What is no-man's land?

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What is No-Man's Land? In Western cultural memory, images like this one are an almost certain point of departure. Disseminated and popularised through journalistic accounts from the Western Front during World War I, the no-man's land became known as the ultimate site of physical and corporeal destruction.

This disintegrated space of and between the trenches made a deep mark on the intellectual landscape of the interwar period on both the right and the left. In his book *The Battle as Inner Experience* (1922, 57), Ernst Jünger describes how life on the edges of the no-man's land dissolves the boundary between body and space, transforming the soldier into an integral part of a frontline ecology: "There, the individual is like a raging storm, the tossing sea and the rearing thunder. He has melted into everything". This is not just a traumatic subjection of the body to mechanised war, but an almost erotic rebirth and transfiguration of men into a new, improved community of the trenches that will lead the creation of "new forms filled with blood and power [that] will be packed with a hard fist". Rather than resort to nostalgia for a pastoral preindustrialised era, in the no-man's land Jünger discovers a landscape where body, machine and soil are fused to form "magnificent and merciless spectacles".

Many accounts of life in No-man's Land bear no resemblance to the heroic rebirth Jünger portrays. A radically different critical trajectory, but one that nevertheless shares a close attention to the impact of the no-man's land on the intellectual and ethico-political landscape

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was famously presented by Walter Benjamin in his 1930 "Theories of German Fascism". In this essay, which reviews Jünger's edited collection "War and Warrior" Benjamin rejects the culture of memory that emerged in the war's aftermath, and its tendency to romanticise and aestheticize the war's decomposed landscapes in the service of nationalistic fervour. Benjamin's critique returns to the very same landscape that haunts the writing of revolutionary conservatives, only to excavate a diametrically opposed intellectual-political imperative. In another often cited essay, "The Storyteller", Benjamin grounds the distinction between *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*, which he developed throughout the 1930s, in a highly humanistic depiction of the decomposed spaces of war:

> A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath those clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body.

For thinkers and artists in the two decades following the war, No-man's Land remained a powerful referent, unmistakably situated in between the physical, political and intellectual trenches of the interwar era. Whether celebrated or condemned, the ruined landscape of No-man's Land and the wounded lives of those who inhabited it never lost their historical, social and material concreteness. Its interpretations varied widely, and the philosophical-political lessons extrapolated from it were equally diverse, but never did it lose its function as a genealogical zero point.

Despite its obvious association with the geopolitical frontlines of the First World War, the notion of no-man's land has a much longer history that both indicates its richness as a qualitative spatial category and perhaps explains its idiomatic dissemination. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term first appeared in the 14th century as a toponym designating a piece of ground outside the north wall of London, later used as a place of burial during the Black Plague, which already alludes to the spatial conjuncture of liminality and death that have become a hallmark of no-man's lands more recently. I will return to this later.

Even as a colloquial trope, the no-man's land seems to predate the First World War. In an address to the Royal Geographical Society in May 1864, the Scottish geologist Roderick Impey Murchison (1864, 250) described the areas surrounding the Nile south of Khartoum as "a sort of No-man's-land, in which numerous warring small tribes are kept in an excited and barbarous state by an extensive importation of firearms." In spite of the derogatory tone, Murchison describes a space that is anything but *terra nullius*. Instead, his no-man's land is already connected to a thriving arms trade and considered part of a larger imperial geopolitics. Yet equally significant is the reference to these lands as "a *sort* of No-man's-land", which suggests that a mid-19th century audience must have already been familiar with the term, at least to the degree of recognizing its metaphoric function.

Murchison uses the no-man's land to address a perceived territorial ungovernability. In the second half of the 20th and early 21st century, this has become one of the most common applications of the term. "No-man's land" offers an easily appropriated trope in the search for new vocabularies that account for spaces from which organised political power has been either intentionally withdrawn or significantly curtailed by adverse social-political or ecological-environmental circumstances. From Afghanistan in the post-9/11 period to the Sinai Peninsula after the 2011 popular revolts, "no-man's land" is easily applied to a wide range of spatial scales, political configurations and geopolitical dynamics.

Equally broad is the application of this term in urban and sub-urban environments ranging from post-industrial urban landscapes, to informal settlements and underprivileged inner-city districts. Urban buffer zones provide important insights into the materiality of these spaces and their role in demarcating both physical perimeters and affective relations. In Kingston, Jamaica, one finds "'no-pass' points" that separate parts of the city with opposing political loyalties, each signposted by "a wrecked automobile, a pile of logs, a group of burned buildings, or a strip of waist-high grass in the middle of the roadway". Similarly intricate material ecologies are found in urban spaces explicitly designed as geopolitical no-man's lands. In Nicosia,

Mostar and Jerusalem, the thick contours of buffer zones feature an urban typology of neglect, isolation and localised efforts of regeneration that often exacerbate, rather than alleviate, the problems which persist in divided cities.

An epistemological reversal occurs once material ecologies of no-man's lands are transplanted to non-human habitats. The material decay of man-made structures and infrastructures, as well as the imposed absence of human physical presence in these spaces are seen as an opportunity for the resuscitation of ecological biodiversity and the formation of highly isolated conservation areas. And rather than seek to abolish these zones of exclusion and see their re-inhabitation, concerted efforts are made to preserve their state of enforced depopulation. 19th century expeditions to the western United States were among the first to associate such common war ground visited only by war parties as a no-man's land that offers refuge for game animals. The Demilitarized Zone between north and south Korea is often cited as a modern manifestation of this *war-zone refugium* effect, noteworthy for offering a largely uninterrupted wildlife habitat. Though *war-zone refugia* advocates may seem far removed from critical urban scholars that seek practices and policies to rehabilitate and reintegrate no-man's lands into the lived fabric of human activity, both share a deeper perception of the no-man's land as a space that facilitates the return of a primordial state of nature, where normative, modern social order is suspended. Murchison's reference to the "barbarous state" of the no-man's land seems, once again, highly pertinent.

Despite its rich interdisciplinary application, the notion of no-man's land still lacks a methodical conceptual framework that would address its specific genealogies, intellectual import and material characteristics. The gradual blurring or the site specificity and conceptual concreteness that typified references to the no-man's land in the 1920s and 30s can likely be traced back to the Second World War, a campaign that saw death transplanted from the killing fields between the trenches to the enclosed spaces of the camp and the gas-chamber, or carried out remotely through aerial killing. As a result, deeper reflections on the term's critical import

have largely dissipated, turning it into a convenient figure of speech, but one that has largely lost its spatial or intellectual specificity. Rather than dismiss the relation between no-man's land and contemporary modalities of governance and social-cultural practice altogether, I would like to suggest an initial conceptual framework through which no-man's land can regain intellectual rigour and analytical import. At its core, we can identify two forces that together produce the unique dynamics of no-man's land: Abandonment and enclosure.

Abandonment has become a central concept in contemporary critical theory and political philosophy, primarily through its evolution in the work of Heidegger, Nancy and Agamben. For Nancy, "the origin of 'abandonment' is a putting at *bandon*," *bandon* being an order, a prescription, a decree. The abandoned being, Nancy writes, "finds itself deserted to the degree that it finds itself thrown to this law" (Nancy 1993, 43–44). This conceptualisation proved highly productive for the condition of exception developed by Agamben. as Minca (2007) points out, Agamben's formulates a fundamentally spatial relation of ambivalence and liminality between civil law and political fact, between juridical order and life. In *States of Exception*, this particular geography of inclusive-exclusion is defined by Agamben as a "no-man's-land", though often interchangeable with a "zone of undecidability" and "threshold of indeterminacy". A rare reference in Agamben's corpus to a <u>concrete</u> articulation of no-man's land is found in his short discussion of the expulsion of Palestinian political activists from the Occupied Palestinian Territories to southern Lebanon in the winter of 1992. At first sight, the reference to the no-man's land appears to be largely figurative, asserting that this space "in which they are refugees has already started from this very moment to act back onto the territory of the state of Israel by perforating it and altering it in such a way that the image of that snowy mountain has become more internal to it than any other region of Eretz Israel" (Agamben 2000, 24–5).

The threat that the banished, and this zone of abandonment, pose to the imagined material and symbolic coherence of the nation-state are certainly worth additional consideration. However, the 1992 expulsion also provides important insights into more concrete temporalities

and territorialities that highlight the productive quality of the no-man's land, dimensions Agamben's theorisation seems to intentionally downplay (and I'm setting aside the fact that Agamben gets the number of deportees wrong; that's seemingly a minor detail): Prior to the deportation, for fourteen hours the deportees sat blindfolded and handcuffed in busses while Israel's Supreme Court debated the legality of the order, which was eventually approved by a deeply divided court. Lebanon immediately responded to Israel's act by deploying military forces to block access routes and prevent the deportees from leaving the border region. This is when things get interesting: Contrary to the passivity often associated with one of Agamben's quintessential spaces, the camp set up by the deportees in the locked territory between the Israeli and Lebanese forces became a focal point of political activity. Both Hezbollah and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards forged close relations with Palestinians in the camp, a relationship that proved critical in shaping the tactical abilities of Palestinian resistance groups in the 1990s and 2000s and launched some of the deportees into political leadership positions. The snowy mountainous camp attracted intense international media attention and diplomatic pressure eventually forced Israel to shorten the expulsion period. Geopolitics, mobility, political agency, temporality and even climate played significant role in shaping the no-man's land inhabited by the 415 Palestinians in southern Lebanon. How, then, can we revive these spatial, temporal and political contingencies? How can we re-inhabit no-man's land and rigorously account for its spatial and social materializations?

Breaking away from a purely Roman-Cristian genealogy, I want to suggest another, and to my mind, more subtle, understanding of abandonment. In Hebrew, the term used to denote a no-man's land is *shatach hefker (שטח הפקר)*, which literally translates as 'a zone of abandonment'. In Jewish jurisprudence, the category of *hefker* dates back to the first and second centuries, and opens a rich genealogy closely attuned to different registers of social action and political subjectivity. After the destruction of the Jewish temple in 70AD,

organised sacrifice was no longer available as an expression of religious dedication. Shortly after, acts of individual, deliberate abandonment – of land, property or goods – begin to appear. In the absence of Jewish political sovereignty, the wilful ceding of ownership rights and their designation as divine property becomes a radical act that redrew the boundary between terrestrial and divine space. The anarchic dimension of this form of abandonment was not lost on the Jewish and Roman elites. Both understood how it potentially evades religious hierarchies and subverts legal frameworks of ownership, tenure and therefore taxation. In a very different context, the notion of *hefker* is applied to the right of an under-aged orphan girl to refuse marriage. This debate directly grapples with the legal and social protections vulnerable individuals are entitled to by the court and the community. Material economies, social responsibilities and affective orders feature here as pivotal forces that re-animate no-man's lands as critical spaces for the living, rather than the liminal spaces for the dead or the dying.

Evidence of this nuanced interpretation of abandonment: In fourteenth century England, the typical use of abandonment stressed its material and practical applications to property and insurance law, particularly with relation to the severing of traditional kinship relations as a result of new land-tenure arrangements and enclosure policies. João Biehl's work on social abandonment in contemporary Brazil is echoed in other scales, from dementia sufferers in American street and the domestic spaces in India (Marrow and Luhrmann 2012) to the negligence and criminalization experienced by communities in the border enclaves of India-Bangladesh (Shewly 2013).

Equally, abandonment ought to be considered as part of a complex political dynamic. Following Peteet (2011) I argue that abandonment must be constantly monitored, patrolled, and maintained, often by force, because those inhabiting these spaces are not quiescent. Zones of abandonment are constantly produced through intense discursive labour and physical means. As

a constitutive dimension of no-man's lands, abandonment produces new forms of political subjectivities and sources of mobilization, as we have already seen in the Palestinian tent camp in the mountains of Lebanon, or as Jane Comaroff identifies among South African health activists. Building on Marx and Foucault, Comaroff speaks of the prolific productiveness of abandonment, and the ways it has given rise to new forms of sociality and signification. To reassert the critical analytical capacity of the no-man's land, much greater attention has to be directed at exactly these productive articulations.

If acts of sovereign abandonment result in a radical devaluation of human life and socio-political agency, the withdrawal of sovereign presence is asserted and enforced through particular materializations and assemblages of enclosure. This dialectical operation of calculated withdrawal of power and its reterritorialization through enclosure is an essential hallmark of no-man's land. Within this formulation, my use of enclosure is intentional, drawing critical attention to the function of no-man's land within a spatial economy that produces, manipulates and reconfigures the understanding of value. This de- and re-valuation is evident in the very first recorded appearance of the term in English, referring to a lot purchased in 1348 by Ralph Stratforde Bishop of London, north of the London Wall. Just before the plague hit London, the lot was "inclosed with a wall of Bricke" and used as an emergency burial ground for victims of the Black Death. In Divine Violence, a recent book which has yet to be published in English, Adi Ophir notes that catastrophe in the 14th century was ultimate the realm of <u>divine</u> intervention. Hence, perhaps, <u>no-man's</u> land. Yet this was a premeditated act of preparation by the London authorities. The demarcation and enclosure of this burial ground as a calculated anticipatory spatial technology, points to an early effort of earthly governance of disaster, its management and bio-political spatialisation – long before the secularisation of catastrophe in the 18th century, meticulously analysed in Adi's recent book Divine Violence, but probably familiar to many of you through Foucault's work.

In their most explicit contemporary manifestations, no-man's lands appear as relatively unsophisticated spaces of enclosure through which, in the words of Judith Butler, a "resurgent sovereignty can rear its anachronistic head" (Butler 2004, 94). Yet these fortified enclosures also radically alter established systems of value, first those relating to the inhabitants of spaces condemned as no-man's land, who are, as we saw earlier, abandoned; simultaniously, the targeted land becomes a wilderness, an unproductive space that can be enclosed and reinserted into systems of property and production. This radical devaluation entails immense investment in physical and discursive infrastructures of enclosures, which, in turn, imbues the devalued space with new signification. Thus the mayor of the South Korean city of Paju can reclaim the Demilitarized Zone as "a land with abundant ecological resources and a landmark for world peace".

In a detailed study of Chernobyl's bio-political aftermath, Adriana Petryna (2004) illustrates how "exposure", the quintessential condition of the homo sacer's absolute vulnerability to violence and death, is made into a resource, into social protections, forms of citizenship and informal economies of healthcare and entitlement. Parallel to these subtle reconstitutions of political agency Petryna notes that the "deep intrusion of illness onto personal lives fostered a type of violence that went beyond the line of what could be policed" (2002, 216). Both the persistent damage (to bodies, ecologies and atmospheres) and its articulation as political capital are never fully confined to the strict enclosures imposed in and around the zones of exclusion. Yet this qualitative migration of (bio)political capital carried in the ill and wounded body of the survivor also produces new enclosures. The wife of one of the first-responders who was exposed to extreme levels of radiation described the bio-chamber into which he was placed during his hospitalization in Moscow, and the extensive quarantine measured that isolated the him from all human interaction. To complete his dehumanisation, one nurse referred to the dying man as "a radioactive object with a strong density of poisoning.[...] That's not a person anymore, that's a nuclear reactor" (Alexievich 2006, 16–17). The radical unmaking of the human

body to the extent that it is no longer distinguished from the original space of disaster, echoes the violent dissolution of distinctions between body and space in the no-man's land of the First World War, which I noted at the opening of this paper. Yet both this devaluation of human subjectivity and the revaluation of political agencies emerge out of a similar qualitative excess of no-man's land, the inability to fully contain its effects through the deliberate acts of its production, namely, abandonment and enclosure.

Re-inhabiting no-man's land is a much longer intellectual endeavour that opens up several important questions: What are the dynamics of sovereignty that produce and manage these spaces? What are the forms of emancipatory politics that emerge out of no-man's land- I'm thinking for example about the Israeli Black Panthers who emerge from the cusp of Jerusalem's no-man's land in the early 70's or the recent work carried out by NGOs inside Nicosia's buffer zone; and what are the assemblages formed between the lines (ecologies, materialities, affective and political orders)? Rather than a conclusive summary, these brief reflections on no-man's land are an invitation for further research, research that will reassert both the intellectual history of this space and the spatial manifestation of this concept.