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Humanitarian assemblages in Naples. How humanitarian space is absorbing urban leftover

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How humanitarian space is absorbing urban leftover

by Sofia Moriconi

Introduction

In this paper, I will argue about the blending between two spatial organization models that my research is investigating: the City and the Camp. In particular, I analyse how the City is using the Humanitarian Space to dampen labour costs and establish a frictional zone where the City is blurring into a camp-like city and the Camp, in turn, is transforming into an urbanizing device.

As a spatial biopolitical technology now used to define spaces of detention or humanitarian assistance, and currently inhabited mostly by migrants, the Camp has always been seen as counterposed to the City. It has been defined as a modern institution, a limited space of exception and temporariness and as an enclave characterized by the presence of bare life and complete «otherness»[1]. On the other hand, the City is now conceived as a complex urban agglomeration: it is the outcome of the agencies of countless actors, and its production cannot be viewed separately from capitalist processes[2]. In contrast, I believe that the Camp is currently beyond the definition of «enclave»: this type of space is now dispersed and deeply entangled with other forms

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[1] G. Agamben, *Homo sacer. Il potere sovrano e la nuda vita*, Torino, Einaudi, 1995; A. Petti, *Arcipelaghi ed Enclave. Architettura dell'ordinamento spaziale contemporaneo*, Milano, Bruno Mondadori, 2007; C. Minca *et al.*, *Geographies of the Camp*, in «Political Geography», vol. 49, 2015, pp. 74-83.

[2] E. Soja, *Postmetropolis. Critical Studies of Cities and Regions*, Massachusetts, Blackwell, 2000.

of spatiality, in addition to being involved with the production of the City. Nowadays, Camps are inhabited not only by bodies stressed to bare life, but also by economies, spatial hierarchies and political resistance[3].

On the other hand, in the last decade the number of global migrants has reached an unprecedented scale. Despite not being the continent most affected by migrations in the world, Europe had to reorganize its political, legal and spatial structure to cope with the increasing number of asylum requests[4]. The existing reception systems have been strengthened, and many obsolete and decaying infrastructures – what we might call «ruins» in the broadest sense – have been quickly transformed into reception centres or facilities for migrants. As frequently happened in the past[5], the result of this process is the conversion of ruins into Camps, relatively widespread across the territory. This conversion has ensured that the vast majority of centres in the Italian Reception System are now CAS (Extraordinary Reception Centers): humanitarian spaces ruled according to an emergency logic.

These types of refugee centres also enlist a particular economic logic. They guarantee profits by providing and maintaining several kinds of services, while keeping people included in their programs at a survival stage. They can count on a fixed income per day depending on the number of beneficiaries, providing minimum living standards with the lowest possible expenditure.

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[3] M. Agier, *Between War and City. Towards an Urban Anthropology of Refugee Camps*, in «Ethnography», vol. 3, n. 3, 2002, pp. 317-341; I. Katz, *From Spaces of Thanatopolitics to Spaces of Natality – Commentary on «Geographies of The Camp»*, in «Political Geography», voll. 1-3, 2015; I. Katz, D. Martin and C. Minca (eds.), *Camps Revisited: Multifaceted Spatialities of a Modern Political Technology*, London, Rowman and Littlefield International, 2018; C. Minca, *Geographies of the Camp*, in «Political Geography», vol. 49, 2015, pp. 74-83; A. Ramadan, *Spatializing the Refugee Camp*, in «Transaction of the Institute of British Geographer», vol. 38, n. 1, 2013, pp. 65-77; E. Werker, *Refugee Camp Economies*, in «Journal of Refugee Studies», Oxford University Press, vol. 20, n. 3, 2007.

[4] UNHCR, *Global Trends. Forced Displacements in 2015*, 2016, available online at: https://www.unhcr.org/576408cd7.

[5] L. Malkki, *Refugees and Exile: From «Refugee Studies» to the National Order of Things*, Annual in «Review of Anthropology», vol. 24, 1995, pp. 495-523.

On the other hand, especially in large urban areas where current capitalism pushes the economy to seek stratagems to absorb surpluses[6], guests of reception centres represent the ideal target for those productive activities that require unskilled and low wage labour. Moreover, entrepreneurs and *caporali*[7] tend to prefer hiring a workforce living in camps because of the «convenient» conditions in which they live[8].

This implies a constant collision between the two worlds mentioned above, which materializes every day in the match between the urban system (as a realm of capitalist production) and humanitarian space (as a realm of care and protection of vulnerabilities). More broadly, this study is important to increase awareness about how the entanglement of capitalistic ruins and racialized dispositives of power are affecting urban space, and, in a more general sense, understanding how the Humanitarian-Space assemblage is redefining what is «Human» through the continuous repositioning of the bare-life-production threshold.

Methodological approach

With the final objective of outlining guidelines and alternative strategies for planning and managing the humanitarian-space assemblage, my research is aimed at understanding how the logic and mechanisms of the Camp relate to the logic and mechanisms of the City, and which are the attractive-repulsion factors of the City-Camp space.

The methodological approach I follow in my dissertation is based on Actor-Network Theory[9], which allows me to focus more on the way actors

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[6] D. Harvey, *Spaces of Capital: Towards a Critical Geography*, London, Routledge, 2001.

[7] Illegal gangmasters (i.e. businessmen hiring illegally and occasionally workers employed in the agricultural sector at very low wages).

[8] «Beneficiaries» living in CASs do not need to pay any rent, food or general care, and often they are also available all day long because they are far from family and friends. With this premise, entrepreneurs take the liberty to lower their workers' wages even further and, at the same time, increase working hours.

[9] B. Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 2005.

position themselves and develop strategic behaviours by means of dynamic connections – *assemblage*. In particular, I believe that the dynamic concept of assemblage is especially useful to understanding a peculiar spatiality that seems constantly attracting, transforming and re-circulating different types of items (especially leftovers both from the human and non-human realms). What I call «discarded materiality» is, in fact, the place of humans (less-than-humans) and non-humans discarded by different capitalist processes, gathered and reassembled through what I call «the humanitarian assemblage». The fieldwork period for this ongoing qualitative research was conducted in June, July and December 2019 and periodically throughout January and February 2020. Research data were collected through participant observation in the emergency's humanitarian clinic, which allowed to examine the territory from the widest possible perspective; a fieldwork diary; one focus group with humanitarian actors; and semi-structured interviews with migrants, institutional actors and foreign, political and spiritual representatives.

Castel Volturno

Castel Volturno is a municipality in the Province of Caserta, an hour's drive from Naples, at the mouth of the Volturno river, built near the railway connection between Rome and Naples. In ancient times it was an Etruscan and Roman settlement called Volturnum, reached by Via Domitiana in 95 AD, which allowed Romans to move for summer holidays along the coast, and to reach the modern Pozzuoli. That settlement, and the surrounding area, were also part of the land generally known by Romans as Campania Felix (happy countryside), due to its great fertility.

Nowadays Castel Volturno is sadly popular because of its degradation. It is inhabited officially by 25,000 people (around 4,000 of them immigrants). But an estimated 15,000 undocumented migrants swell the total population to around 40,000 people. On this basis, we can presume that around 50% of inhabitants are immigrants[10].

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[10] These data are somewhat debated by associations in the area, but they are officially disclosed by the Municipality thanks to an estimate based on the waste collection. Given the high mobility

The municipality estimates a presence of 78 different nationalities and 100 ethnic groups, but the largest communities are from Ghana and Nigeria, particularly from Southern Nigeria. The attraction factors of migrant persons in this area are different. However, they seem to have traits in common with the Camp dynamics I refer to above, and this is what brings me to think of Castel Volturno as a Camp-City. In some ways, here, the city seems to «camp-ize» itself, and the «Camp» seems to appropriate traditionally urban dynamics and practices. Indeed, an incredible amount of *discarded materiality* is among the most evident signs of the «camp-ization» of this place. Buildings, goods, economies and bodies populating the place all have in common the fact of being somehow human and non-human waste. They form a heterogeneous assemblage of human-non-human agencies combining in such a way to constantly overlap *cityness* and *camp-ness*, and thus providing a novel urban form as the entanglement of economic and humanitarian processes. According to the Actor Network Theory, I differentiate this type of materiality based on the factors that I consider most attractive for the creation of the humanitarian assemblage in Castel Volturno: an incredible number of available shelters, economies of re-circulation of waste, an extraordinary number of bodies rejected by the reception system, a government of the territory characterized by a particular state of exception, and a suspended temporality (fundamental trait of the Camp). In fact, the city has a massive number of *abandoned houses and buildings* due to the decline of sea tourism; therefore, a vast housing stock is now accessible to people in poverty. The buildings are occupied or rented at meagre prices. Regarding the exceptional number of discarded *bodies*, most migrants in Castel Volturno have left the National Reception System at various points in the reception process, and for multiple reasons (loss of the right to be hosted by a refugee camp, escape, because of trafficking etc.). The overflowed bodies end up in a large «elsewhere», where it is possible to live without documents. Castel Volturno is a significant part of this elsewhere,

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of the foreign population, which depends on various factors such as the seasonality of crops or the variation of regulations and laws at different levels, it is however certain that the population numbers are highly variable.

with a radius of attraction that covers the whole national territory and some international ones. Also, an example of discarded *economy* involving things and objects is the international container trade. Second-hand items or anything else considered waste in western countries (clothes, old appliances, vehicle parts etc.) are collected everywhere in Italy and Europe. They are then selected and sorted in places like Castel Volturno and shipped to Africa through the rental of containers from the port of Naples. Moreover, if the Camp has been defined as the situation of the *state of exception*, Castel Volturno is characterized by numerous examples of exceptions to general rules. Although its state of exception does not materialize in the increase of control and the stiffening of sovereignty over the territory, it represents in many respects a *unicum* of regulations. To mention the most striking example, an unofficial internal directive from the Ministry of Interior prohibits the opening of official reception centres in the area[11].

As a last testimony of the «camp-ization» of the city, one must consider the *liminality*. The temporary nature has always been one of the main characteristics of the camp-space. It forces inhabitants to live on a threshold, to suspend and multiply time created by administrative limbo and amplified by the obstacles of the migration project. Castel Volturno, for the Italian Reception System, is at a standstill point: migrants use to go there when they need a pause in their struggling migrant pathway. The time spent there seems to be between one phase and another, even though not necessarily between past and future, or between the journey and the goals everyone wants to achieve. It is not necessarily a waiting time, if we consider a waiting time as a time with an end. It is, more properly, a disconnection between the time in their mind and the material world in which they live: a «dislocated temporality»[12].

Furthermore, there are several urban practices adopted by the camp-dimension of Castel Volturno that complement or even replace those of the

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[11] Information confirmed by the former mayor and the Ex Canapificio social center.
[12] See A. Ramadan, *Spatializing the Refugee Camp*, cit., pp. 65-77, p. 72.

everyday city, allowing the Camp to blend itself into the City. The clearest examples are the fundamental presence of a robust humanitarian network and an alternative political delegation system, which guarantee the governmentality of the territory where the institutions fail to do so, to the point of permanently replacing institutional performance. There is also an alternative transport system that follows and fills the shortcomings of the official one, widely used even by those who live permanently on the territory. And finally, the large number of discarded bodies that responds to a significant local demand for unskilled workforce (mainly employed in agriculture and construction). Their bodies take part in urban production processes, sought by entrepreneurs and *caporali* to increase revenues when large-scale retail companies set the price of the final product, and to guarantee a more flexible workforce that responds to the new economic needs of intensive agriculture for exportation[13].

Conclusions

In light of the issues proposed by this ongoing research, I emphasised how the City in the past years is involving humanitarian assemblages in its production as a way to postpone economic crisis and absorb surpluses.

As mentioned initially, the understanding of the contemporary city can no longer be disconnected from that of capitalist production. As such, the State worries about guaranteeing the conditions for competition, free markets and so on, even if the consequence is that someone pays the price with their rights, living at a survival threshold. The wealth of the State (and, in this case, the functioning of the urban system) is guaranteed at the cost of producing and leveraging bare life.

Thus, when certain presences, a certain workforce, is not acknowledged as a proper part of the civil State, the City seems to short-circuit and «camp-sizing».

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[13] G. Avallone, *Sfruttamento e resistenze. Migrazioni e agricoltura in Europa, Italia, Piana del Sele*, Verona, Ombre Corte, 2017.

This dynamic is only possible counting on racialised dispositives such as camps (which produce human bodies in survival status) and on spaces managed in non-institutional ways as humanitarian assemblages. The result of the collision between the City and the Camp realities is the spatial hybridization of specific territories that constantly overlap city-ness and camp-ness, capturing human and non-human elements in a liminal dwelling that is currently essential for the City.

For these reasons, the purpose of my research is to stimulate the awareness of planners, administrators and anyone who has enough agency to affect the Urban. These dynamics cannot be ignored. Instead, they should be recognized and placed at the core of a collective and multidisciplinary search for justice.

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