

Refugee Camps as a Spatial Phenomenon of Self-Organization

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Introduction

By the middle of 2015, the total number of refugees worldwide reached 59 million, as opposed to 52 million a year before and 37 million a decade earlier (UNHCR, 2014). Even though two-thirds of this number is made of urban refugees, camps still create a global urban challenge. More precisely, this challenge lies in the “permanent temporariness” they face during which they self-organize to develop often-unexplored urban settings through the social production of space. This brief aims to promote the camp as a spatial phenomenon and a medium for refugees to gain agency, as opposed to the traditional understanding of it as a site of exception or a site of “bare life”.

The Problem

Around forty percent of all refugees live in camps, most often because they are the most vulnerable with no other choice (UNHCR 2014). The issue of refugees and refugee spaces is not so much of a temporary nature since often the exile lasts for decades creating a status of “permanent temporariness” (Abourahme, 2014). Acknowledging the spatiality of refugee camps, albeit

uncommon, is crucial for future planning and constructing a medium for refugees to recover their agency (Sanyal, 2014).

While Camps provide a medium that facilitates protecting refugees, and delivering aid in a cost effective manner for the host country and humanitarian organizations, the UNHCR 2014 policy nonetheless, revolves around pursuing camp alternatives and avoiding the establishment of camps, which, if to be established, should be the exception and serve only as a temporary measure (UNHCR, 2014). The rationale behind it being that camps violate the rights and freedom of refugees, and an alternative where those rights are provided will eventually make them more self-reliant.

Notwithstanding the fact that a world without refugee camps seems ideal, the implementation will require long time periods, in addition to the political challenges it will face, considering that most host countries would rather have refugees in camps, for security and aid measures amongst others. What remains alarming, in addition to the above-mentioned challenges, is the insistence of camps being temporary, even though this temporariness is prolonged sometimes even for decades. Accordingly

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perceiving camps as temporary, meanwhile more permanent spaces are emerging means that the notions underlying planning, organization and institutions are also of this nature (Al-Qutub, 1989). Hence there is a gap regarding policy formulation concerning urban-type refugee camps.

Camps present a unique spatial phenomenon with unique challenges, and structures. Accordingly they require unique specifications. The UNHCR 2014 policy of camp alternatives also disregards this urban element of the camp; an element that evidently exists and is continuously being reshaped by refugees.

The question of space matters since it is due to space and its appropriation that refugees can cope and advance (Grbac 2013). Here the right to appropriate refers to the refugees' "right to access and make use of their physical urban space" (Purcell 2002 in Grbac 2013). Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan and Lebanon are clear examples on how refugees impose their own imprint on the space of the camps. Abourahme (2014) explains how the production of space in the everyday life of a refugee camp "complicates the permanent temporariness of encampment, that opens up a temporality between the permanence of the built (camp) and the temporariness of the political condition (refugeehood)" (Abourahme 2014).

The appropriation of the camp space is done through the social production of space that is how "it is given meaning and definition by the regular activities and social relationships that unfold in it and the cultural rules governing them" (Peteeet, 2005 in Abdourahme 2014). This continuous production of space, I argue, is how refugees self-organize to adapt to their new urban settings, eventually appropriating these space.

Self-Organization:

The ways in which the urban space of the camp is produced is through a process of socio-spatial self-organization where a new space of a city-mimicking typology emerges. In any process of self-organization the role of "human actors as creative beings" must be stressed out (Fuchs, 2003).

The term social self-organization refers to the dialectical relationship of structures and actions, which results in the overall reproduction of the system (Fuchs, 2003). Both self-organization and emergentism are key words that were first introduced through the sciences of complexity (Fuchs 2003). The way these two processes are relevant to the space of the camp can be explained through a dualistic understanding of them where they play a role on the self-reproduction of social systems. Accordingly to apply this idea of self-organization to the camp space, we can equally argue that space is consistently self-reproducing, where

human actors are crucial to social systems (in this context refugees to camp space). Applying Fuchs' argument once more, we can say that the space of the camp is a re-creative or self-organizing system that corresponds to the notion of the duality of structure because the structural properties of space are both the medium and the outcome of the practices that recursively organize, enable and constrain actions.

This explanation is important because it does not perceive space as a passive component, but rather a means of production of social relations and a by-product of it at the same time. This is a point already established theoretically, what is namely related to this research are the concepts of Lefebvre's dialectics of space (1991), and Löw's duality of space (2008), both emphasizing that space is produced through social action and vice versa.

Recommendations

Lefebvre argues that any attempt to address inequality would have to change space (Lefebvre, 1991). Consequently, the recommendations regarding the previously explained problem entail two levels:

Firstly, a process of reimagining refugee camps as a spatial phenomenon. Therefore, instead of approaching the camps as a social problem, this approach regards them as an opportunity. This

perception allows more rights to refugees, namely, the "right to the city" that would arguably initiate a rights-based discourse (Grbac, 2013).

Secondly, a mixed bottom-up and top-bottom urban policy should be implemented, building upon the concept of self-organization being a result of bottom-up and top-down emergence (Fuchs, 2003). This mixed approach bridges the gap between the commonly adopted top-bottom approach and refugees' actual priorities; while top-down has less knowledge on specific refugee conditions; it has the capacity to deliver change within a foreseeable time period. Similarly, the bottom-up approach is more attentive to specific local needs however lacks a boarder strategic infrastructures to benefit the locals (Rode, 2015).

This urban policy could provide relative autonomy, which allows "the formations of power structure, local representatives and a system of wider participation" (Al-Qutub, 1989). Zaatari, a Syrian refugee camp in northern Jordan, is a proper example that demonstrates how this was applied. It earned much media attention due to its ground-up urbanism, along with the efforts done by UN agents to address the security situation, eventually growing to become the fourth biggest city in Jordan (Kimmelman, 2014).

If done through collaboration between government and the refugee community

a more sustainable outcome for both parties could be produced. The levels of self-organization in the camp are an important potential to be mobilized in a camp urban-specified-policy framework.ⁱ

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