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Topographies/topologies of the camp: Auschwitz as a spatial threshold

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INTRODUCTION

This paper intends to address the somewhat surprisingly scarce interest in human geography for the broader spatialities of Auschwitz and, more in general, of Nazism and the Holocaust. Several authors have investigated specific aspects of the geographies of the Third Reich, including questions of landscape and memory (Charlesworth, 1992; 1994; 2003; 2004a; 2004b; Charlesworth et al., 2006; Keil, 2005; Olin, 1997; Stenning et al., 2008); spatial planning in the Third Reich (Clarke et al., 1996; Elden, 2003; 2006a; Rössler, 1989; 2001; Schenk and Bromley, 2003); and the spatial organization of the ghetto (Cole, 2003; 2009; Cole and Graham, 1995). But despite these important contributions, a broad and open debate on these questions and their relationship to modernity has yet to be engaged by the discipline. This is particularly striking in light of the current influence of Giorgio Agamben's work in the discipline, since Auschwitz is the archetype of the Agambenian definition of the camp-as-a-space-of-exception (2002).

The translation into English of Agamben's work on the constitution of the sovereign exception and the concept of bare life has had a tremendous impact on recent debates centred on questions of biopolitics and modernity. His provocative argument about a putative new global biopolitical nomos, partially inspired by his reading of Carl Schmitt, was received in different ways in different disciplinary fields – a reception that bears witness to a sort of implicit division of labour in English speaking academia. In human geography, the focus has been on the 'spatial' dimension of Agamben's writings, and their important contribution to understanding the constitution and the functioning of 'the political' in modernity. More specifically, a robust field of geographical literature (Ek, 2006; Gregory, 2006; Minca, 2006 and the whole special issue of *Geografiska Annaler B*, 88, 4, 2006; see also Minca, 2005; 2007; Ramadan, 2009) is now engaged with questions regarding the spatialities of the camp – a discussion focused mainly on the nature of contemporary camps in the context of the new geographies produced by the global 'war on terror' and largely inspired by Agamben's work. A theoretical preoccupation with the re-appearance of the camp as a spatial-political 'paradigm' is certainly to be welcomed, especially in light of the enormous importance played by Guantanamo and the geographies of extraordinary rendition engineered by the Bush administration after 9-11 (Raulff, 2004).

It is somewhat surprising, however, that when Auschwitz is mentioned by literature focusing on Agamben's work particular emphasis is placed on the issue of witnessing and, more broadly, on the impossibility of translating the experience of the camp into any linguistic expression (Cohen, 2002; Davis, 2004; Diken and Laustsen, 2005). This emphasis is, again, relevant and must be welcomed; nonetheless, it risks reading 'Auschwitz' solely in its metaphorical dimension, while marginalizing the historical and geographical dimensions that translated it into a violent spatialisation of a permanent state of exception, as Agamben would claim.

The aim of this paper is to address this gap in scholarly literature on Auschwitz and to offer an alternative contribution to the reading of Agamben's concept of the camp, especially in relation to the contemporary interdisciplinary debate on the 'calculative rationalities' (Elden, 2006a; 2006b) at the core of the Nazi project. More specifically, we focus our attention on the relationship between the 'topographical' and the 'topological', as described by Agamben in reference to the state of exception, in order to reflect on the nature of Auschwitz's spatialities.

The simple topographical opposition (inside/outside) implicit in these theories [on the state of exception] seems insufficient to account for the phenomenon that it should explain. [...] In truth, the state of exception is neither external nor internal to the juridical order, and the problem of defining it concerns precisely a threshold, or a zone of indifference, where inside and outside do not exclude each other but rather blur with each other. [...] Hence the interest of those theories that, like Schmitt's, complicate the topographical opposition into a more complex topological relation [...]. In any case, to understand the problem of the state of exception, one must first correctly determine its localization (or illocalization). As we will see, the conflict over the state of exception presents itself essentially as a dispute over its proper locus (Agamben, 2005: 23-24, emphasis added).

The topographical is intended here as a 'measure of space' and/or spatial measure, but also as the attempt to 'spatialise' a set of calculative rationalities into a projected reduction of reality to the coordinates of that very same measure. The 'topological' for Agamben is instead, to put it simply, a broad category that comprises, in the specific case of the camp, that 'which remains' beyond/despite the imposition of such a strict and violently implemented regime of rational spatiality. Needless to say, this remnant is, by definition, vast and indistinct; it is what cannot be contained by and reduced to Euclidian geometry; it is the scarto (gap) that opens up in the biopolitical machine when it tries to make life and calculations coincide. It is perhaps important to note that our interpretation of the topographical and the topological in the pages to follow is entirely tributary to Agamben's reading of these terms.

The opening section thus places particular emphasis on the links between Agamben's theory of the camp and his concept of *soglia* (in Italian, *soglia* means threshold, but also gate/door/entry and limen, border, space of passage and transition). This concept, we argue, provides very useful ground for a reflection on

the topological spatialities of the camp – a dimension that is only partially discussed by the specialist literature. More specifically, we read the *soglia* as a field of tension between the topographical and the topological; Auschwitz, we claim, despite its apparently rigorous geometries, represents in many ways a paradigmatic field for the exploration of this tension and of broader Nazi biopolitical geographies. This *soglia*, in Agamben's terms, is therefore not so much the space-in-between the topographical and the topological. Rather, it is where the two come together in a regime of exception: a space where they inevitably penetrate and produce each other as a field of tension between different spatial logics and where 'sovereign power' and their subjects are produced and defined through a permanent (but unstable and mutable) process of inclusive exclusion. Our claim will be that the camp should be read as a spatio-*soglia* driven by this tension, despite the inherent topographic spatialities that dominate any repressive institution of this kind. In the second section, we briefly reflect on the ways in which contemporary historiographical literature on the Holocaust present the relationship between modernity, rationality, and Nazism. The associated debate around the spatial nature of Auschwitz mirrors a broader controversy about its centrality in the understanding of the Holocaust and the Third Reich. The following two sections are an attempt to read 'geographically' the entanglements between the camp, Nazi spatial planning, bureaucratic rationalities and the Holocaust. The notion of the camp as a spatio-*soglia* (roughly translated as a spatial threshold) is central to this interpretation. The analysis of Auschwitz as a metaphorical and real space of exception is an important starting point in order to reflect on the relationship between this latter notion and the calculative, cartographic, and topographical rationalities of the camp. In 'Auschwitz', the 'camp' proper was localized at the very edge of Oswiecim, a Polish town annexed to the Reich, and consisted of a concentrational complex composed by three main lagers – the concentration camp of Auschwitz I, the extermination camp of Auschwitz II (known as Birkenau) and the slave labor camp of Auschwitz III (known as Buna-Monowitz, where the IG Farben rubber plant was located) – and complemented by an archipelago of almost fifty sub-camps and satellite camps in the surrounding region (Krawowski, 1994). By first contextualizing Auschwitz within a broader regional geography conceived by Nazi planning for that part of Poland, and subsequently reflecting upon the place of the compound called 'Mexico' within Birkenau as a key spatio-*soglia* in the reproduction of these very geographies, we hope to be able to show how the topological spatialities of the camp-as-a-threshold are a constitutive element of the overall biopolitical Nazi project of 'protective custody' and extermination. In and on that threshold, in fact, the calculative and topographical aspirations of the Nazi project meet a crucial limit and a real challenge, and open up to the irruption of the topological.

THE CAMP-AS-A-SPAZIO-SOGLIA

In conceptualizing the state of exception, Agamben hints at the notion of *soglia* as a spatial condition and as an expression of the sovereign. The space of indistinction that Agamben defines as a *soglia* is both metaphorical and very real, and finds in the camp its most visible and violent expression. In his definition of "the paradoxical status of the camp as a space of exception" (1998: 169), he reads the camp precisely through the workings of its spatialised *soglia*:

The camp is a piece of land placed outside the normal juridical order, but it is nevertheless not simply and external space. What is excluded in the camp is, according to the etymological sense of the term

“exception” (ex-capere), taken outside, included through its own exclusion. [...] The camp is thus the structure in which the state of exception – the possibility of deciding on which founds sovereign power – is realized normally. [...] The camp is a hybrid of law and fact in which the two terms have become indistinguishable. [...] Whoever entered the camp moved into a zone of indistinction between outside and inside, exception and rule, licit and illicit, in which the very concepts of subjective right and juridical protection no longer made any sense (Agamben, 1998: 169-170, original emphasis).

The camp is presented as a *soglia* since it challenges the possibility of a clear and stable distinction between an inside and an outside. The camp is, in a sense, the geographical materialization of the threshold of indistinction that comes to light when the norm and the exception tend to merge and become indistinguishable.

if the essence of the camp consists in the materialization of the state of exception and in the subsequent creation of a space in which bare life and the juridical rule enter into a threshold of indistinction, then we must admit that we find ourselves virtually in the presence of a camp every time such a structure is created (Agamben, 1998: 174).

When engaging with Carl Schmitt’s notion of sovereign exception in *Homo Sacer*, Agamben is very explicit about this fundamental relationship between the *soglia* and the topological dimension of the camp:

The link between localization (*Ortung*) and ordering (*Ordnung*) constitutive of the “*nomos of the earth*” [...] is therefore even more complex than Schmitt maintains and, at its center, contains a fundamental ambiguity, an unlocalizable zone of indistinction or exception that, in the last analysis, necessarily acts against it as a principle of its infinite dislocation. [...] When our age tried to grant the unlocalizable a permanent and visible localization, the result was the concentration camp. The camp – and not the prison – is the space that corresponds to this originary structure of the *nomos*. [...] As the absolute space of exception, the camp is topologically different from a simple space of confinement. And it is this space of exception, in which the link between localization and ordering is definitively broken, that has determined the crisis of the old “*nomos of the earth*” (Agamben, 1998: 19-20; emphases added).

According to this perspective, the camp-as-a-*soglia* connotes a kind of spatiality, a realm of indistinction, in which the borders between the inside and the outside are blurred and un-mappable, and the topographical and the topological come together.

Let’s take Agamben’s argument a bit further: on the one hand, he represents the camp as a sort of metaphorical space where modern dichotomous categories (open/closed; internal/external; friend/enemy; human/animal; norm/exception; sovereign/beast; etc.) are progressively replaced by a process of inclusive exclusion in which those very categories tend to become indistinguishable, thereby producing a condition in which any topographical classification and any radical spatial separation is questioned. On the other hand, Agamben identifies Auschwitz as an exemplary case of this camp-

threshold – that is, a spatial structure which, at first sight, seems to be the most extraordinary example of calculative rationality translated into space; a site that was conceived, planned, constructed, and managed in order to ‘optimize’ the (dark) relationship between (a lesser) people and space, as theorized by Nazi pseudo-scientific racial culture (see Ardivissov, 2006; Fritzsche, 2008; Pringler, 2007). The Auschwitz camp(s) are, in fact, often seen by both the academic literature and the popular imaginary as the most striking example of the scientific organization of extermination, and as a machine for rational mass murder:

The gas chambers of Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka [...] preceded Auschwitz’s killing factories, as did Chelmno and experiments under Arthur Nebe [...]. But these remained more or less ad hoc affairs. [...] Despite popular preoccupation with demonic Nazi efficiency or the emphasis placed upon technocracy or bureaucratic terror in post-war scholarship, none of these achieved the status of industrial operations. While the SS displayed pretensions to science and industrial efficiency, the reality escaped them. [...] Auschwitz-Birkenau was designed more carefully. [...] Only trained architects, civil engineers, and a considerable network of subcontractors could have supervised the erection of these buildings. Both to the contemporaries and subsequent historians, they seemed unprecedented for their industrial, bureaucratic efficiency (Allen, 2002a: 190).

Wolfgang Sofsky, in *The Order of Terror*, a milestone in the reflection on the spatial dimension of the Holocaust, is even more explicit on this aspect:

The geography of the modern concentration camp was not the product of historical development; it was the result of an ideal plan that paid no heed to historical or natural conditions. [...] The site was cleared, a tabula rasa for erecting the camp according to strict design. Power occupied space and transformed it totally. Not only did the modernization of the concentration camp system from 1936 on expand the functions of the camp; it also rationalized the order of space (1999: 48).

Sofsky’s analysis is strongly centred on the radical spatial separation of the Nazi camp, on the isolation of its inmates, and on the role played by internal and external borders (1999: 55-64). A rigid separation between the camp and its exterior was paralleled by an obsessive calculative management of the interior. The internal spatialities of the camp – from the dormitories to the latrines – were planned in detail in order to minimize the consumption and the use of space, and to maximise control and discipline: “Activities were functionally dissociated; sites of work, accommodations, and places of execution were rendered spatially separated. The camp enclosure was zoned, divided into regions” (1999: 48). The fundamental topographical nature of the camp is a pillar of Sofsky’s argument; nonetheless, it is his description of the effective and potential breaches of this very order that we find of particular interest, and it is precisely such breaches and their meaning that we intend to interrogate here (for a phenomenological approach to the functioning of the camp see Mezga, 1993).

Now, if the 'shrinking' of the internal spaces of the camp was a functional and symbolic counter-dimension to the expansive nature of German Lebensraum, then some key questions come to the fore. In which way was the camp the pivot of the Reich's political and spatial economy, and, moreover, how did such breaches represent a constant challenge to the camp's rational topographies? How and why did the camp incorporate both topographical and topological elements? Why is it important to investigate this presumed penetration of the 'topological' in the camp? To start engaging with these questions we need first to contextualise our brief investigation within the broader field of the academic studies on the Third Reich and the Holocaust. As we argue in the next section, the understanding of the spatial ordering of the camp must be framed within a more general reflection on the 'topographical' and rational nature of the Nazi project and the 'topological' (and supposedly irrational) nature of some of its elements, a reflection that has been at the core of the historiographical debate on the Holocaust in the last decades and that continues today.

AUSCHWITZ AND THE QUESTION OF MODERNITY

The representation of Auschwitz as the most vivid and cruel expression of the calculative rationality at the core of the Nazi bureaucratic machine dedicated to extermination has been crucial in determining the key role that the Auschwitz complex has played in the 'functionalist' historiographical tradition. Scholars in this tradition have seen the camp and, in general, the Holocaust, as extreme manifestations of the technocratic and bureaucratic rationalities typical of a functionalist interpretation of the Modern. The functionalist school of thought, as it is known, includes some of the best renowned experts on the history of the Holocaust (in primis Raul Hilberg and Götz Aly) but also key thinkers of the Twentieth century (including Hannah Arendt and Zygmunt Bauman). This reading, however, is often set against the so-called 'intentionalist' literature, which instead places a stronger emphasis on the role played by anti-Semitism in its more radical variants. According to historian Yehuda Bauer, "the functionalist school traced the development toward murder through the history of the social and economic structures of German society [...] Racism and antisemitism were in the background, but by themselves would not have led to the so-called Final Solution. [...] The intentionalist school put the primary emphasis on the ideology-ridden dictatorship, which intended to establish a racist utopia and which saw in the Jews a prime target for physical elimination" (2001: 29).

That calculative rationality was an important element of the technocratic and bureaucratic practices of the Third Reich is beyond doubt. It is enough to recall the extraordinary effort of the Nazi apparatus in estimating the actual size of the Jewish population (Aly and Roth, 2004: 56-93), first in Germany (a census took place in June 1933), and subsequently in the rest of Europe; an effort that resulted in the calculation that there existed about 11 million Jews that were to be considered for the Final Solution (Arad et al., 1999: 254). During the infamous Wannsee conference held in January 1942, the crucial (for the Nazis) relationship between calculation and classification (of people) that had been placed at the core of the public debate since the promulgation of the Nuremberg Laws in 1935 was taken to its extreme consequences: in order to quantify and solve the 'Jewish question' it was necessary first to clarify not only 'who was a Jew', but also 'how Jewish each individual might be'. The protocols of the Conference

illustrate the commitment on the part of the Nazi elite to the definition, to the most minute detail, of the status – that is, of the ‘fate’ – of the Mischlinge, the Jews of ‘mixed race’ (1999: 257-259). This should not come as a surprise, since this calculation/classification soon became a key biopolitical terrain in the production of the new German nation led by a new master race (in the making). The threshold between different categories of ‘Jewishness’ was fundamental in the mapping out of a racial cartography aimed at drawing the new cultural geographies of Europe, as is confirmed by the creation of the Reichssippenamt (Reich Kinship Office), an office that was entirely dedicated to the drawing of these imagined (and mobile) borderlines between the Aryan race and the ‘other’, ‘inferior’, races (Hertz, 1997; Pegelow, 2006). Regrettably, this ‘calculative trap’ extended its legacy well beyond the years of the Holocaust: the calculation of the number of victims was central to the discussion that took place during the Nurnberg trials (Seltzer, 1998), but has also been used more recently by the negationist literature (see the discussion in Van Pelt, 2002: 106-136; Zimmerman, 2004).

What is more important for the sake of our argument, however, is the fact that the discussion around the relationship between modern rationalities and the Holocaust has gone beyond the historiographical debate, to be comprised within a more general philosophical critique of modernity. Zygmunt Bauman’s *Modernity and the Holocaust* is a particularly important contribution to this line of thought, since it presents the Holocaust as an event that occurred not despite modernity, but rather because of modernity itself:

Once the hope to contain the Holocaust experience in the theoretical framework of malfunction (modernity incapable of suppressing the essentially alien factors of irrationality, civilizing pressures failing to subdue emotional and violent drives, socialization going awry and hence unable to produce the needed volume of moral motivations) has been dashed, one can be easily tempted to try the ‘obvious’ exit from the theoretical impasse; to proclaim the Holocaust a ‘paradigm’ of modern civilization, its ‘natural’, ‘normal’ (who knows – perhaps also common) product, its ‘historical tendency’. In this version, the Holocaust would be promoted to the status of truth of modernity (rather than recognized as a possibility that modernity contains) (1989:5-6)

Similarly, Stuart Elden reads Nazi rationalities as expressions of a more general modern calculative rationality, also in light of Heidegger’s and Foucault’s critical reflections (Elden, 2003; 2006a; 2006b: in particular 147-169; 2007). According to Elden, who deliberately decides not to engage with the discussion of Heidegger’s implication in the Nazi project (see, for example, Levinas, [1934] 1990), the question is an ontological one (that is, philosophical), and secondarily, ‘genealogical’ (and thus historical):

...the question goes beyond merely an understanding of the techniques that made particular actions possible. Rather the question is one of the conditions of possibility for the techniques themselves, a deeper problematic that seeks to account for the technical, rational, scientific mindset itself. [...] this is not merely a question of epistemology, but, precisely because it enquires into how ‘what is’ is, a question of ontology [...] This is why Heidegger is useful because he enables us to see how the politics of calculation displayed in Nazism showcases a much broader calculative understanding of the world, a

calculative understanding of the political. This ontological determination necessarily exceeds any ontic politics. This particular grasp of the political can be approached through a historical analysis, a historical ontology of the politics of calculation (2006a: 754, 766).

The line of thought that, through the notion of calculative rationality, links Nazism and the Holocaust to modernity, however, has been widely criticised from within the historiographical debate, especially for what is perceived as the exaggerated role assigned to the bureaucratic and rational planning of the Holocaust (for a critique of the functionalist literature see Bauer (2001: 68-92), also Stone (2003: 239-261). From the 1980s onwards, a new wave of scholarship has highlighted the existence of a series of important 'grey zones' and overlaps between the functionalist and the intentionalist approaches, that is, between the roles assigned by the literature to technocratic rationality on the one hand, and to virulent ideology on the other. More specifically, a new stream of literature has put significant effort into the investigation of the presumed 'neutrality' of science and technology in the Third Reich, showing how the technicians and engineers that contributed to the actual realisation of the Holocaust were far from mere 'desk-killers'; on the contrary, they were often 'modernisers' acting in the name of a new world vision entirely consistent with Nazi ideology (see Allen, 2002b; Aly and Heim, 2003; Aly and Roth, 2004; Katz, 2005). In his path-breaking work entitled *Reactionary Modernism*, Jeffrey Herf describes very convincingly the ambiguous relationship that bound the Third Reich technocracy to the mythological and irrational ideology of the party elite:

Technology would have to be legitimated without succumbing to Enlightenment rationality. Just like the literati, the engineers wanted to demonstrate that technological advance was compatible with German nationalism's revolt against positivism. [...] The development of capitalism and its attendant commercial culture threatened the precapitalist, nonutilitarian Aryan traditions of German culture and philosophy, and thus threatened the basis for further technological advance as well. The antimodernist rhetoric of National Socialism promised to preserve this precapitalist culture and paradoxically enhanced further technological development. [...] Germany's illiberal, feudal traditions would enhance technical advance (1984: 155, 159).

Within the broader discussion on the Holocaust, another line of thought, equally relevant for our argument, has been recently developed by Dan Stone, whose analysis is centred on questions of violence and the irrational dimension of the massacres perpetrated by the Nazis. In a recent book (2006), while engaging with a series of different theoretical approaches – from Malinowski's concept of the magic (31-52) to Bataille's notion of 'excess of energy' (69-92), and even Callois' reflection on the carnevalesque and the related literature on violence as transgression (196-216) – he claims that the artificial dichotomy between functionalist and intentionalist interpretations must be overcome:

[...] the historiographical trend towards dismissing the supposedly abstract inquiry into modernity should be treated with caution, just as the trend towards recognising violence and the experiences of its victims is to be welcomed. For the violence should not be seen in opposition to modernity. The question should not be whether violence emerged from rational thinking ('modernity') of irrationality ('barbarism');

rather it should be about determining precisely how the conjunction of rationalised society and violent passions [...] erupts at certain moments into so apocalyptic a force (2006: 12).

An important consequence of this approach is that the central role of Auschwitz in the political economy of the Final Solution is put into question. At the same time, it tends to privilege a more complex and articulated reading of the Nazi regime of extermination, a regime in which Auschwitz and the camps related to the Reinhard Operation (Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka) coexisted with less organised and less technocentric forms of mass murder; a good example being the mass shootings perpetrated by the Einsatzgruppen during the occupation of Russian, Ukrainian and Baltic territories or the castle-turned-into-camp in Chelmno.

Agamben's use of the concept of *soglia* can therefore be helpful in challenging some of the dichotomies (bureaucracy versus ideology; rationality versus violence; resistance versus passivity) that have fed into mainstream historiographical research on the Holocaust. The next section will thus focus on the Auschwitz complex in order to explore to what extent the notion of camp-as-spazio-soglia à la Agamben can help in challenging the limits and the functioning of its rational topographies. In particular, we shall argue that, despite its self-evident topographical layout, Auschwitz encompassed also a set of 'topological' rationalities, in both its external (as part of the broader spatialisation of Nazi policies and politics) and internal organization.

AUSCHWITZ AS A SPATIAL THRESHOLD

If we were to engage with Agamben's claim that the camp was more than a topographical space of reclusion and extermination (determined by a set of radical dichotomies of the inside/outside kind), we need to embrace an interpretation of the geographies of Auschwitz that is able to move beyond the by now well established readings of its calculative rationalities and related topographies. The representation of Auschwitz and of the broader geographies of the Nazi camps as the result of a mere cartographic rationality tells us, in fact, only part of the story. As noted by Charlesworth, the system of Nazi camps was less an isotropic space deprived of any reference to the surroundings geographies, than the result of a project that attempted to realise in the camp a (tragic) experimental combination of radical topographical rationalities and a set of non-calculative spatialities:

We tend to think of the death and concentration camps as built on isotropic surface [...]. Perhaps this is best exemplified in those aerial shots of Birkenau taken by the Soviet Air Force at the liberation [...]. Here we see a grid pattern of rows of black huts, grids of streets and fences, with regularly spaced watchtowers in the snow. The way sites have been presented to us cartographically has confirmed this view. Black dots or lines on white papers characterize such cartographic representations of the Holocaust sites (2004a: 218).

It is not our intention to deny the prominence of topographical elements in the spatialities of this camp, or of any camp; however, we would like to claim that the Nazi-camp exceeded these very rationalities and that its biopolitical machine relied also on a realm of indistinction – a threshold where the topographical and the topological came together. We are here presented with a sort of spatial paradox of great interest: the camp was, at one time, the epitome of modern calculative rationality translated into practice and a topological space, where life collapsed into politics, where *zoë* and *bios*, human being and *homo sacer*, citizen and bandit came together and became indistinguishable (Agamben, 1998: 166-180). What is more important – and this is perhaps the core of our geographical argument – is that the topological in/of the camp was not merely a sort of metaphorical dimension; instead, it translated into real material spaces and a related set of practices. It might thus be useful to confront this hypothesis with two examples of specific spatialities around which the biopolitical camp-machine gravitated: first, the relationship between the Auschwitz complex and the city of Oswiecim-Auschwitz, and between these two and the broader Nazi spatial politics for that part of Europe; and secondly, the ambiguous status of Birkenau III, known by the inmates as ‘Mexico’, a real and imagined space that opened up a topological realm in the very heart of the concentrational system of the Third Reich.

The Camp, The City, The Plan

In order to question the reading of Auschwitz as an absolute topographical and isolated space merely driven by calculative rationality, its spatialities must be contextualised within the broader Nazi spatial imaginary, centred as it was on the concept of *Lebensraum* (see Clarke et al., 1996; Herwig, 1999; Olwig, 2002; Smith, 1980). The organisation of the Final Solution, that found its most dramatic symbolic and functional expression in Auschwitz, was in fact a process that developed through multiple phases and articulated according to a specific geography of events, plans, and practices. These events, plans, and practices aimed at the creation of a greater German space exempt from the presence of a Jewish population (Browning, 2004): from the expulsion of the Jews from the territories of the Reich towards the General Government, to the successive attempted integration of the General Government into a *judenfrei* German space thanks to the efforts and the will of its governor Hans Frank (see Housden, 2004; also Aly and Heim, 2002; Burleigh, 2001); from the widespread discussion about an extra-European final ‘destination’ for the expelled European Jews (the Dominican Republic, the Philippines and Australia, even Alaska, were taken into consideration...) to the inconclusive Evian Conference on the same topic organised by President Roosevelt in 1938 to the grand project for the deportation of all Jews to Madagascar (Jennings, 2007); from Operation Barbarossa, to the expansion of the German *Lebensraum* towards the East, through the colonisation of the Ukraine (Lower, 2005). What will eventually become the most infamous extermination camp was thus not located in a void; quite the contrary: it was fully embedded within the broader spatialities and territorialities that were implemented by the Nazi imperial project. As argued by Sybille Steinbacher, the Nazi plans for Auschwitz were strictly related to the new role of the General Government as a space fully integrated into the German *Lebensraum*, and accelerated after the invasion of the Soviet Union and the infamous decision to localise a new IG Farben plant in the area (2005: 62-78). Robert Van Pelt’s (1994; also, Dwork and Van Pelt, 1996) work on

Auschwitz is very useful in understanding the camp's relationship with the broader geographies of the Third Reich:

The first time I visited Auschwitz I was surprised by the juxtaposition of a centre of extermination and a major town. I had seen Lanzmann's film *Shoah* and remembered its depiction of the isolation of the death camps of Treblinka and Sobibor, the silence of the forest that surrounded them. [...] I began to investigate the archives in Poland and I found that not only was the camp at Auschwitz built right next to an existing town, but this very town had been designated as a centre of growth by the same men who had ordered the construction of the camp. [...] It became clear that the mythification of Auschwitz [...] had blinded me to a more complex reality in which seemingly opposite things – the design for utopia and the reality of dystopia – existed side by side (1994: 94).

The enlargement of the concentration camp took place, in fact, together with the planning of the new city, and these two parallel processes were driven by a very similar rationality. The creation of Auschwitz as a 'company town' (Hayes 2003:331) must therefore be contextualised within broader Nazi regional planning – that is, within the spatial and territorial realisation of a millennial Empire for the Third Reich, as "a Faustian project to create a German paradise amid Polish perdition" (Van Pelt, 1994: 94). Van Pelt and Dwork show how the prominence of Auschwitz – both as a city and as a concentration camp and, eventually, as an extermination camp – was part of a more general resettlement plan that went together the expansion of the German Lebensraum in Eastern Europe, and in primis Poland (Housden, 2004; Rössler, 2001). Van Pelt also rightly links the construction of a newly conceived German and Aryan greater space to the destruction of European Jewry, and identifies Himmler as "The man who was chiefly responsible for transforming the ideology and the resettlement into practical policy [...] Himmler's use of the word brick [in one of his famous speeches] had both a metaphorical and a literal sense. The German concentration camps, which Himmler controlled as Reichsführer-SS, had in the late 1930s taken on a key role in the German production of building materials" (1994: 99, 104-105).

This process of realizing a city-cum-camp was also linked to the evolution of geography and spatial science in Germany (Mullin, 1981; Rössler, 2001), a process in which a key role was played by agronomist Konrad Meyer – head of the Reichskommissars für die Festigung deutschen Volkstums (RKF, the Reich Working Party on Regional Planning) from 1936 to 1940 (Aly and Heim, 2002: 93-98) and in 1941 chief editor of the renowned *Generalplan Ost* (253-282) – and geographer Walter Christaller, recruited by Meyer to give a (geographical) contribution to Himmler's grand plans. Christaller's deep and direct involvement in this enterprise is confirmed by the fact that he "was simultaneously employed on the staff of the Main Office for Planning and the Soil, an agency within Himmler's Reich Commissariat for the Strengthening of Ethnic Germanism" (Rössler 1989: 427). According to Van Pelt, Meyer convinced Himmler "that a speedy Germanisation of the area around Auschwitz was of the highest priority" in order to make of Auschwitz "a paradigm of the settlement in the East" (1994: 106; see also Lower, 2005).

However, the topographical rationalities that linked the realisation of the camp complex to a broader regional context provide only a partial explanation. Regional and urban planning in the Third Reich was, in fact, not depleted of 'irrational' ideological elements; quite the contrary (Renton, 2001). The figure of Gottfried Feder, one of the founders of the German Worker's Party and a key player in Nazi urban planning, is a revealing example of this tension between the two spatial logics. While occupying the Chair of Urban Design at the Technische Universität Berlin, he developed a comprehensive theory of urban design which, after the beginning of the war, matched to some extent Himmler's vision of urban rearticulation of the annexed territories (Schenk and Bromley, 2003; also, Taylor, 1974). Feder embodied one of the most radical interpretations of the calculative rationality of the day, a rationality that constituted the domain of Nazi urban and regional planning, especially in his attempts to theorise the 'ideal' size of a Nazi city (20,000 inhabitants), its economic and productive structures, and its very hierarchical and holistic articulation based on a set of nested scales (household, block, cell, local group, district, province, etc.). At the same time, however, his work was largely inspired by a sort nostalgic drive towards an idealised medieval and pre-modern Germany (see Brüggemeier et al., 2005). A similar tension can be identified in Christaller:

It was Christaller [...] who informed Himmler of the proper relation between a town and the surrounding countryside. Like so many others in Hitler's Reich, Christaller was inspired by the medieval settlement pattern in which urban and rural life had been balanced in healthy symbiosis. The industrial revolution had destroyed that harmony, the countryside was no longer valued by the town, and the latter lost its identity as a result (Van Pelt and Dwork 1996: 240).

This very tension/contradiction is to be found in the construction of Auschwitz itself, as expressed by Hans Stosberg's plan in 1941 that entered into a conflictual relationship with the expansion project of the SS settlement proposed by (SS) architect Lothar Hartjenstein: "the two parties argued for almost a year, pushing the border between the city and the camp up and down between the proposed avenue and the perimeter of the camp" (Van Pelt, 1994: 112, emphasis added). It is precisely in this sense that any description of the camp based on dichotomous categories that imagine a radical inside (the camp(s) of Auschwitz) and a radical outside (the town of Oswiecim-Auschwitz) is not only difficult to sustain, but also overlooks the existence of a mobile threshold between the two and its related geographies that were essential in the production of these experimental racialised spatialities. The unstable nature of the topographical borders of the camp – that for this very reason were at the centre of many ritualised and spectacularised spatial practices (Sofsky, 1999) – in fact played a central role in the production not only of the victims, but also of the perpetrators. Hoess' daily whereabouts in Auschwitz are a very good example of the functioning of this mobile threshold that became, in our view, a defining element of the very spatialities of the camp:

As he stepped from his back garden at his home in Auschwitz, Hoess [the infamous camp commandant at Auschwitz] crossed the boundary between home and work. On the one side of the line he was a family man, who played with his children and swam with them in the Sola River just across the road. On the other side he walked a few steps to his office and a further few to the gas chambers. At the end of the day, he would cross the line back to the bosom of his family. [...] Tragedy on the doorstep could be

ignored for across the threshold a job had to be done to protect the bourgeois family from the world, from the Other, from the Jew (Charlesworth, 2004a: 238-239, emphasis added).

Furthermore, the 'spatial ambiguity' of Auschwitz went well beyond the relationship between the camp(s) and the city, and was connected to the organisation of the broader surrounding territories, through both the eviction and the massive displacement of the Polish population living in the region, and the creation of a true univers concentrationnaire; that is, an articulated system of sub-camps, villages and farms. Accordingly, from June 1940, the local administration (in German hands) began to implement the forced displacement and deportation of the resident population (Lasik et al., 2000). The 40-square-km area in question

was organized as a separate administrative district (Amtsbezirk), exempt from civilian administration. This district was administered by the camp commandant as Amtskommissar. His prerogatives comprised all civil-administrative and police affairs within the district he administered, including civil registry matters. In this regard, a civil registry office (Standesamt) was established in the camp (ibid, 73-74: emphasis added).

This territorial articulation thus created a zone of indistinction between the camp and the city, a sort of novel spazio-soglia. The camp functionally exceeded its own topographies – marked as they were by the violent logic of the barbed wire (Mezga, 1990; Charlesworth, 1994) – and projected its sovereignty onto the surrounding territories by creating a large space of exception exempt from the rule of the civilian/civic administration. Remarkably, the civic registry – the 'catalogue' of people dead or alive, and the primary source of Nazi calculative rationality – was located inside the camp. In the surrounding 'Auschwitzed' region, a sort of Christallerian rationality guided Nazi spatial planning towards the realisation of an archipelago of about fifty secondary camps to which diversified and localised functions were assigned – from agriculture to industrial production – in the greater political economy centred around the Auschwitz complex (Krakowski, 1994).

In this way, the entire region around Auschwitz was converted into a kind of expanded spazio-soglia, where topographical and topological rationalities were intertwined in an inextricable way. These entanglements had a double effect: on the one hand, the borders of the camp were extended to the entire region – as evidenced by the fact that its sovereignty was transferred from civic authority to the Commandant of the camp – that became a sort of unique and enormous space of exception. On the other, this greater "Auschwitzed" region was anything but a homogenous and isotropic space. On the contrary, the camp-region was a highly fragmented space, crossed by endless movements of prisoners from one sub-camp to another, regulated as they were by the calculative (ir)rationalities of the selection process (Wiesel, 2006). The frenzy of activities taking place in this galaxy of sub-camps was in fact a disturbing corollary to the systematic extermination operated in Birkenau. All these complicated (and only partially rational) complementarities and their related movements of people and things, rendered

life in the camp-region – especially the prisoners’ life – extremely unstable and mutable, since the status of the victims depended entirely on the equally mutable functions of this monstrous spazio-soglia and of its mobile borders. It was through and within this threshold that the destiny of the inmate, as well the very possibility of surviving via the assignment to a sub-camp where conditions were less harsh, were produced and negotiated, very often through a semi-arbitrary ‘imbroglio’ of rational and irrational notions and related practices on the part of the Nazi administration (Krakowski, 1994: 58). For this very reason, it might prove useful at this point to move to another scale – that of the camp proper, to see how this sort of imbroglio was actually essential to the very functioning of the thanatopolitical machine (see Agamben, 2002).

Mexico

Whilst the geographies of the extended camp-region reveal the existence of an underlying and inherent tension and an enmeshment between the ‘topographical’ and the ‘topological’, this tension emerges even more evidently when we look at the internal spaces of the camp. In particular, one extension of the Birkenau camp deserves closer investigation: named by the Polish inmates ‘Mexico’ (Meksyk in Polish), this area was located just outside the formal borders of the camp and represented a sort of internal exception to the topographical nature of the camp itself. The term ‘Mexico’ referred to the traditional ways in which different districts were informally denominated in some Polish towns, with areas known as ‘Mexico’ perceived as the most dangerous (Charlesworth, 2003: 509-510).

Mexico raises some troubling questions: why name, within an extermination camp, an area that was more dangerous than others? What was the nature of the different danger inherent in Mexico? Perhaps the label Mexico had not much to do with the idea of danger, but rather with the concept of a borderzone, of a liminal space of indistinction, since it represented a sort of no-man’s-land within the camp where literally anything could happen. Its main characteristic was in fact that here the precarious conditions of the camp were taken to their extremes. Mexico had a relatively short life, since its construction started at the end of 1943, only to be suspended in April 1944, and indefinitely interrupted in October of the same year, when the barracks were dismantled and brought to another camp (Lasik et al., 2000: 100).

The literature on Mexico is remarkably scarce. Even Pressac, in what is one of the most comprehensive studies on the role of the gas chambers in the Final Solution, dedicates only a few lines to Mexico where he confirms its function as a space of ‘transit’ (1989: 512). In theory, Mexico had been conceived to host hundreds of thousand of Hungarian Jewish women deported in 1944 from the liquidated ghettos (Strzelecka, 1994: 395), and it is very possible that the acceleration of extermination in those months made its completion somewhat unnecessary. Within this perspective, Mexico seems to have played the role of an extended spazio-soglia connecting Auschwitz’s camp(s) to the external world in the calculative ‘production of corpses’. In Mexico the deportees were ‘selected’ and re-directed either towards the gas

chambers or towards the labour camps (Iwasko et al., 2000: 246). However, Mexico also represented in many ways the collapse of the topographical order that dominated the Auschwitz project. The tensions between the topographical and the topological that we have highlighted so far, there found a clearer and more explicit expression. In Mexico, the calculative rationality of Nazi planning was in part suspended by the lack of order and efficiency that appeared to dominate the rest of the Auschwitz-Birkenau complex. Langbein underlines the lack of organisation and rationalisation in Mexico, with a chronic shortage of water, permanent overcrowding, and related fights over who should sleep on the floor and who should remain seated (2004: 91, 173, 323). According to a Hungarian deportee, Mexico was “the poorest of the poor” (Isaacson, 1991: 68). The overall suspension of the topographical order of the camp is confirmed by the fact that in August 1944, Mexico was where women arriving from Hungarian ghettos were ‘concentrated’, without any registration number assigned to them (Durchgangs-Juden, passage-Jews), while they were waiting to be sent to the women’s section, or directly to the gas chambers (Sofsky, 1999: 51). “Formally they were not prisoners of Auschwitz concentration camp, since they were not entered in the camp records. Their fate remained to be decided” (Lasik et al., 2000: 99). The lack of registration is even more meaningful if we consider that Auschwitz was the only camp where the matriculation number of the inmates was tattooed on their skins and not simply stamped on their uniforms. This practice, however, was not implemented in Mexico (Langbein, 2004: 48).

It does not come as a surprise, then, that Mexico remained a site of contested memories in the decades that followed liberation, and that it has often been cited by revisionists like Mark Weber, Director of the Institute for Historical Review, who has based his denial of the Holocaust also by speculating on the uncertain destination of this secondary camp which, according to some sources, should have become an hospital (Mattogno, 1999; Weber, 1999). Even now, Mexico is presented to the visitor of the camp as a sort of meaningless tabula rasa, an empty space without signs of its infamous past and hence exempt from the process of ‘monumentalisation’ that has transformed the rest of the camp complex. Remarkably, Charlesworth and Addis highlight the fact that the progressive ‘return to nature’ of Birkenau’s third section is the result of a deliberate decision on the part of the authorities in charge of the ‘heritage’ of Birkenau to focus entirely on the first two sectors of greater historical (and tourist) interest, while Mexico has become as sort of buffer zone – a threshold, (again?) – between the camp and the nearby village (2002: 245), a zone in which some modest rural activity is even practised. It appears as if, even today, Mexico cannot find a proper place in the space of the camp – a space now entirely re-organised for the visitor; as if the only possibility was that of returning it to nature, to the birch forest from which Birkenau’s denomination derived.

What is even more important for the sake of our argument is that Mexico’s unique status was also related to ideas of escape and survival. The most significant event that took place in Mexico was Walter Rosenberg (aka Rudolf Vrba) and Alfred Wetzler’s widely celebrated escape described in the Vrba and Wetzler Report, which became one of the most complete reports of the extent and the organization of the extermination machine circulated before the war’s end in April 1944. Although their escape was officially acknowledged by the Nazis on April 7th 1944, the two inmates had hidden within Mexico for

another three days (Karny, 1994: 553). Their successful plan represented a true challenge to the topographical rationality of Auschwitz. In their own account of the escape, we find a powerful description of the relationship between the rational and orderly organisation of the camp, and the opening up of a topological threshold that allowed for a way out: it was precisely their understanding of the deep structure of the topographical machine of the camp that had translated it into a weapon capable of defeating its rationality and unveiling its nature as a spazio-soglia.

The mother camp of Auschwitz [...] was divided into an outer camp in which we worked and an inner camp in which we slept. The inner camp in Birkenau was guarded by a trench six yards wide and five yards deep. It was filled with water. Then came two barbed wire high voltage fences five yards high. Arc lamps played constantly on the inner camp at night and SS men with machine guns surveyed it from watch towers. In the morning these guards stood down after we had gone to work and fresh guards manned towers on the perimeter of the outer camp which was about four miles long. The approaches to this perimeter were absolutely barren and no prisoner could cross them in daylight without being caught in cross-fire from the towers. If a prisoner did manage to sneak through this network, if he was reported missing from the inner camp at night, the outer towers were manned and reinforcements – 3000 men and 200 dogs – were called in to seal off the entire area. This massive guard stayed on duty for three days and nights while troops and dogs fine-combed the camp. If the prisoner had not been recaptured by that time, it was presumed that he had escaped beyond the camp where other S.S. men were searching already. The guard was dismissed then and the matter was handed over to the authorities beyond Auschwitz. It was clear to me that a man who could remain hidden beyond the inner perimeter for three days and three nights had a reasonable chance (Vrba and Bestic, 1964: 201-202, emphasis added).

An escape from the topography of the camp could be realised only in a spazio-soglia located, at once, both inside and outside of the camp. Mexico allowed, in fact, for a double dispositif of exclusive inclusion to operate: a spatial and a temporal one, that is, a true dispositif of displacement, a spatial threshold where it was possible to be, at the same time, both inside and outside the camp – and a temporal threshold (within the crucial three days) that made it difficult to locate the fugitives in the Auschwitz camp-region.

Nonetheless, as noted above, the literature on Mexico and its role in the spatialities of Auschwitz remains remarkably scarce. We believe, however, that Mexico is a key site in better understanding the unstable spatialities of the camp, since it served as a transient space and was characterised by the uncertainty of its function and of its final destination: it represented a site where the otherwise latent tension between the topographical and the topological in the camp and the camp-region came together and became shockingly explicit. If this was the case, then the need to interrogate the geographical meaning of Mexico and, with it, of the camp-region of Auschwitz is an urgent task. Mexico was in fact not merely a spazio-soglia inside a topographical space; rather, it represented a site where the spatialisation of the dialectic between the topographical and the topological that traversed the entire project of the camp became visible, where the norm and its suspension were explicitly performed at the same time. Mexico was where the internal and the external came together all the time, where two fugitives could hide inside the

camp complex while the (topographical minds of the) guards were looking for them outside. In Mexico it was possible to be outside of Auschwitz by remaining inside, albeit for a limited amount of time.

Mexico was not just an unfinished project or a marginal space, or an 'imperfection' of the camp, as the scarce interest for it in the literature might persuade one to think. On the contrary, our claim is that Mexico was the site in which the coming together and indistinction between the external and internal logic of the camp, between the camp proper and its 'region', between the barbed wire and the celebrative use of the gates, materialised and made visible the unstable nature of the spatialities of the camp – and indeed of the geopolitical and biopolitical Nazi project for Eastern Europe.

AFTER AUSCHWITZ

The Auschwitz project – and the urban and regional complex organised around the camp itself – was a striking expression of a modern rationality that was translated into the geometries of its barracks, of its connecting lines and points, its networks, its barbed wires, and its visible and invisible borders. However, within these rigid spatialities, topography, as a principle of order(ing) and separation, was at once both affirmed and negated. This apparently disorderly sequence of affirmation and negation of the 'rules of the game' was part of the functioning of the camp as a space of exception, as has been argued by Agamben and many others. The always possible and fully arbitrary suspension of the rule was in a sense a constitutive element of the project, together with the forceful imposition of the rule with its often nonsensical geometries. Rule and suspension of the rule constituted the *Nomos* of the camp – the norm that was founded on its own (semi-arbitrary) suspension. The topographical dimension of the camp was therefore only one element of the project. To work as a space of exception and as a site of permanent potential suspension of the rule – and yet at the same time to be 'full of rules' – the camp needed the constant presence and penetration of the topological, what Agamben would define as a 'varco' (see Minca, 2007: 90), a sort of omnipresent but only partially regulated relationship with the outside. Because of this complicated and undefined interpenetration between the topographical and the topological, the murderous biopolitical machine of the camp could be conceived as a kind of gigantic spazio-soglia.

What we would like to suggest in conclusion, then, is that reading the camp as a spazio-soglia can be of some use in order to unravel the imbroglione of the topographical and the topological that produced such a powerful biopolitical machine, but also to unveil the broader tensions between the functional and the ideological, modernity and barbarism, bureaucracy and violence, rational and irrational, that placed the camp at the centre of a larger biopolitical and geopolitical project. It is in this perspective, we suggest, that Agamben's concept of the *soglia* can be of some use to reflect on the role played by calculation, measurement, and classification in the making of the camp and in its relationship with modernity. Moreover, this spazio-soglia can be a potentially powerful tool in order to investigate how certain antinomies come together and are rendered indistinguishable in a permanent state of exception and

how, under certain conditions, they collapse into the materialities and the practices of what is the ultimate space of exception, the camp.

Is this a lesson that can be taken beyond the Auschwitz 'laboratory' (Levi, 1959)? What can be learned from the fact that the blurring between the topographical and the topological was not just immaterial, symbolic, and procedural, but was rather fully embodied in the materialities of the camp? The first question is, of course, whether a deeper understanding of the spatialities of the Nazi camp can provide further insight into some of the key issues that have been at the core of the debate in Holocaust Studies over the past few years – such as the role played by (modern) calculative rationality in the realization of the Final Solution or the exceptional nature of the Auschwitz experiment. For geographers, it could be equally important to ask whether a reflection on the spatialities of the camp can be of use for other fields of enquiry and, in particular, for the analysis of the geographies of exception that have taken shape after 9/11. Is the above described interplay between the topographic and the topological a dispositif that can be identified in other (contemporary) spaces of exception? How can an engagement with the concept of the spazio-soglia contribute to an understanding of such geographies? We hope that this brief incursion into the spatialities of Auschwitz can help not only to better understand its biopolitical machinery, but also to theorise how the spatial threshold between the topographical and the topological remains at the core of all geographies of exception and terror.

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