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**Katherina Zakravsky**

## **A) The Order of Memory**

### **On being haunted by the camp now and then**

#### I. Who owns the memory of the Holocaust?

Every country and every society has their own ‚history of the camp’ – which already implies a certain dialectics: the ‚camp’ as heterotopia, as ‚non-space’, as capsularity, as zone of indistinction, as permanent state of emergency has in any case its history outside of official history. This is structurally not a matter of suppression, repression and denial of historical or collective crime and guilt. It is the very definition and regulation of any ‚camp’ that it is being excluded from the regular order of citizenship. It is therefore a difficult stance within both political theory and activism to simply call for a re-integration of ‚camp history’ into the mainstream of the history of (European) nations. If this were possible the ‚camp’ would end up as just another ‚industrial accident’ on the main road to civilisation. Ironically often the same people who claim – against all evidence in media and historical evidence – that the history of the annihilation camps is still denied and kept secret expect some sort of ‚integration’ of the memory of the camps into the public self-representation of the European nations.

The political claim follows the logic of a promise of self-therapy through enlightenment: if the history of the camps is being commemorated collectively and publicly European society will reach a more civilised level that prevents it from ever returning to a similar system of dehumanisation. If the expected success is not to be noticed the argument states a still not sufficient effort of remembering. Every new emergence of xenophobia, racism, police violence, paranoia, gated communities, ethnic cleansing in Europe is answered with a call for more intense and more public commemoration of the Nazi crimes; as if this complex, painful and demanding memory was the heal-all cure for all failures of civic society.

But more public displays of contriteness, more school classes being led through camp memorials, more concerned commentaries in news papers do not only not improve European civic society, these efforts are actually trivialising the memory of the camps.

If one takes only a very brief glance at contemporary historical research on the camp system of nation socialism – and this has been the most extreme, but not the only camp system in Modernity – we can see that this field is not appropriate for public edification, let alone moral education of the coming generations. The NS camp is not the bogeyman of liberal Europe.

The quite hypocritical project of educating the European public through NS commemoration is reaching an almost grotesque state if this argument is being used to mute any effort to investigate into something that could be called the contemporary fascination and imminence of the ‚camp’.<sup>1</sup> In central European countries

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter is a response to an ongoing polemic controversy in Vienna that involves different intellectuals from different fields that happen to have one thing in common: they are so agitated by what they think is a major assault of contemporary „camp studies” on the memory of the Holocaust that they attack conferences and public events they do not bother to visit in person. See the article „Verharmlosung macht Spaß. Das Spiel mit dem Lagerbegriff an der Kunst-, Pop-, Theorieschnittstelle“ [Trivialisation is fun. Playing with the concept of the camp on the interface of art, pop and theory], <http://www.malmoe.org/artikel/widersprechen/1196> by Oliver Marchart and Nora Sternfeld in the Austrian magazine „Malmoe“ that also made it to the Documenta magazines platform even though it has not

such as Germany and Austria a section of the public discourse still claims that there is not enough public discourse on the NS camps. As this claim does not make a big difference in between qualified historical research, reports of witnesses and victims, basic education and the denials of the generation of the actors and those who identify with their soldier's narrative of 'doing one's duty' this vague call is nothing but the creation of a permanent demand for one's own discourse – a gratification for having the right attitude. For an Austrian it is easy on the other hand to grow allergic to any 'Gesinnungsgemeinschaft' (community of conviction) as this mode of social cohesion has been introduced by the very blue party that still is (even after she grew an orange cyst) the justified but sometimes overrated target of liberal and leftist criticism in Austria and elsewhere.

A strange and mannerist expression such as „Postnazism” used in the year 2006 to denunciate any research on contemporary camp phenomena as simple denial of the one and only relevant camp system of the NS regime cannot signify more than a certain claim of this discourse to be on the right, that is the left side; and this certainty might cause a lack of insight, as it should be by now quite clear that historical and social differentiation in between camp phenomena cannot not quite be compared to the denial of the impact if not the existence of the Nazi camp by the actor's generation and their followers. To demand of anyone who does research on the contemporary fields of capsularities, temporary structures, logistics and the emergence of rather artificial and fleeting connections that one has to focus exclusively on the NS does not only mute contemporary research and discourse but in fact instrumentalize the very memory of the event it claims to preserve.

## II. A Secular Religion

A fundamental interdiction of differentiation and actualisation, a clear order to always stay with the most blatant facts, a call for a permanent public display of commemoration and most of all the claim to keep one's memory of a major historical event stable, clean and focused –what does this resemble? To put up the hypothesis that this discourse resembles the basic structure of a religion should not be taken as a cynical denunciation but as another call for enlightenment. The memory of the crimes of the Second World War came to be the secular religion of civic Europe. This fact does not prevent or disable proper historical research. Yet the religious service of the 2<sup>nd</sup> world war is simply a completely different discourse that can and should not intervene with historical research and has a very difficult relation to artistic practice still to be analysed – to say the least. I do not claim that this religion can or should be abandoned by the fact of being named – in the logic of the spectre that can be expelled as soon as one can call it by its name. This religion in the closet calls for us admitting that we as civic society need this religion and do not mix up our needs for the cultivation of a certain memory with the documentation and historical investigation into the complex

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been translated so far – and a bit earlier as a response to a conference on camps and gated communities from architectural and philosophical perspectives organized by the theorist of architecture Christa Kamleithner in the IWK in 2003 (<http://philo.at/pipermail/register/2003-October/000357.html>, 26. March 2007), a text by Alice Pechriggl who did not take part in the conference herself <http://www.uni-klu.ac.at/uniklu/fodok/print/veroeffentlichung.do;jsessionid=ECA5203AC52234C1AD06F7552409C556?type=publication&pubid=22077>, 26. March 2007. Even though I have been attacked by these authors as I am a leading coordinator of the “camp project” (<http://www.camp-project.eu>) criticized by Marchart/Sternfeld and have been a participant of the IWK-conference I do not simply defend myself but want to clarify the very framework of the debate – using an opportunity that neither IWK (then planning but not realizing a publication) nor the editorial of “Malmoe” were willing to grant.

historical facts. Any religion is very selective with facts and carefully chooses the few facts it does not want to be changed, reduced or augmented. If my hypotheses were true and there would be a civic religion of commemorating the 2<sup>nd</sup> world war that is not to be mixed up with historical research then this would also support my first claim that the history of the camp cannot be integrated into the regular national histories. This unique crime if commemorated properly would blow up any definition of national citizenship – and actually it does so by eroding it. This process of erosion has been necessarily slow as the waking up to a memory of the event had to undergo a state of collective amnesia. To blame a collective for this amnesia by making it a moral judgement not only against actors but a whole society is actually in danger to prevent the emergence of memory when its time has finally come. We as a society cannot plan to close the case after everyone who is morally obliged to has finally remembered the events. It's too late for that – and it has always been so. The aftermath of this event has its own collective half-life (in physical terms). And while this aftermath goes on eroding national identities the memory itself changes. It does not simply change from a state of amnesia to a state of consciousness. And again there are voices who claim that it is a flaw of morals or attitude to point out the changes of remembrance. Yet this claim to own the right memory and thus to be entitled to demand it of others is again proof to the hypothesis that this is in fact a religious setting. The civic religion of the 2<sup>nd</sup> world war can be described as the mantle that grew around the glowing core of erosion that prevents the history of the camp to ever be re-integrated into a national history. It slowed down the erosion, made it almost invisible, enabled new generations to grow up who could face an event that demands nothing less than a completely different sense of identity, citizenship and society. Rather than blaming the actors' generation that they did not succeed in remembering and thus liberating the next generations from this weight it would be wise to accept the fact that only the next generations are able to work on the memory of an event that is rather an event horizon that shifted the whole perspective on history and memory. In this sense there can and will never be a state that could be properly called „Postnazism“ if not for those who are blinded by the very event horizon they are caught in.

## **B) Baring Art to Life**

### **On the aftermath of Giorgio Agamben's concept of 'Bare Life' in the wake of Documenta 12**

#### I. Giorgio Agamben's study on 'Homo Sacer'

As there is no clean and total picture of the Nazi camps there is also no clear and smooth line going from this most extreme camp system to a whole set of contemporary camp phenomena that mark the contemporary state of Western societies as symptoms of a heavy and multiple transition. Stating that there is no similarity between extermination camps and the camp systems for migrants and refugees, the therapeutic and disciplinary camps for managers, juvenile delinquents and sexual neurotics, holiday camps, event parks and gated communities does of course not mean that these phenomena are meaningless and do not share certain traits that mark them as symptoms of contemporary society. To examine the intuition that we are 'campifying' ourselves and others we do not only have to rely on the investigation of empirical camp phenomena but we can also start from the theoretical approach to the camp as paradigm of Modernity as outlined by Giorgio Agamben in his study on 'Homo Sacer'. There Agamben is constructing a political mode of existence that integrates the irregular status of the camp detainee into the basic terminology of modern politics. The existence of 'bare life' emerges if sovereignty is excluding it from the regular political zone. The excluded, seemingly 'natural' or biopolitical remainder of classical politics is bound to sovereignty by the paradoxical but tight bond of the 'ban', a gesture of an including exclusion that causes an irreducible blur between the interior and the exterior of the political subject.

„ ... that, together with the process by which the exception everywhere becomes the rule, the realm of bare life – which is originally situated at the margins of the political order – gradually begins to coincide with the political realm, and exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, *bios* and *zoe*, right and fact, enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction.”<sup>2</sup>

This claim is either overstressing a marginal phenomenon or changing our basic approach to politics. In his treatment of Hannah Arendt's criticism of the idea of 'human rights' as an abstract form of humanitarianism unable to reintegrate the masses of 'displaced persons' after World War II Agamben calls for a redefinition of the whole field of political identity. If the legal definition of the refugee as main addressee of human rights is so utterly unsuccessful and does not go beyond hypocritical declarations of good intentions there are only two possible answers: to marginalize the figure of the refugee or to take the problematic legal status of the refugee as a hint to rethink the whole classical set of definitions concerning nationality and citizenship. In this context 'bare life' functions as a limit concept. If taken as signifying something like a biological core that could be bared by peeling off all cultural and social layers of a human being 'bare life' is revealed as something like a test; as this very definition of reduction by peeling is exactly the biopolitical ideology that accompanies the very relation between sovereignty and political subjectivity. The act of reduction that wants to state a reality outside of politics and society is in itself a political act denying its own political impact. And the power to define this remainder, this 'outside' that is 'bare life' is the very definition of sovereignty according to Agamben.

#### II. The Pull of 'Bare Life'

<sup>2</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Daniel Heller-Roazen trans., Stanford University Press 1998. p.9

It is symptomatic that Agamben introduces a political limit function called ‚bare life’ while changes in medicine, biotechnology and media make it more and more difficult to define life and death as ontologically fixed categories. In this sense bare life is neither a core nor an entity, it is a move or even more precisely: *a pull*. ‚Bare life’ resembles a kind of suction that pretends to go beyond all social structures thus introducing a social function of its own: the function of denying and cancelling social relations. In this sense ‚bare life’ is conceptually anorectic; it can never be bare enough. Outside of the social and artificial sphere there is simply nothing, nothing but the limit to define a sphere, a zone without of an outside. There are structural reasons why ‚bare life’ is so closely linked to annihilation, extermination and the license to kill without sacrificing. As the stable core of ‚bare life’ can never be touched the lack of ‚bare life’ is introducing a violent impulse in the subject struck by the delusion of being able to strip someone to bare life.

In this sense one could ask if it is an act of political enlightenment to introduce such a term while the limits and definitions of being alive in general become so fleeting. It could well be that also this time a name pops up when the things is about to vanish. ‚Bare life’ became a major issue for the Humanities while a new virtual world emerged that allows for all sorts of life without reference to a stable living entity. Right after ‚bare life’ came ‚Second Life’; these two are opposite siblings from the same historical family tree. While the agent of contemporary media life can choose several virtual bodies and identities and can even have sex and earn money as a multitude of fictitious avatars ‚bare life’ resembles an extra life that is separated from the complex organisation of social conduct.

Thus ‚Bare life’ could be described as a decomplexifying function in an overcomplex environment – similar to Luhmann’s description of ‚love’ as a function without a particular function that just cuts across the whole system of functional differentiation to make the claim of not loving a function or a role but a person as a whole. The very introduction of this function as a horizon of expectation already implies the impossibility of its fulfilment.

As justified as every doubt against ‚bare life’ as ontological delusion may be – and Agamben is aware if these problems – as irreducible is ‚bare life’ as a limit concept of discourse. ‚Bare life’ is its own discourse.