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Precarious Residence

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Brussels, Avenue Franklin D. Roosevelt: a long stretch on the periphery of the European capital, forming a section of the connection between one of the most stylish shopping districts in Brussels and the noble suburbs to the south of the city. Here, away from the city center, and also away from the European quarter and its *immigrés de luxe*, is a row of embassies and ambassadorial residencies, classical sites of international diplomacy and representation. One of these villas, lined up side by side, housed the Somali embassy until 1991. Today, due to Somalia's civil war and the lack of an internationally recognized government, the embassy has lost its function. Whatever might be happening in "Somalia" and whatever the affairs of "Somalis" might be anywhere in the world, for the time being, this can no longer be represented within the framework of an international representational model based on the idea and practice of national delegates. The fading photographs of Somali politicians hanging on the walls in the interior of the abandoned embassy, the maps, on which the lost integrity of a territory is recorded, are the mute witnesses to this impossibility.

It is no coincidence that an embassy building abandoned under precisely these circumstances was able to become one of the central

sites of the political and social struggle of the Sans-Papiers residing in Belgium: the Universal Embassy. The reason for this is not so much that the occupation of the building by a group of Sans-Papiers in January of 2001 was primarily, and in a general sense, meant as an offensive appropriation and recoding of certain "symbols of power." Initially decisive was the plain fact that an abandoned embassy, due to its-in a double sense (with reference to Belgium as well as Somalia)-extraterritorial legal status, presented an appropriate site of *refuge*. In this context, the gesture of occupation was granted a precise meaning: it referred to the actual appropriation of a certain legal protective zone, which was a result of the system of diplomatic representation that continued to function in certain ways even after the de facto collapse of the system; it claimed the piece of ground on which they stood, which remained on the precarious border between representation and its impossibility. The possible outcome of this is, in fact, as Tristan Wibault wrote in a text about the Universal Embassy, first and foremost a "micropolitical habitat":[1] the persistently precarious possibility of residing this side of every kind of territory.

How precarious this possibility is, is just as legible in the immediate prehistory of the Universal Embassy as in its first central area of activity: since 1998, a group of Sans-Papiers had occupied the centrally located Béguinage church in Brussels. When the occupation came to an abrupt end in 2000 after an unexplained fire in the church, the Belgian authorities offered to house the Sans-Papiers by scattering them throughout various Belgian cities. However, the strengthened network of Sans-Papiers and supporters, which had formed in the steady confrontations with authorities, had soon detected a new site in the unoccupied Somali embassy building. Apart from the necessary renovations, the initial work carried out there, against the backdrop of the regularization

campaign called for in 1999 by the liberal-socialist-green party coalition government in Belgium, concentrated to a great extent on the mutual exchange of experiences as well as the provision of legal support in regularization procedures. The actual founding of the Universal Embassy first followed one year after the occupation, with the proclamation of the *Déclaration de l'Ambassade Universelle*[2] in the lead-up to the EU summit in Laeken, Brussels, in December 2001.

The process of the extraordinary regularization of Sans-Papiers, which was set in motion in Belgium very much in the wake of strong public protests following from the death of 20-year-old Semira Adamu in 1998-a result of deportation measures-very clearly shows the shortcomings characteristic of even those migration policies posing as "liberal": approximately 30,000 regularization applications stood in contrast to a wealth of unprocessed and rejected applications and those not even made because of the pre-set criteria. Those who still had no residency status after the finish of the campaign could await only, as stated in the Universal Embassy *Declaration*, "repression and expulsion." The flipside of the processed regularizations came in the form of intensified deportations and the six *centres fermés* (closed camps) erected during the 1990s, which still remain highly active. The key point, however, is that every regularization campaign leads in the most extreme case, as it says in the *Declaration* to a "temporary cleansing of the prominent clandestineness." It does not at all change the basic facts of the matter of the permanent social, economic, and political *production* of clandestine existence with which we are currently confronted.

The Universal Embassy's analysis is unambiguous on this point. The new social figure of the Sans-Papiers emerges mainly at the scattered intersections of the economic regime of neo-liberal

globalization and the juridical-political regime of the nation state, there, where the new rejections and inclusions of the one, cross the inclusion-exclusion mechanisms of the other. Whereas current movements of migration are highly motivated by the effects of the globalization-induced destruction of traditional economies as well as the austerity policies imposed by international institutions in the countries of origin, in the classic industrial states we are experiencing huge numbers of migrants being pushed into precarious legal situations and socially declassed as well as the emergence of new forms of exploitation, particularly in out-sourcing, the agricultural sector, as well as in the low-wage area of the service sector. As stated in the *Declaration,* "The clandestine, as an inverted figure, is a de-localized worker from the third world in our neighborhoods." The official policy seems to know only two reactions to the growing chasm between aggravated economic existential conditions and various degrees of deprivation of social rights tied to citizenship-police repression and models of selective opening of borders and international temporary work that serve economic interests: "Work is imposing inclusion norms outside the law."

This deals with a norm of precariousness, which extends from the working situation into unemployment, from the withholding of social rights into the deprivation of the sheer right of residency and finds its most extreme intensification in the existence of Sans-Papiers. The Sans-Papiers existence is characterized by a multiplicity of survival techniques, which develop within the framework of a splintering of distressed living situations. Therefore, it is not only the exclusion from enjoying political rights that forms an obstacle to the political articulation of the social evidence present in the Sans-Papiers existence, but primarily, the social atomization which underlies this existence.

It is precisely here that we can see why the activities of the Universal Embassy are neither limited to individual support activities (based on the model of social work), nor to the carrying through of direct protest actions, or the formulation of programmatic demands (based on the models of activism or representation of political interests). The pivot of the various activities is the attempt to counteract the initial situation of social atomization by creating a context of experience and articulation, a context which is often lacking due to the isolating effects of declassing. In this context, it is possible to understand the crucial significance given to exchange, the production of texts (or even theatrical forms) as well as the so-called *témoignages*-practices of "testifying" that mediate the concrete experiences of Sans-Papiers with structurally oriented analyses. The context of articulation that we are speaking of, incidentally, is by no means limited to the Embassy's immediate surroundings, but also supports mobilization and intervention capacities in conflict situations taking place elsewhere, for example, on the occasion of several hunger strikes in occupied churches and university buildings in Brussels (an action taken in 2003 by groups of Afghan and Iranian refugees in protest of the receipt of deportation notices).

Ultimately, what opposes the social production of clandestine existence is the social production of a context of life through which the social evidence of the Sans-Papiers existence can be translated into political articulation. That also explains the Universal Embassy's clear rejection of the abstract idea of "world citizen rights": "A hypothetical world citizen status is a useless abstraction. Planetary belonging is not a status, it is a factual reality." The demand, as articulated by the Universal Embassy, is, instead, to quote Tristan Wibault once more, in the "call for a new relationship of the legal subject to the productive subject,"[3]

which means to an emerging social subject, as it appears in the current processes of social recomposition. The fact that this subject cannot be represented in the framework of the nation-state's legal order, does not mean that it could be represented in a "world legal order," of which we have hardly any idea other than a higher, but for that reason diluted and less obligatory version of national legal systems.

On the other hand, the "universality" of the Universal Embassy is not on the order of being and representation, but rather, of becoming; it is not oriented on the abstract idea of an all-encompassing global area, but rather, on a local "inhabited space": an inhabited space that is constantly reconstituted through social practices and whose evidences form the basis on which law has to be examined, if it wants to avoid turning into injustice. This concept of the local, which is central in the *Declaration*, includes the possibility of residing just as much as the possibility of moving - in Europe as well as in all locations, in which the perspective for a local existence are being destroyed on a daily basis. The precarious residency, which the Universal Embassy enables, is temporarily established somewhere between a site of refuge and that double possibility, whose liberation from the dictates of territory has yet to be realized.

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[1] See T. Wibault, "The Universal Embassy: A Place Open to the World", at: http://eipcp.net/transversal/1203/wibault/en; Tristan Wibault is one of the co-initiators of the Embassy.

[2] Can be found at: http://www.universal-embassy.be/.

[3] T. Wibault, "The Universal Embassy: A Place Open to the World," loc. cit.