

# Neither Inside Nor Outside Dutch Society

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An Ethnographic Analysis of the Refugee Camp In  
Utrecht

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## Foreword

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## Introduction

Refugee discourse is everywhere these days. Pictures and footage of people cramped in boats, of the Calais jungle being evacuated and displaced people waiting in camps flood the news. Also in Dutch society, there is much controversy surrounding refugees. There are people who want to welcome refugees and help them integrate into Dutch society, but there are also people who protest against the building of new asylum seekers centres and who do not want to share their neighbourhoods with refugees. There are many conversations about refugees, but not so many conversations *with* refugees, about their experience since they arrived in Dutch society. There are, however, many volunteer organisations that aim to bridge the gap between Dutch people and refugees and open a conversation between them. One such organisation is New Dutch Connections, where I was an intern for six months. During my internship, I worked closely with refugees and spent a large amount of time at the camp in Utrecht. Being in the camp for the first time was a draining experience which left me exhausted. I could not imagine living there for months or even years. The camp is a place that is located in Dutch society and is bound by Dutch rules and laws, but at the same time is outside of Dutch society. Someone might live close to the camp without ever coming into contact with the people living there. This seemingly paradoxical situation of inside and outside is what led me to write my thesis about the refugee camp. This thesis will examine this distinction between inside and outside by focusing on the camp in Utrecht. I will do so with the help of Giorgio Agamben's theory about the zone of indistinction: a liminal space where the lines between inside and outside, legal and illegal and citizen and non-citizen start to blur and become indistinguishable from one another. Agamben especially focuses on lives lived on the margin, whether they are social, political or juridical. He has often applied his theory to the figure of the refugee, but he has not focussed on the lived experience of refugees who are inhabiting a zone of indistinction. This thesis will focus on the experience of the camp's inhabitants and answer the question: To what extent does the asylum seeker centre in Utrecht symbolise Giorgio Agamben's notion of a zone of indistinction and how does this affect the people living there?

Since the research component of my internship at New Dutch Connections consisted mostly of doing ethnographical fieldwork, this thesis will take a critical ethnographic approach. Critical ethnography emerged in the wake of post-structuralism as a way to gain insight into the relationship between social structures and human agency (Goodman 51). Its purpose is not to simply describe 'what's out there', but to engage with the power structures

that lie at the heart of the observed and to challenge these economic, political and social structures of oppression. Within critical ethnography, however, there is always a tension between critical theory and ethnography: “many critical scholars in education view ethnography as too atheoretical in their approach to research while ethnographers see critical scholars as too ideological and thus overly biased in their research” (Goodman 51). Finding the right balance between the two can be a challenge, but a challenge that can shed new light on the way daily lives are influenced by political and social structures. What is important in finding this balance is to use a definition of experience that allows for questioning and analysing the power relations that shape experience. It is also of high significance to acknowledge my own embedded position in society. We are all creatures of the world and therefore “we are all destined as interpreters to analyze from within its boundaries and blinders” (Kincheloe and McLaren 97). My ethnographic approach will thus constantly examine power relations in order to be able to challenge these relations. With this approach, I also hope to not reinforce these power relations, since I am writing from a privileged position about other people. I want to be very careful about portraying the people living in the centre in an ethically sound manner. I do not wish to paint them as victims or as helpless people, but rather, account for their agency and use this thesis as a way to let their voices be heard. Furthermore, for privacy reasons, all names of the interviewees are changed.

The outline of this thesis is as follows. Chapter 1 will explain in detail the notion of Agamben’s zones of indistinction and the *homo sacer*. Agamben uses the *homo sacer* as a figure who inhabits the zone of indistinction. It is a figure who is left outside of the law, but at the same time is still subjected to it. This chapter will apply this theory to the refugee camp and its inhabitants. Chapter 2 will take a closer look at the refugee camp and describe the field setting of my ethnographic research. What does an ordinary Dutch asylum seekers centre look like? What happens to refugees once they apply for asylum in the Netherlands? This chapter will furthermore describe multiple characteristics of the camp and Dutch asylum procedure. Chapter 3 will focus on the experience of the people living in the camp. What are their daily schedules? How does living in the camp affect them? These questions will be answered with quotes obtained during conversations and interviews. I will also explain in more detail how I conducted my research in this chapter.

## Chapter 1: Zones of Indistinction and the Homo Sacer

To understand the concept of a refugee camp as a zone of indistinction, we must first explore the notion of a zone of indistinction. In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Giorgio Agamben thoroughly investigates what constitutes zones of indistinction and who the people inhabiting these places are. Agamben's work in *Homo Sacer* is heavily influenced by Michel Foucault's notion of biopolitics. Agamben has stated in an interview that he "first began to understand the figure of the *homo sacer* after [he] read Foucault's texts on biopolitics" (Leitgeb and Vismann 17). Since his theory about the *homo sacer* can be quite dense, it will be useful to briefly explore Foucault's work on biopolitics in order to gain a better understanding. Foucault is concerned with the questions: who has the right to decide over life and death and who is deemed to be worthy of living? Biopolitics refers to the domain of life over which power has taken control: "[i]t is a form of power that disseminates through society as an effective tool in power relations to normalize social acts and the conduct of populations" (Larraniga, De, and Doucet 520). Bodies are subjugated to the power of the state; their right to live is controlled by the sovereign. Foucault argues that before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the state had the power to let people live or to put them to death, which he calls the power to take life or to let live (Foucault 241). Death in that time used to be a spectacle, a ritual, meant to signify the power of the state; public beheadings and shootings were quite common ways to discourage citizens from disobeying the state's power. This gradually changed and rather by explicitly putting people to death, the state now has the power to invest in subjects and to enable life for them, while the subjects they do not invest in are left to die. Foucault calls this to make live or to let die.

Biopolitics' function is to lengthen and improve life, to make it more productive and efficient. It is no surprise that, when the improvement of life became the state's power instead of putting to death, the ritualisation of death began to disappear. Death became something to be hidden away: "death now becomes, in contrast, the moment when the individual escapes all power, falls back on himself and retreats, so to speak, into his own privacy. Power no longer recognizes death. Power literally ignores death" (248). The state is no longer actively killing people, but rather ignoring people and not investing in the improvement of their life. According to Rosi Braidotti, the subjects who are ignored by the state suffer from social and political phenomena such as poverty, famine and homelessness (111). These phenomena therefore become the new causes of death caused by the state. The question remains who

these subjects are that are being left to die. Braidotti argues that they are the people who fall outside of the norm: “The bodies of the empirical subjects who signify difference (woman/native/earth or natural others) have become the disposable bodies of the global economy” (111). The state wants to invest in lives and improve them, but the people who fall outside of the norm are disposable and not worthy of being invested in. This means that entire populations suffer from conditions such as poverty. Achille Mbembe argues that biopolitics therefore creates “new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead” (Mbembe 40). This status of living dead is very closely related to the figure of the *homo sacer*.

The main difference between Foucault and Agamben, however, is that Foucault points to the 19<sup>th</sup> century as the time when biopolitics first started to appear, while Agamben claims that it can actually be traced back to the origins of Western politics in Greece and Rome (Snoek 47). For Agamben, the original act of the sovereign is the creation of sacred life or bare life. He argues that biopolitics and the sovereign are thus interwoven from the beginning: “Not simple natural life, but life exposed to death (bare life or sacred life) is the originary political element” (1998, 88).

### The Homo Sacer

In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Agamben first starts with the definition of the word ‘life’. He points out that the ancient Greek had two words for this word: “*zoë*, which expressed the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods), and *bios*, which indicated the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group” (1998, 1). *Zoë* was in the time of the ancient Greeks used to refer to life restricted to the confines of the home, outside of political interference, while *bios* specifically indicates life that has entered the political domain. These two forms of life are of course not separate; there is a point at which *bios* and *zoë* start to overlap. Agamben focuses on the places where these two forms of life overlap, and he argues that the distinction between *zoë* and *bios* lies at the foundation of Western democracy: “The fundamental categorical pair of Western politics is not that of friend/enemy but that of bare life/political existence, *zoë/bios*, exclusion/inclusion” (8). Agamben takes a special interest in these dichotomies, because all of them cannot be seen as separate from each other, but rather, they constitute each other. He focuses on the lives lived on the margin, whether they are social, political or juridical, and he takes the *homo sacer* as his starting point.

The *homo sacer* is a figure who, under Roman law, was judged of committing a crime (71). As punishment, his rights as a citizen were revoked and he was banned from society. He consequently became a *homo sacer*, a sacred man, someone who could be killed by anyone without it being considered homicide. On the other hand, since his natural life, *zoë*, was considered sacred, he could not be sacrificed in a ritual ceremony. The *homo sacer* thus “presents the originary figure of life taken into the sovereign ban and preserves the memory of the originary exclusion through which the political dimension was first constituted” (83). However, the sovereign ban is quite a paradoxical phrase. While the *homo sacer* is banned from society and is free to be killed by anyone, he is at the same time still subjected to the society he has been abandoned. Being abandoned always means being in relation to the very thing one is abandoned from: “What has been banned is delivered over to its own separateness and, at the same time, consigned to the mercy of the one who abandons it - at once excluded and included, removed and at the same time captured” (110). The *homo sacer* is outside of the law, and precisely because of that exclusion, he is exposed to the constant threat of death that derives from no longer living inside the law. The abandonment is thus not merely exclusion, rather, it is an “inclusive exclusion”. This is where the distinction between *bios* and *zoë* starts to become indistinct. The *homo sacer* is stripped of his political life, so what remains is pure *zoë*. However, his *zoë* is politicized to the point where it is caught in the sovereign ban “and must reckon with it at every moment, finding the best way to elude or deceive it. In this sense, no life, as exiles and bandits know well, is more ‘political’ than his” (183-184). His life is caught in a zone of indistinction, where *zoë* and *bios* include and exclude each other at the same time.

Following Carl Schmitt, Agamben gives the name ‘relation of exception’ to the form of relation where something is included solely by being excluded (18). He argues that the law functions only because of this relation of exception. Rule and order cannot be applied to chaos, so a ‘normal’ or regular situation will have to be established. The sovereign creates this regular situation and decides if this situation is effective and if it can be properly ruled and governed: “The law has a regulative character and is a ‘rule’ not because it commands and proscribes, but because it must first of all create the sphere of its own reference in real life and make that reference regular” (26). Thus, a situation is created that is constituted as a fact, a situation that is considered normal and legal. However, to create a regular situation, there also has to be a situation that is irregular, a situation that remains chaotic: the exception. The exception is not completely outside of the rule, “rather, the rule, suspending itself, gives rise to the exception and, maintaining itself in relation to the exception, first constitutes itself as a



rule” (18). The law is therefore comprised of “what it manages to capture inside itself through the inclusive exclusion of the *exceptio*: it nourishes itself on this exception and is a dead letter without it” (27). The rule then, cannot exist without the exception, while at the same time, the exception cannot exist without the rule.

The sovereign also has a paradoxical relation with the law, which becomes apparent when the sovereign has the power to declare a state of exception: “Through the state of exception, the sovereign ‘creates and guarantees the situation’ that the law needs for its own validity” (17). The sovereign has the power to legally suspend the validity of the law, but he also places himself outside of the law. He is therefore both on the inside and the outside of the law at the same time (15). The state of exception is supposed to be an exceptional state, only applicable in times of war and civil unrest. However, as Agamben argues, the exception slowly starts to become the rule. He gives the example of the Decree for the Protection of the People and the State that was declared in Germany during the Second World War, which suspended laws of personal liberties. This decree was never repealed until twelve years later (2005, 2). These days, states of exception are more and more becoming the rule. One might even argue that the war on terror gave rise to the suspension of certain individual liberties and rights in the name of security. According to Agamben, “the voluntary creation of a permanent state of emergency (though perhaps not declared in the technical sense) has become one of the essential practices of contemporary states, including so-called democratic ones” (2). Even though a state of emergency may not have been officially declared, it has become a prevalent feature of today’s societies. Emergencies allow for the state of exception to persist. The exception is thus not an exception anymore, but is starting to become the rule:

The decisive fact is that, together with the process by which 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 (1998, 9).

Since the lines between outside and inside start to blur and exception becomes the rule, the zones of indistinction are not merely limited to one particular place but rather, whole cities can become zones of indistinction. However, in some places these indistinctions are more visible than in others. The refugee camp is one of the biggest examples.

## Refugees and the Camp

Agamben uses the figure of the refugee to challenge the link between citizen, nation and state. Refugees are often seen as an exception, not belonging to the new society they seek refuge in. They belong neither here nor there, they are inside and outside of society at the same time. They are presented as a problem that needs to be solved and gain a lot of attention – positive or negative – in the media. If refugees indeed “represent such a disquieting element in the order of the modern nation-state, this is above all because by breaking the continuity between man and citizen, nativity and nationality, they put the originary fiction of modern sovereignty in crisis” (131). They do so in different ways. The first one is visible when the notion of human rights is examined more carefully. Human rights imply that there are certain rights that are intrinsic to every human being. Merely by being human, one should have access to these rights. In fact, human rights only seem to apply to citizens of a nation-state. In the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, it is not clear whether man and citizen are two independent beings or if one is always included in the other (126). Agamben draws a close line to the work of Hannah Arendt here, who states that the moment someone is no longer a citizenship and has only his or her humanity left, that person is not seen as human anymore and loses the very rights that should have been inherent to anyone: “The conception of human rights, based upon the assumed existence of a human being as such, broke down at the very moment when those who professed to believe in it were for the first time confronted with people who had indeed lost all other qualities and specific relationships - except that they were still human” (Arendt 299). Refugees have been wholly reduced to *zōē*, to bare life. However, after losing their citizenship, they are consequently no longer seen as entirely human anymore. It seems that the distinction between *zōē* and *bios* has blurred and that at the moment of birth, life is immediately politicized to the point that one becomes a citizen.

Another way refugees challenge modern sovereignty becomes clear when examining the image of the refugee as proposed by Simon Turner. He argues that the refugee lacks not only citizenship, but also a proper voice and proper agency (Turner 2). The refugee is produced as a marginal and lacking other, as an exception to the rule. This causes the rule itself to be normalized, which in this case is the order of the citizen and the nation state. This means that, “while the figure of the refugee threatens the nation state, it also stabilizes it by being the ‘constitutive outside’ of the national order of things” (2). Even though the refugee is portrayed as an outsider, he is thus contained in the national order. According to Turner, this is done in three ways. First, the flow of bodies across borders is problematised as a problem with a specific name: refugees. Second, they are framed in a problem-solving discourse, as an

aberration in need of a solution (2). Lastly, since refugees are seen as a problem being caused by exceptional situations, such as war, refugee discourse involves language of emergencies, for instance the phrasing ‘the refugee crisis’ (2). Due to framing refugees in emergency language, “humanitarian and state responses are also often perceived as ‘emergency measures’; they are exceptional, temporary and often in legal grey zones” (2). One of these emergency measures is the refugee camp, which is often seen as a temporary place that refugees inhabit until they are granted a residency permit – which is also temporary – or are eventually repatriated. Of course, there are refugees that remain in their new host country for the rest of their lives, but the refugee status is always seen as temporary. Agamben argues that there is no autonomous place in the nation-state for the refugee status, that is, “for the pure human in itself”, and that this is “evident at the very least from the fact that, even in the best of cases, the status of refugee has always been considered a temporary condition that ought to lead either to naturalization or to repatriation” (Agamben 2000, 19). Precisely the fact that the nation-state cannot provide the solution for the so-called refugee crisis, shows that the figure of the refugee calls into question the categories of the nation-state.

One of the temporary measures undertaken by the nation-state to deal with the influx of refugees is the refugee camp. Refugee camps are a form of permanent temporality: they exist in order to cope with a ‘temporary problem’, but refugee camps can exist for decades. They are a place in which the zone of indistinction is geographically located: “The state of exception, which used to be essentially a temporary suspension of the order, becomes now a new and stable spatial arrangement inhabited by that naked life that increasingly cannot be inscribed into the order” (Agamben 2000, 42-43). Camps may also in legal terms be defined as exceptional, since the organisations and legal instruments that govern the camps cannot be found elsewhere in society (Turner 3). The camps thus belong legally to the host society, but is also excluded because different laws and rules apply to the camps. The inhabitants also experience a social exclusion since they are treated as if they do not belong to their host country. The camps can be geographically excluded: most camps are located outside the city or at the outskirts of the city. Even the camps that lie in the city are marked with fences and security. There is a distinction between inside and outside in the camps, but this distinction is often blurred. People are free to visit the camps – in the Netherlands at least – and the inhabitants are also free to leave the camp, as long as they return.

### **The Camp as a Space of Exception**

The camp is the geographical space in which politics start to become biopolitics and the

citizen becomes the *homo sacer*. For Agamben, the camp is the ultimate biopolitical paradigm of modern Western society; “it is the space that opens up when the state of exception starts to become the rule” (2000, 38). The process by which the state of exception starts to become the rule is the increasing politics of security. Bülent Diken argues that the ‘classic’ war had a clearly defined enemy who was oftentimes clearly defined by borders (Diken and Laustsen 302). However, after 9/11, the threat of terrorism suddenly was omnipresent. The war on terror came to a rise and there was no longer a clear enemy. The enemy was no longer defined by borders but rather, the enemy could be virtually anywhere and anyone: “With terrorism, the enemy is potentially unclear, and the battlefield is without demarcations; terror is a ‘formless war’. It creates a zone of indistinction – a camp that we all inhabit” (302). In response to the threat of terrorism, the state sharpens its security. The politics of security becomes the new basic principle of state activity. Agamben argues that a state defined by the politics of security is a fragile structure: there is always a risk that the state can be provoked by terrorism to turn terroristic itself (Agamben 2006). Indeed, in the name of security and the war on terror, the state of exception allows for violations of privacy, of the law and of human rights in order to keep its citizens safe. This way, politics reduces itself to policing and “the difference between state and terrorism threatens to disappear. In the end security and terrorism may form a single deadly system, in which they justify and legitimate each other’s actions” (Agamben 2006). Security and terrorism thus cannot be seen apart from each other.

The politics of security and the fear of terror are related to forms of life; security forms and produces dynamic aspects of social life (Diken 90). The politics of asylum is therefore increasingly drawn into the orbit of security and fear. The politics of asylum is dependent upon the figure of the refugee as a threat to Western society. There is a fear that in the current flow of refugees, terrorists are hiding and making their way to Europe. The contemporary discourse on refugees is very fixed upon the idea that borders are crossed by potential enemies, people who do not belong in the new country they are entering. This discourse is “based on the sovereign myth and its body politic that conceives of the state as a container, as a ‘body endangered by migrants’ who ‘penetrate’ its borders” (Diken 88). It is precisely because asylum seekers are portrayed as a danger to national security that it is deemed acceptable to keep them in asylum seekers centres or in refugee camps. In those places, rights that should have been inherent to every single person are suddenly not easily accessible anymore. In the name of national security, “the right of territorial sovereignty and to protect the way of life of ‘normal citizens’”, therefore, “everything is permitted” (Owens 575). The camp thus becomes a place for outsiders within, a place of inclusive exclusion, where people

can be regulated and governed at the level of population in a permanent ‘state of exception’ outside the normal legal framework” (Owens 568). Before refugees settle in camps for months or even years, they and their movements are often depicted as problems in the legal world order. However, once they are settled, “the threat and potential burden they once posed dissipates and their plight is depoliticized” (Hyndman and Giles 366). Refugees thus stop being specific persons, or citizens, “and become pure victims in general [. . .] Humanitarian practices tend to silence refugees” (Malkki 1996, 378).

The people in the camp have been stripped of their political life, *bios*, and what remains is pure *zoë*. They have been reduced to bare life. The camp is thus “the most absolute biopolitical space that has ever been realized - a space in which power confronts nothing other than pure biological life without any mediation” (Agamben 2000, 40). Agamben names the Nazi concentration camps as the ultimate biopolitical camp, but he argues that the creation of camps has become essential to any modern nation state, since the state of exception has become a permanent structure:

If the essence of the camp consists in the materialization of the state of exception and in the consequent creation of a space for naked life as such, we will then have to admit to be facing a camp virtually every time that such a structure is created, regardless of the nature of the crimes committed in it and regardless of the denomination and specific topography it might have (2000, 40-41).

In Agamben’s terms, camps can thus be refugee camps such as the camp in Calais, detention centres off the shore of Australia and every form of asylum seekers centre. This is why the asylum seekers centre in Utrecht is addressed as ‘the camp’ in this thesis. The residents of the asylum seekers centre also refer to it themselves as the camp. In the next chapter, the refugee camp as a zone of indistinction will be examined more closely. The focus will lie on the refugee camp, or the asylum seekers centre, in Utrecht.

## Chapter 2: Dutch Asylum Procedure and the Camp

In order to gain an idea of the asylum procedure in the Netherlands, a brief description will be given. The camp is the place where asylum seekers are housed by the state until their status as refugee is verified and they are granted a residence permit. The moment asylum seekers arrive to the Netherlands, they go to the detention centre in Ter Apel for identification and registration (“Ter Apel”). This procedure takes up to three days, after which the asylum seeker is transferred to another refugee camp where he or she has to wait until the IND, the Immigration and Naturalization Service, starts with the asylum procedure. The IND does not have a location at every camp in the Netherlands, which means that the moment the procedure starts, people are moved to the camps that do have IND locations. Previously, the time from entry into the country until the decision about the residence permit is made, could not take more than six months by law. However, because of the IND’s incapability to quickly process the current influx of refugees, it may now take up to fifteen months. Three months may also be added to these fifteen months if the IND deems this necessary in order to make a decision (“Asielprocedure”). If asylum is granted, the refugee has to move to another camp and wait there until he or she receives housing, for which there is no specific time limit. This means that the period of living at the camp can take up to more than 18 months and people are continuously moved from one location to another. The organisation in charge of the camps is the COA, the Central Body Shelter Asylum Seekers. The COA is in charge with providing every asylum seeker a roof above his/her head in the form of the camp, and to provide housing the moment they leave the camp.

The asylum procedure is also based upon the notion of asylum seekers as a potential threat. Together with other interns of New Dutch Connections, I attended the closing ceremony of the Asielzoekmachine, which translates roughly as the Asylumseekmachine. This organisation had held open meetings throughout the country in which citizens could voice their opinions about the Dutch asylum procedure and think together to create new and innovative ways to make the procedure run more smoothly and friendly. At the closing ceremony, the director of the IND, the director of the COA and various politicians were present to listen to the ideas citizens had come up with. One of these ideas was to make the interrogation rooms of the IND more hospitable in order to create a better atmosphere in which the asylum seeker can feel more at ease. It is perhaps important to note that this was one of the easier suggestions to actually implement in the asylum procedure. However, the

director of the IND, Rob van Lint, replied that the IND does not want to put flower vases in the rooms, because vases can be used as a weapon by an angry asylum seeker. He noted that in ninety-nine out of one hundred cases, everything runs smoothly, but there only needs to be one asylum seeker who loses his temper to create a problem. Even though the chance of actual danger is very small, the IND thus organises their procedure around the one percent chance of a threat. By organising the asylum procedure around the exception, the exception is established as the rule.

### **A Closer Look at the Camp**

White walls with smears on it, strange smells and endless corridors lined with doors that lead to tiny rooms. Doors that lead to even more corridors. People who are sitting on the floor aimlessly for hours at a time. The first encounter with the refugee camp in Utrecht is not pleasant. The camp is located in a former military hospital and like any hospital, it can seem like a maze to the people who do not yet understand the layout of the building. The atmosphere of the old hospital still resides in the hallways: there are lingering, unidentifiable smells and an aura of waiting, wondering when this place can be left behind. Rooms are filled with nothing more than beds and some lockers. Some rooms have two separate beds, while others have (multiple) bunk beds and accommodate up to eight people. Smoking in the rooms is prohibited, but still the rooms reek of smoke and marihuana. The kitchen and bathrooms have to be shared with all the people from one hallway. The first time we visited the camp as interns, it was February and the square in front of the building was deserted. The hallways also seemed deserted; most people took to the warmth in their rooms. When the weather got better and as we started to get to know more and more people living in the camp, the place seemed to become much livelier.

The building has been an asylum seekers centre since 1990, offering room for 450 people. Inhabitants are free to leave the camp whenever they want and also to sleep elsewhere, as long as they return once every two weeks to stamp their fingerprints. Visitors are also free to enter the camp, but this is a little more complicated. They have to enter at the reception and identify themselves with passports/ID-cards/drivers licences to the security. They also have to state who they are going to visit, which means that the visitor already has to be acquainted with someone at the camp in order to enter. Since meeting Dutch people is quite a hurdle and a difficult task to accomplish as a newcomer in Dutch society, this arrangement does not make it any easier. Meeting new people is thus mostly arranged through organisations that match volunteer buddies to refugees. People living at the camp receive a

weekly allowance of the COA to pay for food and clothes, which is a maximum of €58 per week. People with a residence permit are free to find paid work; people still waiting for their residence permit are allowed to find a job for up to 24 weeks a year if they have been in the Netherlands for more than six months. However, everyone has to give up most of their earnings to the COA and is only allowed to keep up to €158 a month for themselves. Finding work and gaining back economic self-reliance is thus discouraged by this system.

Bülent Diken argues that at least four characteristics of camp life can be distinguished: “living on small amounts of support payments or even food vouchers with no cash allowance, which pushes the asylum seeker out of the normal functioning of the economic system; to be prevented from finding paid work; living according to the governments’ choice of residency; and minimum geographical mobility (Diken 92). Another characteristic is that the camp always has a clear distinction between outside and inside. Often camps are located outside of the city and are surrounded by fences or walls. In Utrecht, this is not the case. The camp is located in the city and while there is indeed a fence, the building is not completely surrounded by it. People move in- and outside of the camp; the limits of the camp can thus be porous. Nevertheless, even though the lines between outside and inside may be minimal, the distinction remains: “Living inside a refugee camp [. . .] marks one’s life and defines one’s position: a position that is simultaneously excluded from and included into host society, excluded spatially and legally while simultaneously being defined and contained by the surrounding society” (Turner 4).

Another characteristic of the camp is that of immobility. In contemporary society, distances are shrinking and flows of goods and people across borders become faster. However, these flows are managed carefully, because of “sovereign power’s obsession with security in space of flows, with secured and sorted mobilities as a consequence (Ek 374). Richard Ek gives the example of the airport as the counterpart of the camp. An airport facilitates movement while the camp prohibits it. However, both are places of exception, outside and inside the nation at the same time, and both are regulated by a state of emergency. In the airport, it also becomes clear that mobility is a right for some (VIP lounges, first class travels, shorter waiting time to board the plane) and can mean exclusion for others. The creation of mobility always comes with the creation of immobility (Ek 374). While crossing borders in Europe is no problem for some, for refugees, no distance is greater than the few meters between two countries. When refugees arrive at the country in which they apply for asylum, this immobility persists. The camp is supposed to be a temporary solution, but people can be stuck at them for years: “the refugee camp has today become a ‘permanent’ location



and the transient condition of the refugee extends indefinitely, becoming an irrevocable and permanent situation, freezing into non-negotiable, rigid structures (Diken 93). Refugees are transferred from one camp to another, while nothing really changes for them. They are thus supposedly on the move without ever really moving. As Simon Turner puts it, refugees in camps are in a doubly paradoxical situation: “first, they cannot settle where they are because they are supposedly ‘on the move’, on their way home or somewhere else in the future; second, they cannot remain ‘on the move’ as they possibly are not going anywhere, either now or in the near future (Turner 4). The camp thus embodies a permanent state of temporariness, a certain limbo with no promise of an ending. In the camp, time grinds to a halt while life outside of the camp continues.

The camp is thus a biopolitical space which refugees inhabit. These refugees have been reduced to bare life and are no longer citizen of a state. In the name of national security, a state of exception opens up which allows the nation-state to deny people what should have been their basic human rights. This is visible in the form of the camp. In the camp, basic human needs are taken care of. People have a place to sleep and to eat. However, they cannot live their lives as fully as any other Dutch person, since they are not allowed to work and even if they are, they are only allowed to keep a small amount of the money they make. Refugees are, as Agamben argues in the figure of the *homo sacer*, outside of the normal legal framework, but at the same time still subjected to the law, perhaps even more so than any other citizen. The next chapter will explore refugees’ relation with the camp. Their experience of living in a zone of indistinction will be described and related to Agamben’s theory.

### Chapter 3: Experience of the Camp's Inhabitants

Agamben's theory about the state of exception and its production of zones of indistinction is very useful to examine and analyse refugee camps. However, what Agamben has not focussed on is how the production of zones of indistinction influence the daily lives of the people living in them. Working at New Dutch Connections, I came into close contact with people living at the camp in Utrecht and gained insight into their experience of living in this place. For my research, I have interviewed six people, three of whom are still living at the asylum seekers centre and three of whom have lived at the centre but now have their own place. The interviewees are people who participate in the New Dutch Connections programme or who volunteer at the organisation. I have selected the people I have interviewed based on their fluency in the English language in order to have an uninhibited conversation. Many of the participants in the New Dutch Connections programme do not speak Dutch and/or little English, which can make it hard to communicate effectively. I have thus selected people who are well-versed in the English language in order to conduct interviews that are more likely to be unaffected by a language barrier. All these six people were Syrian men. I did not plan to only interview Syrian men, but the participants of the programme were mostly male, from the age of 18 to 29, and either Syrian or Eritrean. The Syrian men I met were also the ones who spoke English very well, which is why this turned out to be my demographic. I am aware that this group does not reflect the demographic of all the people living at the asylum seekers centre, but unfortunately I did not have the chance to interview other people. I conducted unstructured interviews. I did not have any predetermined questions, in order to remain open and adaptable to the interviewee's statements and responses. I prepared a list of subjects I wanted to talk about, such as daily schedules, what has happened to them since they entered the Netherlands, their feelings about the asylum seekers centre and the state of constant waiting.

The notion of lived experience needs to be clearly defined in order to combine it with Agamben's poststructuralist framework. Poststructuralist approaches can be quite sceptical of the focus on experience because this focus, according to Joan Scott, "precludes critical examination of the workings of the ideological system itself, its categories of representation (homosexual/heterosexual, man/woman, black/white as fixed immutable identities), its premises about what these categories mean and how they operate, and of its notions of subjects, origin, and cause" (Scott 778). While Agamben assumes a poststructuralist

approach, it does not mean that it cannot be combined with focus on experience. Experience is not unrelated to the workings of the ideological system it is constituted in, rather, experience is formed by power structures. Power structures, formed by historical processes, position subjects and also form their experience. In the words of Scott, “[i]t is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience” (779). It is therefore arduous to think about the power structures that play a vital part in forming experience. By acknowledging experience’s relation to power structures, it becomes possible to account for the way experience is shaped by these structures. Experience should not be used as an authoritative explanation that grounds what is already known, “but rather that which we seek to explain, that about which knowledge is produced. To think about experience in this way is to historicize it as well as to historicize the identities it produces (779-780). Critical ethnography is therefore, as mentioned before, an appropriate method to account for people experience’s while at the same time analysing the power structures that shape those experiences.

### **Living in Limbo**

Living in a zone of indistinction unsurprisingly has an enormous effect on people’s daily lives, their sleep rhythms and their sense of time. Before we visited the camp, a volunteer at New Dutch Connections, Ibriz, already painted a realistic picture of what living at the camp is like. He spoke about the fact that people in the camp have nothing but time on their hands and no activities or distractions with which to fill this time: “The only thing we can do is wait. There is nothing to do in the camp. For children, there are a lot of activities and they can go to school, but we have nothing to do”. The continuous waiting and not knowing what is going to happen pushes people to find escape in substances like marijuana and alcohol. Ibriz lived in one of the only rooms – which he calls the VIP room – which had access to WiFi. Other inhabitants of the camp often spent time in his room, giving him little privacy. Ibriz made some attempts to study the Dutch language, but often felt unable to concentrate since he did not have a place for himself and was easily distracted by the noises and the people entering and leaving his room. He described night-time as perhaps the worst part of living at the camp: “I could not sleep at night. People do not want to think about what happened, so we smoke weed and fall asleep at three a.m., maybe at four, and sleep until midday. Then the next day is exactly the same”. People in the camp do not have the same sleep-and-eat schedule as most people with a nine to five job do. People eat when they are hungry and sleep only when they

cannot keep their eyes open anymore. Time becomes a blur, since everyday is the same. The only time Ibriz would have an appointment on his calendar is when he would meet with his contact person from the COA. This did not happen often; once every month would be royally frequent. Not having any appointments or schedules and filling the time with marijuana and alcohol would cause the days to all blur into one. Life in the camp is literally lived day to day. The promise of a future outside of the camp seems very far away, but still people would rather wait until they leave the camp before they start with Dutch lessons or other activities to start their new life in the Netherlands. This is the paradoxical part of living in a temporary space that has no promise of ending. People wait until they can leave the camp before they start their new lives, but at the same time have no clear idea when their new lives will start or what they will look like.

This limbo is not only limited to Utrecht's camp, but to other camps across the country as well. Aahil, a volunteer at new Dutch Connections, is the only person I interviewed who has not stayed at the camp in Utrecht. He has been in the Netherlands since June 2014. Like all other refugees, his first camp in the Netherlands was in Ter Apel, where he stayed for 35 days. Unlike in Utrecht, in Ter Apel, the people do not have access to a kitchen and cannot cook for themselves. At first Aahil felt glad to be in a safe place: "The first week I was happy, yeah, to be safe. But after a week, I was so bored. I had nothing to do. There were no Dutch people in the camp, no visitors. It was not good". Other than waiting, there was nothing for him to do. He did not have any contact with Dutch people, his meals were prepared for him and he had to be back at the camp every day at ten p.m. sharp. This is thus very different from the camp in Utrecht, where people only have to be back at the camp once every two weeks and are expected to cook their own meals. Aahil was then transferred to Luttgeest, where he stayed for three months, and then to Emmeloord. The camp in Emmeloord lay outside of the city and Aahil had to walk eight kilometres to buy groceries: "The camp was outside of the city, so we never spoke to Dutch people. In the camp, I only talked to Syrian people". He experienced this as very frustrating: when he came to the Netherlands, he felt motivated to build a new life, to learn the language and to meet new people, but he felt very discouraged and incapable of doing such things. He said: "I try to study in the camp, but I don't ever talk Dutch, so I do not remember anything that I have learned". While the COA provides Dutch lessons for people with a residence permit, these lessons are only two hours a week and, according to my interviewees, not too professional. Studying while at the camp proves to be hard, and if one does not talk any Dutch outside of class, the Dutch that has been learned is just as easily forgotten.

People are often moved from one camp to another. The six men I interviewed have all been in at least three camps since they arrived in the Netherlands. This moving around without actually going anywhere proves to be very difficult. During my internship at New Dutch Connections, six participants heard on a Saturday that they were supposed to be moving to Doetinchem the next Monday, where they would have interviews with the IND in order to finally gain a residence permit. One of these boys, Ahmad, had already been in the Netherlands for seven months and been in four different camps. He had stayed in Utrecht the longest, almost half a year. When the news broke that he had to move again, he was angry and distraught. While he was glad that he would finally know if he would be allowed to stay in the Netherlands or not, he did not want to leave Utrecht: “I have met people here, I have made friends, I like this city. I do not want to start over again”. Being moved around is a very disturbing and destabilizing pattern when trying to rebuild one’s life. If someone does not know how long he or she is going to stay, it can be hard to see the point in building a network and a future. The fact that these men were only warned two days in advance of the disruption of the life they had built so far also shows how people in the camp are not fully treated as human beings. “We are moved around like cattle”, Ahmad said, “and I do not understand why”. When the COA in Utrecht was asked about this, they merely replied that they had received an e-mail from the COA in Doetinchem that there were places left in Doetinchem for the asylum procedure. The COA in Utrecht did not know any more than that and could not tell the men what exactly was going to happen, how long they would have to stay in Doetinchem and if they could return to Utrecht afterwards. Even when they arrived in Doetinchem, it took some weeks before they gained information about when they would meet their lawyers and when the interviews with the IND would start. In the meantime, they did not know what was going to happen and how much longer they had to wait until they did.

### **The Dangers of Victimizing**

Refugee discourse and humanitarian organisations often portray refugees as victims of war and violence, “appealing to humanitarian compassion and a philanthropic will to help fellow human beings in need” (Turner 5). The camp is a temporary measure to make sure that refugees are safe until they are allowed to stay in a new society. In the camp, their biological needs are taken care of: they have a roof above their heads, access to food and water and to health treatment. However, they are deprived of citizenship and it is only because they are reduced to bare life, to pure humanity, that they are worthy of humanitarian assistance: “This appeal to compassion, in other words, reduces the refugee to his wounded body—to biological

life rather than political subjectivity” (Turner 5). By portraying refugees as victims in need of help, the distinction between *zoë* and *bios* is thus emphasized. Masheer, a 30 year old man, talked about the way he felt treated at the camp. He gave the example that when he arrived in the Netherlands, he had to attend a demonstration on how to brush his teeth. He felt insulted: “They think we live in villages or something, they think we are animals”. While there may be people who did not have access to dental care in their home countries, the Syrian interviewees come from a prosperous country and not only had access to dental care, but also to education, adequate housing etc. By treating everyone as a helpless victim who cannot fend for themselves, their humanity and agency is once again taken away. The *homo sacer* in the camp thus becomes “the privileged object of the humanitarian biopolitics—it is the one who is deprived of his full humanity through the very patronizing way of being taken care of” (Zizek 91). Humanitarian organisations thus also take away agency from refugees.

With the picture that has been painted of the camp so far and with Agamben’s theory about the *homo sacer*, it is very easy to think about refugees in terms of victimhood and helplessness. In simply portraying refugees as victims, we fall into the trap of homogenizing an entire group of people and taking away their agency. It confirms their status as *homo sacer*, as “[h]omo sacer figures are homogenized, rather than individualized” (Mountz 386). Therefore, the act of categorizing refugees as victims repeats the same power structures that reduce people to bare life. These structures are thereby again established as the norm. What is also important to remember is the fact that no one willingly wants to be cast in the role of a victim. This stigmatization is something that refugees encounter every day. In order to get a residence permit, refugees have to tell their story to the IND. In the words of my internship mentor, “the sadder the story, the better”. To achieve a residence permit, people are forced to put themselves in the role of a victim who is fleeing from horrendous things like war and poverty. This victimhood gets repeated over and over again, by living in a camp where people merely have to wait and do not know what is going to happen to them and by living in limbo. Mabruk, a 30 year old man, was aware of the fact that people see refugees as either a threat or as victims. He did not feel as if people could see him for who he really is. Also Ahmad felt as if people on the streets looked at him with pity in their eyes. He said: “Why look at me with pity? I do not understand. I do not need to be pitied. What is this look?” No one wants to be seen as a victim. The danger with constantly putting someone in the role of a victim, is that he or she may grow to believe he/she is indeed a victim.

Nobody wants to live in a camp, in a state of limbo, unsure about the future. However, living in a camp does not mean there are no opportunities for the people living there. Camp

life may indeed lead to a form of social paralysis but “adaptation may, however, also lead to new social forms and opportunities” (Turner 5). While the COA’s rules about working while living at the camp can be discouraging to find work, it does not mean that people do not see other benefits in working besides earning money. Masheer was offered a job to work in a Syrian restaurant – one of the many initiatives in Utrecht to welcome refugees into society – and he had some doubt at first since the COA would receive most of his salary. However, he decided to accept the job: “I would rather work and give all my money to the COA than to be in the camp all day. It will still look good on my résumé when I am out of the camp”.

Masheer realised he did not have to wait until he could leave to camp to start with his new life. In the camp, refugees wait, “but they also organize, network, speak out and use technology to garner attention and collaborate with activists on mainland territory (Mountz 383). The limits of the camp in Utrecht are porous. Many organisations cross its boundaries every day with opportunities for inhabitants to learn Dutch, to meet Dutch people and to offer them ways to become part of Dutch society. Many organisations match refugees with buddies and coaches who can help them with the language. One of the most important aspects for refugees to remain socially alive is “to imagine a meaningful future for themselves – however miserable their present-day situation is” (Turner 7). This is what Masheer did when he accepted the job at the restaurant. It may be very hard to keep imagining a future when there is no promise of change, but this is also where activist organisations come into play. New Dutch Connections is one of the only organisations that does focus on the Dutch language, but rather, on the Dutch job market, on schools, on building a Dutch network. They match refugees with buddies and coaches who can aid them in imagining a new future, by visiting schools, by introducing them to their own friends who might have something in common in the terms of career wishes. Moreover, New Dutch Connections wants people to find their individual strengths again, to help them gain back control over their own lives. This is of course easier said than done, and this process takes longer than the four months that New Dutch Connections offers its project. However, many of the participants did indeed benefit from taking part in the project. Some even said that while they were living at the camp, they thought about returning to Syria because they could not picture a future in the Netherlands. Now that they had met Dutch people who made them feel welcome, saw them as individuals and helped them to think about their future, they wanted to stay in the Netherlands.

Portraying the *homo sacer* as a victim is not Agamben’s intention. He does not write about victimhood at all; “rather, he is suggesting that the discretionary ability of the sovereign state to bring the weight of its unmediated power to bear upon the body of its subjects is an

inherent part of living in a democracy” (Downey 110). Still, this paints a rather bleak picture and leaves the question if the system can be changed at all, if we are not all merely victims of the power of the sovereign state. For Agamben, there is no point in implementing or changing laws to include more asylum rights and rights that recognize all human beings, rather than just the citizen. According to his theoretical framework, “[r]eform of existing institutions can only entrench rather than overcome the worst aspects of sovereign power and the system of nation-states that produces refugees” (Owens 568). While that may hold some truth, this thought has gained certain critique. One of the first critiques is that Agamben is a philosopher and not a social scientist. He does not visit the places that he writes about (Mountz 387). Another point of critique is that for Agamben, zones of indistinction and the camps are all the same. He does not take into account all the different variables that apply meaning to the camp. Details about history, place, gender and race are not touched upon. The camp in this way is a phenomenon that can happen anywhere, even though in reality, not all camps are the same. The final point of critique is that for the *homo sacer*, the only escape from his existence is through death. He can only realise his position “in the final hour, in death, leaving no opportunity for agency, resistance or escape” (Mountz 387). However, the real lives of refugees cannot be described as simple as that. Many are, at least to an extent, very aware of their position in society and are fighting every day to make the best out of their situation. While Agamben’s theory about the refugee as a limit-concept is very useful to call into question the very foundations of the nation state, it also has its limitations. As Patricia Owens puts it:

[T]here are also clear limitations to political philosophy representations of refugees. They can be accused of both arrogance and irrelevance to the lives of real refugees who are often seeking, above all, to be included in the existing formal arrangement of world politics, which recognises a world of states of sovereign equality (579).

While the figure of the refugee calls into question the nation-state, refugees themselves cannot be expected to change the legal order of things. They are working with the means they have got, which is not much, to try to change their lives for the better and be included in the existing arrangement of world politics.



## Conclusion

This thesis aimed to answer the question: To what extent does the asylum seeker centre in Utrecht symbolise Giorgio Agamben's notion of a zone of indistinction and how does this affect the people living there? It can be said that the asylum seeker centre in Utrecht symbolises a zone of indistinction to a great extent. This thesis has applied the notion of Agamben's zones of indistinction and the *homo sacer* to the refugee camp and refugees. Zones of indistinction are places where the lines between legal and illegal, *zoë* and *bios* and outside and inside are blurred. The state of exception gives rise to these places. In the name of national security, refugees who apply for asylum in the Netherlands are placed in asylum seekers centres across the country, where they have to wait for months, sometimes even years, before they are allowed to become a contributing member of society. Camps become a geographical location, inhabited by bare life that cannot be inscribed into the normal order. The refugee camp is a prime example of such a place. The camp in Utrecht is neither inside nor outside Dutch society. The camp is a place of exception: it is outside the normal legal framework. Organisations and legal instruments that are nowhere else to be found in society apply to the camp. The camp thus legally belongs to Dutch society, but is at the same time excluded from it, because different laws and rules apply to the camp.

The camp becomes a place of permanent exception. It is supposed to be temporary, but people remain there for months and sometimes even years. During this time, the inhabitants do not know what is going to happen to them. Time comes to a grinding halt. People start to live in a state of limbo: they have to wait and wait and in the meantime do not have a lot of distractions or means to start with their life. According to Agamben, the figure of the *homo sacer* can be applied to the figure of the refugee. Both are abandoned by the normal legal framework. Both are stripped of their citizenship and find themselves reduced to bare life. The experience of people living in the camp are shaped by the power structures that allow for the existence of the camp in the first place. These structures reduce people to bare life and leave them excluded from the host society which they are bound to. For Agamben, the *homo sacer* does not have any means to escape his cruel fate. However, the lives of refugees cannot be described as simple as that. While it is true that refugees have been assigned a position no one should find themselves in, it does not mean that they stop fighting and do not have any agency left. Even though options are limited, people in the camp are making the best out of their situation. They sign up with organisations which matches them with a Dutch buddy, they take language classes and they reach out and network. While the camp has a clear distinction

between inside and outside, people and opportunities cross its borders every day. Agamben uses the figure of the refugee to call into question the very foundations of the nation-state. These foundations may indeed be long overdue for a renewal. However, people living in the camp are more than just a theoretical symbol. They are real people with real experiences, people with agency, beliefs and desires. We should not portray them as victims or use them as tools to achieve a goal they might perhaps not even wish to achieve. Rather, we should open a conversation with them and recognise their individual strengths and desires.

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