

This is not Australia

This is not Australia. You are not permitted to be here. You cannot leave. The law allows us to detain you until your boat leaves Australia. You cannot enter our country. We have burnt your boat. You cannot leave. Welcome to the camp...

In 1992, the Australian Government was forced into the Federal Court to justify its three year internment of a group of Cambodian asylum-seekers. In justification, the Government relied on Section 88 of the Migration Act “Custody of Prohibited Entrant During Stay of Vessel in Port”; a section, which provided for the temporary detention of stowaways—who were considered to have “not entered Australia”—until such time as the boat on which they had arrived in Australia left the country. Under s88, people who were physically within Australia’s national territory could be detained then disappeared, all without ever being legally considered to have entered the country. Section 88 was always a law based on a fiction, but the work the Government tried to make it do in justifying the indefinite detention of the Cambodians went beyond this original fiction of ‘not-Australia.’ In order to justify the detentions, the government argued that the vessels on which the Cambodians arrived had still not left Australia, and would not be leaving any time soon: the government, after all, had arranged to have them burnt. The boats had not yet left Australia. The detentions would continue until they did.

* *

In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Giorgio Agamben suggests that the ferocity with which the nation-state has responded to the claims of refugees is connected to a crisis in the very form of the nation-state. This nation-state, Agamben argues, is founded on the unity of birth-nation-territory. Central to this unity is the immediate passage from birth to nation, or the myth that birth in a determined territory is automatically nation. The formula “blood and soil”, which cannot but make us shudder in the wake of National Socialism, has been, since Roman times, a juridical formula by which a citizen is defined—a citizen was one who was born in a particular territory to citizen parents. If the state responds as it does when faced with asylum seekers, this is because “by breaking the continuity between man and citizen, *nativity* and *nationality*, they put the originary fiction of modern sovereignty into crisis”¹. In the person who has no recourse to citizenship in the nation-state they have fled, and has not yet been granted it in the state they have fled to, we see, for a moment, the pure fact of a birth that resists subsumption into nation. This is the life that the nation-state cannot tolerate. And so, a fourth element has added itself to the birth-nation-territory nexus: today, the unity of the nation-state is secured only through the camp.

Camps, like those in which the Cambodians were held after their boats were burnt, camps that are still occupied today, are where the life that threatens to undermine the nation-state is captured. Excluded from the nation, yet interned within its territory absolutely exposed to state violence, the life in the camp is bare life.

The camp is not a recent phenomenon in Australia’s history: from its origins as a penal colony to the reserves and indenture of the Aborigines Protection Act (1909); from the capture and forced deportation of Pacific Islanders in the wake of White Australia to the war time detentions of ‘enemy aliens’, the unity of the Australian nation-state has always presupposed the camp. Australia—a nation founded on genocide of an indigenous population—has never been a state where birth and nation coincided precisely, or where citizenship was automatic by virtue of birth. Without easy recourse to the myth of the unity of birth and nation in an eternal national belonging, the Australian nation-state has been in crisis since its inception. The survival of the state has always been premised on the biopolitical capture of bare life. The camp constitutes the nation.

* *

*“Delegates from the various social groups incarcerated at the Woomera Detention Centre met last night (Saturday) to plan a hunger strike in support of the 85 Afghanians (sic) there, many of whom are Hazaras, who are being threatened with forced deportation in the next few weeks, by the Australian Government. It is expected that over 100 detainees will participate in the hunger strike, which was scheduled to begin today (Sunday). Iranians are taking a stand in solidarity with their brothers from Afghanistan, because they fear that they will be the next to go.”*²

In June 2002, as hunger-striking Woomera detainees lay in graves they themselves had dug, life and death entered a zone of indistinction utterly suggestive of Agamben’s bare life. “When some people moved from their graves, another one stayed instead in hole in ground and waiting for their death”³. a detainee described the event. No figure can better evoke the liminal zone of bare life than that of the refugee, “very thin and feeling dizzy”⁴, who lies day and night in a makeshift grave, demonstrating, and courting, death while struggling for a life which is more than mere life. Yet it is precisely this struggle that punctuates the zone of bare life. In this moment of resistance, detainees refuse their subjection to sovereign power and challenge this power on the very terrain on which it operates: the terrain of death. What does it mean for the one who is already *sacer* to threaten his own life? For one man, interned in Woomera, the hunger strike

is a means to “feel human”—“Something controls you all the time”, he said. “With the hunger strike I control myself”⁵. Paradoxically, by threatening their own lives, detainees regain the control that is lost the moment they are captured in a sovereign ban. No longer simply abandoned to the wishes of the state, they re-grasp their own lives from the ban, retaining the capacity to determine their own fates. “It is a very serious hunger strike,” a detainee said, “for some it will be to the death.”⁶

If this struggle then occurs on the terrain of death, on the terrain of *thanatopolitics*, is there a form of struggle that—while still operating on a plane determined by the biopolitical control that finds its expression in the camp—supersedes this plane, or refuses to be defined solely by it? For while the terrain of death presents itself as a space where the *sacer* can remove themselves from the ban and the consecration of their lives to the power of the sovereign, there is only one place to go. “Death”, said Aristotle, “is most frightening because it is a boundary”⁷. For some in the camps this boundary appears as the only one available, hence the “pervasive belief”, described by a former Woomera psychiatric nurse “that suicide was the only way out.”⁸

If bare life is a threshold however, it is not one that is determined entirely by sovereign power. Rather, the threshold is unstable not simply because “politics must again and again enact its internal distinction from bare life”,⁹ but because this movement is confronted again and again by the resistance of those who refuse this distinction, and struggle against the power of the camp, and their subjection to sovereign power within it. Over Easter 2002, this struggle revealed the possibility of another boundary, another way to release oneself from the relation of the sovereign ban. This time the boundary that was crossed was not the blurred boundary separating life in the camps from death, but the razor wire boundary of the camp itself. With the aid of tools and towels, and with the combined strength of those on either side of the fence, the razor wire was cut, and one bar, then another, was levered off, providing just enough space for detainees inside to climb through the hole, hurling themselves through the air into the arms of the protesters below.¹⁰ “...on Good Friday people came there and we broke the fence and we came out,” one of the escapees wrote. “At first night we was very scared and it was very cold night and we was waiting until 2 o’clock morning and we was happy that we came out. But at last after too much struggle we came out. We finished to listening the abusing and beatings of ACM and their guard with their black stick and we came to city.”¹¹

The city they came to however is no longer the city of classical times. As Agamben says, “there is no return from the camp to classical politics.”¹² When the camp is opened, it cannot help but overflow its own boundaries, permeating the outside and blurring the distinction between camp and the city. The overflowing of the camp imbues every aspect of the lives of those who escape—and, living illegally, must live in constant fear of a return to the camp—and of those who are in contact with them. In ‘the city’ the exceptional regime instituted to reinforce the sovereignty of the Australian

nation state imbues every crevice. The task we are faced with then is one that is modelled on the escape from Woomera and yet recognizes that there is no outside to escape to, no space outside the camp. Such a politics must recognize the futility of appealing to that nation-state which, in a state of perpetual crisis, is evermore reliant on the camp. The struggle against the camp, against the reduction of us all to bare life, can only be a struggle against the state.

Jess Whyte is a writer and PhD candidate in Monash University’s Centre for Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies, Melbourne Australia.

Notes

- 1 Giorgio Agamben, 1995, p. 131.
- 2 Dave McKay: “Woomera Hunger Strike: Update from the Refugee Embassy”, Nettime, June 2002, <http://amsterdam.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-0206/msg00156.html> (accessed May 28th 2007)
- 3 Ashraf Shad, “15 Iraqi Refugees Bury Themselves”, Dawn: Internet Edition, 9 March, 2002, <http://www.dawn.com/2002/03/09/int4.htm> (accessed May 28th 2007)
- 4 Sadiq Ali, Woomera 2001-2002, *Desert Storm*, Lowenthal, Whyte et al [Eds], <http://www.antimedia.net/desertstorm/contact.shtml> (accessed May 28th 2007)
- 5 In Schwartz, Larry: “A Scar is Born”, *The Sunday Age*, Melbourne, June 15, 2003, p. 13.
- 6 Woomera delegate, quoted in, “Woomera Hunger Strike: Update from the Refugee Embassy”, Nettime, June 2002, <http://amsterdam.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-0206/msg00156.html>
- 7 Aristotle, quoted in Andrew Norris, 2000, p. 38.
- 8 Glenda Koutroulis, quoted in Penelope Debelle, “Blowing the Whistle on Hidden Suffering in Woomera”, *The Age*, April 24 2002, <http://theage.com.au/articles/2002/04/23/1019441244295.html> (accessed May 28th 2007)
- 9 Andrew Norris, 2000, p. 41.
- 10 This account is based on my own observations, as a participant, of the Woomera protest, which are recounted at greater length in: “Finding Humanity in Woomera”, *ZNet*, April 16, 2002, http://www.zmag.org/content/Activism/whyte_woomera.cfm (accessed May 28th 2007)
- 11 Sadiq Ali, Woomera 2001-2002, *Desert Storm*, Lowenthal, Whyte et al [Eds], <http://www.antimedia.net/desertstorm/contact.shtml> (accessed May 28th 2007)
- 12 Giorgio Agamben, 1995, p. 170.