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Transit

Robert S. C. Gordon — University of Cambridge — rscg1@cam.ac.uk

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These notes have their origin in the conceptualization of a conference and research project centred on the mid-20th-century prison camp at Fossoli, outside the town of Carpi (Emilia, central Italy), a camp which was in operation in various forms and periods from the 1940s to the 1970s. The foundation responsible for the maintenance and valorization of Fossoli and other memorial sites linked to it in and near Capri, including the remarkable museum/monument to the deported in the town centre (BBPR, 1973), wanted to launch a series of research initiatives led by its academic advisory board (*Comitato scientifico*), which would re-establish and re-invigorate the importance of Fossoli in the town, the region, in Italy and in Europe, inserting the history and site of Fossoli into a wider debate and discourse, supporting high-level historical research but looking also for impact and resonance in the present day. The board's discussions centred, then, on a key question: what does it mean *today* to propose Fossoli as a site of remembrance and of research; how does Fossoli fit the archive and the map of the contemporary?

FIG. 1 The Camp of Fossoli. Historical archive of the city of Carpi, Modena, ethnographic section.

In answering these questions, first considerations inevitably centred on Fossoli's role as part of the history of the Holocaust, since in early 1944 the camp was taken over by the occupying Nazi forces in central Italy, in collaboration with Italian Fascists who had been managing the camp until then, and it became the principal national holding site in Italy for arrested Jews as well as resisters ready for deportation to the concentration and extermination camps of central and eastern Europe. This phase of Fossoli's history, its best known, links it into the complex European history of the Shoah, as well as pointing to the often ill-understood or misremembered ways in which Italy entered into that history; as well as tying this reality into the local communities and networks around such camps, which made the entire system function in practice. Fossoli and the Shoah is a key history in its own right, with further research and documentation still to be carried out across all these layers and networks; but it has also taken on a resonant *symbolic* role in Italian memories of the Shoah over the long post-war period, not least because of a few pages of remarkably powerful writing dedicated to it in Primo Levi's first work of Holocaust testimony, *If This is Man* (1947; 2nd edition 1958), as well as in a handful of poems, where he describes his weeks spent in Fossoli between 20 January and 22 February 1944, and his subsequent deportation from Fossoli to Carpi station and

from there by train to Auschwitz.[1] Those pages contain some of the most moving and also sensitive reflections on what is lost in the hours and days before deportation and they mark all subsequent work of memory and research on Fossoli; to cite just one example, the historian Liliana Picciotto Fargion entitled her account of Fossoli during the Shoah with a phrase from Levi, *L'alba ci colse come un tradimento* (Dawn caught us like a betrayal).[2] The documented and symbolic role of Fossoli in the history of the Holocaust stands alongside its representative status as one of the hundreds of sites in the Europe-wide network of Nazi (and Fascist) camps, of varying kinds and varying levels of function, imprisoning various population groups, and deploying different degrees of murderous violence and torture; from extermination camps, to concentration, holding, deportation, work, and prison camps and indeed combinations and mixtures of these, not to mention the extensive patterns of mobility of prisoners between them. This complex network is the reality captured in David Rousset's pregnant phrase, coined as early in 1947, the *univers concentrationnaire*.[3] Along with sites such as Drancy, Westerbork, Mechelen, Gurs, Bolzano, even Theresienstadt in certain respects, Fossoli fits within this "universe" most properly under the category of the *Durchsgangslager*, or transit camp..

Fossoli, however, like most other concentrationary sites, was not built for nor did it exist only in its Nazi configuration, nor was the entire system as closed, watertight or invisible to the surrounding world as it might seem in some contemporary and later accounts. Indeed, the attempt by both perpetrators and bystanders to maintain the fiction that it was closed off—that most outsiders had 'no inkling' of what was happening there—is what makes the early sequences of Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985), when he visits with ageing witnesses the woods and river around Chelmno with survivor Simon Srebnik or the train station at Treblinka, in places that now seems oblivious to their history, so poignant and necessary. Fossoli's functioning as a transit camp was, in other words, embedded in a wider network of wartime, occupation, Republic of Salò Italy, which in turn was one branch-line of the continental networks of the camp genocides.

Fossoli in 1944, and the entire network it was part of, was furthermore a manifestation of the idea and practice of the concentration-camp which has its own long history, stretching in its modern iteration at least as far back as the late 1800s (Cuba, South Africa) and existing across a vast, indeed global geographical space, as Nicola Labanca and Michela Ceccorulli have shown in a recent survey.[4]

Finally, like most of the camps sites used within the Nazi system, Fossoli's

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1. Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo*, 2nd edition (Turin: Einaudi, 1958).

2. Liliana Picciotto Fargion, *L'alba ci colse come un tradimento: gli ebrei nel campo di Fossoli 1943-1944* (Milan: Mondadori, 2010).

3. David Rousset, *L'Univers concentrationnaire* (Paris: Editions du Pavois, 1946).

4. Nicola Labanca and Michela Ceccorulli, "The Geography and History of Camps" in *The EU, Migration and the Politics of Administrative Detention* (London: Routledge, 2014), 28-50.

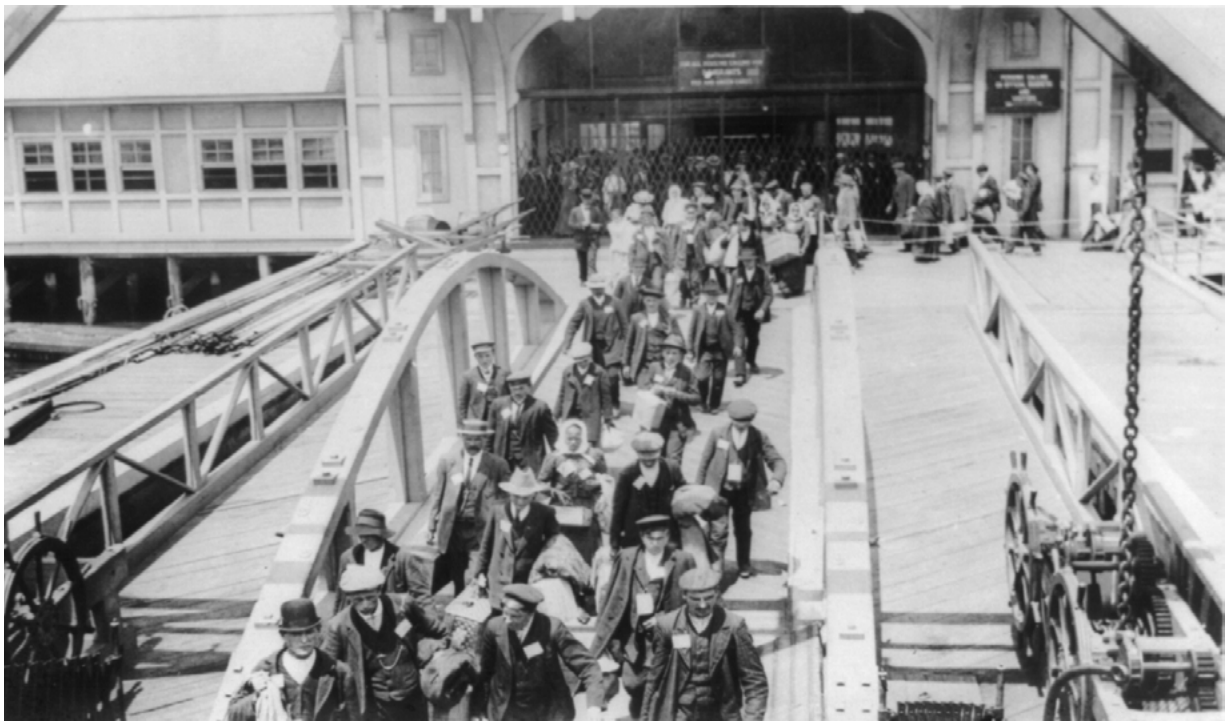

FIG. 2 New York. Ellis Island. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C.

own local history expands well beyond the months of Nazi control, in a long and complex trajectory of multiple use and re-use, both structured and improvised, and indeed of lengthy periods of disuse and abandon. Fossoli's history has been well studied, although the force of the memory of its Nazi (Nazi-Fascist) period has inevitably obscured all other parts of it.[5] It was opened in 1942 as a Fascist prisoner-of-war camps for Allied soldiers captured in the Africa campaign; it was subsequently used also as an internal Fascist internment camp for Jews and for anti-Fascists (part of the national network of Fascist camps that have only recently been recovered in their full articulation through the research of Carlo Spartaco Capogreco and initiatives such as the 'Campi fascisti' online project),[6] before being taken over by the Nazi SS and turned into a holding, transit and deportation camp for Jews, political prisoners and forced labourers. At the end of the war it was briefly used as a prison camp for interned Fascists, before being reclaimed as a camp for war orphans by the Christian community of Nomadelfia, led by Don Zeno Saltini. Later it became a camp for refugees from Yugoslavia, the so-called Villaggio San Marco. Before, after and between these periods, the site was variously expanded, reduced, dismantled, rebuilt, reclaimed as farmland, in disuse, until finally it now stands within an unfinished trajectory of development as a memorial, museum and education site. All these phases and functions, the site as locus of imprisonment and death, which is then repurposed, stripped and re-shaped, and in part lost, are part and parcel of its history.

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5. Marzia Luppi and Patrizia Tamassia, eds., *Il museo monumento al deportato politico e razziale di Carpi e l'ex campo di Fossoli*, (Bologna: Bononia University Press, 2016).

6. Carlo Spartaco Capogreco, *I campi del Duce* (Turin: Einaudi, 2004); www.campifascisti.it.

The camp's site and history—for Fossoli as for so many others—are balanced between the horizontal—its role within the history of the Holocaust or within other temporally delimited historical "events"—and the vertical—the longer history of "the camp" as phenomenon and a place that operates in both space and in time. The fluid changeability of all these dimensions can be usefully subsumed under an idea, drawing on but extending the category of the *Durchgangslager*, of transit.

FIG. 3 New York. Ellis Island. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C.

Transit offers a means of merging different models, patterns and sites, and different histories, into a new configuration that offers a distinctive and illuminating perspective on key aspects of the modern. This is significant not least because the category of "the camp", represented by everything from Auschwitz to Guantanamo, has been elevated in recently political theory to something like the emblem and essence of a certain modernity; a notable and influential instance was Giorgio Agamben's epigrammatic assertion, in his *Homo Sacer* project, that the camp is "the nomos of the modern", something like the degree zero of the norms and laws of exclusion, the biopolitical discipline, and the state of exception deployed by the modern state.[7] The proposition is a powerful one, which has found terrible contemporary geopolitical and historical resonance but the problem with the elevation of this idea of the camp to such high symbolic status, for all its undoubted force, is that it risks reproducing the enclosed focus, the assumption of system and planned perfectibility that was one of the self-sustaining myths of the system itself, including of the Holocaust and its early post-war interpretations. It reflects essentially an

7. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1998), esp. pp. 166-80.

industrial and capitalist model of efficient production (of control, degradation and death). By shifting our ground and perspective sideways, from the enclosed site and system of the camp to the complementary category of transit, of camps as sites of nodal points in a network of movement, and of the dynamic of transit across space and time as intersecting with different single camp sites, we can open such sites outwards to their inherent dimensions of mobility, migration and unplanned contingency. These are further dimensions of the modern, built on fluidity, liquidity and inherent instability.[8] Transit shifts the focus to dynamics of suspension, liminality, and is therefore more sensitive to the voided status of the refugee and of statelessness, something akin to the figure of the pariah, all essential elements in the reflections of Hannah Arendt in her *Origins of Totalitarianism*.[9]

If Arendt was writing in the aftermath of the war, with her own very personal experience of exile and loss in mind, it is undoubtedly also the case that the mobility and contingent danger of the refugee's experience points forward powerfully and directly to our immediately contemporary, late modern anxieties about transit as migration and population movement. Globalization, porous borders, migration and the fierce backlash against it are defining vectors of the current moment and it is plausible to propose that a notion of transit in space and time, in history and our present can help illuminate these. Contemporary migration or transit, like most other migrations in history, works through a simultaneous push-and-pull dynamic; it begins in an idea of movement to freedom, prosperity, safety and thus in some sort of dream of remaking, a subjective imaginary of a new self; but it is also rooted in escape from, in response to risk, fear, hunger and violence. This double dynamic is remarkably powerful, propelling widespread reformations of global socio-economic reality, especially accelerating in periods of deepening economic and ecological instability. The mass movements of people that results flows at different speeds, through different channels and technologies, propelled by different internal (and often illegal) economies and in different groupings, but they all inevitably coalesce into both routes and sites, stop-start dyads of transit. Sites of transit are temporary spaces where for shorter or longer periods, populations are variously held, processed, recorded bureaucratically or simply obliged to wait between phases of onward movement (or indeed failure and return). Under this conception, sites of transit are bottleneck spaces, where the flow of people along transit routes stalls temporarily, but they are also something like mass-production processing sites, where "new" citizens are produced.

At different times in both history and in the present, this model of the transit site as production-line has worked with extreme rapidity and efficiency: the Nazi system transformed individuals from free subjects into nameless,

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8. Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000).

9. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1958), 1st edition 1951.

FIG. 4 Inspection room, Ellis Island, New York, N.Y. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C.

undifferentiated and dehumanized masses in hours; but a converse, equally significant and representative parallel example of productive transit in global history might be Ellis Island in the Hudson harbour off Manhattan (New York), which processed up to 20 millions European immigrants from the l890s to the 1920s, its period of peak operation, transforming the vast majority of them from poor anonymous masses into American proto-citizens, producing in the process also a founding myth and identity of modern America itself (figures 2-6). The processing of populations, even the architectonic structure of the site, on Ellis Island was uncannily similar to the processing in mass prison and concentration camps, even if the ends and outcomes were in some sense opposite; not degradation and death but new identity and a new mass citizenship (although several hundred thousand were held or hospitalized on the island, or indeed rejected and sent back to Europe). The place was contradictory in its iteration of transit: productive, transformative but also profoundly anonymous and mass in scale, and objectifying in its processes. Georges Perec, the French writer and experimental chronicler of the objects and spaces of the modern, visited Ellis Island and made a documentary film about it in 1979 with filmmaker Robert Bober, eloquently capturing its contradictory

status as a "non-place", shapeless, rooted in histories of exile and chance, wandering and hope (*histoires d'errance et d'espoir*).[10]

Auschwitz and Ellis Island, in their mirrored trajectories, both operated as actual and symbolic sites of transit, rapidly producing millions of new subjects or citizens and/or rapidly moving them through their destructive or productive processes, either by physically destroying them or bureaucratically and medically certifying them for a new status. But they are in some sense anomalous, exceptions in both their vast scale, efficient planning and astonishing rapidity. Another messier and more variegated archipelago of small-scale, contingent transit exists across the field of modernity in myriad different sites, closer in analogy to Fossoli than to Auschwitz in the 'transit universe', and replicated in many different guises in contemporary flows of migration. Smaller sites of transit, which are more numerous and thus more typical in many ways, work with different rhythms and temporalities, and different structures and regulations, compared to those mass-scale operations. It is the temporal, spatial and functional characteristics of this vast archipelago that requires urgent research and elaboration today, and some lines of analysis and distinction can be usefully laid down to help map them.

First, in temporal terms, where Ellis Island was frighteningly efficient and rapid, small sites of transit are often slower—transit becomes holding—and can block their subjects for months and years, stagnating, becoming suspended and unproductive (both the site and the embryonic "citizens"). Fossoli is an interesting case in point, not only because of the experience of Jewish prisoners including Levi who were held in the camp and not deported for weeks or months until a rapid acceleration following takeover by the Nazis; but also because of the post-war periods of Nomadelfia and Villaggio San Marco, when refugees were not so much processed and removed as set up in semi-stable, if temporary communities. Even more extreme examples are to be found in Palestinian or African "temporary" refugee camps, some of which have survived now for decades and become, paradoxically, semi-permanent civic societies built on transit.

In spatial and social terms, small-scale transit sites tend also to bleed into local setting and populations, to be less hermetically sealed off than larger-scale, self-sufficient and heavily policed camps. This creates local forms of transit in and out of the sites, of work and contact: here one might point to prisoners of war who escaped from camps such as Fossoli, in some cases joined the local Resistance, forging relations with local populations, at times even marrying and settling. Small-scale sites of transit are also inevitably more easily adaptable to the changing uses and purposes, changes and adaptations in architecture, and changes in regulation, which are strongly characteristic of Fossoli among many other sites and which

10. Georges Perec and Robert Bober, *Récits d'Ellis Island. Histoires d'errance et d'espoir* (Paris: POL, 1994). See also documentary at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s6l2xFQztsM. Cf. Marc Augé, *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London: Verso, 1995

are in themselves also forms of functional and spatial transit.

As well as being porous to local populations and social realities, sites of transit are also embedded in and conditioned by the local through their necessary proximity to and relation with networks of transport (routes of

FIG. 5 Emigrants in "pens" at Ellis Island, New York, probably on or near Christmas, ca. 1906. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C.

transit): transit camps and transit sites emerge typically at nodal points in transport networks and at bottleneck points in migration flows, whether this be in a planned site such as Fossoli, which was able to draw prisoners from across central and northern Italy by train (Levi was arrested in Val d'Aosta and moved via Milan to Fossoli), and propel them from there along the direct train line north to Bolzano, Austria and from there to Mauthausen or Auschwitz; or in accidental geographies of convergence, such as the island of Lampedusa or the central train station in Milan, where "concentrations" of migrations have formed in recent years. Again, there is a difference to be noted in scale: a vast operation at Oswieçim / Auschwitz operated its own train station; across the larger part of the European train network that subtended the Holocaust, civilian stations were used, which

for Fossoli meant the small town station at Carpi, criss-crossed with local populations and services.

Inevitably, many of these nodal points and transport-transit sites cluster also at or near borders, walls, natural and man-made barriers to population flow and to identification; another source of the bottleneck-and-flow vectors noted earlier. In the contemporary European migration crisis, there are countless examples of this; Lampedusa again, but also Calais, Ventimiglia, the Hungarian border wall erected in 2015, or indeed Trump's real or imagined wall at the Mexican border.[11] Borders are always also policed sites, and a focus on the conjunction of transit and borders prompts a further set of questions on the governing structures and efficient and material causes of emerging sites of transit. Put into a series of simple binaries, we might ask of any given site whether it has been institutionally established, or improvised by the migrant population itself; whether it is hidden and isolated, or in close proximity and open to local populations and economies; whether it is officially managed by police, state, local or national government (or inter-governmental agreement) applying national or international law (on asylum, refugees), or whether instead it works by informal internal self-regulation, or indeed whether it is in some sense anarchically unregulated, thus becoming a no-go area for local authority (often requiring eventually, as in the case of Calais in 2016, para-military forms of invasion or aggressive dismantling by the state to take back control of the site); whether it has been planned and constructed with a more or less long-term vision of purpose and function, or whether it has been thrown up by a situation of emergency, a natural disaster (earthquakes, famines, storms) or an unpredictable and sudden acceleration in man-made flows; or once again, a combination of the two. In the latter regard, one of the more suggestive examples in recent history might be the case of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005, when a natural cataclysm, among its many disastrous effects, led to the re-purposing as an improvised shelter and transit site of the city's vast Convention Center, as well as an improvised jail under a law of exception, which produced rapid degrading in social order and civic function, caused by a combination of natural disaster and human mismanagement.[12]

This sequence of binaries suggests one final aspect of the site of transit in this fluid and open formulation of the category, one perhaps especially pertinent in the modern reality of migration and population movement: unlike the relentless violence and control of the Nazi camp system which left only infinitesimal margins for the subjects and victims, contemporary sites of transit can on occasion be reframed as sites of resistance or struggle. Even though there might be no possibility of autonomy in

11. On contemporary Transit Points, see the "Documenting Migration" project, Queen Mary University of London, https://www.qmul.ac.uk/documentingmigration/.

12. See the powerful narrative-documentary account in David Eggers, *Zeitoun* (San Francisco: McSweeneys, 2009).

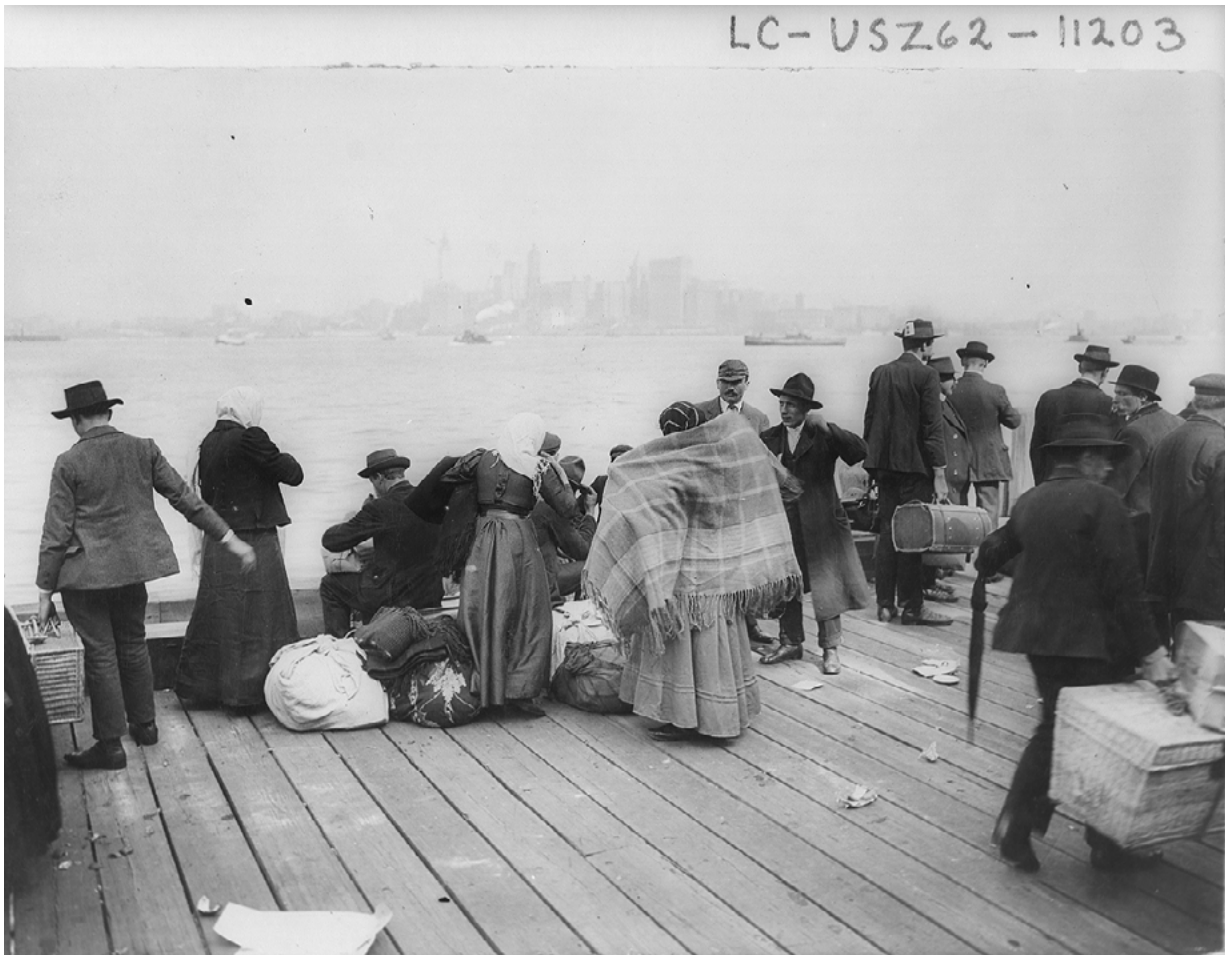

FIG. 6 Immigrants waiting to be transferred, Ellis Island, October 30, 1912. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C.

almost all cases, there is nevertheless a potential, if not for controlling the central process of citizen-production, of forcing acceptance into the host nation or community, then at least for contesting control of the site itself, its meanings and local customs, the intimate regulation of human, social, economic relations within the camps. If the overarching *system* of exclusion, expulsion, integration, of processing and management is opaque to the inhabitant of the site and often also to its local regulators (police, officials etc), determined as it often is at the level of national or supranational treaty law; nevertheless, sometimes, these same sites can produce resistance, temporary community, improvised domesticity, even real or imagined utopias, however short-lived. Sociologist Nando Sigona has attempted to capture something of this status of subjecthood and citizenship even within often degrading and highly challenging settings, with his proposed neologism and new category of citizenship, "campzenship".[13]

Fossoli, then, might stand a starting-point for a new interrogation of the camp as a site of transit, in both space and time, in function, structure and architectural reality. Fossoli stands as a potent example of all of these in its history, but also as a site, in its buildings and spaces, and its modes of

13. Nando Sigona, "Campzenship: Reimagining the Camp as a Social and Political Space," *Citizenship Studies* 19, no. 1 (2015): 1-15.

use, re-use and disuse. Of course, it is only one such site amongst hundreds, even thousands, but to note this is merely to reinforce the point and the initial intuition, that a shift from the closed category of the camp to the fluid and open site and dynamic of transit can potentially open up rich new territories of theoretical conceptualization, resonant parallel histories and transversal connections across geographies; in other words, new angles from which to interrogate some of the most urgent challenges of the contemporary world.

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