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The Universal Embassy: A Place Open to the World

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There is only one virtue: impotence.
Robert Desnos

A Micropolitical Habitat

In January 2001 a group of "illegals" – sans-papiers fighting for regularization[1] – occupied the abandoned building of the Somalian embassy in Brussels to meet their urgent need for accommodations.

This place, abandoned because of the civil war in Somalia, property of a vanished state, was soon to become the Universal Embassy.[2] It is universal, because the individuals assembled here are conscious of the discrimination that is produced through ties to a nationality. Since then, the building has been inhabited solely by sans-papiers. The aim of the Universal Embassy is support and consequently autonomy. It helps the residents with their various administrative treks of a legal or social nature. It is a place that is open, where people that are illegal in their place of residence and can expect no support from the authorities of their countries of origin can exchange information, meet other communities, prepare battle

plans. It has become the embassy of those who no longer have any embassy.

The Universal Embassy is a unique place in Brussels, where sans-papiers can share their experiences, mutually support one another and develop a public voice, where all kinds of encounters are possible, where different communities mix, where a social life can become manifest and diversity can be expressed. Today there are approximately thirty people living in the Universal Embassy: men, women and children of Algerian, Moroccan, Rwandan, Ecuadorian, Albanian, Iranian, Ukrainian origins.

Agency in the Universal Embassy is developed in articulation between the misery of clandestinity and a political fiction. What is able to emerge in this is a new language. The language of a people to come.

The function of acceptance and care is fundamental. This makes it possible to grasp the development of the situation of migrants: the processes leading to clandestinity, the obstacles in the way of regularization. This is where the center of agency is found. From this point, an expertise in survival is developed together with the residents, a legal and political expertise, an everyday sensibility. The entirety of the activities is directed to preparing the sans-papiers for the battle for the recognition of their rights, to giving them confidence in their means again. Something beyond the horizon of survival slowly crystallizes – a place that is more than emergency accommodations. The residents are the political subject, they organize their life.

Social work retreats into an individual relationship between supporter and supported. This relationship is hopelessly incapable of helping the victims of clandestinity, who are by definition

without legal security. The measure of the humanity of the policies that the illegals encounter is variable. On the one hand they have access to certain rights and to certain institutions: such as receiving medical treatment, enrolling their children in school, or even rights to carry out precarious activities. Other than that, they can be prey to a raid in the subway and end up in a *centre fermé*[3]. It is ultimately in this constrained juridical space that the sans-papiers conducts his or her battle. The arbitrariness and the lack of an overall vision constantly contribute to the isolation of migrants, to the development of rumors, to the reproduction of acts of subjugation to procedures with no future. The political dimension disappears. Almost all that is left in the end is to demand the minimal status of a human being ...

It is not enough to cry out the political dimension loudly. The sans-papiers are not a legal body that can assert certain claims. And yet mobilization work is all too often thought of in these kinds of terms. Clandestinity dissolves every life project. It is easy to accuse the sans-papiers of a corporatism of survival. It is time to go beyond the one-dimensional character of the battle.

Constrained Everyday Life

The Universal Embassy is a star.

Clandestinity is an absurd journey, at the end of which there is the loss of identity. A resident from Somalia, that vanished country, wanders around in the city wearing a Zorro mask. In the *centre fermé* he would have held incoherent speeches ... A migrant grandmother rings the doorbell of the neighboring building, convinced that her daughter lives there: the Embassy of Saudi Arabia. She has spent seven years on a journey, during which

reality dissolves ... She is 77 years old. Clandestinity becomes a state of suspension in a parallel world, an evaporation of one's own substance.

The Universal Embassy is a concentrate of weakness. When someone comes here to find shelter, then it is because the precariousness of their situation has become unbearable.

Fear is the clandestine's shadow. Fear of everything and everyone: of taking the bus, of working, of moving. One must take care not to be conspicuous, not to loiter in the shopping centers. Those who have nothing to buy, have no reason to loiter there ... Every action holds its own measure of risk.

It is the justice system that holds one together. The hope is minute, and everyone settles into waiting. Always, always waiting, everything concentrated on this waiting. Wearing out in wearing through the procedure, for months, for years. One seeks encouragement in thinking that it is still better than risking certain deportation. Obscene labyrinth.

20, 30 years old, with no future, no possible life plan. Clandestine migration extends the bitter experience of a lost youth. In order to flee from a leaden society or unemployment, migration becomes a life project in itself, the hope of a possibility. This dream retreats back to itself. The project becomes unreal. There is no more desire that could be articulated. The hypothetical day of regularization becomes devoid of meaning, none can be invested in it. The only constant is that there is no solution.

The loss of self is at work here. Becoming a driven, exploited animal, a criminal and a victim. No more reading, no more writing, earning three euros in an hour, even less as a woman.

Founding and building up the Universal Embassy means finding a concrete hope again. This is the articulation that is the point here: countering this constrained reality with something and moving beyond the nations and their desolate territories; being able to gain confidence in one's own means, to desire, to plan one's life.

The Universal Embassy is a facilitation. Initially it was a matter of accommodations that had to be renovated: cleaning from the top to the bottom, connecting water and electricity, furnishing a kitchen, repairing sanitary facilities, fixing the roof, etc.

Nevertheless, this place - which is open in every respect and exposed to all possible influences - can only be a place of crisis. The living space alone is not viable, if the entirety of the problems of its inhabitants are not covered. Without having any authority, without being able to delegate anything. Every difficulty requires finding ways to overcome it. Very often outside the realm of medicine, outside the realm of law, through the realization of a habitat. A heterogeneous mosaic of those involved gradually emerges, which is grounded in respect and the exchange of knowledge. At the same time that the habitat is enriched, it breaks through the social isolation that is so effectively organized through repression. It becomes autonomous.

One can read "Ailleurs" ("Elsewhere") by Henri Michaux together, the story of the Arpedres: "The Arpedres are the most obstinate people there are, obsessed with righteousness, with rights and even more with duties. Respectable traditions, certainly. All of it without a horizon." - Expression liberates itself, steps out of the stigma, one can break loose, celebrate, and celebrating also means eating. It is possible to invest politics with meaning and derive a force of desiring from this, finding a place in the world again, where opinions are meaningful and actions are effective.

Autonomous Migrants

As migrants with no protocol, the sans-papiers are driven by the evidence of law to have rights. They are neither victims nor criminals. The autonomy of their movements sounds the call for a new relation of the legal subject to the productive subject. What can the historical bond between the citizen and the worker still mean, if foreigners are enslaved here? Supernumeraries of bio-power, their existence in the transnational world today invents new diasporas without the original break and constitutes multifarious networks of solidarity and exploitation, in which origins, settlement and transit touch across several generations. The territory becomes the local that is linked with the journey.

What we have here is the immediacy of a legal subject that is transnational, because it transcends the small agreements between nations; an interest other than in changing citizenship or in (inevitably always suspicious) dual citizenship, the desire for something else: an autonomy of personal and collective constitution and the paths of new solidarities that are released from territories and borders.

Europe remains blind with regard to this essential foundation of the world to come. By insisting on a conception of nationality that has nearly run its course, the various European countries indulge in the illusion of being able to control and halt the migrations, whose motivations lie solely in the initiatives of the migrants. What is implemented here is a new landscape of war. And it was actually thought that the negativity of the wall had been overcome.

By accepting that human beings undergo existential crises because they have no papers, the states remind us of how identity is to be

understood. The existence of an identity between states is a loss of identity, which can go as far as the loss of one's name, but can also become a place of the universal that recomposes itself where the paths cross. The Universal Embassy seeks to impel this transition: from the extinguished identity to the universal that is to be constituted; transgressing affirmation by power of the negation of an existence without papers and sowing the seeds of constitutive desire; leaving the obligatory mediation of the state behind, in order to invoke a direct effect on a transnational right. Like every embassy, the Universal Embassy is a place of representation, but without a figured state. What is represented is emerging. Its inhabitants, the sans-papiers, new pariahs of the free world, contest a national citizenship that is a blood relation of the nation. By intervening in the contours of state representations, the embassy abolishes the limitation of the border locally. Its inhabitants are those who have already arrived in terms of a local that is present in the world.

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[1] The Verhofstadt I cabinet, the so-called "rainbow coalition" of liberal, socialist and green parties, had initiated a regularization campaign in 1999 for a limited period, which is meanwhile over. Roughly 30,000 sans-papiers were legalized in the course of this campaign. However, many applications still remained unprocessed after the end of the campaign, and many sans-papiers did not dare to submit applications to begin with (for fear of not meeting the criteria). (*translator's note*)

[2] See also the Universal Embassy web site, where further information and documentation can be found, along with the "Declaration of the Universal Embassy": http://www.universal-embassy.be/.

[3] In Belgium, as in a number of other EU states, there are so-called "closed centers" (*centres fermés*), i.e. separate camps, in which sans-papiers can be detained for months, before finally being deported or – in the case of those persons who cannot be deported, for example, for legal or administrative reasons – released into clandestinity again. (*translator's note*)