

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

One recurrent theme in Anthropology, Philosophy and other social sciences today is the notion of ‘sovereign power’ and ‘bare life’ as discussed in Giorgio Agamben’s works. This interest in how power is exercised has led to an array of studies and accounts on sites where this can be observed: from prisons to immigration removal centres, to refugee camps and Nazi concentration camps (Agamben 1998, Malkki 1995, Feldman 1991, Frankl 1959, Levi 1979).

If one looks closely at these types of settings one has the benefit of clearly observable relations of power due to the rigid and structural power relations from those who run the site unto those occupying it. In a way one could dub them total institutions “where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life” (Goffman 1961: 11). However one should also point out that the techniques of power exercised in different ‘total institutions’ vary according to the purpose of that same institution. For instance a total institution whose purpose is to reintegrate its occupants into society (such as a prison) will necessarily have a different approach towards its occupants from one whose inmates are there in order to be removed or exterminated (such as an immigration removal centre, Guantanamo Bay, or a Nazi concentration camp). This dissertation looks more closely at the latter type of setting and for this reason invokes Agamben’s notions of ‘bare life’ and ‘state of exception’ as its central themes.

Agamben, in *Homo Sacer* (1998) puts forward the idea of the ‘state of exception’ where the sovereign holds power on ‘bare life’, that is, life stripped from its political and legal life and which becomes essentially a body that simply exists in nature, but upon which the political (sovereign) exercises discipline with impunity (Agamben 1998: 1-12). As Hansen and Stepputat (2006) explain, Agamben’s approach suggests that a “citizen has an included body, a body that has itself an array of rights by virtue of its inclusion into the political community, and simultaneously a biological body, a life that can be stripped of symbolisation and humanity and reduced to ‘bare life’ by

decree” (Hansen and Stepputat 2006: 297). By ‘state of exception’, however, Agamben does not literally mean an exception as in ‘not the rule’. Rather, he explains that by means of the state of exception, “modern totalitarianism can be defined as the establishment... of a legal civil war that allows for the physical elimination not only of political adversaries but of entire categories of citizens who for some reason cannot be integrated into the political system... [T]he voluntary creation of a permanent state of emergency... has become one of the essential practices of contemporary states, including so-called democratic ones” (Agamben 2005: 2).

1.2 The Main Problematic

Being an anthropology student with an interest in what happens at ground level, it is my intention to explore Agamben’s work by providing an account of how this strategy of power is experienced in real terms. It is apposite to mention that my research generally complements Agamben’s and even though my approach to the subject is somewhat different from his, it is more often than not in line with his work.

However, after reading *Homo Sacer*, one is left with a desire to know more than what Agamben provides the reader with. His theoretical work will be explored in more depth in Chapter 2 and for now is being mentioned to set out my main problematic. Agamben (1998, 2005) sets out an elaborate explanation of how sovereign power in our day and age can abstract the political being from its subjects and thus turn them into ‘bare life’ that simply exist in nature. This is done, according to him, in order for the state to defend itself since politics defines itself “in terms of its genesis from and its non-identity with bare life” (Norris 2000: 41). A threshold is created which allows a relationship between the nonlegal (bare life) and political life. Through this relationship the sovereign not only defines them both, but also “decides on the exception” (Carl Schmitt quoted in Norris 2000: 46). This threshold between the law and the nonlegal is what defines sovereignty (almost in a borderline sense). “There is no norm applicable to chaos [the nonlegal]. For a legal order to make sense, a normal situation must exist, and he is sovereign who definitely decides whether this normal situation exists” (Carl Schmitt quoted in Norris 200: 46, my bracket). It is in this sense that Agamben claims that the rule constitutes itself through its own suspension from the exception since it is the very decision of what is and what is not to be

considered within the juridico-legal sphere that gives meaning to both what is included in the juridico-political structure [such as the citizen] and what is excluded from it [such as the immigrant waiting to be deported] (Agamben 1998: 18, my brackets). This suspension of the law, Agamben argues, creates a fictitious lacuna that serves to “safeguard the existence of the norm and its applicability to the normal situation” (Agamben 2005: 31). And as a result, what is outside the juridico-legal sphere is reduced to a liminal figure upon which the sovereign can exercise absolute control over its fate.

My main interest is to look intently at the receiving end of this strategy and explore the ways, means and resources available to those on whom this strategy of reducing existence to ‘bare life’ is being imposed. Even though Agamben never implies that the ‘victims’ of this strategy do not have any means to resist it, he does not dedicate the necessary attention to how they can react to it. This is specifically what I will be looking at. In my research I will be looking at the ‘resources’ available to detainees from the outside of the removal centre they are in¹, particularly the pool of volunteers who regularly visit them. However, apart from my research, in order to illustrate further examples of how ‘bare life’ can be resisted from inside these institutions, I will also look at autobiographical accounts of survivors of Nazi concentrations camps (Frankl 1959; Levi 1979, 1985; Wiesel 1972). These provide an abundance of information about life inside the camps and what was possible and what was not in order for them not to become ‘bare life’; or as it was referred to inside concentration camps, a ‘*moslem*²’; or as Primo Levi (1979) says, “not to begin to die” (Levi 1979: 47).

1.3 The Site of Interest

¹ See section 1.3 in this chapter for the setting being researched.

² An inmate inside a Nazi concentration camp explains to Viktor Frankl (1959) that by Moslem they mean “a man who looks miserable, down and out, sick and emaciated, and who cannot manage hard physical labor any longer... Sooner or later... every ‘Moslem’ goes to the gas chambers” (Frankl 1959: 32).

In order for me to explore what counter-strategies exist for the ‘victims’ of ‘bare life’ I have focused my research around the various forces that surround the Dover Immigration Removal Centre³ (DIRC) situated in Western Heights in Dover.

The DIRC is a removal centre detaining over three hundred male adult immigrants inside the UK who are, for a variety of reasons, waiting to be deported back to their home countries. Some of the detainees have had some form of residence permit granted to them but have been convicted of a criminal offence. After serving their prison sentence they are sent to a removal centre waiting for orders from the Home Office regarding whether or not they will be deported. The criminal convictions range from aggravated assault to distribution of fake DVDs. Other inmates have never committed a crime and are simply awaiting deportation orders following a rejection of their application for asylum in the UK. The centre is run by the HM Prison Service and has one visiting room where the public (such as relatives and friends of the detainees) can visit detainees during specific times of the day and under certain restrictions (such as avoiding physical and ‘inappropriate’ contact with detainees).

Among those who make most use of this visiting room are the visitor volunteers of the Dover Detainee Visitor Group (DDVG). Their aim is the “relief of poverty and distress of those detained by the immigration authorities at the [DIRC]...by providing such persons with basic amenities, information and support particularly through, but not limited to, the provision of a trained and supported visiting network” (www.ddvg.org.uk). From the various interviews I conducted with both paid staff and volunteers of this charity, most gave the same explanation regarding the charity’s mission: to befriend and provide emotional support to detainees during their time in detention, and to help detainees in practical ways while they are detained (such as providing them with a mobile phone, clothing and so on). The group also helps the small minority of detainees who manage to get released from detention and are given a permit to stay, for example by providing them with pocket money and taking care of their first accommodation upon their release. The DDVG, according to paid staff I have interviewed, visits one third of the DIRC population which is constantly moving

³ See section 1.4 and 3.2 for a discussion why the Dover Immigration Removal Centre can be considered as a site where detainees are reduced to ‘bare life’.

around⁴. When a detainee contacts the DDVG requesting a visitor, the group assigns him with one who will meet up with the detainee, generally once a week.

There are in fact other ‘interested parties’ around the DIRC, including religious organisations, the Refugee Legal Council and of course the detention officers and the management working at the DIRC. However, due to practical reasons I have limited my research with the DDVG paid staff, the visitor volunteers and ex-DIRC detainees who are now released.

1.4 The DIRC as a space of strategies and counter-strategies on the political being.

In order to address the choice of site for this dissertation I will first parallel the DIRC (like any other removal centre around the UK) with Agamben’s ‘state of exception’. I will then describe (in an introductory manner for now) how the DDVG group uses this space to counter the strategies of the ‘sovereign’ (in this case the Home Office) in order to help the detainee not to lose his political being despite his precarious status as a non-citizen.

First of all one must realise that the detainee at the DIRC cannot be compared to the ordinary prisoner. For instance while the prisoner has a set date for his/her release, the detainee in the removal centre does not know if and when he is going to be released at all. While the prisoner can have his/her jail term shortened if s/he behaves well, the detainee does not have that option either. Also while the prisoner, guilty or otherwise, knows exactly why s/he is being convicted, the detainee enters the removal centre not knowing exactly why he is there, apart from being put there once their asylum application has failed or else their prison sentence has been served in full. Whether they will be deported, released temporarily on bail or else released permanently is something they do not know⁵. In this sense one could describe their life in the removal centre as a limbo where they become ‘liminal *personae*’ who “fall in the interstices of social structures, are on its margins, or occupy its lowest rungs” (Turner 1969: 125).

⁴ That is, detainees are transferred from one removal centre to another centre around the UK. Others are simply deported back to their home countries or released into British society. Their place is eventually taken by new detainees (either from other removal centres or new detainees just out of prison).

⁵ Waiting time in removal centres is not set and can vary from a few weeks or months to over three years.

For this reason I maintain that the Home Office, through the DIRC and other removal centres, can be compared to Agamben's 'sovereign power'. Just like 'sovereign power' creates the 'state of exception', which are situations when the law is suspended in order to defend itself, the Home Office can be said to suspend the law in order to protect itself from 'unwanted' non-citizens. When I say it suspends the law I mean that what is applicable to the British citizen and prisoner is not applicable to the detainee. For instance, as Diken and Laustsen mention, in the detention centre near Heathrow airport detainees are paid less than the minimum wage for cleaning and cooking, since the legal obligation to pay minimum wage was waived for UK detention services (Diken and Laustsen: 6). In section 3.2 of this dissertation, more concrete examples of such instances are given, including those related to legal representation, medical welfare and even death.

I now turn to the work of the DDVG group with detainees. As the title of the dissertation suggests, I consider the removal centre to be a space of contestation on the political being. Whereas the Home Office uses this site to strip the detainees from their the political being in order to deport them, the DDVG group does precisely the opposite. Despite the fact that the official aim of the group is to befriend the detainees, the findings on Chapter 3 show that as a matter of fact, the group does much more than befriending them. As most of the ex-detainees I have interviewed have told me, their visitor was for them a window bringing in news and opportunities from the outside into the inside. For this reason I consider the DDVG as a political tool which is not only easily accessible for the detainee, but which also proves to be effective in the struggle "not to begin to die" (Levi 1979: 47), in this case the death is a political one.

1.5 Methodology and Ethical Considerations

In this research I have primarily used semi-structured interviews⁶ with some participant observation.

⁶ I have conducted eighteen semi structured interviews: five with ex-detainees, seven with unpaid volunteers and six with DDVG staff.

Before I started researching I volunteered with the DDVG by visiting two detainees on a weekly basis. It is not permitted to conduct research inside the DIRC and therefore this volunteering will not be used in this dissertation as part of my findings. However, by visiting detainees I could get a better understanding of what type of relationship develops between a detainee and his visitor. On one occasion I went inside the DIRC for an 'open day' activity inside the centre. But since the activity's official aim was for socialisation purposes and not for research, no further information will be divulged in my research. The activity did, however, give me a better idea of how life inside looks like since at least I was not confined to the visiting room of the DIRC and could see more of the DIRC physical structure while making informal conversations with detainees I had never met before.

Let me now turn to the actual methods deployed. The semi structured interview, as Bernard (2006) points out, is the best option in occasions when the researcher will not get another chance to interview the same interviewee (Bernard 2006: 212). This was in fact my case especially with ex-detainees who all live in another region in the UK other than Kent, where I reside. This was also the case with staff and volunteers of the DDVG since the occasions where one can meet them are limited, both because of geographical distance (this applies to both staff and volunteers) and the fact that volunteers rarely meet each other since they meet detainees on their own and at a time and date that suits both the volunteer and the detainee. The semi-structured interview uses an interview guide, which is "a written list of questions and topics that need to be covered in a particular order" (ibid). This has been done in my research since I needed to extract as much detail from the interviewee as I could. The general theme of the interview was life inside detention and ways to survive and struggle inside. The first few questions were very general, such as "how do you remember life inside detention?" in the case of detainees, and "what does the DDVG do?" to staff and volunteers. The idea is to start off with a general question that, apart from being relatively easy to answer (given that in both questions, the matter being discussed forms or had formed an integral part of the interviewee's life), it would also set the mood as to what will be discussed. Then, after these general questions the following themes were addressed: In the case of ex-detainees, the ways available to 'work' the system while being on the inside, their perspective of the Home Office and how powerful they felt when compared to it, what life looked like after detention, and

finally their opinion of how the DDVG has helped them while they were inside the DIRC. In the case of the DDVG staff and visitors the themes were the following: what a conversation with a detainee looks like, the requests done by the detainees to the visitor and their involvement in the detainee's life (both in terms of their personal life and their application for asylum).

I have also used open ended questions since these give enough space for the interviewee to open up and elaborate as much as s/he wants on the question and topic being discussed. The interviewee has all the space available to elaborate on what s/he believes is an important point, and to cut short on matters which s/he does not have much to say about or feels uncomfortable talking about. In my case this was beneficial not only to get all the information possible from the interviewee, but also to allow them to answer questions which they may believe are too confidential, in the way they deem safest. This was an essential guarantee that I had to provide to ex-detainees given their constant fear that the Home Office might use any evidence to argue against their asylum claims. Bernard (2006) in fact cautions the interviewer when asking for sensitive information. He says that ideally one needs to be non-judgemental (ibid: 220). From the way that ex-detainees have opened up to me and answered all questions without too many reservations, I argue that this was possible for two reasons: the first was, as Bernard points out, because I was non-judgemental in my reactions. The second was that I was seen by the ex-detainees, the DDVG staff and the volunteers, as being one of them. This was partly due to the fact that I was also a visitor and that I had volunteered to assist the DDVG in the production of a video clip promoting the organisation, and partly because of my previous professional background in working for illegal immigrants in Malta. I always made sure I said this, so that the interviewee feels comfortable talking to me.

With regards to the role that participant observation has played in my research, it is necessary to make a distinction in this type of method. There are researchers who "can be insiders who observe and record some aspects of life around them (in which case, they're observing participants); or they can be outsiders who participate in some aspects of life around them and record what they can (in which case, they're participating observers)" (ibid: 347). I categorise myself as being part of the latter type. Since volunteers and ex-detainees lead separate lives, there is no such thing as a

permanent observable community of volunteers and detainees. This meant that the opportunity for participant observation was limited. There were occasions where despite that as a researcher I was tempted to conduct participant observation (such as inside the visiting room in the DIRC and during the 'open day' at the DIRC), I could not since this would have been in violation of the DIRC regulations. Given that in both cases my presence there was as a volunteer with the DDVG, any such attempt could have hindered the relationship between the DIRC management and the DDVG. One instance when I did conduct participant observation was during a conference organised by the DDVG where representatives from the Home Office, the DIRC, ex-detainees and various nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) were discussing life after detention for ex-detainees. Other occasions included a 'support meeting' which the DDVG organises every month so that visitors can meet the DDVG staff and discuss anything that they feel ought to be addressed. I also attended two induction meetings organised by the DDVG. These meetings are for newly recruited volunteers, who are given an introductory presentation about the DDVG, the DIRC, what to expect from volunteering and other introductory material. Participant observation has enriched this research mainly in terms of how the DDVG portrays itself professionally; however the central method I am relying on is the semi-structured interview. For this reason I will be making use of direct quotes from my interviews in order to remain as loyal as possible to the unedited versions of the interviewees' comments and arguments.

With regards to ethical considerations, I have decided that I will use pseudonyms in order to protect my informants' identity. This is because the ex-detainees I have interviewed live in fear that the Home Office may be able to obtain anything (including my dictaphone with their interviews) and use it against their asylum application, despite the fact that nothing said during the interviews suggests any wrong doings. In order to further secure this anonymity and keep my promise to the ex-detainees who have opened up to me, I will also not be attaching any of the transcribed interviews conducted. By doing this I want to make sure that I do not provide statements or descriptions that could indicate the interviewee or other people mentioned in the interview.

1.6 Synopsis of the following Chapters

This introduction has provided an outline of Agamben's work and has explained how my work will look at the receiving end of the political strategy he describes. Having laid out some basic facts about the DIRC and the charity DDVG, I have elucidated why Agamben's 'bare life' and 'state of exception' are adequate terms for the situation involving the forces surrounding the DIRC.

Chapter 2 will explain in more detail the theoretical implications of Agamben's work. His theoretical framework will be substantiated by providing ethnographies such as Liisa Malkki's *Purity and Exile* (1995) and autobiographies of survivors of Nazi concentration camps such as Primo Levi (1979, 1985). I will be looking at Victor Turner's (1967, 1969) notion of the liminal *personae* and compare it to the 'victims' of the bare life strategy. Then I will analyse the means by which such victims can resist becoming bare life by using established ethnographies and autobiographies. Finally I will introduce the scepticism of Agamben with regards to nongovernmental organisations' role in the bare life strategy.

In Chapter 3 the findings of my research will be compared and contrasted with the theoretical framework being discussed. While the findings are in line with Agamben's general theory of sovereign power and bare life from an organisational point of view, it is in opposition with Agamben's claim that humanitarian organisation generally contribute to the bare life strategy, and not resist it.

Chapter 4 will then conclude and sum up the main themes and arguments of this research with a stress on how the DDVG, through its pool of volunteers, is an integral part of the detainees' struggle in not succumbing to the sovereign and become bare life.

Chapter 2: Theory

2.1 Introduction

The discussion in this chapter will start with Agamben's notions of 'bare life' and 'the state of exception' which are the key terms in this dissertation. I will then discuss the implications of bare life upon the 'victim' of such strategy, invoking Victor Turner's *The Ritual Process* (1969). Agamben's theoretical framework will be analysed in relation to Liisa Malkki's ethnography among Hutu Refugees (1995) and autobiographies such as Levi's (1979, 1985). At the end of the discussion on theory, Agamben's (1998) implication that non-Governmental Organisations contribute to the bare life strategy on immigrants will be introduced. However this latter point will be explored in better detail in Chapter 3 when it is contrasted with my own research findings and in Chapter 4.

2.2 Agamben – *The State of Exception as the Rule*

As mentioned in section 1.2, Agamben considers the relationship between the law and the nonlegal (bare life) as the very constitution of the 'normal situation' where the law can operate. The law and the nonlegal, despite being what the other is not, still maintain a relationship which Agamben terms as being one of 'exclusionary inclusion'. "What is outside is included ... by means of the suspension of the juridical order's validity – by letting the juridical order... withdraw from the exception and abandon it. The exception does not subtract itself from the rule: rather, the rule, suspending itself, gives rise to the exception and, maintaining itself in relation to the exception, *first constitutes itself as a rule*. The particular 'force' of law consists in this capacity of law to maintain itself in relation to an exteriority" (Agamben 1998: 18, my italics). The necessity for the sovereign to maintain this type of relation with this exteriority is imperative since in this manner the sovereign not only defines the exception, but also defines the norm and justifies "its applicability to the normal situation" (Agamben 2005: 31).

Translating this to the case of asylum seekers, Diken and Laustsen (2003) point out that "the refugee is... radically internal to the process of ordering and... that ordering does not seek to 'purge' the ambivalence of the refugee but emerges and expands in a

relation to this ambivalence” (Diken and Laustsen 2003: 3). For Agamben “it is... the camp⁷... that is the *nomos*⁸ of the modern: the camp is what illustrates how sovereignty functions and how the political space is constructed in modernity” (ibid: 18).

Discussing the Nazi concentration camps, Agamben claims that this type of camp “was the most absolute biopolitical⁹ space ever to have been realized, in which power confronts nothing but pure life” (Agamben 1998: 171). The Jew “had... been deprived of his rights as a citizen... and was ... completely denationalised... [The camp’s] inhabitants were stripped of every political status and wholly reduced to bare life” (ibid: 170-171). Wiesel’s personal experience in a concentration camp illustrates this: “all that mattered to me was my daily bowl of soup, my crust of stale bread. The bread, the soup – those were my entire life. I was nothing but a body. Perhaps even less: a famished stomach” (Wiesel 1972: 53).

“The camp is the space that is opened when the state of exception begins to become the rule. In the camp, the state of exception, which was essentially a temporary suspension of the rule of law on the basis of a factual state of danger, is now given a permanent spatial arrangement” (Agamben 1998: 168-169, original italics). For Agamben, the ‘camp’ is not only represented by the Nazi concentration camp, but “by every time such a structure is created” (ibid: 174), including immigration removal centres¹⁰. This space is not “external or internal to the juridical order... [Rather] the problem of defining it concerns precisely a threshold, or a zone of indifference, where inside and outside do not exclude each other. The suspension of the norm does not mean its abolition, and the zone of anomie that it establishes is not unrelated to the juridical order” (Agamben 2005: 23).

⁷ The camp is the space that is opened when the state of exception begins to become the rule (Agamben 1998: 168)

⁸ Greek word for law.

⁹ Biopolitics is a style of government where natural life is included in the mechanism of State power. This sees a shift from older governments concerned primarily with territory, to modern governments concerned primarily with the control of populations. This implies both ‘caring’ for the population in terms of health and birth rate, and also the possibility of exterminating whole populations based on race. This control over the population is referred to by Foucault as biopolitics (Foucault 1978).

¹⁰ In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben lists the stadium in Bari (Italy) where illegal Albanian immigrants were held before being deported and the French international airports in which foreigners asking for refugee status are detained, as examples of the modern ‘camp’ (Agamben 1998: 174).

Shahram Khosravi's (2007) personal account can further illustrate this permanent state of exception. Khosravi, an anthropologist, a Swedish citizen and an immigrant from Iran recounts his experience in a British airport where he was stopped by security. When he refused to answer questions related to his family he was threatened to be detained according to the Anti-Terrorism Act. He explains that "I am a quasi-citizen whose rights can be suspended in the state of emergency. I am included and at the same time excluded" (Khosravi 2007: 332). He argues that the border regime is in fact one type of spatial arrangement of the state of exception as described by Agamben.

It is now worth exploring the implications of the state of exception on those on whom such strategy is being imposed.

2.3 The Liminal Personae and Bare Life

Victor Turner's (1969) description of the liminal *personae* adequately matches Agamben's description of bare life. Discussing rites of passage, Turner discusses the liminal phase of subjects who have been detached from a group and are subjected to utter obedience and must accept arbitrary punishment without complaints (Turner 1969: 94-95). The characteristics of subjects enduring this 'condition' are similar to those in the process of becoming bare life. As Turner argues, "the attributes of... liminal *personae* are necessarily ambiguous, since ... these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space" (ibid: 95). He says that symbolically, liminality is frequently likened to invisibility and death (ibid) and that liminal roles are everywhere regarded as dangerous and anarchical. Therefore those concerned with the maintenance of 'structure' [such as the UK Home Office in relation to asylum seekers] prescribe, prohibit and dictate the conditions of the liminal *personae*'s existence (ibid: 108-109, my bracket). It is necessary to assert that the parallelism I am drawing between Turner and Agamben concerns primarily the characteristics of those in a liminal phase and those enduring the strategy of bare life. This is because while Turner goes on to describe the processes by which the liminal *personae* is normalised back into the group, the victim of the bare life strategy must be kept in a relationship of

exclusionary inclusion. In this sense, the victim of bare life may be said to be in a permanent state of liminality.

Interestingly, Turner uses the term ‘threshold people’ to describe the liminal *personae* (ibid: 95). This threshold also serves to illustrate a delineation of the normal situation as discussed by Carl Schmitt. This delineation is observed in the contrasting elements between the social ties among those in the liminal phase, and the social ties among those in ‘society’. As Turner argues, the two types of models are “juxtaposed and alternating. The first is of society as a structured, differentiated, and often hierarchical system of politico-legal-economic positions... The second, which emerges ... in the liminal period, is of society as an unstructured... and relatively undifferentiated... communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders” (ibid: 96). Turner reasons that in such a process these two opposite models of ‘structure’ constitute each other and are “mutually indispensable” (ibid: 97). The variance from Agamben’s relation of exclusionary inclusion is evident here (in the end the liminal *personae* in the rite of passage is given a higher status), but so is the similarity. Both the relationship between bare life and political being (Agamben) and the relationship between the liminal phase and the final social structure (Turner) define what the other opposite is (or rather, define itself through contrasting itself with the opposite), and consequently also restore ‘the normal situation’.

As argued before, asylum seekers can be said to be in a permanent liminal state in the host society. Malkki (1995) argues that the nation is a regime of classification ordering people into national kinds. The refugee, according to Malkki, is a subversion of that ordering, a “matter out of place” (Douglas 1996), and is no longer classified and not yet classified (Malkki 1995: 6-7). And as Fuglerud explains, thousands of asylum seekers whose asylum applications have been turned down by various European governments live in an “orbit... or an indefinite border zone: not inside, not outside; denied the right to settle but not forcefully evicted” (Fuglerud 2004: 31).

2.4 Resisting Bare Life

It would be naïve, however, to assume that the bare life strategy is impenetrable. What is available to the ‘victim’ of this strategy in order to hold on to his political

being and resist becoming bare life? This is the chief question that my research addresses.

In the first instance one should mention two types of resources available: those available from the inside of the camp, and the options presented from the outside of the spatial arrangement of the state of exception. This section illustrates the former type of resource, while Chapter 3 discusses the latter type.

It is pertinent to look at some firsthand accounts of life inside Nazi concentration camps. Agamben considers these camps as “the most absolute biopolitical space ever to have been realized, in which power confronts nothing but pure life” (Agamben 1998: 171). Viktor Frankl (1959), a survivor of a concentration camp depicts life in the camp as a “provisional existence of unknown limit” (Frankl 1959: 78). He argues that since prisoners stop living for a future, the entire structure of their inner life changes, leading to decay where anything beyond the barbed wires of the camp becomes remote, or even unreal. “The outside life... appeared to him almost as it might have to a dead man who looked at it from another world” (ibid: 80).

But assuming that the inmate cannot struggle against bare life is erroneous. As Levi (1979) recounts “we are slaves, deprived of every right, exposed to every insult, condemned to certain death, but we still possess one power, and we must defend it with all our strength for it is the last – the power to refuse to consent. So we must certainly wash our faces without soap in dirty water and dry ourselves on our jackets. We must polish our shoes, not because the regulation states it, but for dignity and propriety. We must walk erect, without dragging our feet, not in homage to Prussian discipline but to remain alive, not to begin to die” (Levi 1979: 47). Here we observe ‘inner strength’ as a means to survive.

But there are other strategies available from the inside that can illustrate this struggle. For instance, Wiesel (1972) recounts how before the SS officers where about to interrogate him and other new inmates about their age and professions¹¹, a fellow inmate asked Wiesel for his age. Was it not for this inmate’s determination, both

¹¹ And according to the answer given, one would be either sent to the work camps or sent to death in the gas chambers.

Wiesel and his father would have probably been sent to the gas chambers. This is the conversation following the inmate's question regarding Wiesel's age:

“ *Fifteen.* ’
‘*No. you’re eighteen.* ’
‘*But I’m not, I said. I’m fifteen.* ’
‘*Fool. Listen to what I say*’
Then he asked my father, who answered:
I’m fifty. ’
‘*No.*’ *The man now sounded angry. ‘Not fifty. You’re forty.*
Do you hear? Eighteen and forty.’ ”
(Wiesel 1972: 30)

This sense of camaraderie was also expressed upon Wiesel's arrival at Auschwitz. As the group of new inmates reached their block, they were greeted by a fellow inmate who was in charge of their block. He told them: “Ahead of you lies a long road paved with suffering. Don't lose hope. You have already eluded the worst danger: the selection. Therefore, muster your strength and keep your faith. We shall all see the day of liberation. Have faith in life, a thousand times faith. By driving out despair, you will move away from death. Hell does not last forever... let there be camaraderie among you... Help each other. That is the only way to survive” (ibid: 41). Wiesel and his father were also occasionally visited by a relative of theirs, also an inmate, who gave them bread since he said that in order to avoid the gas chambers, they had to eat all they could so that they would appear fit for work (ibid: 44-45). Similar advice was given to the whole block an hour before a selection by the SS officers. The leader of the block encouraged everyone to boost their chances of survival by moving their limbs to get some colour, running instead of walking and avoiding showing fear. Two other inmates who had befriended Wiesel came up with the idea that the three of them stay together since this, they believed, would make them appear stronger in front of the SS (ibid: 71). Viktor Frankl also recounts this type of advice being given by fellow inmates, including shaving daily and standing and walking smartly (Frankl 1959: 32).

Liisa Malkki's ethnography (1995) among Burundian Hutu refugees living in a Tanzanian refugee camp is another illustration of how to resist bare life. Malkki says

that refugee life is “marked by a chronic tension between their presence as ‘bare life’... and [at the same time] as political actors, subjects of history” (Malkki 2002: 359, my bracket). She follows Turner’s notion of the liminal *personae* which describes people as transitional beings who are “‘betwixt and between’ all the recognised fixed points in the space-time of cultural classification” (Turner 1967: 97). Refugees fit into this since, she claims, they attack the categorical order of nations. Malkki suggests that bare life is also brought to relevance in the photographic over-representations of children refugees who seem to embody the universalism of bare humanity. The model (children) chosen to represent the category ‘refugee’ is closer to bare life than an adult model could be (Malkki 1995: 11).

Explaining life in the refugee camp, she describes the bureaucracy of the spatial arrangement not just from an authoritative point of view (that is, from the Tanzanian authorities’ perspective who created the camp¹²), but also as experienced by the refugees. In what Malkki refers to as the mythico-historical¹³ explanations of the refugees’ current lived experiences, their segregation and the rules from the Tanzanian authorities reproduced the structure of the Burundian society they fled from (ibid: 105-106). These aspects involved hierarchy, controlled agricultural production and tax collection. Her ethnography analyses mechanisms of control not just in terms of what they are meant to produce (as a strategy by the Tanzanian authorities) but also in terms of how the subjects live them and how categorisations are not limited to the Tanzanian authorities, but also to the refugees themselves.

Hierarchy in the camp, for instance, was translated according to the mythico-history of the refugees as the equivalent experience when they were controlled by an ethnic other (the Tutsi) in Burundi (ibid: 116-118). In the case of the controlled production and distribution of agricultural products produced by the refugees, this was reminiscent of slavery. Just like when the Hutu were treated as slaves by the Tutsi and were made to cultivate land for the ‘other’, the same was happening in the camp: the Hutu were now being forced into cultivation that was directed in the interests of the

¹² In fact, the camp was run by the Hutu themselves, but it was the Tanzanian Home Office which ultimately determined the living conditions and regulations of the place.

¹³ By mythico-history Malkki means “the refugees’ historical narratives [that] comprised a set of moral and cosmological ordering stories: stories which classify the world according to certain principles, thereby simultaneously creating it” (Malkki: 1995: 54).

‘Tanzanians’, and not for a more profitable distribution decided by the workers/refugees themselves. The categorization of ‘cultivators’ by the Tanzanian authorities onto the refugees was translated positively by the refugees since, as they were renowned to be hard workers, this label was a proof of their strength. This same strength, according to the refugees, would one day help them to ameliorate their position in society (ibid: 118-121). Taxes and other forms of payments due to the Tanzanian authorities by the refugees were likened with the various tributes that the Hutu had to give to the Tutsi. And the lack of secondary schools in the camp reminded them that back in Burundi, schooling and intellectual activities were the domain of the Tutsi in order to govern, while the Hutu’s principal role was to cultivate. This latter asymmetry was not solely concerned with economic opportunities (or the lack of them), but also with the fact that the Hutu believed that they were being prevented from studying subjects such as philosophy and the humanities (perceived by them as intellectual subjects) both in Burundi and in Tanzania. And according to the refugees these subjects could produce intellectuals among them who would be able to challenge both Tutsi and Tanzanians (ibid: 132-137).

Even though the camp was new for the refugees in the sense of an actually lived experienced, its meaning and function were a continuation of a long history that the Hutu have ‘collectively’ experienced. And it is through the very continuation of this repressive experience in the camp, with its submissiveness and lack of mobility (both geographical and economic/political) that the refugees believed they would be able to return to their homeland. Living in exile was seen as vital by the Hutu refugees, since it was “envisioned as that post-massacre era that finally taught the Hutu ‘what a Hutu is’ and prepared people for the return to the place where the Hutu ‘belong’” (ibid: 209). The status of ‘refugee’ for the refugees in the camp was not a stigma but rather an affirmation that they were not Tanzanians. Here Malkki’s ethnography casts a shadow over Agamben’s notion of the sovereign’s power over ‘bare life’, since the status ‘refugee’, according to the refugees themselves, was not a condition of powerlessness but a positive political identity without which the return to their homeland would be impeded.

I have explored options available to inmates to resist bare life. From inner strength to camaraderie and the inmates’ manipulation of the spatial arrangement of the state of

exception (in this case the mythico-history of the Hutu refugees, but see also Allen Feldman's work [1991]¹⁴) the inmate can still be said to hold an opportunity to remain intact and to a certain degree have control upon his fate.

2.5 *The Role of Non-Governmental Organisations*

The resources available from the outside of the spatial arrangement of the state of exception will be explored through my research findings in Chapter 3. Some academics suggest that humanitarian organisations, rather than helping refugees and asylum seekers in all their circumstances, primarily deal with their human needs. Agamben, for instance, argues that nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) base their work around the idea of the refugee as bare life, stripped from his/her political being. He explains how NGOs are more and more distancing themselves from the political causes and instead claim to be humanitarian organisations. In this sense, Agamben explains, there is a separation between the rights of man and the rights of the citizen. NGOs, according to him, by working for the rights of refugees on the basis that every man has rights, are promoting the idea that the refugee is not a political being (like the citizen), but simply bare life which needs to be treated with respect. He goes on to say that these NGOs maintain a secret alliance with the powers they ought to be fighting (Agamben 1998: 133).

This alliance implied by Agamben is reproduced in David Pero's *Migrants and the politics of governance: The case of Barcelona* (2007). Pero' claims that 'immigrants allied organisations' in Barcelona have to maintain a professional image and must meet certain criteria in order to benefit from public funding. This, he implies, is governmental conformism (Pero' 2007: 278-279). He translates a statement given by the most senior municipal responsible for hiring these NGOs. The official stated that 'immigrants allied organisations' should not act like trade union representatives for migrants and that the hierarchy of Spanish values are more or less established. For

¹⁴ Feldman's (1991) work with ex-political prisoners in Northern Ireland describes the counter-instrumentalisation of the prisoners' bodies to dissociation himself from the rituals of domination. The prisoner turned the spatial arrangement supposedly belonging to the 'sovereign' into a shared political arena. They used strategies such as provoking prison guards in order to beat the prisoner under interrogation straight away in order to get the worst part of the interrogation over without having confessed anything (ibid: 38-39).

this reason, the senior municipal claimed, any meeting point that can be achieved between the municipality and these NGOs was not an intermediate point where both parties had to compromise more or less the same amount. Rather, the official says, the intermediate point must be closer to the system of the Spanish values (ibid: 280). When Pero' discussed this statement with some NGO representatives, they admitted that it was an assimilationist argument which they didn't agree with, but to which they didn't reply due to their professional relationship (and dependence) with this official. Pero' goes on to say that this amounts to poor commitment to cultural recognition and immigrants' inclusion, and also doubts the effectiveness of these NGOs in representing immigrants. Pero's argument, however, is weak. While it is unproblematic to pursue the logic in his claim, one inevitably speculates as to what would happen if these NGOs would stop compromising and start militating for radical change in policy. My assumption would be that these NGOs would not only be prevented from public funding (without which they could not function) but also from any forum where decisions are taken and in which NGOs' presence is necessary if the migrants' plea is to be taken into consideration. It seems that Pero' is merely pinpointing an obvious drawback in the politics of compromise. The bottom line would be that if such NGOs refused compromise, they would not be taken seriously at a decision making level. What would have made Pero's study more prolific with regards to this implied 'alliance' is if he had addressed the extent to which these NGOs manage to defend the political representation (and therefore the struggle against bare life) of the immigrants they 'represent', despite the politically inevitable compromises.

Malkki also implies that NGOs generally tend to contribute towards the bare life strategy. When mentioning NGOs' photographic exhibitions to raise awareness on the situation of refugees, she notices that there is a photographic overrepresentation of refugee children to represent the 'refugee' as a categorical type. This, she says, portrays the refugee closer to bare life than to political life because the child embodies "the universalism of bare humanity" (Malkki 1995: 11). Malkki interprets this overrepresentation in terms of the popular belief that the refugee loses his/her identity and culture upon his/her escape from his/her homeland, and therefore resembles bare humanity more than s/he resembles a citizen or a political being. She quotes from an article entitled 'Involuntary International Migration' to further sustain her claim:

“there is a remarkable similarity between the needs of the new immigrant and those of the newborn human being” (David 1969: 78, quoted in Malkki 1995: 11). In a different article Malkki (2002) goes further than this. She implies that humanitarian organisation such as the United Nations “[want] to see the docility proper [of the refugee body] to objects of humanitarian and development assistance” (Malkki 2002: 359, my brackets).

But then Malkki also mentions that international organisations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) were not seen malign in the Hutu refugees’ mythico-historical representation of the camp. She explains that despite that the UNHCR was part of a Tri-Partite Agreement¹⁵ which came up with the spatial, social and economic design of the camp, when it came to the malign aspects of the camps, the refugees always considered the Tanzanian authorities responsible for these. According to the refugees, the UNHCR was not an accomplice, but the deceived party. Whenever abuses were reported the refugees used to ask ‘where is the UNHCR now?’ (Malkki 1995: 147-148). This implies that such organisations were seen as being able to provide assistance to refugees in opposition to those who were reducing them to bare life. While acknowledging that Malkki’s central theme in her research is not the role of these organisations and that she simply mentions it as a passing remark, I still insist about the incoherence in her two arguments provided in this paragraph.

The role of such organisations in producing or resisting bare life will be addressed in better detail in Chapter 3 through the semi structured interviews I conducted with ex-DIRC detainees and staff and volunteers of the DDVG.

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed Agamben’s theory of sovereign power and has evaluated it by looking at established ethnographies such as Malkki’s and autobiographies of Nazi concentration camps survivors. Agamben’s theory on bare life seems suitable to explain how modern sovereign power functions. For this reason his approach will be central to my research findings which will be discussed in Chapter 3.

¹⁵ This included the UNHCR, Tanzanian Ministry of Home Affairs and the Tanganyika Christian Refugee Service (Malkki 1995: 147)

The options on the inside of the camp in order to resist bare life have been discussed here in some detail through the use of established ethnographies and autobiographies of concentration camp survivors. The reason for this lengthy consideration is that while this particular survival strategy cannot be ignored when studying bare life, in my research it was difficult to look at this aspect for two reasons. Firstly, research is prohibited inside the DIRC and therefore I had no direct access to current detainees except for my weekly visits as a volunteer. However, as I explained in section 1.5, this volunteering could only be used to get a feeling of the life inside the DIRC. Secondly, even though I have conducted interviews with ex-detainees who are now living in British society, I considered it unethical to ask too many questions regarding their means of survival inside the centre. All of the ex-detainees I interviewed are still waiting for a final verdict from the Home Office with regards to their asylum application, and therefore I felt that they could not open enough to me in order to reveal these strategies due to fear of being identified. Avoiding asking too many questions that would make them uncomfortable made them feel more at ease in discussing other aspects of life inside detention. Having said that, references were still made by the detainees with regards to their means of survival inside the centre and these will be explored in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3: Resisting Bare Life inside a Removal Centre

3.1 Introduction

This chapter explores how ex-detainees have experienced the DIRC and in what ways the volunteers provided by the DDVG played a role in their struggle against becoming bare life. I will start by looking at how the DIRC is in fact a 'state of exception'. Then I will look at resource available to the detainees from inside the 'camp', similar to those discussed in section 2.4. The role of the visitor volunteers will then be analysed. I divide their contribution into two: one that concerns the mental and emotional wellbeing of the detainee; the other concerning the political struggle in order not to become bare life. Even though the two will be discussed separately, they are not unrelated as will be explained in section 3.4. Section 3.5 will counter Agamben's (1998) claim that NGOs generally maintain a secret alliance with those who they should be opposing.

3.2 Immigration Removal Centres as a 'State of Exception'

As the report '*Fit for purpose yet?*' (2008) published by the Independent Asylum Commission¹⁶ states, it is the UK Home Office that is responsible for asylum applications. However the report claims that decisions to detain someone in a removal centre is discretionary since it is the individual immigration officer who takes the decision and this is not automatically subject to an independent evaluation for its lawfulness¹⁷ (ibid: 54).

The complete control of the sovereign over its subjects (the former exemplified by the Home Office and the latter by the detainees), does not seem to follow a conduct that is applied to everyone, citizens and non citizens. This can be noted in the fact that there is no legal limit as to how long an asylum seeker can be detained for. Other examples of this control are the trend of 'super fast-track' applications where a detainee "is interviewed on the second day of detention, served a decision on the third day and is

¹⁶ The DDVG and other visitors groups around the UK have provided 'data' for this report.

¹⁷ Amnesty International went as far as claiming that most decisions for detaining asylum seekers were unlawful (Fit for purpose yet? 2008: 54). See also Diken and Laustsen (2003) for a further discussion on the discretionary way that decisions on asylum application are taken in various European countries.

given two days to appeal¹⁸” (ibid: 55). In these cases, “99% of cases are refused, more than half of detainees at appeal stage are left without legal representation and being unable to apply for bail so [detainees] remain in detention for long periods” (ibid: 56). This also leads to reluctance from solicitors to take on these types of cases because of the limited timeframe available to prepare for the case (ibid: 59). It is also necessary to mention that detainees are generally transferred from one removal centre to another, which generally means that they lose contact with their legal representative as in most cases this entails being moved to a place where it is difficult for the solicitor to meet the detainee. Other conditions reported in the publication are the lack of a 24 hour medical service, no facilities to deal with serious illnesses and the limits of receiving visits and making and receiving calls (ibid: 58). All of these negatively impact the chances of ‘political survival’ for the detainee against a more powerful sovereign (the Home Office). The control over the detainee goes as far as their death inside detention. Deaths inside removal centres do not have to be reported to outside agencies, and may not be brought to the attention of the Prison Ombudsman¹⁹ (ibid: 60). Even the logic of ‘innocent until proven guilty’ is waived in these cases. For instance if an asylum seeker claims to be a minor but his/her physical appearance suggests s/he is over eighteen years of age, then s/he must be treated as an adult (that is, can be detained) until evidence is produced to substantiate the claim (ibid: 62).

Horace, a member of the staff at the DDVG, commented on this control and the way it also affects the detention officers:

“ It’s a bit dispiriting for them [officers at the DIRC] ... because they are merely a hotel service accommodating people at the whim of the immigration service, whereas at least in the prison ... [some officers] have a desire to try to reform the people. After a while they may feel that [they] never get anywhere because the whole system is stacked against them, because ... they don’t know when the person

¹⁸ This type of method is generally used in removal centres close to airports where detainees are generally sent because their cases are considered relatively straight forward (meaning, can be rejected easily). Among these centres are the ones in Oakington, Harmondsworth and Yarl’s Wood.

¹⁹ The report here cites another report, *Self-inflicted deaths of asylum seekers and migrants detained under immigration Act powers in the United Kingdom*, produced by the group Bail for Immigration Detainees in 2005.

is going to be gone so they are not in a position to intervene like with people who are actually prisoners. They are literally just hotel staff.”

This illustrates how the sovereign here does not follow the normal procedures of corrective interventions but rather creates a spatial arrangement of people living in limbo.

The absolute control of the sovereign can also be noted in the fear of those asylum seekers who have still not experienced a removal centre. Benjamin, an ex-detainee, explained how before being detained he was so scared that he was willing to compromise his health since he believed that if he went to hospital the authorities would catch him:

“And when I am sick I cannot go to the hospital. And there is a place called Refugee Help where they have clinic, so I have to go to that clinic because I was really ill, and they had to transfer me to the hospital. Because I was so scared at that time I went to the hospital and the doctor told me, “Look, tell me plain what happened with you”. He said “because the sickness you have is too dangerous.” ... And I told him I just have problems in my country ... Because I was scared that they would call the Home Office and they will arrest me. I was really scared because what people told me is that when your case is finished they put you in detention prison.”

He goes on to describe the lack of choice he had inside the removal centre once he was detained:

“[Immigration authorities] have made sign deportation orders four times! The person will come and tell ... if you don’t do this it’s a crime. Then I would sign it. Another time I was just in my cell and they call me ... When I

answered the phone they said immigration wants to see you. I go again and they tell me to sign... But you can't do anything about it. You can't even argue with ...because you talk something, they tell you assaulted somebody. And right away they arrest you. So what can you do? You have absolutely no right²⁰."

John, another ex-detainee, further illustrates how life inside is in fact at the whim of the Home Office:

"[The Home Office] ... decided to refuse my application and they ordered my detention at the last minute. And I [had] been detained ... for 9 months [in total between the time spent in prison for a criminal conviction and the time in DIRC], three months more than what I spent for my criminal offence sentence. And through that period I have tried every single thing. I went through the legal system where you appeal... but they didn't release me... their excuse was that I would abscond... [Eventually] my appeal was allowed by the immigration tribunal. So I won my appeal basically... And that [when I won my appeal] was in October. And I ... remained inside till November till one day they came ... and told me I am free to go."

His words about life inside detention are very clear:

"I'm just a number. Nobody cares and nobody's bothered. Everybody in detention is a scapegoat. Those 3 months in [DIRC] were worse than my imprisonment [in prison] and any period in my whole life. Because there is nothing like it. And even at the time when I had knew that I won the appeal,

²⁰ Benjamin was not reported to the authorities by the hospital staff. He was later sentenced to prison for a conviction and then sent to the DIRC awaiting deportation orders, eventually being released on bail.

it only got worse when I was still there! They said they could detain me as long as they wanted to under the terrorist act or immigration act of 1997 or 98. You know, indefinite detention... the Home Secretary has the right to do this. And that's when serious suicidal thoughts passed through my mind.²¹”

Now that the strategies of the Home Office through the DIRC and other removal centres have been analysed, I move on to discuss the active role of the DDVG in countering the bare life strategy imposed by the Home Office. But first I will briefly mention the solidarity among the detainees.

3.3 Help from the Inside

The resources available from inside the camp have been discussed in section 2.4. Information about camaraderie inside the DIRC was difficult to obtain since research with current detainees is prohibited. Here I unfold comments made by ex-detainees I interviewed which nonetheless reveal the sort of solidarity among detainees. To start with, four of the five ex-detainees I interviewed said that they acted as translators for people who did not speak English. This happened in meetings between case officers and the detainee, but also when reading and writing letters for these detainees. The four detainees also told me that this was very common and that one did not need to be a friend of the detainee in order to offer his help.

Another aspect of solidarity among the detainees was the fact that they used to tell other detainees about the DDVG. Whether they were new detainees or detainees who seemed very depressed or those who were risking deportation, detainees used to talk to each other and suggest they get help from the outside, that is, from the DDVG.

John in fact got to know about the DDVG through a fellow detainee:

“[A] friend of mine told me “let us see how they [DDVG] can help you ... because I wasn't having any type of

²¹ According to the report ‘Fit for purpose yet?’ “from April 2006 to January 2007 there were 176 self-harm incidents that required medical treatment and 1,643 detainees were deemed at risk of self-harm. Campaign groups believe the actual numbers of self-harm incidents to be higher than reported” (Fit for purpose yet? 2008: 61).

communication, I haven't had any money from the prison payments [when I worked there]. The other thing because after I won my appeal, the home office still detained me knowing that I won it. The solicitor said he can't force the Home Office to release me, but we could make an application ... to be released in the surety²² of somebody... just the address. But I didn't have any address. I didn't know anybody. Initially that was the advice of my friend to contact them so they can advise me. Fortunately enough through the charity I had been given a name and address of a lady who was very helpful and she was in touch with DDVG. She was willing to stand as my surety."

After inside resources for resisting bare life, I now look at the resources available from the outside. I divide these outside resources into two: emotional and mental support (discussed in section 3.4) and political support (discussed in section 3.5).

3.4 Emotional Support

The weekly visits by visitors to detainees generally help the detainee to alleviate some of his pressures and at least have someone with whom to talk to about his frustration. Since every detainee in detention has his own problems, a visitor can provide that individual attention in order for the detainee to express himself. When I spoke to volunteers about what a typical conversation with a detainee looks like, they all agreed that most of it was either small talk (such as conversations on sports) or discussions on current affairs but which are not related to the immigration and asylum field (for instance religion and news about the detainee's country).

As Clinton, a volunteer, explains, he tries to set targets for 'his' detainee in order to motivate him while in detention. For instance while discussing his current detainee who he suspects has lost all hope of struggling, he told me that he has managed to

²² In order for a detainee to be released on bail while waiting for a decision by the Home Office on his/her legal status in the UK, s/he has to have someone who can stand as surety. The person standing as surety would be responsible for the detainee if s/he is released.

convince the detainee to start practising using a computer inside the DIRC²³. He explained that the aim was to make his detainee look ahead and think long term, in such a way as to start with the computer, and hopefully translate this attitude into the detainee's attitude towards his legal case. Clinton has also had a detainee who was suicidal and he believes that his involvement in the detainee's life was part of the reason why he did not commit suicide. He said that in that case he talked him through the idea about how much sorrow he would have caused to his family and friends and that he [Clinton] would dedicate his marathon run [which was due the following week] to him. A similar case happened to Rebecca, another volunteer.

The need for detainees to have someone from the outside to talk to was expressed by Rebecca when she explained how easy and fast it is for detainees to open up to a 'stranger':

“What’s funny is you get to them very quickly because they’re so desperate to talk to somebody and by the second visit you’re like old mates. They always asked me to go more often because they were so lonely. They just wanted company that wasn’t part of the poor desperate souls in there, if that doesn’t sound too patronising.”

Even though I am discussing the emotional support in this section, and the political support in the next one, the two should not be considered as unrelated. The reason is that, as Levi (1979) says about his own condition inside a Nazi concentration camp, doing things to uplift your own morale is necessary in order not to lose hope. This is why he insisted to still shower with dirty water and walk straight and not drag his feet (Levi 1979: 47). Another visitor, Neil, said that one of his detainees had given up hope to such an extent that he did not bother calling a solicitor in the first place. Was it not for Neil whose job, as he says, was to shake him up, the detainee would not have been released at all. For this reason one should not ignore the impact that this

²³ There are certain services such as a computer room (with no internet), a gym and a library that detainees may use in the time they are let out of their cells. These are provided by the DIRC itself, but not all detainees are too keen on using them. John, for instance, told me that for him this is an insult and that only an ignorant cannot understand that these services are there so that the DIRC looks as humane as possible while robbing them of their 'soul'.

type of emotional support makes on the detainee and his willingness to keep on struggling to be released from detention.

3.5 DDVG as a political tool

Agamben (1998) suggests that nongovernmental organisations are distancing themselves from the political cause of asylum seekers and instead are focusing on the humanitarian aspect of this issue. In doing this, he argues, they make a distinction between the rights of man (read humanity) and the rights of citizens. NGOs, Agamben says, are focusing their efforts in helping asylum seekers on behalf of the rights of humanity, and not on behalf of a political struggle (Agamben 1998: 133). If one looks at some declared mission statements of NGOs, including the DDVG's²⁴, one would be tempted to argue that Agamben's analysis is correct. However, after having interviewed ex-detainees at the DIRC, paid staff and volunteers of the DDVG, I cannot agree with this statement. The reason is that what volunteers do in actual fact, that is directly between themselves and 'their' detainees is as concerned with humanitarian causes such as befriending and alleviating detainees' lives, as it is concerned with their political struggle against bare life and in order to achieve a legal status. For instance even though the DDVG cannot give legal advice to detainees (it is a crime to do so, unless one is a solicitor by profession) this does not stop them from directing detainees towards legal means through the necessary channels (not just in terms of pointing them towards a legal representative, but also by practically helping them in doing so, such as by calling solicitors themselves).

Here I propose to first look at what the paid staff and the volunteers of the DDVG had to say about their role in the detainees' struggle, and then shift towards the ex-detainees' experience in this regard.

To start with, of the seven visitors I spoke to, six of them have said that they have on numerous occasions called 'their' detainee's solicitors on behalf of the detainee. And the one volunteer who never did this said this was because she was a relatively new visitor and up till the date of the interview she had no request from 'her' detainee to do so. Other ways of helping in this sense included attending bail hearings simply, as

²⁴ Officially it is to befriend detainees.

Clinton said, “to be there to support. And that’s very important.” Another volunteer, Mandy, was also even to testify during her detainee’s bail hearing in order to be a witness for the detainee’s character and general conduct. Having visited the detainee for a long time, Mandy told me, was a valid enough reason for the judge presiding over the hearing to call her in as a witness. Phoning detainees’ solicitors is necessary since it not only alleviates the financial burden for detainees (calls cost money, especially if one has to wait a long time to get through to one particular solicitor), but it also serves to remind the solicitor to give the detainee’s case the due attention and not procrastinate simply because the detainee is locked up in a removal centre and cannot personally chase after his lawyer. As Rebecca said:

“It is helpful to call their solicitors because they’ve got a huge caseload and they [detainees] have to keep on pestering them. It’s not really their fault but you have to insist. I think that’s one of the most important things you could do.”

The extent to which a visitor helps a detainee in his legal case can sometimes make the visitor feel that s/he was even more essential than the solicitor representing the detainee. For instance Karl argued:

“On more than one occasion I think I’ve done more sensitive advice ... on one occasion for the bail hearing [after the detainee was successful in getting bail] the solicitor said “well I got that one”. And I said “no you didn’t, I did!” This is the thing with legal system. Those involved do it as their job. This is where the visitor has an advantage.”

Mandy expressed anger at the fact that it is prohibited to volunteers to give legal advice. When discussing this restriction, this is what she had to say:

“Absolute rubbish! If somebody needs to know something on a point of law ... I go and research on the internet [and]

go back and take the print out from the internet and give them the translated into English that they can understand, because quite often written English is difficult for our detainees. But reading English and reading legal documents is beyond a lot of people so I will give them the document, go through it with them and tell them what it says.”

One could point out that visitors may be exaggerating as to how their role influences detainees’ legal cases in order to justify the time they invest in volunteering. It is therefore necessary that I also mention what ex-detainees had to say about it.

Alfred (an ex-detainee) for instance, mentioned that it was a paid staff of the DDVG who used to call the solicitor on his behalf in order to see how the case was proceeding. Another ex-detainee, William, mentioned that apart from having his volunteer contact his solicitor, the DDVG also provided him with phone cards so that he could directly speak to the solicitor. He also mentioned that on the day of his hearing, his visitor attended the hearing and that action, as he claimed:

“helps because you feel ... that someone has sacrificed to leave his or her daily duties to come for me, and it gives a lot of weight to that. It uplifts you and it gives you the courage... someone is kind to me and someone is next to me.”

Another necessary way in which a visitor helps the detainee is by standing as surety for the detainee in order to get bail. Getting bail means being released from detention but it does not mean that he is given a legal status. However bail does help the detainee to gain back control over his life and have better means with which to fight his pending asylum case with the Home Office. Despite that during the induction meeting for new visitors that I attended, it was clearly stated that the DDVG does not promote the idea of volunteers standing as surety, in reality visitors who want to do so simply keep it quiet and do it out of their personal will (and not on behalf of the DDVG). From the seven visitors I spoke to, four had in fact done this (the others did

not due to financial reasons since one must offer a financial guarantee to act as a surety). Benjamin, an ex-detainee, said that in his case his visitor acted as surety for him. But apart from providing a bank statement to the judge (in order to prove that he had the necessary money to stand as surety), he also presented his own house plan to the judge in case the sum of money for surety was not enough. Even Benjamin himself was surprised at the extent to which his visitor was willing to help him. As he said: *“Who will do that for you? You tell me...”*

One should also mention that the DDVG provides a mobile phone for free to detainees who contact them and who do not already possess one. My first personal reaction to this was that this would mainly contribute towards the detainee by enabling him to keep contact with family and friends. As it turns out, a mobile phone inside the DIRC is necessary for their legal case. If a detainee does not have a mobile phone, he has to rely on the pager system. This means that a person about to contact the detainee needs to call the DIRC on a landline, ask for the detainee and provide his pager number, then wait approximately half an hour until the detainee is paged and gets to the phone. This, needless to say, is an inefficient way to communicate with a solicitor who probably has a huge workload to deal with. A mobile phone, on the other hand, makes them reachable anytime and anywhere they are. The necessity of such mobiles is felt to the point that when a detainee calls the DDVG simply to get hold of a mobile and not of a visitor, the DDVG’s reaction is not one of betrayal or disappointment, but rather of understanding. As Horace, a member of the staff said:

“Do I blame them [for calling us just to get a mobile]? No. I mean what else have they got to do for a start? And why shouldn’t they? If you can play the system, you gotta survive.”

This section has explored the ways in which the DDVG, contrary to what Agamben claims, serves in fact to counter the measures of the Home Office that try to turn the detainees into bare life. The practical means by which the staff and the visitors of the DDVG help the detainee are necessary to make up for the huge imbalance of power that exists between the Home Office and the detainee. Granted, the extent to which the DDVG can help in restoring power to the detainee is limited due to resources.

However to claim that NGOs maintain a secret alliance with those whom they should be opposing (Agamben 1998: 133) is incorrect. The next section explores this issue in further detail.

3.6 Government Conformism or Obvious Strategy?

As mentioned in section 2.5, David Pero' (2007) has a go at 'immigrants allied organisations' for what he calls government conformism and a poor commitment to cultural recognition (Pero' 2007: 278-280). I counter his claim by pointing to one vital strategy that NGOs, such as the DDVG, need to follow if they want to survive in the 'decision making' arena. The DDVG officially is not a campaigning group, cannot give legal advice and their volunteers should not stand as surety. As Frank, a paid member of the DDVG staff states:

“Visitors are not advised to give any advice. If we know that a visitor is doing this we would question them and warn them. Yes a visitor can empower them simply by giving them encouragement to be patient, to stay focused and strong ... But not advise giving.”

If I had to follow Pero's logic, I would be tempted to agree with what he says, especially after these testimonials from various DDVG members of staff:

“In one of the early meeting with the governors [of the DIRC], I said ‘I’m sure we’re able to help you in terms of your performance target in reducing the number of suicides’. And there was a bit of a surprised look on their face and then the penny dropped... we are useful to them if you want to put in terms of those performance targets.”²⁵

(Horace, DDVG staff)

²⁵ Here it is worth noting that Benjamin, an ex-detainee, told me that it was a detention officer who suggested he contacts the DDVG, since the officer thought that Benjamin was too depressed and cut off for himself.

“I was affected by the things he [a detainee] was saying about England and that when he goes back to his country, whenever he sees the English people, he would do something really bad to them, he would kill them and I told him it wasn’t fair... We had to report it to the officer, but it wasn’t pleasant for me to do it.”

(Annabelle, DDVG staff)

“We [DDVG] were thinking about doing a complaint [regarding an arrogant detention officer], but we didn’t. And also, I don’t like to make complaints. There have been a couple of times that an officer has been rude and you have to give their numbers to do a complaint. And I feel a little bit ... don’t really want to cause trouble with the officers, Just want to chill out unless it’s really severe. I think it’s better for the group to just go along with it. If we start causing trouble I think that’s when life will be harder for us.”

(Mary, DDVG staff)

After these statements one would be tempted to give credit to David Pero’. But it seems that maintaining this type of relationship with the DIRC is simply the only way for the DDVG to be able to function within the DIRC. As Kevin, a senior member of staff of the DDVG told me, one of their previous members of staff was banned from the DIRC because of her attitude and this was of course harmful to the charity. Frank, another member of the DDVG staff simply explains this relationship as being professional and ultimately functional:

“We have a professional and working relationship with DIRC because we realised at DDVG that we... by building a good relationship with the centre, can guarantee mutual respect, and that includes meetings, listening to our concerns, and we listen to theirs [DIRC’s]. We have a regular bi-monthly meeting with DIRC management. In

that meeting we discuss the needs of DDVG, of volunteers, and sometimes we deliver messages of the detainees to the centre manager ... So while having a respectful relationship with the centre manager, we can guarantee that they listen to us. While if you go about working with them and complaining and be negative, they don't necessarily have to listen to us."

I believe that Frank's words problematise Pero's sweeping statement about government conformism. The point is not, as Pero' suggests, of conforming to government regulations. Rather the point is to be diplomatic and maintain a professional relationship in order to be able to work within the system.

At the end of the day, it is through this type of professional relationship that the DDVG has managed successfully to change some of the policies inside the DIRC, for instance detainees are now allowed to own a mobile. The next aims, according to Kevin, is to replace the inefficient pager system by providing each and every detainee with a mobile, to provide internet access inside the DIRC and to create a dining area as opposed to the current rule of eating in their own cells.

But apart from this criticism towards Pero', I also believe that had Pero' given more attention to how 'his' informants from the Spanish NGO worked at ground level, he would not have made that claim. For instance in the case of the DDVG, even though the group should not give legal advice, or stand for bail, or campaign (in other words not to be seen as a pain in the neck by the DIRC), what happens between the detainee and his visitor is a different story. For instance Karl acted as surety twice, Rebecca did this twice and Clinton and Mandy also did it once. Mandy also bluntly said that she is not willing to follow restrictions that are, according to her, 'rubbish'. For her, the role she needs to take is to serve as a bridge between her detainee and the authorities.

It is not government conformism when a visitor does not give direct legal advice but instead directs the detainee towards other agencies (generally by providing detailed information regarding people to ask for, when to call, how to talk to the agency and

so on). The options for the volunteers are clear: act radically and be expelled from the DIRC or else act professionally and maintain a relationship with 'your' detainee. The latter, in my opinion, is simply the obvious strategy to take.

3.7 Conclusion

Rather than a conclusion, this section is more of an introduction to the next chapter. As this chapter has shown, the various ways in which a visitor can help a detainee can vary from offering individual attention to chasing their detainee's solicitor and from providing amenities such as a dictionary or clothes to acting as surety for 'their' detainee's bail appeal. The extent to which a visitor helps 'his/her' detainee is totally up to them. It is very common that when a visitor meets regularly with a detainee (generally once a week, but sometimes even more often than that) the relationship between the two develops to such an extent that the visitor feels obligated to help the detainee as much as it is possible. Therefore the work of this NGO, unlike what Agamben claims, is not only not allied to the Home Office, but provides a tool with which the detainee can struggle against the sovereign for the sake of resisting becoming bare life.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

In this dissertation I have adopted Agamben's theory of sovereign power and bare life as a model to illustrate how immigration policy in the UK functions, specifically through the use of immigration removal centres. The 'sovereign' described by Agamben is in my case the Home Office which creates a permanent spatial arrangement of the state of exception via removal centres in order to turn asylum seekers into bare life. This is done so that detainees will finally be ejected altogether from the juridico-legal sphere of the sovereign.

The ways in which this strategy works from a top-down perspective (that is as a strategy by the Home Office) has been illustrated throughout my discussion. If one had to strictly adhere to Agamben's model that illustrates how bare life (through the creation of the state of exception) is imposed unto non-citizens from a top-down perspective, then Agamben's analysis can be deemed appropriate. My research in fact complements this model. As already argued the Home Office does create a spatial arrangement of the state of exception described by Agamben, and the bare life strategy has also been affirmed throughout my research.

What this research adds to Agamben's work is that it looks at counter-strategies that resist becoming bare life. For this reason I have first looked at counter-strategies available from the inside of 'camps', invoking autobiographies of Nazi concentration camps such as Primo Levi (1979, 1985), Victor Frankl (1959) and Elie Wiesel (1972). Liisa Malkki's work (1995) among Hutu refugees in a Tanzanian camp was discussed in order to show that certain statuses which are meant to categorise and segregate a section of the population may in fact produce a 'positive' identity for that same population. Malkki's work argues that the status of 'refugee' was a process of purity for the Hutu in Tanzania who believed they could use such status to regain their homeland (Burundi). By affirming their refugee status they remained loyal to their ethnic origins which also meant not assimilating into the Tanzanian society and in fact living strictly by the camp's way of life and its segregation.

As stated elsewhere in this dissertation, Agamben does not deny that counter-strategies to resist bare life exist, but he does not dedicate the necessary attention to it either. As an anthropology student interested in how people experience their world in real terms, I have taken Agamben's model as a starting point in order to see how asylum seekers react to the sovereign's bare life strategy.

The point where my dissertation parts ways from Agamben is in his claim that NGOs are distancing themselves from the political causes of asylum seekers, and instead are focusing on the humanitarian aspect (Agamben 1998: 133). This means, according to Agamben, that NGOs partake in the sovereign's strategy of bare life because like the sovereign they not only differentiate between the rights of the political being and the rights of the human, but also imply that asylum seekers form part of the latter and not the former (*ibid.*). What my research proves, however, is a different scenario than the one Agamben provides.

In the first place NGOs such as the DDVG officially speak of humanitarian causes rather than political ones in order to portray their image with the sovereign (read authorities) as moderate, professional, reasonable and non-radical. The reason for this is simple. If NGOs want to have their share in the decision making process, they must first manage to get a place 'around the table'. One does not need to research in depth in order to realise that if they want to be part of the decision making process, they need to portray this type of professional image. I believe that Agamben's drawback is that he has only commented on the façade that NGOs portray of themselves. If one's access is limited to the exterior and official statements of such NGOs, then one would be attracted to give credit to Agamben's scepticism of NGOs and their humanitarian work.

My research, on the other hand, takes this type of 'professional image' for what it really is – just a façade. I accept it as an inevitable way that NGOs need to portray themselves in order, for instance in my case, not to suspend the regular meetings between them and the DIRC. This is necessary if the DDVG wants to push for change in policy, or even simply in order not to be banned from the DIRC (as was the case with a previous DDVG member of staff) and be able to operate. I believe that Agamben has either read too much into the 'official' and 'professional' mission

statements of NGOs, or else has simply ignored that beyond this façade lies a different story.

What my research has illustrated is that beyond the humanitarian façade (which Agamben implies is taking NGOs further away from the political causes of asylum seekers) of these NGOs lies a whole political struggle that helps individual detainees in resisting bare life and possibly in gaining a legal status in the UK. This is why I have mentioned earlier that I consider that DDVG to be an effective political tool for detainees in their struggle. The help the DDVG provides is not solely directed towards ‘befriending’ or providing emotional support (a typical humanitarian cause) but also through an active participation in the detainees’ life. This type of help can vary from mundane tasks (such as chasing detainees’ solicitors or providing detainees with appropriating clothing for a court hearing) to more substantial contributions (such as standing as surety for a detainee in order for him to be released on bail from the removal centre). One must also realise that what I have termed as the humanitarian aspects of the DDVG (by providing emotional support) are also political in their own right. The reason is that from the interviews I conducted for this dissertation, it also emerges that there have been occasions where by befriending a detainee and giving him courage, he was then able to get back on his feet and focus more clearly on his legal case. This was especially the case with detainees who were going through a depression and those who had simply given up hope on their case.

When discussing NGOs, Agamben says that “[a] humanitarianism separated from politics cannot fail to reproduce the isolation of [bare] life at the basis of sovereignty, and the camp – which is to say, the pure space of exception – is the biopolitical paradigm that it cannot master” (Agamben 1998: 134). There are two problems with his statement. The first is that, as my research has shown, the biopolitical paradigm that is the camp can in fact be penetrated by humanitarian NGOs. By ‘penetrated’ I do not merely mean the NGOs’ presence inside, but their active contribution in the life of the detainee. The second problem lies in the first five words of the above quote. Agamben here implies that humanitarian organisations are cut off from the political causes. As I have illustrated through my research with ex-detainees, volunteers and staff of the DDVG, their humanitarianism is not separated from politics at all. In the DDVG’s case, humanitarianism was the official mission statement through which it

could gain access inside the 'state of exception'. I would assume that Agamben would have overlooked this aspect of the DDVG, mainly because his work does not include research that takes you closer to the 'subjects' (such as the use of ethnography) in order to realise that this humanitarianism has very different functions from the ones he notes. This can also be proven by the fact that from his 188 pages in *Homo Sacer*, only one page is dedicated to this topic. But in that one page he does not seem to have a problem implying that NGOs maintain a secret alliance with the 'sovereign'. I believe this is a rather brusque implication for something that was evidently not researched in detail.

Also, by stating that NGOs are more interested in humanitarian causes than in political ones, Agamben is indirectly implying that the best way to 'help' asylum seekers is through political activism. This, however, is not necessarily the case. One could easily claim that political activism which refuses taking part in the sovereign's dirty tactics (such as the DDVG's involvement in the DIRC) and which is unwilling to 'compromise' is ineffective. The reason is that one could put forward the argument that a cry for change in policy by political activists could very easily be discarded by the sovereign on the basis of being 'unrealistic' or 'too idealistic'. I do not consider any of these two opposing arguments valid or fruitful at all. Advocacy groups and humanitarian ones do not exclude each other and they do not fight a different battle. The report '*Fit For Purpose Yet?*' (2008), discussed in section 3.2, is a case in point. It is advocacy groups who can safely propose a change in policy without risking losing too much. The publication of the report is one such instance when they do this. On the other hand it is the so-called humanitarian organisations such as the DDVG who give them the ammunition by providing the facts about life inside detention.

The DDVG and other NGOs simply accept the situation as it is. That is, they accept that the amount of influence they have on the Home Office is limited. But they choose to do what they can with that little power in order to ameliorate the detainees' situation.

This is why, as a concluding remark, I reiterate that organisations such as the DDVG serve the detainee well in his struggle to resist bare life. Precisely through the type of

help that the DDVG provides, the detainee finds another means by which to confront the Home Office despite the evident imbalance of power that exists between the two.

With this research I believe I have contributed towards the study of how political power is exercised, enforced, experienced and contested. It is only through the use of research methods which take you as close as possible to the subjects being investigated that we can genuinely understand how people, not only live and experience political power, but also how they redefine it (see Malkki 1995) and resist it. I also believe that my research illustrates how theories and research on how power is exercised cannot be limited to the analysis of strategies of those in power (in this case the Home Office). This, of course, does not mean that already established studies, such as Agamben's, should be discredited. Rather what is needed is a more holistic approach towards this topic in order to grasp a clearer picture of what really goes on at ground level. I reiterate that my research complements Agamben's general theory of power, but because my interest is in how the victims of bare life experience the sovereign's power, I was able to demonstrate the various tools and resources available for such victims in their struggle against the sovereign's attempt to turn them into bare life. This is one of the major advantages of anthropological research since it refutes taking the face value of the topic being studied as its central argument, and instead seeks to illustrate and elaborate on the various layers and forces that are present behind that which is easily observable to everyone.

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