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A network of camps on the way to Europe

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While makeshift camps, such as those that have proliferated around Europe, may form spaces of resourcefulness and agency which cannot be accommodated in state-run detention camps, none of these temporary spaces is a definitive solution.

“No camp! No camp!” shouted the refugees who were on their way to Austria, refusing to get off the train after it was stopped by the Hungarian police at the town of Bicske, where one of the country’s main refugee camps is located.

Over the last decade, an increasing number of refugees and asylum seekers are being held in closed European refugee camps and detention centres; ‘processing centres’ for displaced populations have also opened in transit countries outside Europe. These facilities within Europe and beyond are often appalling and damaging to the physical and the mental health of the detainees. As many of the camps are run by private companies, they are mostly closed to the media and social activists, leaving the people who are detained in them abandoned beyond the reach of civic oversight.

Similar to refugee camps in the regions of origin, the detention camps in Europe are located in isolated places, remote from other built environments and from urban centres, keeping people out of sight, separated from the rest of the population. Thus, the refugees call “No camp!” – and their resistance to being transferred to such a closed facility – is an active refusal to be separated from the rest of the world, suspended for an unknown period in an arbitrary location.

Makeshift camps

Forced migrants demand free movement, insisting on continuing the journey to their preferred destination and refusing to stay in camps which are opened by the authorities to assist them but also to control them. At the same time, however, they create their own makeshift camps as part of their way through Europe. These provisional spaces have become common in European cities such as Berlin, Paris, Calais and Patras over

the last decade, as part of the movements of displaced populations who are both their residents and their constructors. These camps are often evacuated and demolished after a short period of time, sometimes only to be erected again in a different form or location.

As part of the increased movement of refugees through Hungary, a makeshift camp was created in the heart of Budapest at Keleti train station where more than 2,000 migrants waited for trains to take them to the Austrian border. Makeshift camps have sprung up on the Greek island of Lesbos, where thousands of refugees wait for documents which will enable them to move on. Makeshift camps were erected in Paris, such as those under Pont Charles-de-Gaulle and under La Chapelle railway bridge, the latter camp being demolished by the police after a few weeks.

Other similar camps have been erected and destroyed in other places around Europe over the last decade. The camp in the Greek port city of Patras, which sheltered more than 1,000 refugees from Afghanistan and existed for several years, was demolished in July 2009. The camp in the French port city of Calais, now called the ‘new jungle’, where more than 5,000 migrants from the Middle East, Central Asia and Africa wait for documents or for an opportunity to cross the border to the UK, is probably the best known makeshift camp in Europe. Whilst the previous ‘jungle’ camp which existed for a few years was bulldozed in 2009, the appearance of the new camp in the same area shows that the pressing needs of the displaced populations are stronger than state policies.

While these makeshift camps differ in the duration of time they exist, in their location, in the displaced populations which create them and in the way they are constructed and function, they are all spaces created by people



on the move, where men, women and children find temporary refuge on their journeys across Europe. The people in these camps are often supported by NGO activists and by volunteers from neighbouring communities, citizens who assist the refugees through various acts of solidarity and support.

Isolation and movement

Rather than being hidden from the general public, makeshift camps are often erected not far from or within existing built environments, nestled in urban centres or in the outskirts of cities. These camps are squalid spaces of inadequate shelters and deplorable sanitary conditions, forming miserable sites which cannot be praised. However, unlike the closed 'detention' or 'reception' state facilities which impose isolation on those detained in them while denying them freedom, these makeshift camps are made by their own residents in resourceful acts of survival, and sometimes become sites where displaced people recover their agency through producing their own spaces. These camps also become part of urban environments that create encounters with the local population.

Thus, instead of hiding the 'problem' by locking people away in remote places, these spaces make the situation visible and by doing so turn it into a political issue.

Whereas state-created camps usually endure for long periods of times, makeshift camps often exist for only short periods. The creation of these built spaces seems to be completely arbitrary, since they are constituted in unexpected times and places in relation to various social, economic and political conditions. But where there is an enforced restriction of movement, camps will form. These camps, where people wait pending their departure for their next destination, often grow rapidly, becoming visible when a bottleneck forms due to border policies which temporarily or permanently block certain migration routes.

Forcibly displaced people are often socially, culturally and linguistically isolated in these camp spaces. The call "No camp!" reflects the refugees' personal and political demand not to be stopped and suspended in dreadful conditions for unknown periods of time in places they did not wish to come to. While the makeshift camps may be symptomatic of the resourcefulness

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Pont Charles-de-Gaulle, Paris, June 2015.

of these people, they are nevertheless inadequate places for people to live in.

Europe must change its perspective. If camps are needed to host migrants temporarily, they should not be in remote places but part of the civic environment. Most importantly, these vulnerable people need to be able to move forward instead of being trapped in temporary

spaces of coercion, within Europe yet only suspended on its threshold.

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