

FEATURE

Behrouz Boochani and the Biopolitics of the Camp

The New Primo Levi?

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Dimitris Vardoulakis

Associate Professor and Chair of Philosophy Department at Western Sydney University.



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Behrouz Boochani's *No Friend but the Mountains*, a literary sensation upon its publication in Australia in August 2018, and soon to be released in the United States, deserves a place alongside classics of the prison writing genre. [1] At the same time, it contains important lessons for everyone thinking about power in the contemporary world. In particular, it prompts to reconsider the kind of power that is exercised in camps, where it comes from and how it could be resisted.

Context, personal and political

Boochani is an Iranian refugee who had the bad luck to arrive to Australia by boat just as the government introduced its infamous "Pacific Solution," better known as the "PNG Solution." [2]

The "PNG Solution" erects an imaginary wall on the ocean surrounding Australia. If a boat carrying asylum seekers arrives to Australia, the asylum seekers will be processed in detention centers in the Pacific — specifically, in Manus Island (where single men and men traveling alone were sent) and Nauru (where women, families and unaccompanied minors are held). Even if any of the applicants are found to be genuine refugees, they will never be allowed settlement in Australia. [3]

Do you recall Donald Trump's rhetoric during his Oval Office address on January 8, 2019, referring to a "humanitarian crisis" at the border to justify the erection of a wall? The trope that calls for the protection of life to justify draconian measures that threaten the life of those who they are supposedly protecting, and which cost the budget an extraordinary amount, could be taken straight out of Australia's "PNG Solution."

The effect of this policy is that either asylum seekers accept refolement, return to their nation of origin, or they remain detained indefinitely. Behrouz Boochani belongs to the latter category. He arrived in Australia a few days after the policy was implemented in July 2013, he was transported to the detention center on Manus Island shortly after that, and he remains detained on Manus without any clear prospect of release.

The title of the book refers to Boochani's Kurdish roots. The Kurdish nation is confined to the mountains on the border between Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran. The mountains carry clear cultural resonances for the oppressed Kurdish people. [4] They were also the place of refuge when the Kurdish populations were attacked, for instance by warplanes, either when the Kurds were caught up in the middle of the conflict between Iran and Iraq, or when attacked by Turkey. [5] Even though Boochani, a journalist and public intellectual in Iran, does not explain the reasons for seeking asylum, the implication in the title is clear.

How the book was written

How could Boochani write a close to 400-page account of his detention at Manus, given the repressive imprisonment regime?

Boochani was not allowed pen and paper, let alone a computer, at the detention center. He had a mobile phone smuggled into the detention center and he sent messages using mostly WhatsApp to a number of collaborators in Australia.

These collaborators were headed by Omid Tofighian, who himself also experienced displacement and exile from Iran and who is a philosophy graduate from the University of Sydney and is currently Assistant Professor at the American University of Cairo. He has also been active in refugee politics for years and he collaborates with a number of refugee advocacy collectives

Assisted by a group of people, Tofighian assembled the text messages and arranged them into chapters, gradually building the narrative that constitutes *No Friend but the Mountains*.

Let me be clear: Tofighian is not an imposing editor. He is not like Max Brod who took over Franz Kafka's manuscript changing and rearranging them at will. Rather, Tofighian has been in direct consultation with Boochani about the decisions that resulted in the final form of the book. The book is the result of this dialogue or collaboration.

The voice

I think the greatest achievement of this collective effort is to construct a consistent voice throughout the book, one that is ruthless in presenting the dehumanizing process of detention but without thereby losing its playfulness and its lyricism.

The lyricism comes through the versified vignettes that intersperse the narrative. The humor is paramount. Let me provide an example. The asylum seekers are processed on Christmas Island prior to transportation to the Pacific. The first group of refugees attracted significant media attention, with many journalists and their cameras seeking to capture their pictures.

Boochani becomes self-conscious about his ill-fitting clothes when he is

confronted by the media in a scene whose description is reminiscent of a red-carpet gala. But when he has to walk toward the media, he is “protected” by huge, not body-guards, but prison guards, who lift him to rush him past the cameras. A fashion calamity has been — “thankfully” — averted.[6]

The book is divided into three parts. The first three chapters narrate the terrifying journey from Indonesia to Christmas Island. The second and by far the longest part presents the capture of the asylum seekers and Boochani’s imprisonment in the detention center. And the last chapter, chapter 12, details the infamous riots in the detention center that resulted in the death of one of the inmates, Reza Barati, and the injuries of scores or others in February 2014.

The last chapter is not necessarily the latest one chronologically. Rather, it presents the point when death explicitly arrives at the camp. But for the most part the descriptions are of mundane, everyday things that make nonetheless life unbearable in detention.

The tyranny of the mundane

Boochani’s narrative describes the everyday difficulties that make life unbearable, such as the repressive heat in the detention rooms, the difficulty in obtaining adequate food, the restrictions in making telephone calls and the unbearable sanitation conditions.

Boochani has an uncanny capacity to combine the tragic with the humorous thereby creating a lively narrative that subverts the oppression of the mundane. Let me provide an example about the sanitation conditions.

The condition of the toilets at the detention center are a matter of constant anxiety for the inmates. This is exacerbated when the generator malfunctions leading to the toilets overflowing and being rendered unusable.

Boochani describes a detainee referred to as the Prime Minister because of the authority and universal respect he commands. (Throughout the book, Boochani creates nick-names of the detainees to protect their identities.) The Prime Minister is caught up in one occasion when the generators are not working and he has to relieve himself outside, where he is seen by other inmates.

One of these is the joker of the group and he pointedly makes fun of the Prime Minister’s lack of decorum in relieving himself in public. The Prime Minister cannot stand the erosion of his authority by the laughter of this other inmates, and he accepts refoolment soon after. [7]

This story is typical of the narrative strategy of *No Friend but the Mountains*. It is the small things in the everyday life of the inmates that render their incarceration oppressive and unbearable, often leading to tragic results such as Prime Minister’s decision to return to a country where his life will be in danger.

To appreciate Boochani’s conceptual insight, it helps to turn briefly to philosophy.

Using the example of the shoes we wear, Martin Heidegger describes two ways in which we related to instrumentality. We are either unaware of the shoes as we wear them in which case they fulfill their instrumental function; or the shoes hurts us or break altogether in which case we become conscious of them but they thereby lose their instrumentality. Objects fulfill their utility when they work seamlessly and remain unnoticed.

Boochani describes a third notion of instrumentality that can allows us to understand the inmates' experience at the Manus Island: the entire detention center is instrumentally functional by failing to be instrumental. The detention center succeeds through its failure to function. The instrumental collapse of instrumentality is the condition of oppressiveness in mundane experience.

A biopolitical instrumentality

We could understand this predicament as an expression of biopower. We are used to conceiving biopower as the normalization and regulation of populations. As Foucault puts it, biopolitics is not concerned with the birth and death of individuals but with the birth and mortality rates. Biopolitics is not concerned with the individual in its uniqueness but with groups of individuals whose properties are quantified.

This biopolitical characteristic fits Boochani's description. The plight of the refugees in Manus is due to the fact that they are not recognized as individuals who are seeking asylum because they are fleeing persecution endangering their lives. Rather, they are labeled as "illegal immigrants" who are incarcerated *en masse* regardless of the peculiarities of their individual cases.

Foucault further notes how biopower does not concentrate on the prerogative of life and death that characterizes classical power, but rather on how to manage the life of entire populations, such as the nutrition and sanitation processes that Boochani describes so poignantly.

How can we express the same point in instrumental terms? What's the means and ends relation that characterizes the instrumental collapse of instrumentality, the use of the useless?

We could say that the instrumentality of biopolitics purports to lack an end. It is as if means endlessly perpetuate themselves for no other reason than to sustain the culture of control. Let me provide an example from the book.

When an inmate finds out that his father is dying, he tries to reach him on the phone. However, it is not the turn of his group to queue to gain access to the telephone booths. When he manages to obtain the consent of those whose turn it is to call his father, all that he needs is the agreement of the guards.

The guard on duty refuses to give him access because it is against the rules. After strong protests and significant commotion, the manager is called, who also says "I'm sorry [I can't let you call], I'm just following orders."^[8]

The biopolitical management of populations relies on low-ranked employees and middle managers to assert the importance of the means of the exercise of power as a means, without any discernible end. It is control and normalization for their own sake.

Other forms of instrumental power

This may sound like a familiar experience to any “free citizen” in a capitalist country who makes a call to an insurance company or a bank or the welfare system. We are all too familiar the reply that “it is not my problem and it is not my decision, I am simply here to oversee the implementation of rules,” which is to say, to ensure that the means of the exercise of power keep on working regardless of their end.

And yet there is a significant difference between the inmates in Manus Island and the “free citizens.” The difference pertains to forms of instrumental power other than biopower affecting the body that is the target of power.

When the inmate who wants to call his father persists in protesting, he ends up being wrestled to ground and sent to solitary confinement. This reaffirms a motif that Boochani describes in various points in the book, namely, how the Australian guards regard the inmates as their enemies. This inimical attitude does not arise from any specific attribute or any identifiable reason. It is simply based on a logic of “us vs. them.” Let me put this logic in instrumental terms, that is, in terms of the relation of means and ends: there is an end (in this instance some kind of imaginary “Australian identity”) that is opposed to the “other” (the “illegal immigrant”). This end becomes the justification of the means of the exercise of violence toward the other.

In my book *Sovereignty and its Other*, I call this instrumental justification of power “ancient.” I further identify there a third kind of power, the “modern” one.

If biopower is characterized by the justification of violence for the sake of the continuing operation of the means of control over life, and the ancient by the purported protection of a supposedly inviolable end, then the modern one is defined by the means justifying an end.

The defense of the border, or of territorial integrity, is the most prevalent way in which the modern logic of instrumental power is exercised. The sovereign power of a state has as its end its own perpetuation — a point that Machiavelli presents brilliantly. But this perpetuation is possible on condition that power preserves itself.

In other words, the exercise of the means determines the successful attainment of the end. Thus, the defense of the border, with whatever means, including the indefinite incarceration of “illegal immigrants,” constitutes the justification of the end, namely, the perpetuation of the state.

Even if the logic of the biopolitical predicament of the inmates may appear familiar to “us” living in the neoliberal societies of high capitalism, still the instrumentality of power affects the prisoners at Manus in varied ways whose

combination is always unique to given historical circumstances. It is the confluence and combination of the three modalities of instrumental justification of violence that determines the historically singular way in which power is used.

Not exceptional: The anti-Agamben

The most horrifying aspect of Boochani's book is that, despite the singularity of the predicament of the inmates in Manus, their situation is not exceptional.

If their uniqueness is defined through the complex combinations of instrumentality to justify the exercise of violence against them, exceptionality requires an additional element, namely, the exclusion from the purview of the law.

Carl Schmitt confines this exceptionality to the sovereign who is called upon to "decide on the exception," that is, to step outside legal restrictions so as to defend the state in cases of emergency.

Giorgio Agamben provides a significant and influential expansion of this idea by linking exceptionality and biopolitics. The exclusion from the law, such as we might find with an outlaw or a refugee produces, according to Agamben, "bare life." This is the "pure body" or *zoe* separated from its political dimension or *bios*.

Agamben's interpretation gained significant currency in the aftermath of 9/11 that saw the proliferation of spaces of confinement where the law of the state does not apply, such as Guantanamo Bay. The detention center on Manus Island can be understood according to the same logic.

The designation of the asylum seekers as "illegal immigrants" is designed to strip them of their rights and to deprive them of access to the law, thereby enabling their indefinite detention — as "bare lives."

From this perspective, the detainees in Manus are not that different from the inmates in Auschwitz that Primo Levi describes and whose authority Agamben invokes.

And yet, an attentive reading of *No Friend but the Mountains* bucks such an interpretation. It is not simply that the condition of the possibility of the establishment of the detention center is predicated on an agreement between the Australian and the PNG governments, and that the latter retains jurisdiction over the detention center, as was demonstrated by a decision of the PNG High Court in 2016 that determined the unconstitutionality of the detention center.

More significantly, as soon as instrumentality operates in the various relations that characterize means and ends that I described above, there is a sense of law, written or unwritten, that operates within a field of social relations.

The Prime Minister was forced to return to his country of origin, despite the great danger to his life, to evade the conduct of his fellow inmates. And the man who wanted to call his dying father was supported by his fellow detainees following a kind of code of honor or solidarity.

The most insightful and ultimately the most disturbing pages of Boochani's powerful account concern the social relations that form between the inmates. These continue to operate instrumentally, in some cases supporting the instrumentality that characterizes biopower as well as modern and ancient power, but in other cases also resisting their particular confluence in the Manus prison.

Boochani's pragmatic account does not suffer from Agamben's illusion of a space supposedly beyond law's reach. There is no "bare life" in Manus Island.

The new Primo Levi?

This insight is not what distinguishes Boochani's book from Primo Levi, as a similar argument about the non-exceptionality of Auschwitz can also be illuminated. Neither is it the case that Boochani describes a radically different logic for the justification of confinement.

It was rather the case that the predominant type of instrumental logic was different: the mortality rate in Auschwitz was 98%, as Primo Levi never tired of repeating, whereas in Manus Island the predominant condition is about the instrumentalization of the mundane. Differently put, whereas in Auschwitz we see the operation of a right over life and death leading to extermination, the predominant condition at Manus is that of making life unbearable through the oppression of the mundane and letting die a symbolic death by not recognizing the refugee's right, as human being, to claim asylum.

Ultimately, all the above pertain to the uniqueness and singularity of Manus as well as of any other place of detention, that is, they pertain to how the different types of instrumentality combine within certain unique conditions.

Rather, what distinguishes Boochani's account is, I believe, the materiality of its composition. It reaches us as a series of text messages that were never allowed to be written. This act of disobedience, instrumental in itself, gives us hope that we can meet head-on the instrumentality of violence that characterizes Manus.

The fact that Boochani remains indefinitely detained in Manus makes his book all the more powerful, his message all the more pertinent and urgent. It places the onus on us, the recipients of this message that should never even have been sent in the first places, to join in the resistance, everyone with whatever means at their disposal, against the violent logic that justifies Boochani's incarceration and which more broadly sustains the "PNG Solution" and indefinite detention.

Dimitris Vardoulakis is an Associate Professor and Chair of Philosophy Department at Western Sydney University.

[1] Behrouz Boochani, *No Friend but the Mountains: Writings from Manus Prison*, trans. Omid Tofighian (Sydney: Picador, 2018), all in-text references to this edition. The book will be published in the US and Canada by Anansi Press July. As

this article was being edited, the news arrived that *No Friend but the Mountains* won the Victorian prize for literature at Victorian premier's literary awards on January 31, 2019. For more publicity and to follow news you can visit Boochani's [FB page](#).

[2] In fact, the "PNG Solution" is an extension of the "Pacific Solution." The latter was operational from 2001 to 2007, whereas the former came into force in July 2013. I will refrain here from providing the legal historical details of these two policies, as they are readily available online.

[3] In fact, over 90% of asylum seekers from Manus and Nauru have been found to be genuine refugees, Behrouz Boochani being one of them.

[4] Pages 71-72.

[5] Page 259.

[6] Page 97.

[7] Page 186.

[8] Page 209.

Keywords: [Australia](#), [Biopolitics](#), [Biopower](#), [Manus Island](#), [PNG Solution](#), [Refugee camps](#), [Refugees](#)

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