“Let them in!” Humanitarian work as political activism? The case of the Maximiliaan refugee camp in Brussels.

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Running head title
A refugee camp in Brussels: ambivalent politicization.

Abstract
Humanitarian aid projects associated with the emergence of refugee camps within European territories, are generally perceived as apolitical. Scholars however, are increasingly questioning this view, pointing to many, often untold ways, in which humanitarianism interacts with the politics of migration and border enforcement. This article examines the case of a temporary refugee camp set up in Brussels in September 2015. We show how organizational and spatio-temporal particularities, as well as media framing of the humanitarian assistance, led to controversy, civil initiatives, and hyper-politicization, eventually calling the state to take responsibility for the refugees, but simultaneously silenced other explicit political responses.

Key Words
Asylum seekers, refugee camp, Belgium, Maximiliaan Park, Agamben, humanitarianism, hyper-politicization.
Introduction

Besides the rapid growth of the well-known ‘jungles’ in Calais and Dunkirk, Europe has recently witnessed the emergence of several new refugee and foreigner camps within and along its borders. Such camps can take many forms, ranging from prisons and closed detention centres to open spaces where migrants and asylum seekers, because of a deprivation of rights, have no other options but to be there. (MIGREUROP, s.d.; Intrand & Perrouty, 2005). Although the notion of a camp is a complex and contested one, in this article we refer to camps as localized areas where unwelcome non-European citizens, crossing or attempting to cross a border, are managed and externalized as a group. As a result of progressively restrictive migration policies and rising numbers of migrants, a relatively new phenomenon of humanitarian camps has emerged, where aid, relief and assistance is predominantly provided by non-state actors (Walters, 2010; Squire, 2014; Agier, 2014).

Inspired by the work of Agamben, refugee camps have been theorized as abject spaces of exception, in which subjects are reduced to a form of ‘bare life’. Referring to Walter Benjamin, Agamben described the camp as:

… the space that opens up when the exception starts to become the rule. In it, the state of exception, which was essentially a temporal suspension of the state of law, acquires a permanent spatial arrangement, that, as such, remains constantly outside the normal state of law (Agamben, 1998).

Agamben’s powerful notion of ‘bare life’ has been widely used to describe how refugees and migrants are legally and politically excluded and are therefore reduced to a mere physical state of being. As Ticktin (2011) demonstrates, the representation of subjects of humanitarian camps as apolitical suffering bodies, depicts humanitarian aid as neutral and illness and relief are seen as apolitical and private matters. Moreover, by isolating human beings in camps, humanitarian actors contribute to the exclusion of refugees and thus operationalize a mode similar to ‘apartheid’ (Balibar, 2004) by managing the so-called ‘undesirables’ (Agier, 2011).

However, scholars also question the representation of refugee camps as apolitical spaces, pointing to the complex interactions between humanitarianism, policies and politics¹. In contrast to Agamben’s conceptualization, refugee camps may also constitute social and political spaces that offer potential for political activism (Rygiel, 2011; Fassin, 2012) and new transformative social relations (Agier, 2011; Turner, 2015). Humanitarianism, with its potential to raise empathy and emotions surrounding a particular issue, may lead to hyper-politicization, an intensification and increased polarization of the public debate that aims at policy changes (Turner, 2015).

In this article we explore the informal refugee camp that was set up in the Maximiliaan Park in Brussels in September 2015. Rather than alongside a geographical border, the so-called Maximiliaan camp was established in the heart of the ‘European capital’ Brussels, opposite the Belgian Immigration Office, in front of a highly symbolic institutional border. This camp, that started as a spontaneous encampment, provoked an overwhelming humanitarian

¹ With the notion ‘politics’ we refer to different kinds of political activism or protest movements that aim to question existing social order mechanisms, whereas ‘policies’ refer to governmental and institutional acts aiming to establish social order. (Rancière, 1999)
response, but also intense political discussions. It received huge media coverage in Belgium and elicited a temporary wave of public sympathy for refugees that was very much in contrast with the widely hailed restrictive policies of recent years. Instead of becoming a chronic presence like for example the Grand-Synthe ‘jungle’ camp outside Dunkirk, it disappeared almost as quickly as it arrived.

In order to gain insight in the rapid process of politicization and the ambivalent role of humanitarian actors in this setting, the first author performed participant observation in September and October 2015, as well as multiple informal conversations with NGO-staff, volunteering citizens and undocumented residents that offered help on an ad-hoc base in Maximiliaan Park. He also carried out five semi-structured in-depth interviews with different key actors. During his exploratory fieldwork in 2015, he visited the ‘jungle’ camp in Grand-Synthe. In addition, he observed the framing of political and humanitarian messages in Belgian news media (TV, newspapers), analysed reports generated by humanitarian groups. This was supplemented with content analysis data from academic publications on the refugee ‘crisis’ in the same period.

The first section shows how the humanitarian assistance allowed to obscure certain important political decisions. In the second section we explore how, despite its humanitarization, spatial particularities of the site, political motivations of the humanitarian actors, and media reporting all contributed to an intense politicization of the situation. In the third section we examine the political responses to the hyper-politicization. In the fourth and final section, we outline the significance of this case for refugee studies and political-philosophical conceptualizations of the camp, and in particular its implications for theorizing governmentability of humanitarianism and bordering practices as they are currently operationalized.

1. Creating ‘bare life’: Welcome to Maximiliaan Park

I have really asked myself ‘Why is this done?’ I think it’s to... It’s like in Calais. The signal that is given... What is said: ‘Don’t come here, we won’t properly take care about you.’

(Belgian volunteer, follow-up interview)

From April to July 2015, largely due to ongoing conflicts at different countries bordering Europe and increased migration via the so-called Western Balkan route, the number of asylum applications in Belgium steadily increased (CGVS, 2016). Early in August 2015 the Immigration Office communicated that they were unable to process in excess of 250 applications for asylum they were receiving every day, and so asked new arrivals to wait and return to submit their application. They had no other choice but to stay at the Maximiliaan Park. This resulted in an improvised transit camp in the Maximiliaan Park opposite the Immigration Office, and hundreds of migrants were queuing every morning to try to make their request. As they were not entitled to government support until they were formally registered, a precarious situation developed, provoking a humanitarian response. Initially, assistance was provided ‘ambulatory’ by mainstream social and refugee organizations like Samu Social and Vluchtelingenwerk. NGO’s such as the Red Cross and Médecins du Monde

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2 The semi-structured in-depth interviews lasted between 30 minutes and an hour and a half. The interviews were performed after informed consent. They were anonymized and transcribed prior to analysis.
(MdM) had a mobile clinic visited the site 3 times per week.

Referring back to Agamben’s quote about camps as ‘spaces of exception’, we can raise the question as to what exceptions could have triggered the emergence of the camp in Maximiliaan Park. To some extent its emergence was the logical and foreseeable consequence of several administrative and political decisions in the months prior to the onset of the events in the Maximiliaan Park. In 2013 and 2014 the state secretary for asylum and migration Maggie De Block (Flemish Liberal Party, VLD) decided to close down 5000 places in the refugee reception centres. In the months prior to the crisis her successor, Theo Francken (Flemish Nationalist Party, N-VA), closed over 1000 extra places. The immediate crisis however, was sparked by an administrative safety-measure: according to the fire department no more than 250 people could be allowed in the waiting area of the Immigration Office. In the aftermath of the crisis the number was lowered to 150, and later on to 60, applications per day. Purportedly an occupational physician stated that the reduced quality of the air didn’t allow for a higher number of candidate-refugees in the same waiting room.

The use of a crisis-discourse allowed the political and humanitarian actors to focus on problem solving and urgent exceptional measures, as is illustrated by a quote of one of the volunteers:

That’s also one of the big frustrations. In the beginning […] the focus was very hard on ‘How can we better organize that camp?’ and very little focus on ‘That camp actually has to disappear’.

(Belgian volunteer, follow-up interview)

The priority became the material and technical aspects of the relief work (the sanitation, the distribution of clothes and food). The discussion was mainly centred on who was responsible for granting aid. In Maximiliaan Park, this obscured any discussion of the policy measures that certainly sparked the crisis. Whether this effect was foreseen and calculated by policymakers remains unclear. These observations seem to confirm Agamben’s views about the separation between a humanitarian approach and politics. The creation of a precarious group in a shared social space can take many forms, but the model of a camp is a very visible manifestation of large numbers of people being physically separated and being reduced to a ‘bare life’.

The decision to limit the number of possible asylum applications was hardly questioned, let alone challenged. However, by limiting the possible applications that could be processed, Belgium reduced its annual applications to approximately 39,000 (and later on to 15,000). Six months prior to Europe’s decision to significantly reinterpret the Geneva Convention in the restrictive EU-Turkey deal of March 2016 and four months before Austria had become the first European country to defy the Geneva Convention, officially setting an upper limit (37,500) to the number of possible asylum applications in its country; Belgium had already implemented this measure, albeit in an indirect and informal way. Many similarities can be drawn with other policy practices in the European context, where policymakers largely ignored research evidence predicting imminent increases of migration, and where responses to the ‘crisis’ was mainly shaped by geo-political opportunism, characterized by inaction or failing to deliver what was promised, and focused more on responding to fears in the dominant public than responding to the movement of people. (Crawley, 2016)

2. Border struggles in the centre of Brussels
On 2 September 2015 the image of the Syrian toddler Aylan Kurdi, washed up on the beach at Bodrum having drowned in the Aegean, made global headlines. The day after, the Belgian sections of several large NGO’s, Samu Social and MdM announced that they had decided to set up a refugee camp in Maximiliaan Park in Brussels, with logistical support from Médecins sans Frontières (MSF). Almost simultaneously, a new association was created, named Citizens’ Platform for the Support of Refugees Brussels. The Platform consisted of volunteers, students, action committees of undocumented migrants and political activists of Hart boven Hard, that coordinated all forms of civil initiatives, as well as relief for asylum seekers in Maximiliaan Park, whilst they waited to register their request for asylum. These different humanitarian actors started to organize the settlement as a refugee camp.

Very soon, a wave of media attention and public sympathy with the people living in Maximiliaan Park emerged. For several weeks the site also became the focus of intense public debate. Volunteers organized solidarity demonstrations with the refugees. A collective of undocumented migrants, CollectActif, set up a fixed kitchen and staged themselves as part of a broader citizens’ movement (Depraetere & Oosterlynck, 2017). Opinion leaders commented on Belgium’s ‘inhospitable’ and ‘inhumane’ reception of refugees (De Morgen, September 5, 2015). Humanitarian actors internally politicized their work by repeatedly stating that the government transferred its responsibilities to them and asked the government to organize a ‘decent’ reception. Right-wing politicians, already being under criticism for recently taken austerity measures and potentially hoping that taking anti-immigrant positions would result in political gain, warned that providing aid prolonged the crisis by attracting more people. They urged for a forceful evacuation of the site and talked down on the asylum seekers and the volunteers, questioning the legitimacy of the former as well as the applicability of the Geneva Convention to the latter (Le soir, September 12, 2015). In this way a factor of external politicization was added. Contrary to Agamben’s views the situation at Maximiliaan Park thus somehow still became particularly politicized. The following section explores three key factors that contributed to this.

The scene: a frontier zone in a global city

Unlike the location of most refugee camps, Maximiliaan Park is not situated at the margins of the city, but in the heart of Brussels, close to the major Belgian and European political institutions and opposite the Immigration Office. As Sassen (2012) argues large, complex cities should be considered as the new global frontier zones. There the disadvantaged can confront powerful global institutions simply by their presence. In line with this argument, we see that the camp was situated along a second frontier zone which was much less visible than national or geographical borders, yet had much more potential for contestation.

3 The Citizens’ Platform for the Support of Refugees Brussels (Dutch:Burgerplatform – French: Plateforme citoyenne de soutien aux réfugiés Bruxelles) will further be referred to as the (Citizens’) Platform.

4 People active in the political citizens movement Tout autre Chose/Hart boven Hard [Heart above hard], a Belgian political citizens movement, somehow similar to European movements like Podemos, etc..., that emerged during and after the austerity measures imposed by the newly elected government in 2014. One of the 10 demands in their manifest was more solidarity with refugees.
By definition, camps have spatially defined boundaries. Maximiliaan Park is a secluded strip of green, in the shadowy and grey business centre in the North of Brussels. Unlike many refugee camps however, the camp in Maximiliaan Park was not completely fenced, and in contradistinction to the ‘jungle’ camp in Grand-Synthe, migrants were not subject to police controls. Since the boundaries of the camp were so porous, future asylum seekers could move easily in and outside the camp. Soon after the opening, not only candidates for asylum and a whole range of actors providing humanitarian assistance, but also undocumented residents (and to a lesser extent homeless people) settled in the camp.

Interaction was further facilitated by ethnic and linguistic ties between the surrounding society and the candidate refugees, who were mostly coming from Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan. Brussels hosts a large community of undocumented migrants. Estimates by relief workers range between 60,000 - 80,000 of which many have an Arabic ethnic background providing lingual ties with the Arab speaking asylum seekers of Iraq and Syria. This created room for a new and unexpected alliance between candidate refugees and existing undocumented migrants. Three collectives of undocumented migrants, with experience in political activism, jointly set up a fixed kitchen providing about 1000 meals per day with donated food. Several undocumented migrants also volunteered as interpreters between candidate refugees, aid workers and (semi-) official institutions. Surrounding schools for example visited the camp with their pupils to volunteer. Many of the students, being second and third generation immigrants of Arab speaking countries (often facing discrimination and socio-economic deprivation in Belgium), discovered to be able to easily communicate with the residents of the camp. They exchanged phone numbers and spontaneously continued volunteering after school hours, amongst others serving the cooked meals and organizing a soccer-tournament with the refugees.

The specific demography and socio-economic relations in Brussels, along with the spatiality of the park, notably the porosity of its boundaries as well as its central location in Brussels, induced interactions, engagement, and connections between the refugees and the surrounding society of which several had experience and/or a common interest in political activism. Occupying a central public space and turning it into a refugee camp thus resulted in an intense public debate by creating links by different marginalized groups and by putting the outside in the centre of the debate. The included outside-ness, whereby the exclusion by society became too visible to be ignored; thus offered the potential to critically question the policies of bordering.

The actors: who cares?

The standard organizational structure of a humanitarian camp is commonly shaped by large NGO’s. In Maximiliaan Park however aid was also provided by what Hardt & Negri (2000) would describe as a ‘multitude’ of volunteering citizens, action committees, religious organizations, migrants support groups, undocumented migrants (both as providers and beneficiaries of aid), besides the large ‘institutional’ NGOs. Functions like coordination, dispatch, and communication as well as food provision and the distribution of clothes, were managed by the Citizens’ Platform. MSF, MdM and Samusocial provided tents, medical assistance and sanitation. Even the local authority of Brussels City Council provided some logistical support and safety measures.

This heterogeneity of volunteers resulted in very different opinions and attitudes towards the asylum seekers. A central debate focused upon the question of whether to implement,
negotiate, openly confront, or just not question state policies? The interviews with the humanitarian actors show different subject positions regarding the political nature of aid and caring. Some volunteers focused on providing care without engaging with state policies:

It wasn’t for me to ask why they had come. Are they political refugees? Do they flee the war? That was not my problem. Those people were there, they needed to be helped. Further I didn’t ask myself anything.
(Belgian volunteer, follow-up interview)

These volunteers stressed the importance of alleviating the immediate suffering or illness (‘compassionate caring’). Another quote illustrates that for other volunteers the emphasis was on their professional and deontological duties to provide assistance (‘professional caring’).

They did their job, something like ‘we are here in our tent and if you need something: come to us and we will take care of all these donations...’
(Belgian volunteer, follow-up interview)

Although both these positions maintain that newcomers should be received in a humane and hospitable way, they also proclaim a humanitarian neutrality in which state policies are not questioned. However, other volunteers and humanitarian aid workers considered the lack of a decent reception of the migrants as a political issue, and referred to it as a created ‘reception crisis’. Whilst taking care of the asylum-seekers, they simultaneously negotiated with official institutions like the City Council and the Immigration Office on behalf of the migrants to find another solution to their plight:

... halfway this changed, whereby the message from [name organization] also became ‘we don’t want to take over the duties of the government, we have to take steps to ensure the government takes its responsibilities’. There was a bit of lobbying.
(NGO-staff, follow-up interview)

Questioning the reception conditions and providing food and shelter for migrants became a way to push the government to fulfil its human rights commitments. (‘caring while negotiating’). Some of the volunteers also were active in or sympathized with the political activist movement Hart boven Hard. For them Maximiliaan Park became a site of discontent, and caring foremost a form of protesting alongside and within the wider frame of anti-austerity dissent (‘caring to protest’). As one interviewee stated:

..you had a political movement that went much broader, that already was signed by 12000 people [...] and on that moment they actually had the aim to jointly represent those different topics that bring together Hart boven Hard.
(Belgian volunteer, follow-up interview)

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5 The subject positions that we describe shouldn’t be conceived as fixed or mutually exclusive. Some people changed their positions along the course of the events due to what they experienced and due to discussions with others. Still others shifted between different seemingly opposite positions during discussions or during the interview. Further were these not the only subject positions we encountered. Eg. we don’t discuss ‘caring for reasons of curiosity’ which was mentioned on several occasions.
A final subject position of those providing care was taken by activist and migrant support groups. Soon after the camp opened undocumented migrants and migrant activist groups settled in the camp. Some undocumented migrants came because they needed assistance (which suddenly was easily accessible) but many came to volunteer for the refugees with whom there were ethnic and/or linguistic links. Simultaneously they tried to raise political awareness, rallying around the slogan “The asylum seekers of today are the undocumented migrants of tomorrow!” (Belgian volunteers and volunteering undocumented migrants, fieldnotes) A quote retrieved from an interview with an undocumented migrant, who was assisting in Maximiliaan Park, shows that some volunteers:

... prepared to take action... That the case of the Iraqi [asylum-seekers] and the case of the undocumented migrants are exactly the same. That’s what the collective wanted [...] Eventually there has been a consensus to take [sic] the problem of the refugees and leave aside the undocumented migrants. Whilst every action, the reception, the solidarity, it came from the undocumented migrants ... They looked for a compensation, to be regularised. (Volunteering undocumented migrant, follow-up interview)

The situation in Maximiliaan Park offered undocumented migrants the possibility to show solidarity with the newly arrived migrants, but at the same time to establish connections between the plight of undocumented migrants and the asylum seekers. In this way, undocumented migrants tried to initiate a debate on a more fundamental changes in the Belgian immigration policies, claiming for regularisation, and stressing the importance of not just focusing on the newly arrived, but also on other migrants (‘caring to confront’).

The different actors providing care in the heavily politicized context of migration, had to balance competing pressures. On the one hand, a humanitarian aid worker mentioned:

Some people just made the switch: ‘I’m here to care, not to judge.’ Yet some people really had some kind of indignation [...] Towards authorities some people really made statements. And we tried to canalize this as good as possible as ‘your private opinion is your private opinion. The opinion of the organization goes via the coordination and not via...’ Because it was constantly full of press. (NGO-staff, follow-up interview)

On the other hand, some volunteers were talked down upon by activist and migrant support groups because they were offering “just temporary charity, and therefor being antipolitical” (Belgian volunteer, fieldnotes) as well as “doing the job of the immigration office by differentiating between migrants.” (Volunteering undocumented migrant, fieldnotes)

Underpinning humanitarian work is often a desire to work within a notion of social justice, yet at the same time, humanitarian aid workers can lose official legitimacy if they are seen to be drifting away from a position of humanitarian neutrality. As Ticktin (2011) suggests, in this way humanitarian actors are often forced into an ambiguous role, or even into power struggles, with extant political agencies and actors. In Maximiliaan Park, the diversity of caretakers gave rise to discussions about their different underlying motivations as well as debates about migration policies. Despite the tensions and the widely diverging positions that we describe here, respondents simultaneously mentioned “a sense of togetherness that went very broad” (Belgian volunteer, fieldnotes). The reality of working together, jointly taking care of the asylum-seekers, allowed to raise awareness about the everyday realities of
undocumented migrants in Brussels:

So actually I just came to help. There were people from everywhere, and this really created a sense of solidarity with people you had never seen, a very abstract sense of solidarity around this topic... I mean, this topic is really there, it’s very specific, but it’s not structured in an organization or so.

(Belgian volunteer, follow-up interview)

By taking up an active role themselves, the status of undocumented migrants as not (yet) citizens partially disappeared (Depraetere & Oosterlynck 2017). The collaboration between volunteers who were “responding all just the same way although officially different” (Belgian volunteer, fieldnotes) problematized categorisations of individuals as economic migrants versus refugees, and citizens versus ‘non-citizens’. Thus the organizational model of the camp, not only offered the opportunity to hold the government accountable for their handling of asylum seekers, but also to symbolically embody a critical perspective toward broader migration policies, more specifically toward the policy of identifying different categories of migrants and citizens.

The theatre: the ‘good refugee’...

After a while you also had the feeling that it was a bit like a tourist attraction, the camp. [...] the guitar, eat together, have a coffee and exchange and... It was all fun, but at the same time in the tents you had people who, yeah, ... Some of them had a really difficult time, you didn’t really see them, they stayed in their tent. And well, you had the feeling like... they are simply forgotten.

(NGO-staff, follow-up interview)

A third key factor that contributed to hyper-politicization is the representation of the camp and the media coverage of the events. The Citizens’ Platform was established almost simultaneously with the image of Aylan Kurdi that dominated global headlines for days. The large humanitarian organizations decided to set up tents right after the photograph started circulating. Very soon, the camp, the volunteers, and organizations offering assistance, as well as the migrants were omnipresent in the news media.

An exploratory content analysis of European newspapers undertaken by van Schaik (2015) in the autumn of 2015, showed that the media coverage, following the publication of the photograph all over Europe, had important parallels with a media hype. As van Schaik puts it, such a hype is typically triggered by a key event, generating a sudden wave of attention rising steeply and fading away slowly. The explosion of media attention for the refugee issue in September 2015 did not mirror the increase in the actual number of refugees since numbers of refugees had already started to rise in April. (Vis & Goriusova, 2015).

The content analysis further shows that not only the number of news media reports changed in September, but also the way the reports were framed. Dominant discourses on immigration in news media have been widely studied. Immigrants are usually represented as a large, impersonal and anonymous entity, employing suggestive water metaphors and container memes of swarms, streams, waves, fullness... implicitly suggesting threat and the need for control (Bigo, 2002; Schrover & Schinkel, 2013). Until the end of August the language to represent the ‘crisis’ in Maximiliaan Park was one that focused on numbers, the queue in front of the immigration office, or the clusters of tents. However, by early September the
general focus somehow shifted towards a more refugee-friendly humanitarian discourse. News media reports used visual representations and discourses that have similar patterns to those used in traditional – and often criticized – NGO reporting (Vis & Goriunova, 2015; De Cleen & Zienkowski, 2017).

Consonant with these research findings, the national media coverage in Belgium started to focus intensely on how the people in Maximiliaan Park were ‘genuinely in need’, and ‘not on the move for pleasure or benefits’. Close observation of several Belgian news media also showed that they started to employ a more individualized approach, using personalized images and particular stories. In place of the more familiar tropes, asylum seekers were primarily referred to as ‘Syrian refugees’, fleeing the ongoing war and the atrocities committed by ISIS/ISIL and the regime of Bashar al-Assad. They were also mainly represented as families with children, many of them ill and exhausted, urgently needing medical and psychological assistance, and by stressing the risks taken during a perilous, and long journey towards Western Europe; immigrants were explicitly framed as deserving and welcome.

Thus, through individualization, followed by re-identification, an emotional relationship was established between the public, a distant, morally absolute and universally recognizable suffering, and an associated, concretely present, Other. In this way empathy was raised for ‘the Syrian refugee’, as a stereotypical victim, a representation which is required to create the apolitical status allowing for humanitarian intervention. Following the circulation of the photograph of Aylan, the agenda setting and framing of the media reports seems, at least partially, to have turned the situation in Maximiliaan Park into some kind of ‘humanitarian media event’ (Vandevoordt, 2016), similar to nationwide fundraising appeals launched in case of specific disasters. As Vandevoordt puts it,

In these appeals the media, public institutions and individual citizens are asked to contribute their share by donating a sum of money or by organizing their own fundraising activities. If all goes well, the appeal then soon acquires a festive character as an entire nation interrupts its regular course of affairs to organize fundraising activities ... (Vandevoordt, 2016).

Analogous with this definition was the immense involvement of unbound volunteers who came to help; over a period of five weeks, thousands volunteered. Their profile was very diverse, ranging from students and schoolchildren with their teachers, nurses, doctors, civil servants, youth movements, retired people, undocumented migrants, different religious organizations. Respondents stressed that they came from all over Belgium to help. Nationwide fundraising activities were set up - resulting in a massive rise of donations for large NGO’s, as well as people sending tents, clothes, food, toys, and all kinds of equipment as gifts for the asylum seekers. Some even offered job opportunities to the candidate-refugees. Soon the Citizens’ Platform and NGO’s requested to stop sending gifts because they couldn’t manage any longer. One humanitarian worker said “we actually struggled more to manage all the gifts, than to take care of the beneficiaries” (follow-up interview). Several respondents also stressed the welcoming atmosphere of the camp. The initial ambience was described by a respondent as follows:

In the beginning it really was a nice festival camping so to speak. Maybe I can’t use this word, because that will be abused.
(Belgian volunteer, follow-up interview)
The representation of victimhood associated with the photograph of Aylan is obviously not uncontested, as it stresses a particularly essentialized conception of vulnerability (as opposed to a more shared conception of it). This type of representation tends to frame refugees as passive, unable to define their own priorities, and hides the complexity of individuals' stories and decisions, as well as the actions they undertook themselves to confront the suffering. (Ticktin, 2011) The attention for ‘the Syrian refugee’ also raised fears amongst Iraqi, and claimants of other deemed as ‘non-deserving’ nationalities, that only the Syrians would be accepted. We observed that several amongst them decided to move to more Northern-European countries for this reason, instead of asking asylum in Belgium as they had initially planned. With this representation of victimhood, the identity in hosting countries undergoes an opposite but interrelated change. The Belgian society could present itself as a community positively affirming such values as generosity, care and responsibility.

In sum, the reception of refugees by a multitude of volunteers offering assistance temporarily created a space for discussion about the need for a decent reception for asylum seekers and the regularisation of undocumented migrants, along with the potential to voice discontent with governmental austerity measures. Interactions of candidate refugees with the surrounding society established connections between a range of very different volunteers, which led, amongst others, to the questioning of the commonly used categories to ‘identify’ different citizens and migrants, and caused meaning to become fluid and negotiable. This temporary disruption of the pre-existing social order (Agier, 2011) and the potential of humanitarian motives to set the agenda by raising empathy and emotions surrounding a particular public space, therefore contributed to making the camp peculiarly politicized. This hyper-politicization was not deliberately organized from the outset.

3. When historicity kicks in: political responses to hyperpoliticalization.

The ‘less good refugee’...

Soon after the image of Aylan Kurdi started circulating political figures all around the globe declared this was a ‘lightbulb moment’, a ‘wake-up call’. Whilst in Norway this mobilisation seems to have resulted in some sustainable change in public policy, this wasn’t the case in the UK. (Vis & Goriunova, 2015) An important question remains whether the resulting intense political debate had any impact on Belgian immigration policies.

Although most politicians publicly declared in the newspapers that they were deeply moved by the photograph of Aylan and the situation in Maximaliaan Park, at the same time it offered them an opportunity to promote their views on restricting migration. In line with what was happening in many EU member states, the political debate was mainly dominated by right-wing voices (De Cleen & Zienkowski, 2017). Bart De Wever, chairman of N-VA suggested that the Syrian refugees were so-called economic refugees, since they didn’t just look for safety by fleeing to their neighbouring country Turkey, and warned for the influx of extremist fighters from Syria (De Morgen, September 7, 2015). Other politicians highlighted that refugees were not only coming from Syria, but also from Iraq and Afghanistan. In early September the Immigration Office spread information via press and social media to discourage asylum seekers from Iraq and Afghanistan to come to Belgium (Myria, 2016).

Analyses of the representation of migrants in the news media show that after the initial humanitarian news coverage, the style of reporting gradually fell back into its more ‘dominant’ forms. When the government opened a temporary ‘pre-reception’ shelter in a
building next to Maximiliaan park, where those waiting to apply for asylum could spend the night, most preferred to stay in the Park. The State Secretary for asylum and migration began to frame the migrants as ‘difficult’ or ‘ungrateful’ on social media and suggested that the camp was “too nice and cosy” to leave. In a news-paper interview the aid-workers were portrayed as “a bunch of left extremists”. (De Morgen, September 9, 2015) After some families moved to the pre-reception centre, the focus shifted to the large proportion of men. This impacted on the way volunteers perceived their assistance, as the following quote shows:

Towards the end you mainly had men, and yeah, the support to continue shrunk, the conditions also became less, worse...
(Belgian volunteer, follow-up interview)

Further, media reported about undocumented migrants that ‘took chance’ by trading or stealing some of the donated gifts (P-Magazine, September 18, 2015). The victimhood once conferred upon the pure Syrian refugee, was now ‘contaminated’ by competing notions of Belgian victimhood emphasizing the possible burden of migration, as well as by perceptions of ‘impurity’ of the victim. A study on the ‘Syria 1212’ campaign, a rather unsuccessful appeal in Belgium for donations to Syrian refugees in 2013, shows similar findings.
(Vandevoordt, 2016).

However, the camp continued to exist in spite of the shifts in representation, shrinking numbers of volunteers and growing disagreements between humanitarian actors on whether or not to continue. Eventually, the government decided to open a permanent ‘pre-reception’ shelter, where food, support and medical care was offered for those waiting to make their claim. Undocumented migrants that had settled in the camp were excluded from this, and denied the humanitarian actors that worked in the camp were denied access to the pre-reception centre. Subsequently, on 4th October the Platform decided to stop the camp and NGO’s partly evacuated the site, which had a depoliticising effect (Depraetere, 2017). The people that stayed behind and resisted against the demolition of the camp were mainly undocumented migrants staying in Belgium before the onset of the ‘crisis’, and were eventually arrested. The park remained fenced off for almost a year.

The invisible camp...

Refugee camps are usually framed in a ‘language of emergencies’(Turner, 2015). However, in many situations, as in Dunkirk and Calais for example, these camps become chronic, causing a ‘protracted crisis’ and ‘indeterminate temporariness’ (Turner, 2015). Remarkably, the camp in the Maximiliaan Park disappeared almost as quickly as it appeared, and the political potential of the Platform and the citizen’s movement ‘Hart boven Hard’, capturing the spirit of political discomfort, also vanished with it. Following the demolition of the camp the Belgian government strongly started advocating reception of the refugees in the region of conflict.

Yet, the crisis discourse in Belgium didn’t disappear once the camp had been dismantled and ‘refugee crisis’ policies were adopted to discourage asylum seekers from migrating to Belgium and regularisation of undocumented migrants, which was an important political issue in Belgium until 2015, disappeared completely from the public agenda (De Cleen & Zienkowski, 2017). Moreover, the ‘temporary measures’, such as limiting the daily number of applications, persisted after the camp disappeared. The ‘crisis’ discourse was thus
instrumentalized to legitimate policies restricting migration afterwards. In 2016 the number of asylum applications has reached historical lows in Belgium (CGVS, 2016). Obviously, the EU-Turkey deal significantly impacted upon number of people arriving in a lot of EU-countries as Belgium. However, figures suggest that, on top of that, Belgium got less attractive as a migration destination compared to other countries, possibly by new migration legislation, or potentially because the signal was given to potential asylum seekers that the Belgian government wouldn’t properly take care of them.

Research in the Mediterranean region shows that crisis-discourses are rather focused on restoring the status quo, reinforcing the pre-existing modes of governance and obscuring the structural role of European border policies (Jeandesboz & Pallister-Wilkins, 2016). In the case of Maximiliaan Park, the discourse of crisis clearly remained and became politically instrumentalized to legitimate increasingly restrictive migration policies. The language of ‘crisis’ thus seems to have the potential to serve different goals.

4. Theoretical/conceptual implications: the spatial government of humanitarian activism

*Humanitarianism and politics: tropes on the camp.*

In the literature on camp spaces, the topology of the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben offers a powerful metaphor for the space of exception that emerges in a camp setting. The concept of ‘bare life’, describing refugees as being reduced to an apolitical form of life, has gained considerable traction. However, the case of the Maximiliaan camp points to rather contradictory political effects, which can be explained by some of its particularities. Analysis of these particularities can provide insights about which specific features of camp spaces impact on the political function that Agamben attributed to camps.

First, the significance of the porosity of an urban camp is different from camps located in peripheries. Volunteers, activists, ethnic minorities, and undocumented migrants had immediate access and an indispensable role. By taking care in a central public space they also acquired a permanent place for political demands. Walters has pointed to the emergence of a so-called humanitarian border delineating the global North (Walters, 2010). If however, this humanitarian border coincides with the frontier zone in global cities that Sassen describes, porosity of the camp gives space for interactions between different groups. Although the mass-mobilization by different interest groups potentially also made the desired policy changes more diffuse, their visibility increased by introducing a ‘numerical calculus of force’ into a system dominated by legality (Rygiel, 2011).

Second, people engaging in humanitarian work may have different motivations. Studies on humanitarianism often presuppose a specific kind of institutional humanitarian actor or a stereotypical do-gooder apolitical volunteer. Balibar describes how humanitarian actors can become institutional gatekeepers and enforce the law. Symbolically these intermediaries create the border, recreate the governmental discourse or ‘are’ the border (Balibar, 2004). As this case shows however, outsourcing this gatekeeping allows different purposes, such as political demands, to come into play (Ticktin, 2011) and also allocates potential power to those who impersonate this gatekeeping function to challenge these boundaries. Interpreted in this way the massive material support and the caring for ‘basic’ human needs in the camp, even if it were from a compassionate caring position (for which many scholars are critical),
can also become an important facilitator for politicization.

Third, the coincidence of humanitarian camp with a sudden massive media attention added an ‘emotional calculus of force’, in which a globally circulating image of suffering became associated with a concretely present ‘other’, who shows similarities with this distant other. However, this process also impacted on the agency of refugees as subjects. Along with this individualized representation we observed the emergence of selectivity and hierarchies of victimhood: Syrian refugees were presented as more deserving then others; children, women and elderly were constructed as vulnerable, young men as a threat. The re-identification induced fears amongst those who didn’t match the image that was conferred upon them. Further one could even argue that the refugees’ suffering did become instrumental in voicing political demands that were partly centred around Belgian issues.

Although public empathy with ‘the Syrian refugee’ led to a temporary discursive redrawing of the boundaries, humanitarian media events follow the pattern of a hype and only allow a very temporary integration of the victims and the ‘benefactor’ society into a global community (Vandevoordt, 2016). Humanitarian actors acquired the potential to plead to ‘open the gates’, yet it didn’t materialize in effectively (re)opening borders.

The case of Maximiliaan Park thus illustrates the complexity and ambiguity of camp spaces, humanitarianism and humanitarian reason. The camp was not merely an apolitical island. Rather, it was the withdrawal of the big humanitarian actors that effectuated the end of political activism. Humanitarianism is sometimes too easily categorised either as a political ‘good’ or as a political ‘bad’, it is multi-faceted (Squire, 2014). Alongside humanitarian intervention a political space was created, offering the potential to challenge some aspects of asylum procedure and immigration policy, whilst other policy measures became obscured.

Depoliticization through de- and re-humanitarisation. Humanitarianism as contingent power?

The politicization challenging the migration policies, eventually forced the government to account for the assistance of candidate refugees in the stage before they claim asylum, thus dehumanitarizing the so-called reception crisis, yet without changing its policy of limiting the fixed daily number of possible applications or its broader migration policies. It evoked some temporary solutions, without enforcing substantial long term political changes. The case confirms Agamben’s conception of the camp as ‘a state of exception’, yet nuancing the humanitarian camp as an a-political space in a paradoxical way.

Likewise, Fassin (2012) suggests, after witnessing the emergence of political activism in asylum centres, that there is no mere separation between humanitarian camps and politics. According to Fassin humanitarian government has become one of the predominant means of moral reasoning by the state. Until recently humanitarian arguments played an important role in Belgium’s policies towards migrants. However, where these arguments could once offer ‘loopholes’ in immigration legislation, this exceptionalism globally slowly began disappearing over the last decade (Williams, 2015). For example, granting residence status in Belgium to undocumented migrants for humanitarian or medical reasons has been increasingly challenged since 2013. The de-humanitarisation of the reception in Maximiliaan Park can be seen as the next step in questioning the legitimacy of humanitarian arguments. Humanitarianism remains an important discourse in our present-day world, but only seems to be tolerated if it doesn’t offer sites for politicization, or if it doesn’t confront anti-immigration
discourses.

The politicization of Maximiliaan camp seems the most important reason for its quick disappearance. To de-politicize the humanitarian assistance, the support was brought back under control of the Belgian government in the so called ‘pre-reception’. This humanitarian government illustrates that a humanitarian approach needs to remain invisible, or out of the centre of public debate, also physically and symbolically located at the margin of the ‘polis’. Governing undifferentiated masses of people with humanitarian assistance in camps at the borders reduces the spatial diffusion of bordering practices, at the same time diverting these practices from central, urban and publicly visible spaces. The mainstream policies to progressively externalize border controls (Collyer, 2007), to ‘filter’ migrants further upstream, and to force people to request asylum in refugee camps outside of Europe, can be considered as a means of re-humanitarizing in a depoliticized way.

Humanitarian activism has a complex legal spatiality acting both within and above the level of the nation-state, by appealing to higher laws to question national policies and at the same time strategically engaging with national laws to obtain their goals (Cook, 2011). A specific government of physical spatiality and temporality however, allows for the muzzling of this ambiguous potential of a humanitarian approach. Humanitarian action is only allowed to become manifest in the global North, if it is individualized, very temporary, or marginal. Through contestation and specific allocation, humanitarian action can be confined to a space at the margin or to a noncommittal temporariness. In addition, a differential deployment of a ‘language of crisis’ between the centre and the periphery serves the same goal. The visibility of a ‘crisis’ can namely serve to problematize migration in the former, but just as well can it be used to restore the status-quo in the latter.

These insights help to improve our understandings on how camps in certain settings can become chronic whilst others don’t. Furthermore, as well as illustrating the governmentability of camps, humanitarian responses, and a language of crisis, it also helps to understand why in some settings ‘governing’ is more pronounced than in others.

**Conclusions**

The reception ‘crisis’ in Maximiliaan Park was the most visible recent manifestation of the chronically unresolved tensions around migration, borders, and refugees in Belgium. By impeding the access to the Immigration Office as a means to reduce immigration, the Belgian government created a situation of precariousness that provoked a humanitarian response, that coincided with a profound humanitarization of bordering practices in the whole of Europe.

However, the refugee camp that emerged, became a place with a very indifferent and contradictory status. Humanitarization somehow obscured that the primary source of harm intersected with political decision making and various power relations. On the other hand, the specific temporal and spatial setting of this camp gave rise to new connectivities, new intersubjectivities and hyperpoliticization of the migration crisis. The global circulation of the photograph of Aylan Kurdi coincided with this and created an association between an absolute and universally recognizable suffering, and a concretely present ‘Other’ through individualization and re-identification. This eventually forced the Belgian authorities to adjust its policies, yet without fundamentally changing them.

This case-study therefore shows the necessity to avoid generalization about camps and
humanitarianism, as well as to analyse different functions in specific contexts. Humanitarian arguments are omnipresent in the narratives that have been used to negotiate between proponents and opponents of immigration. They offer potential both for humanitarian government and for hyperpolarization. However, humanitarian language, for this very potential of hyperpolarization in specific circumstances, might well be increasingly replaced by a language of security and force in the global North.
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