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Longing for Stillness: The Forced Movement of Asylum Seeker Nick Gill (2009)

Introduction

British initiatives to manage both the number of arrivals of asylum seekers and the experiences of those who arrive have burgeoned in recent years. The budget dedicated to asylum seeker management increased from £357 million in 1998-1999 to £1.71 billion in 2004-2005, making the Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND) the second largest concern of the Home Office behind the Prison Service in 2005 (Back *et al*). The IND was replaced in April 2007 by the Border and Immigration Agency (BIA), whose expenditure exceeded £2 billion in 2007-2008 (BIA). Perhaps as a consequence the number of asylum seekers applying to the UK has fallen dramatically, illustrating the continuing influence of exclusionary state policies despite the globalisation and transnationalisation of migrant flows (UNHCR; Koser).

One of the difficulties with the study of asylum seekers is the persistent risk that, by employing the term 'asylum seeker', research conducted into their experiences will contribute towards the exclusion of a marginalised and abject group of people, precisely by employing a term that emphasises the suspended recognition of a community (Nyers). The 'asylum seeker' is a figure defined in law in order to facilitate government-level avoidance of humanitarian obligations by emphasising the non-refugeeness of asylum claimants (Tyler). This group is identified as supplicant to the state, positioning the state itself as a legitimate arbiter. It is in this sense that asylum seekers suffer a degree of cruel optimism (Berlant) – wishing to be recognised as a refugee while nevertheless subject to state-defined discourses, whatever the outcome. The term 'forced migrant' is little better, conveying a de-humanising and disabling lack of agency (Turton), while the terms 'undocumented migrant', 'irregular migrant' and 'illegal migrant' all imply a failure to conform to respectable, desirable and legitimate forms of migration.

Another consequence of these co-opted and politically subjugating forms of language is their production of simple imagined geographies of migration that position the foreigner as strange, unfamiliar and incapable of communication across this divide. Such imaginings precipitate their own responses, most clearly expressed in the blunt, intrusive uses of space and time in migration governance (Lahav and Guiraudon; Cohen; Guild; Gronendijk). Various institutions exist in Britain that function to actually produce the imagined differences between migrants and citizens, from the two huge, airport-like 'Asylum Screening Units' in Liverpool and London where asylum seekers can lodge their claims, to the 12 'Removal Centres' within which soon-to-be deported asylum seekers are incarcerated and the 17 'Hearing Centres' at which British judges preside over the precise legal status of asylum applicants.

Less attention, however, has been given to the tension between mobility and stillness in asylum contexts. Asylum seeker management is characterised by a complex combination of enforced

stillness and enforced mobility of asylum seeking bodies, and resistance can also be understood in these terms. This research draws upon 37 interviews with asylum seekers, asylum activists, and government employees in the UK conducted between 2005 and 2007 (see Gill) and distils three characteristics of stillness. First, an association between stillness and safety is clearly evident, exacerbated by the fear that the state may force asylum seekers to move at any time. Second, stillness of asylum seekers in a physical, literal sense is intimately related to their psychological condition, underscoring the affectual properties of stillness. Third, the desire to be still, and to be safe, precipitates various political strategies that seek to secure stillness, meaning that stillness functions as more than an aspiration, becoming also a key political metric in the struggle between the included and excluded. In these multiple and contradictory ways stillness is a key factor that structures asylum seekers' experiences of migration.

Governing through Mobility

The British state utilises both stillness and mobility in the governance of asylum seeking bodies. On the one hand, asylum seekers' personal freedoms are routinely curtailed both through their incarceration and through the requirements imposed upon them by the state in terms of 'signing in' at local police stations, even when they are not incarcerated, throughout the time that they are awaiting a decision on their claim for asylum (Cwerner). This requirement, which consists of attending a police station to confirm the continuing compliance of the asylum seeker, can vary in frequency, from once every month to once every few days.

On the other hand, the British state employs a range of strategies of mobility that serve to deprive asylum seeking communities of geographical stillness and, consequently, also often undermines their psychological stability. First, the seizure of asylum seekers and transportation to a Removal Centre can be sudden and traumatic, and incarceration in this manner is becoming increasingly common (Bacon; Home Office). In extreme cases, very little or no warning is given to asylum seekers who are taken into detention, and so-called 'dawn raids' have been organised in order to exploit an element of surprise in the introduction of asylum seekers to detention (Burnett). A second source of forced mobility associated with Removal Centres is the transfer of detainees from one Removal Centre to another for a variety of reasons, from the practical constraints imposed by the capacities of various centres, to differences in the conditions of centres themselves, which are used to form a reward and sanction mechanism among the detainee population (Hayter; Granville-Chapman). Intra-detention estate transfers have increased in scope and significance in recent years: in 2004/5, the most recent financial year for which figures are available, the British government spent over £6.5 million simply moving detainees from one secure facility to another within the UK (Hansard, 2005; 2006).

Outside incarceration, a third source of spatial disruption of asylum seekers in the UK concerns their relationship with accommodation providers. Housing is provided to asylum seekers as they await a decision on their claim, but this housing is provided on a 'no-choice' basis, meaning that asylum seekers who are not prepared to travel to the accommodation that is allocated to them will forfeit their right to accommodation (Schuster). In other words, accommodation is contingent upon asylum seekers' willingness to be mobile, producing a direct trade-off between the attractions of accommodation and stillness. The rationale for this "dispersal policy", is to draw asylum seekers away from London, where the majority of asylum seekers chose to reside

before 2000. The maintenance of a diverse portfolio of housing across the UK is resource intensive, with the re-negotiation of housing contracts worth over a £1 billion a constant concern (Noble *et al*). As these contracts are renegotiated, asylum seekers are expected to move in response to the varying affordability of housing around the country. In parallel to the system of deportee movements within the detention estate therefore, a comparable system of movement of asylum seekers around the UK in response to urban and regional housing market conditions also operates.

Stillness as Sanctuary

In all three cases, the psychological stress that movement of asylum seekers can cause is significant. Within detention, according to a series of government reports into the conditions of removal centres, one of the recurring difficulties facing incarcerated asylum seekers is incomprehension of their legal status (e.g. HMIP 2002; 2008). This, coupled with very short warning of impending movements, results in widespread anxiety among detained asylum seekers that they may be deported or transferred imminently. Outside detention, the fear of snatch squads of police officers, or alternatively the fear of hate crimes against asylum seekers (Tyler), render movement in the public realm a dangerous practice in the eyes of many marginalised migrants.

The degree of uncertainty and the mental and emotional demands of relocation introduced through forced mobility can have a damaging psychological effect upon an already vulnerable population. Expressing his frustration at this particular implication of the movement of detainees, one activist who had provided sanctuary to over 20 asylum seekers in his community outlined some of the consequences of onward movement.

The number of times I've had to write panic letters saying you know you cannot move this person to the other end of the country because it destabilises them in terms of their mental health and it is abusive. [...] Their solicitors are here, they're in process, in legal process, they've got a community, they've got friends, they may even have a partner or a child here and they would still move them.

The association between governance, mobility and trepidation highlights one characteristic of stillness in the asylum seeking field: in contra-distinction to the risk associated with movement, to be still is very often to be safe. Given the necessity to flee violence in origin countries and the tendency for destination country governments to require constant re-positioning, often backed-up with the threat of force, stillness comes to be viewed as offering a sort of sanctuary. Indeed, the Independent Asylum Commission charity that has conducted a series of reviews of asylum seekers' treatment in the UK (Hobson *et al.*), has recently suggested dispensing with the term 'asylum' in favour of 'sanctuary' precisely because of the positive associations with security and stability that the latter provides.

To be in one place for a sustained period allows networks of human trust and reciprocity to develop which can form the basis of supportive community relationships. Another activist who had accompanied many asylum seekers through

the legal process spoke passionately about the functions that communities can serve in asylum seekers' lives.

So you actually become substitute family [...]

I think it's what helps people in the midst of trauma when the future is uncertain [...] to find a community which values them, which accepts them, which listens to them, where they can begin to find a place and touch a creative life again which they may not have had for years: it's enormously important.

There is a danger in romanticising the benefits of community (Joseph). Indeed, much of the racism and xenophobia directed towards asylum seekers has been the result of local community hostilities towards different national and ethnic groups (Boswell). For many asylum seekers, however, the reciprocal relations found in communities are crucially important to their well-being. What is more, the inclusion of asylum seekers into communities is one of the most effective anti-state and anti-deportation strategies available to activists and asylum seekers alike (Tyler), because it arrests the process of anonymising and cordoning asylum seekers as an homogenous group, providing instead a chance for individuals to cast off this label in favour of more 'humane' characteristics: families, learning, friendship, love.

Strategies for Stillness

For this reason, the pursuit of stillness among asylum seekers is both a human and political response to their situations – stillness becomes a metric in the struggle between abject migrants and the state. Crucial to this political function is the complex relationship between stillness and social visibility: if an asylum seeker can command their own stillness then they can also have greater influence over their public profile, either in order to develop it or to become less conspicuous.

Tyler argues that asylum seekers are what she calls a 'hypervisible' social group, referring to the high profile association between a fictional, dehumanised asylum seeking figure and a range of defamatory characteristics circulated by the popular printed press. Stillness can be used to strategically reduce this imposed form of hypervisibility, and to raise awareness of real asylum seeker stories and situations. This is achieved by building community coalitions, which require physically and socially settled asylum seeking families and communities. Asylum advocacy groups and local community support networks work together in the UK in order to generate a genuine public profile of asylum seekers by utilising local and national newspapers, staging public demonstrations, delivering speeches, attending rallies and garnering support among local organisations through art exhibitions, performances and debates. Some activist networks specialise explicitly in supporting asylum seekers in these endeavours, and sympathetic networks of journalists, lawyers, doctors and radio producers combine their expertise with varying degrees of success.

These sorts of strategies can produce strong loyalties between local communities and the asylum seekers in their midst, precisely because, through their co-presence, asylum seekers cease to be merely asylum seekers, but become active and valued members of communities. One activist

who had helped to organise the protection of an asylum seeker in a church described some of the preparations that had been made for the arrival of immigration task forces in her middle class parish.

There were all sorts of things we practiced: if they did break through the door what would we do? We set up a telephone tree so that each person would phone two or three people. We had I don't know how many cars outside. We arranged a safe house, where we would hide her. We practiced getting her out of the room into a car [...] We were expecting them to come at any time. We always had people at the back [...] guarding, looking at strangers who might be around and [name] was never, ever allowed to be on her own without a whole group of people completely surrounding her so she could feel safe and we would feel safe.

Securing stillness here becomes more than simply an operation to secure geographic fixity: it is a symbolic struggle between state and community, crystallising in specific tactics of spatial and temporal arrangement. It reflects the fear of further forced movement, the abiding association between stillness and safety, and the complex relationship between community visibility and an ability to remain still.

There are, nevertheless, drawbacks to these tactics that suggest a very different relationship between stillness and visibility. Juries can be alienated by loud tactics of activism, meaning that asylum seekers can damage their chances of a sympathetic legal hearing if they have had too high a profile. Furthermore, many asylum seekers do not have the benefits of such a dedicated community. An alternative way in which stillness becomes political is through its ability to render invisible the abject body. Invisibility is taken to mean the decision to 'go underground', miss the appointments at local police stations and attempt to anticipate the movements of immigration removal enforcement teams. Perversely, although this is a strategy for stillness at the national or regional scale, mobile strategies are often employed at finer scales in order to achieve this objective. Asylum seekers sometimes endure extremely precarious and difficult conditions of housing and subsistence moving from house to house regularly or sleeping and living in cars in order to avoid detection by authorities.

This strategy is difficult because it involves a high degree of uncertainty, stress and reliance upon the goodwill of others. One police officer outlined the situation facing many 'invisible' asylum seekers as one of poverty and desperation:

Immigration haven't got a clue where they are, they just can't find them because they're sofa surfing, that's living in peoples coffee shops ... I see them in the coffee shop and they come up and they're bloody starving!

Despite the difficulties associated with this form of invisibility, it is estimated that this strategy is becoming increasingly common in the UK. In 2006 the Red Cross estimated that there were some 36 000 refused and destitute asylum seekers in England, up from 25 000 the previous year, and reported that their organisation was having to provide induction tours of soup kitchens and night shelters in order to alleviate the conditions of many claimants in these situations (Taylor and Muir).

Conclusion

The case of asylum seekers in the UK illustrates the multiple, contradictory and splintered character of stillness. While some forms of governance impose stillness upon asylum seeking bodies, in the form of incarceration and 'signing in' requirements, other forms of governance impose mobility either within detention or outside it. Consequently stillness figures in the responses of asylum seeking communities in various ways. Given the unwelcome within-country movement of asylum seekers, and adding to this the initial fact of their forced migration from their home countries, the condition of stillness becomes desirable, promising to bring with it stability and safety. These promises contrast the psychological disruption that further mobility, and even the threat of further mobility, can bring about. This illustrates the affectual qualities both of movement and of stillness in the asylum-seeking context. Literal stillness is associated with social and emotional stability that complicates the distinction between real and emotional spaces. While this is certainly not the case uniformly – incarceration and inhibited personal liberties have opposite consequences – the promises of stillness in terms of stability and sanctuary are clearly significant because this desirability leads asylum advocates and asylum seekers to execute a range of political strategies that seek to ensure stillness, either through enhanced or reduced forms of social visibility.

The association of mobility with freedom that typifies much of the literature surrounding mobility needs closer inspection. At least in some situations, asylum seekers pursue geographical stillness for the political and psychological benefits it can offer, while mobility is both employed as a subjugating strategy by states and is itself actively resisted by those who constitute its targets.

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