the process, the structurally isolating effects of camps reduce different ethnic groups into an ethnically stigmatized grouping. It allows the distribution and concentration of different ethnic populations under the stigma of unwanted outsiders, according to which seclusion is a necessary response to a seemingly threatening global and urban disorder. Camps are socio-spatial formations for the control of not only migrants, but of unworthy and suspicious individuals, and it opens up a comparative line of inquiry on camp inhabitants and other urban out-

casts (Picker, Pasquetti 2015). They are bounded to the ever-present threat of violence in a territorially suspended space.

Contemporary philosophers' preoccupation with camps is consistently related to the nature of human rights which, according to them, cannot protect stateless, displaced and alien subjects. For Agamben (1998), camp space is born when the political system enters into a crisis. Individuals who are detached from both human rights and the rights of the nation-state become available for confinement and exclusion. Seen as a normal condition of everyday life in the camp, everything is possible, and everything can happen. In defining the essence of the camp, Agamben (2003) points out that the camp comes to represent the most potent expression of the state of exception. For Bauman, the concept of the camp is rooted in modernity with its focus on an invention of rationality and technology. In Bauman's words, the camp is a "curious and terrifying socially invented modern contraption which permits the separation of action and ethics, of what people do from what people feel or believe, of the nature of collective deed from the motives of individual actors" (Bauman 2001:269). Similarly to Agamben, Bauman believes that the reality of the camp outlines the exceptionality of the human condition, in which a project of humanitarian order will turn into an inhuman order. Conceptualizing the camp as a space in which action and ethics are ultimately separated, Bauman is able to come up with some interesting insights. First, according to him, the individual in the modern society acts at a distance. Acting at a distance means that a personally performed action seems to be a mediated action, because in the horizontal and functional system of relations that characterize modern society, each individual performs a specific, self-contained task. In addition, this performance does not concern other human beings, but rather deals with "facets, features, [and] statistically represented traits" (Bauman 2001: 269–270). Second, as a result, moral constraints of action are easily neutralized. Moreover, the structures of modern society create a "way in which cruel things could be done by non-cruel people" (Bauman 2001: 272). The law-abiding, peaceful, and disciplined bureaucrats, officers and workers just do their jobs. Third, a rationally designated order is pursued above all else, because the camp "derives its need and usefulness, and functionality from the declared ambitions of modern society, a society that views having such ambitions as the foremost mark of its superiority" (Bauman 2001: 268). Both Agamben and Bauman construct the concept of the camp as a trap in a sphere of inaction, wherein individuals, stripped of their autonomy, become the first of all victims whose responses to situations are endangered by the camp.

Although, in particular, Agamben's notion of the camp as the state of exception triggers anthropological imagination to create a new spatial theory of power, sovereignty and displacement (Ek 2006: 364), some scholars insist that an understanding of the camp cannot be considered in such an absolute sense. In fact, a closer look at different camp spaces shows their typological differences. For instance, Agier (2011:39–56) suggests four distinct space types. The first space type consists of places

where people have found refuge. They are self-organized refuges, encompassing informal camp grounds, squats and provisional shelters. Their goal is to provide sites of rest, before migrants pursue their journey. The second space type contains transit centers, which are part of a larger system of 'flow management' that includes selection, expulsion, or admission. The third space type focuses on spaces of confinement such as refugee camps. The fourth space type covers camps for internally displaced persons. While camps for internally displaced persons can resemble refugee camps, according to Agier (2011: 56), they are more unstable for their occupants because of both local and global dynamics that ultimately shape these spaces. The typology helps to get a better understanding of "within and between" different camp settings. Moreover, it creates a further need to show the camp as an assembled space.

The spatial constitution of the camp calls to frame it as an urban formation. For instance, Sanyal (2012: 634) suggests that there is a need to rethink camp spaces as "city-like with complex social arrangements and economic activities" while questioning whether camps can be "seen as being cities in their own right". Not to mention that many migrants are, in fact, urban migrants with their greater presence and visibility in urban environments than rural ones. It makes the city in a certain way an important framework to interrogate the spaces of refugees (Sanyal 2012: 633). It opens up for analyses that take into consideration distinct spatial, legal and temporal features that affect how migrants negotiate their everyday lives and how they experience both the camp and the urban environment around them. The link between the city and the camp shows the complex architecture of borders and displacement. The sanctioned spatial isolation of the camp reinforces conviction among its inhabitants that natural territorial belonging is the camp, rather than the city.

Agier (2002, 2019) argues that the camp ought to be understood as a socio-spatial formation, in which new identities crystallize and subjectivities take root. In addition to being a space of identity formation, the camp is the organization of space, social life, and the system of power. For Agier (2002: 324), the camp has three features, which he believes define urban life. The first feature is the symbolic spatiality of the camp. It refers to the ways in which migrants project their cultural baggage into space. For instance, camp residents often give names in their ethnic languages to anonymous spaces in order to put an emphasis on distinct ethnic settlement. The second feature is social stratification inside the camp. Despite the limited economic options, the division of camp residents into different socio-economic layers is clear and range from traders and voluntary community workers to recipients of basic aid. The third feature is inter-ethnic exchange. Although the camp setting contributes to the strengthening of ethnic identity formation in general, the life in the camp is a self-constituting form of human cohabitation. To conclude Agier's claim of the camp as urban sociability, it is based on hybrid nature that characterizes camp space, the rights that camp residents believe to have to the places they inhabit, and the responses to shelter and settlement arrangements. Therefore the camp is not a space of abjection,

but a space where there are multiple potential political subjectivities to address political agency among camp inhabitants. For instance, the political potential will emerge in protests, because the camp creates opportunities for solidarity in a space where migrants can disrupt the institutional order that relegates them at the margin. Agier argues that an urban scholarship on camps will show camps as socio-political spaces where multiple strategies of claim-making emerge and various camp actors operate in solidarity that exceed the simplistic understandings of camps as spaces of complete exclusion and bare life.

Nevertheless, there is some initial skepticism concerning Agier's own admission that the camp remains an incomplete form of urbanity, because in his words, "the shift from the management of camps in the name of emergency towards the political recognition of their enduring reality does not take place" (Agier 2002: 337). Other scholars, such as Malkki, suggest a broader comparative approach to the management of undesirable populations. She maintains that comparing camps to other spatial formations for undesirable populations will allow detecting common aspects of regimes of governance and everyday experiences as well as different devices of care and control (Malkki 2002: 335). In that sense, one of the possible ways of dealing with camps/ urban spaces in a comparative approach is to search for similarities between camps' functions of containment and control and the management of marginal urban formations such as ghettoes and hyper-ghettoes (Wacquant 2008).

Territorial stigmatization

The link globally between advanced adversity and migrant minors is becoming ever more apparent. Yet in generally accepted beliefs this association demonstrates child movement away from the home as family rupture and dysfunction. Family proximity and the residentially fixed home have been for a while marked milestones for a fundamental understanding of child well-being. Moreover, the lives of children are commonly considered as if they were nested in the boundaries of a single nation. The two-way relationship, in which children are critical to the long-term future of states, just as those states are seen to play a principal role (as *parens patriale*) in the lives of children, is equally evident. In effect, minors are classified as appendages or possessions of adults (parents, families, communities) rather than treated as individual subjects of immigrant concerns. It is not surprising that child migration, when it is considered, is framed in the calamity, as causing great damage to children's lives. In addition, however, decisions about migrant children's immigration status and rights are explicitly linked to and driven by adult entitlements and concerns.

The term of "unaccompanied migrant children" usually refers to persons, "who are under the age of eighteen" and who are "separated from both parents and are not being cared for by an adult who by law or custom has responsibility to do so"

(UNHCR 1997). The definition of unaccompanied migrant children also includes separated children accompanied by someone other than a parent or habitual caregiver, such as another minor or relative, a smuggler or a trafficker. It is important, because sometimes these children are not considered as real refugees in their own right. It means that they are outside the formal system of refugee adjudication. The cases of unaccompanied migrant children present themselves with substantial increases in recent years, and are thus impossible to ignore (Bhabha 2014, Menjivar, Perreira 2019). Instead of invisibility, migrant minors are treated with mixed feelings as they navigate the web of administrative procedures and legal requirements.

Unaccompanied migrant children are examples of children's lives in a precarious space (Connolly, Ennew 1996). These children face procedures that are strongly protective and resolutely punitive at the same time. After all, according to the law, they are persons who are under the age where they legally become an adult and are responsible for their actions. As a result, their child agency is often undermined and translated into an act of deviancy, because popular images of childhood tend to leave children devoid of agency and can veil differences among them. Moreover, such images of childhood promote children as cute, vulnerable and defenseless creatures, while street children and unaccompanied migrant children are surely not well-adjusted into childhood fantasies. Furthermore, humanitarian impulses to care for children in liberal democracies can be transformed into fear and hate (McLaughlin 2018). People feel they are obligated to protect children, but are also frightened and resentful of alien juveniles.

Inconsistency is an important part of the problem, but some child-specific attitudes such as suspicion, condescension and a patriarchal perspective, also play a role in highlighting their culpability, when perceptions of childish innocence and otherness collide dramatically (Bhabha 2014). Moreover, some of these children do not search for rescue in state-run facilities where their opportunities to earn are blocked, and where their aspirations are erased. They often drift into abusive contexts such as prostitution, street violence, thievery and drugs (Albański 2020a). The street mentoring is highly abusive, but it provides the child with a survival mode, even the possibility of some income. Meanwhile state interventions are seen by minors as punitive and infantilizing. This explains why ambivalence is such a powerful concept to describe experiences of children outside the realm of conventional childhood.

Understanding the ambivalence that underlies public policies concerning unaccompanied children stresses the weight and effects of territorial stigmatization (Wacquant 2008). In child rights term, there is a right to public education and health care, but in practice, there are practical obstacles to their access to these services. There is an obligation to protect children from persecution and destitution, but one may easily blame them for the risks they pose to the very fabric of society by finding ways to push them to advanced social marginality. And because the shattered spaces of childhood such as camps or urban ghettoes become closely associated, in the public

mind, with depravity and lawlessness, sometimes policy-makers and media depictions contribute to the construction of images of these minors as potential criminals and residents of hellish breeding grounds of "social pathologies" (Albański 2018a, Albański 2020a). However, the reality and potency of the territorial stigma imposed upon children should not be underestimated. The sense of indignity, social pollution, and otherness; it carries a salient dimension of self-esteem which negatively affects interpersonal relations, motivations and aspirations. The symbolic degradation feeds interpersonal mistrust and undermines the sense of justice.

Territorial stigmatization opens up a comparative line of inquiry between durable social-spatial formations for the control and relegation to advanced marginality not only of unaccompanied minors, but also unworthy urban outcasts (Wacquant 2008). This does not mean that minors' citizenship status is not a key axis for exploring how camps work and how life within them is negotiated. However, spatial regimes of temporariness and precariousness offer an interesting link between encampment and urbanism.

Migrant childhood and camps: regimes of permanent temporariness

The camp emerges as an important space determining contemporary rights struggles. As Lefebvre (1991) argued, space is the ultimate locus and medium of struggle, and therefore a critical political issue. The camp's conditions are the result of some deep-rooted understandings of sovereignty and statehood reliant on the idea of exercising the power of borders for migrant control on the one side and spatial confinement on the other. The spatial dynamics of the camp allow for the opening of the possibility of political claims of non-citizens. In that sense, the space of the camp becomes a strategic property in process by which different ethnic groups of camp inhabitants and volunteers are constituted as a cosmopolitan community (Agier 2019 et al., Sandri 2018, Sigona 2014). In many cases, however, improvisation plays a pivotal role in channeling camp activities as volunteers respond to a humanitarian emergency depending on what is urgently needed (Jensen 2018). Despite humanitarian efforts, numerous concerns are raised about the conditions in which unaccompanied children live in the camp (Albański 2020a, Bhabha 2014, Grayson 2017). Moreover, unaccompanied children living in irregular situations often fall outside domestic legislation and institutional protection in the destination states where they reside. They are trapped in the limbo of uncertainty. The period of waiting in deteriorating camp conditions has a detrimental impact on children's learning, socialization and care. It is necessary to understand that without the institutional structures and recognition, the standard mechanisms of international child protection are not often put into practice. In the case of unaccompanied children, the reality of living

in the camp has more to do with a space of utter exclusion than with a space of political subjectivities that exceeds that of bare life.

For migrant children, no distance is more awesome than the few feet across borders or frontiers (Gonzales 2009: 419). The distance can seem as vast as heavens when unaccompanied migrant minors fight for their survival in a harsh environment alone, separated from immediate caregivers. Many of them are stripped of their rights following the crossing of borders. Minors are much less likely than adults to reach distant countries where they can make an application for refugee protection. Among the majority of migrant children who do not make it to a wealthy destination to claim asylum, over 1 million live in overcrowded and impoverished refugee camps and settlements (Bhabha 2014: 209). To spend a period of time in such a state of destitution is devastating for children. Not to mention epidemics, depression and violence – any sense of well-being important for the development of young people is impossible to achieve there. Furthermore, camps' condition of permanent temporariness contributes to a common experience of marginalization and insecurity, a constellation of vulnerabilities extremely shocking to minors with far reaching consequences for their adulthood.

The permanent temporariness of camps plays a key role in state strategies, embraced in keeping out migrants from entering and controlling undesirable and dispossessed subjects (Agier 2011, Picker, Pasquetti 2015). In the process, the camp turns into a site of spatial confinement and exclusion, ultimately becoming an easy to use political device for the management of migrant marginality through arbitrary governance actions. Its inhabitants are reduced to a mere precariat of deprived subjectivity. In other words, people are forced into a state of precariousness and they are lumped together into one peculiar category of the destitute. It means that for many inhabitants, the camp is a dead end, because they are unable to resolve the formal obstacles to their asylum requests, but at the same time, they cannot abandon the attempt to reach a better place to live. Experienced time as a dimension which is constructed as instant and never-too-far-away to come to an end, they live in an indefinitely permanent temporary dimension. Even the spatial formation of a camp develops from temporary to permanent constructions, because any camp arrangements, which seem to be bound to temporariness at first, become even more permanent in the process.

The perspective of the child is strikingly absent under the condition of permanent temporariness. In addition, for the children, their uncertain immigration status like childhood itself is a status in process. It means that the circumstances of children are changing with the pivotal moment of their coming of age experiences (Menjivar, Perreira 2019). Some migrant minors spend their childhood and early adolescence in a state of suspended illegality (Gonzales 2016). It means that the absence of a regular immigration status is critical to securing a stable rights-based environment for their future. They are trapped in a liminal situation, in which they are not certain what to do next.

In the meantime, the absence of legal status trumps any legitimate demand for basic human rights. The contradiction between international obligations to protect vulnerable children and domestic pressures to disqualify all undesirable populations from access to state services manifests itself in the camp. Unaccompanied children are absent in such basic social projects as education and a public health system (Bhabha 2014). Moreover, many rights cease when they leave childhood and come of age as adults (Albański, Kowalski 2018, Gonzales 2016). They will be denied everyday access to social services. It means that they will be put into an overwhelmingly powerless social situation and they will lose every right to support. Moreover, these young people are likely to remain in the receiving country, because of the severe limitation of other options. As a result, they have to learn to live as a disfranchised underclass of young adults, who risk to be repatriated to their country of origin or another country. In a certain way, one may call them "wasted lives" (Bauman 2004). Furthermore, all efforts made by volunteers and social workers to integrate them into the receiving society are hampered by a lack of hospitality (Sandri 2018). Depression is endemic, while exit options are severely limited. Exposed to the lure of any life option, children enter very endangering and abusive situations. There is no wonder that camps are well-known grounds for recruiting child soldiers and trafficked sex workers.

Conclusion

Greater attention to child migration brings more sophistication to a general discussion on migration (Albański 2020a, Bhabha 2014). As acknowledgement of the various migrant possibilities concerning the child experience has extended, the more nuanced understanding of the child's capabilities of decision-making in the migration context complicates a more traditional meaning of the best interests of the child as applied to the boundaries of a single nation. There is a growing recognition that unaccompanied minors are usually adolescents with complex life stories that challenge the simplicity of 'undeserved and undocumented' labels (Albański 2020b). The autonomy and adolescent aspirations of child migrants are a relatively new focus of concern, which questions previous orthodoxies built up around simplistic return-home policies, and in that way are not consistent with the assumption that children are merely passive victims of migration. Nevertheless, protective policies omit their aspirations for agency that express their choice-making about future preferences (whether experts considered them in their best interests or not).

Conceptualizing the camp as a city allows for the possibility of considering the extent to which the camp has qualities for promoting a space of semi-citizenship. However, camps are not exactly urban sites, and thus any reference to urbanity is considered rather metaphorical than real, on the one hand. On the other hand however, the urban reference holds the potential to liberate the inhabitants of the camp from

the dominant discourses of victimization and humanitarianism. On a conceptual level, they are not seen as passive objects of relief. Instead, notions of organizational influence of inhabitance will encourage a community-based approaches towards engagement, empowerment and participation. In practice, the inhabitants of the camp ought to play an important role in any decision that affects the creation and maintenance of the camp space. However, the camp may show some signs of urban life and organization, but it is still the site of containment and control. No wonder that the camp is an ambivalent place.

Ambivalence is actually a key word in describing the tension between the hypermobility of the privileged and the confinement of undesirable populations. The concept of ambivalence is also useful to understanding injustices, once they come to light. Comparing camps to other forms of treatment for undesirable populations, such as ghettos and hyper-ghettos, shows a similar regime of governance based on functions of containment and the control of the undesirable. Permanent temporariness plays an important role in spatial confinement, where the adolescent aspirations of many child migrants are blocked and where they are inducted into routes which do not provide safe passages into adulthood. Most unaccompanied minors are trapped in a time dimension which is detached from the future and reduced to an indefinitely permanent temporary dimension.

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