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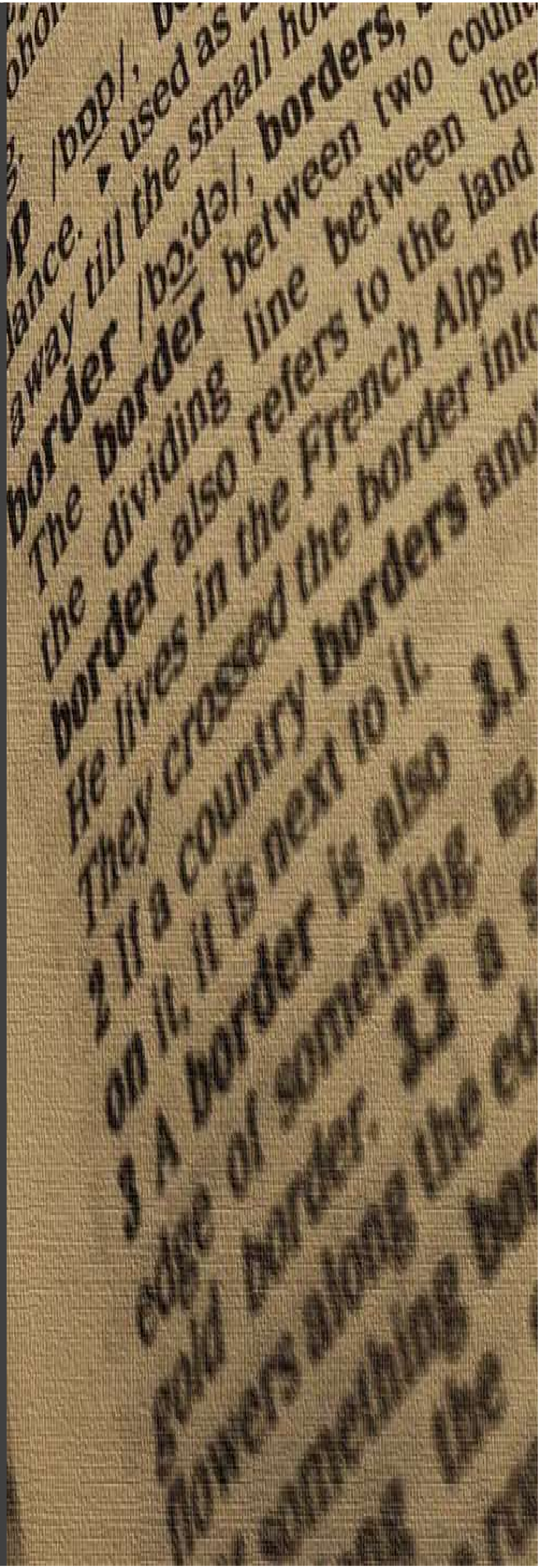

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HOMO SACER IN THE CITY: SPATIAL POLITICS OF EXCLUSION IN J. G. BALLARD'S *EMPIRE OF THE SUN*

İsmail Serdar ALTAÇ[1]

Abstract

James Graham Ballard is an author who is known as one of the keen observers of the social and accompanying spatial shifts taking place in the 20th century. Although his oeuvre is filled with "ballardian" science fiction, his mid and late career is also marked by such autobiographical and semi-autobiographical works as Empire of the Sun (1984), The Kindness of Women (1991) and Miracles of Life (2008). The gated-communities, with which Ballard had been preoccupied throughout much of his career, have globally become one of the significant components of the urban spaces today. The proliferation of these communities has been creating a widening gap between those inside and those outside, to an extent that citizenship can no longer continue to be an overarching term for all of the urban dwellers. This paper aims to examine the birth of gated-communities and their impact on the public space of the city in Empire of the Sun. Set in Shanghai, the birthplace of J. G. Ballard, the novel relates a fictional account of Ballard's childhood in Shanghai on the eve of World War II and in the Lunghua Civilian Assembly Camp during the war. This paper will firstly deal with the impact of Ballard's post-war fictions, with regard to spatial politics, on Empire of the Sun, a semi-autobiographical novel. Secondly, it will aim to demonstrate how the spatial paradigm which situates homo sacer, a person who can be killed with impunity according to Roman law, outside the city has shifted towards a new understanding in which homo sacer is situated within the city after the establishment of the gated-communities in the novel. It will be concluded that Empire of the Sun testifies to the disintegration of the city as a public space as a result of the introduction of homo sacer into the urban space.

Keywords: J. G. Ballard, city, space, gated-community, homo sacer

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"Peace had come, but it failed to fit properly"
(*Empire of the Sun*: 296)

Introduction

Konstantinos Cavafy's "Waiting for the Barbarians" (2007 [1898]) is a significant text that implies much about the politico-spatial understanding of the Western societies which had been in effect for centuries. In the poem, while the space inside the gates accommodates an inventory of political bodies (e.g. senate, emperor, consuls, and praetors) providing with an order, the space outside the walls is implied to be a source of peril and indeterminacy. A second dichotomy between these two spaces is that while the first can be defined with complexity and subtlety, the latter is characterized by plainness in that it involves only barbarians. These dichotomies are reminiscent of what Giorgio Agamben refers to as "bios" and "zoe" as the fundamental political categories of Western politics. These two terms designate two kinds of lives to which the ancient Greeks refer. While *zoe* designates that aspect of human life shared by all living organisms, *bios* indicates "the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group" (Agamben, 1998: 1). He claims that "in the classical world [...] simple natural life is excluded from the polis in the strict sense" (1998: 2), which is to say that the citizens of a city could be defined by *bios* and they were a part of a system that, by its very nature, expelled *zoe*. Thus, *zoe* embodies a paradoxical relation to the city and sovereign. It is included in the domain of the sovereign only through its exclusion. According to Agamben's understanding of biopolitics, the logic of inclusive exclusion is the means by which the sovereign operates, rather than an inclusiveness that rules the people. He argues that "[i]n Western politics, bare life has the privilege of being that whose exclusion founds the city of men" (1998: 7). While the city symbolizes the order and rule, outside the city becomes a state of exception.

Agamben focuses on the Roman legal figure, *homo sacer*, to highlight that *bios*, or political life, is not a taken for granted characteristic for the people in the European history that he traces from the ancient Greece until the 20th century. *Homo sacer* refers to a person "who *may be killed and yet not sacrificed*" in religious rituals (Agamben, 1998: 8). The life of *homo sacer* is neither under the protection of a juridical order nor a topic of any juridical order, which puts him into a state of exception. He is the figure, says Agamben, "with respect to whom all men act as sovereign" (1998: 84). Although *homo sacer* belongs to the ancient Roman law, it casts a long shadow on the biopolitics of Western modernity. Especially the 20th century reincarnated this figure in the Nazi concentration camps and later in the refugee camps where "the most absolute [inhuman condition] that has ever existed on earth was realized" (Agamben, 1998: 166). Those who have entered these camps have been stripped of their human and citizen rights, which shows that the camps are the places where

bare life is produced. As such, camps are at the opposite pole of the axis whose other end is occupied by civil society and city.

However, urban life which has come to be largely associated with dystopic images testifies that camp and its logic cease to be an exception. In the face of gradually diminishing public space, the cities have not only lost civility (Sennett, 2002) but also, contrary to its classical function, it has become the location of bare life. As a result of the high levels of perceived danger, a person in the city feels more akin to *friedlos*, a man without peace who is the Germanic counterpart of *homo sacer.* This paper aims to examine the spatiality of *homo sacer* in *Empire of the Sun*, with an emphasis on the role of gated communities and spaces of exclusion. It will be argued that the boundaries of camp, as the traditional site of *homo sacer*, shifts in the novel, only to include a wider geography. Kong (2009) examines the biopolitical connotations of the novel, highlighting the figure of *homo sacer*. However, this study aims to demonstrate the function of the gated communities and spaces of exclusion in the shifting spatiality of homo sacer.

Patricia Garcia (2015) argues that "space occupies a primordial position in Ballard's text" (71) in that it functions as an actor in these works. To Garcia's argument, one may add that the gated-communities are the most frequented spatial form in his fiction. Blakely and Snyder (1997) define the gated communities as the "residential areas with restricted access in which normally public spaces are privatised. They are security developments with designated perimeters, usually walls or fences, and controlled entrances that are intended to prevent penetration by non-residents" (2). This definition underpins the utopian connotations associated with gated communities. In the face of the images of the cities suffering from lawlessness and violence, these communities have become the locations of residence among the affluent milieu of the society. Although the typology of these communities may vary, as lifestyle, prestige, and security zone (Blakely and Snyder, 1997), the idea of a perceived danger precipitates their development in its all typologies. However, in many of his works, Ballard is obsessed with proving that gating out the city does not necessarily mean that the evil is filtered out. Ballard's such novels as *High-Rise* (1975)*, Cocaine Nights, Super-Cannes* (2000) and *Millenium People* extrapolate the psychopathological consequences induced by the homogeneity, affluence and the resultant boredom in the gated communities. These works, set in the postwar period, portray either a loss of social competences needed to navigate through socially compelling issues or a rebellion to the conditions of boredom and regulatory nature of the built environment. Thus, these novels usually focus on the internal social problems precipitated by the homogeneity and the affluence of the communities. However, *Empire of the Sun* differs from these novels in that it focuses on socio-spatial outcomes and meanings of

the gated communities within a wider urban space. Though the novel appears to be a detour from the Ballard's science fiction, being a semi-autobiographical work, Ballard projects his postwar observations on socio-spatial trends which shaped his science fiction, onto his memories of Shanghai years in *Empire of the Sun*. The most explicit proof of this argument is the conversion of the internment camp into a gated community at the end of the novel, instead of a high school as it is in reality and as Ballard (2008) also notes in his biography entitled *The Miracles of Life* (271).

Towards the End of the City

In the novel, the destitute conditions of the Chinese and Eastern European refugees in Shanghai lucidly depict the threats against which *homo sacer* is vulnerable. In a stark contrast with the living standards of the British citizens, the refugees suffer from both the scarcity of economic means and epidemic diseases: "Real war was the thousands of Chinese refugees dying of cholera in the sealed stockades at Pootung, and the bloody heads of the communist soldiers mounted on pikes along the Bund" (14). Too much preoccupied with the war in the Europe, the British simply remains oblivious to the inhuman treatment of the refugees in the city. The relationship between Jim and the servants illuminates the relationship between the sovereign and *homo sacer*. Referring to Jim's misbehavior at home the narrator remarks that "[t]he nine Chinese servants would be there, but in Jim's mind, and in those of the other British children, they remained as passive and unseeing as the furniture" (16). Despite the disapproval of his parents, he occasionally threatens the servants to kill them, which signals the sovereign's position in relation to bare life. In Jim's understanding, the Chinese lives are simply negligible. The Eastern European refugees shares a similar fate with the Chinese. Jim's nanny, Vera Frankel is a Jew who fled from the Nazi army occupying Poland. Ironically, her family lives in a ghetto which would be similar to one where they would live if they had been captured by the Nazis:

> She and her parents had escaped on one of the last boats from Hitler's Europe and now lived with thousands of Jewish refugees in Hongkew, a gloomy district of tenements and faded apartment blocks behind the port area of Shanghai. To Jim's amazement, Herr Frankel and Vera's mother *existed* in one room. (17) [italics mine]

The employment of the verb "exist" in this statement implies that the life of *homo sacer* is no more than a matter of existence. These refugees are "excluded from political and social context to which [they] once belonged" (Agamben, 1998: 185). The irony of the Jews as *homo sacer* in a non-German territory is further consolidated by the continual assaults of the Nazi groups living in Shanghai on Jewish refugees (37). The Nazi attack on the Jews is made possible by the suspension of law in the city. Despite

the supremacy of the British in the city, the text undermines the apparent superiority of the British rule, continually referring to the indifference of the British soldiers guarding the city to the anarchic environment pervading the city. As a result of this indifference, Shanghai becomes a city which can be defined by a Hobbesian state of nature. Therefore city, which had been associated with civilization and protection, passes through a reversal of role by which it becomes a locus of violence. Diken and Laustsen (2002) summarize this transformation as follows:

> City life turns into a state of nature characterized by the rule of terror, accompanied by an omnipresent fear. This fear is not the fear of punishment that follows transgression of the law but stems from knowing that there is no law to transgress. Here, we have the underlying fantasy behind contemporary urban life: The city is an unpredictable and dangerous site of survival, an "urban jungle. (291)

Though the British appear to be colonial sovereigns in Shanghai, they are not exempt from the "fear" that Diken and Laustsen emphasize in their portrayal of modern metropolises. The consequences of this fear are evident in the spatial practices of the Western settlers. Their retreat into the suburbs of the city is a result of this urban fear. Zygmunt Bauman (2007) warns that such tendencies "[normalize] the state of emergency in which urban residents, addicted to safety yet perpetually unsure of it, dwell daily" (72). The extensive use of automobiles, which is a concomitant outcome of suburban sprawl, serves as a protection from the dangers of the city. Until the Japanese occupation, none of the European settlers visit downtown Shanghai without a car. These vehicles become instruments by which they exercise their right to live in a space, which would be called "camp" by Agamben. Following the Japanese occupation, there is an illustrative scene explaining the biopolitical function of the automobiles in the city. Roaming in the streets of Shanghai, Jim is threatened by a Chinese boy. In an attempt to evade him, Jim says that "I am waiting for my chauffeur […] No- he is over there" (58). Jim's reaction is a result of the protective role ascribed to the automobiles in a crime-ridden city. However, the function of the automobiles as a protective shell serves to further decay of the city, a process that leads to a network society where geography is obliterated from the mental maps of the British residents. As to the impact of the automobiles on the city, Sheller and Urry (2000) state that "[t]he environment beyond the windscreen is an alien other, to be kept at bay through the diverse privatizing technologies incorporated within the contemporary car" (747). As a result, the overprotective environment where Jim grows up poorly prepares him to live with the 'alien other'.

The Rise of Gated Communities

Japanese occupation of Shanghai marks the shift of the biopolitical framework in which Jim is situated. Jim is not only separated from his

parents during the turmoil of the Japanese *blitzkrieg* but also separated from the community which had been protecting his life in a dangerous city. The disappearance of the British after the Japanese attack strips Jim from his *bios* and transforms him into *homo sacer* who has no legal rights. Although Jim occupied the sovereign position before the war- e.g. when he threatens his *amah* to kill her (18) - he is slapped by one of the Chinese *amah*s during his search for food in the streets of Shanghai (68). The narrator summarizes his condition follows: "A peculiar space was opening around him, which separated him from the secure world he had known before" (76). In this 'peculiar space', he becomes equal to the stateless refugees suffering from hunger and diseases in Shanghai's ghettoes. In the scenes following the Japanese occupation, Jim is left to meet such immediate physical needs as hunger just like an animal. He continually feels compelled to change residence and sneak into abandoned houses to find food. When he settles in one of the houses, he is chased away by an Iraqi woman living in the same building (79). Jim's expulsion from the building is a natural result of the disturbance of the order that his presence creates in the building. According to this order, the place of a British boy after the Japanese occupation is Japanese internment. For this reason, until his detainment by the Japanese forces, Jim is *friedlos*, a man without peace. The protection that he needs is ironically provided by the Japanese army. The point at which Jim enters the camp marks a positive biopolitical shift in his life as well as in the lives of the other British citizens. Under Japanese detainment, the first camp where he is temporarily located is a former cinema building where the sick prisoners are held. Although the sick prisoners are left either to die or without proper medical assistance, a fate also shared by *homo sacer*, the fact that the Japanese separate the healthy prisoners from the others implies that the British and other allied prisoners are not in a position of *homo sacer*. The condition of re-joining the politically protected British community is recovery from the contagious diseases in this temporary camp. Accordingly, when Jim is found fit to leave the detainment center, he is placed among a group of prisoners heading towards the new internment camps established in the outskirts of the city.

During the Japanese's search for a camp to accommodate this group, they arrive at a camp, only to be refused. What is strange about this refusal is that the group is not refused by the camp's Japanese guards but by the British prisoners on the ground that the group may have brought disease from Shanghai. In contrast with the Nazi concentration camps into whose entry signals the loss of citizenship and right to live, this camp displays an almost absurd twist of power relations. The narrator relates that "[t]he Japanese sentries opened the barbed-wire gates, but the British prisoners immediately closed them and began to shout at the Japanese sergeant" (154). The prisoners sustain their political existence in a way that is

superior to their captors. This scene is a telling example in which the spatiality of *homo sacer* mutates whereby outside the physical camp becomes the location of *homo sacer,* rather than inside the physical camp.

After this camp, they arrive at the Lunghua Civilian Assembly Center where they would be interned until the end of the war. However, there is a huge gap between their internment and the final months of the war in the narrative. The omission of the years in which the Japanese forces counterbalanced the American army seems to be a deliberate act of the author in an attempt to highlight the new biopolitical function of the internment camp in the middle of a geography disturbed by war. Just like the camp they had visited before arriving at Lunghua, the prisoners sustain their political existence through their civic activities and mechanisms of decisions to run the camp. Far from being maltreated, they are protected against the dangers that may be inflicted by the hungry Chinese and the American air raids. Even if there may be some examples in which the prisoners seem to be maltreated, the underlying reasons may be totally different from what a child's point of view may grasp. For instance, Jim thinks that they receive no food from the Japanese "as a reprisal for a Superfortress raid that devastated Tokyo" (179). Although the interruption of the food supply is related to the American air raids, the provision of meager amount of food to the prisoners is not a result of an urge for reprisal but a natural result of interruption of supply routes. The malnutrition of the prisoners is no more severe than that of the Japanese soldiers guarding the camp. The narrator discloses that "the Japanese guards were almost as badly fed as their British and American prisoners" (165). Since the novel is just a fictional account of Ballard's early life, the details regarding the treatment of the prisoners may be taken with a grain of salt. However, a study carried out by Bernice Archer (2004) about the Western internees in the Japanese camps confirms that the internees retained their political existence in the camps during the war:

> The Japanese did not force the civilian internees into slave labour in mines or building railways as were the military POWs; rather the work the civilian men had to do was related to the maintenance of the camp and their own survival. (88)

In this respect, Lunghua camp in both reality and Ballard's account is diametrically opposed to the biopolitical qualities of the Nazi concentration camps. While both Lunghua and Nazi camps are those spaces "opened when the state of exception begins to become the rule" (Agamben, 1998: 169), the function of Nazi concentration camps was to strip the inmates/citizens of their rights, to denationalize them and consequently to reduce them to bare life (*zoe*) in order to 'justify' the atrocities inflicted upon them. Lunghua, on the other hand, illustrates an example in which the apparent sovereign, who opens up the camp, does not act as such. The people on whom the Japanese act as sovereign are the

Chinese villagers whom they murder with "impunity" (pp. 151,158, 160, 163). The Chinese are either worked to death or beaten to death without any reason:

> [The Japanese] surrounded a Chinese coolie who pulled a rickshaw which had brought one of their officers from Shanghai. […] [They] strode briskly on either side of him. None of them was armed but they carried wooden staves with which they struck at the wheels of rickshaw and at the shoulder of coolie. […] Raising their staves, they struck him a blow on the head, then strolled away as if deep in thought. (pp. 227-228)

The discrepancy between the treatment of the Chinese and the allied prisoners, both of whom are official enemies of Japan, is exactly the discrepancy between bare life and political life, respectively. However, contrary to its traditional biopolitical function, camp becomes a place where life is promoted while outside the camp accommodates those who "does not deserve to live, destined to a future more or less close to death" (Agamben, 1998: 185). The logic of the camp and the state of exception represented by camp sprawl over a wider geography. As a result, the physical camp turns into a space whose borders need to be continually fortified to keep positive biopolitics inside:

> Outside the guardhouse, a work party of British and Belgian prisoners were strengthening the fence. Two of the prisoners unwound a coil of barbed wire, which the others cut and nailed to the fencing posts. Several of the Japanese soldiers were working shoulder to shoulder with their prisoners, ragged uniforms barely indistinguishable from the khaki of the inmates. (179)

The enforcement of the camp borders, a precaution against the hungry Chinese, has the same logic with the gated communities which mushroomed after the war. Especially, when the Japanese defeat becomes imminent, the guards keeping the inmates in cease to patrol the perimeter, leaving the camp and its management only to prisoners, which turns the camp into a *de facto* civilian settlement (234). Although the Japanese authority weakens towards the end of the novel, the American army does not immediately arrive to restore order and the space around the camp becomes a no-man's land: "By June 1945, the landscape around Lunghua was so hostile, roamed by bandits, starving villagers and deserters from the puppet armies, that the camp and its Japanese guards offered the only security" (175). The continual deferral of the peace results in a disbelief in the restoration of order among the prisoners and also a skepticism about the peace itself. The rightfulness of these fears is proved when the Japanese decide to transport the prisoners. Though the prisoners start a long march with their Japanese guardians, after the A-bomb the Japanese soldiers disappear, leaving them unguarded and vulnerable to any danger in a space where the laws are suspended. The narrator describes this space of indistinction as follows: "The whole of Shanghai and the surrounding

countryside was locked into a zone where there was neither war nor peace, a vacuum that soon be filled by every warlord and disaffected general in China" (305). Thus, outside the gates of the camp, without Japanese protection, Jim becomes a *homo sacer* once again. For instance, when he sees the members of Chinese puppet army he thinks that "if he approached them, they would kill him for his shoes" (277) or when an American fighter flies over him "it [occurs] to him that the pilot might kill him for fun. He [raises] the cartoon of Chesterfields and Reader's Digests, displaying them to the pilot like a set of passports" (291). Since the ground on which he stands belongs to *homo sacer,* Jim feels obliged to prove his national identity in order not to be killed. Coupled with the nascent armed conflict between the Kuomintang, the nationalist Chinese forces and the communists, the space between Shanghai and the camp becomes totally uninhabitable for Jim. As a result, he resolves to go back to Lunghua camp, the only place where he can be at peace. Jim's return to Lungua camp marks another decisive moment signaling the withdrawal of people into biopolitically positive camps. Losing his belief in the end of the war, Jim even thinks that "[h]e was going back to his real home. If Shanghai was too dangerous, perhaps his mother and father would leave Amherst Avenue and live with him in Lunghua" (291).

After the arrival of the American army and Jim reunites with his family in Shanghai, he wants to visit Lunghua camp again:

> Jim expected to see Lungua camp deserted but far from being abandoned, the former prison was busy again, fresh barbed wire strung along its fences. Although the war had been over for nearly three months, more than a hundred British nationals were still living in the closely guarded compound. (348)

This scene is the official announcement of the common genealogy between the camps and the gated communities in the novel. Bülent Diken's (2004) comparison of the refugee or concentration camps and the gated communities is highly elucidatory at this point:

> [O]ur society seems to be producing two kinds of camps; […] those voluntary camps where the entry is blocked but the exit is free, and those where entry is free but exit is blocked. Some camps are designed to keep people (outcasts) 'out', some to keep people (inmates) 'in'. In both cases, the principle is founded on the distribution of (the possibilities of) entry and exit. (99)

Both types of camps are extralegal in that the normal juridical order is suspended in these spaces. The gated communities are the result of an incredulity towards the state's ability to police the city. In that respect, they may be considered to be "'spatial products' with varying degrees of administrative autonomy" (Murray, 2017: 304). Due to their extralegal status, the gated communities resemble the Nazi camps. However, as to the legal condition of the inmates, they strictly differ from each other.

In conclusion, the novel foregrounds that an architecture built for war and state of exception retains its materiality and affects the spatial organization of the urban space in the post-war period. The withdrawal from the public space of the city both signals the end of city and city's positive biopolitical order. The novel shows that a process that begins with the retreat into the suburbs culminates in the establishment of gated communities which is a space of exclusion par excellence. In this new organization of the urban space, camp-like structures become the only places where political existence of the people conserved. Although it is not strictly classified as one of the dystopias of J. G. Ballard, *Empire of the Sun* reflects a dystopian vision of the city in which it is left to *homo sacer.*

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