
Image 1: Crowds of people prevent an Immigration Enforcement Team from removing their neighbours. Source: Delahunty, S. (2021).

# HOSTILITY AS SLOW VIOLENCE

## THE IMPACTS OF AUSTERITY ON PEOPLE SEEKING ASYLUM IN THE UK

Welcome to this three-part blog series unpacking some of the interconnections and entanglements between austerity and asylum politics. This research draws upon my master’s dissertation, which explored the state of extreme hostility, violence, and racism within the asylum system as told by practitioners working in third-sector organisations in Glasgow.

**Violence hidden from headlines**

On 13th May 2021 in the Pollokshields area of Glasgow, two men were forcibly removed from their property of 10 years by Immigration Enforcement Officers for alleged violations of immigration law. The dawn raid led to a spontaneous blockade protest by neighbours and activists which prevented the enforcement van from leaving (see above image). With the support of a lawyer, the men emerged from the van after an eight-hour stand-off. The event, now known as the Kenmure Street Protests exposed not only a form of violent statecraft designed to remove migrants from public space, but also the powerful potential of public resistance in the face of injustice.

The Kenmure Street Protests were the starting point of my research into violence and racism in the asylum system and I continued to research other raids, evictions, and forms of public spectacle. However, as troubling as these events are, I began to understand them as just the tip of the iceberg. Lurking in the murkier depths are the violence and hostility of endless waiting, bureaucratic delays, inadequate food, sub-standard housing conditions, insufficient health care and mental health support, and the burden of inaccurate stereotypes and scapegoating unapologetically dumped upon those seeking safety.

Such hostility occurs in private, everyday settings, becoming normalised and rendered invisible through routine and the very architecture of the system.

One lens through which to view such systemic failings is to consider them forms of slow violence, that which is “neither spectacular nor instantaneous”, and “is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all”.[1]

Originating from a theory to understand environmental phenomena such as toxic waste and climate change, Rob Nixon’s theory of slow violence enables us to think beyond moments of crisis and political hyperbole to uncover and challenge deeply embedded structural injustice. It helps to unpack power within structural violence and privileges feminist understandings of the everyday which critique gendered and raced understandings of the world that typically ignore intimate and private violence. [2]

Many geographers have focused on these hidden, mundane processes when reflecting on the impacts and legacies of austerity which are often felt in daily activities such as shopping or caring.[3] The same applies to the asylum system: people seeking safety are exposed to degrading and prolonged conditions of inequality within everyday settings, such as asylum accommodation. Austerity politics and hostility towards migrants are deeply entangled and both operate as slow and attritional violence that exacerbates gendered, racial, and class inequalities which become tangled up in divisive media narratives.

**Austerity and hostility**

In 2010, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government came into office and responded to the financial crisis by creating a regressive fiscal strategy called austerity, likened to a 'tightening of the belt' for everyone but the private sector.[4],[5] Regions already economically marginalised suffered disproportionately from cuts to services, including the welfare state.[6]

For the majority of people, austerity made everyday life increasingly challenging. Eating, caring, traveling, and day-to-day rhythms were affected by budget cuts to the tune of £37 billion a year by 2020 (to welfare and benefits spending alone).[7] In downloading austerity onto individuals, it's violence became felt in everyday life. [8],[9]

Language such as 'scroungers' and 'benefits broods' became commonplace within the discourse of austerity to justify policies. Those claiming benefits and relying on the welfare state became vilified through tactics that displaced blame from the government for eroding the welfare state.[10]

In 2012, then-Home Secretary Theresa May announced the government intended to "create a really hostile environment for illegal migration"[11], followed by a series of legislation designed to entrench racial violence and diffuse exclusionary borders into everyday life. Migrants became vilified and blamed for the consequences of the government's regressive fiscal strategy.[12]

So not only did austerity-induced hostility, increasing inequality become a precursor to life in the UK for migrants, but those who arrived trying to claim asylum and refugee status became the scapegoat for austerity.[13] Austerity exacerbated class and race divisions and inequalities in the UK, and, as one participant expressed, "the way that people seeking asylum are treated is often reflective… [of] how proportions of the citizenship are getting treated."

One of the main narratives that created division within society was that migrants undermined the citizenship rights of British workers by increasing pressure on social resources such as healthcare and housing.

**Framed as undeserving**

During interviews I conducted with staff in asylum- and refugee-supporting organisations, many reported that stereotypes around people seeking asylum dictated people's views on policy. For example, the view that people seeking asylum receive food, accommodation, and healthcare free of charge at the expense of those previously claiming benefits can manifest in a competition narrative over dwindling public resources - the very same resources that have been eroded by austerity policies.

Tabloid newspapers, and increasingly, other major news outlets, are a key vessel for popularising such narratives which favour the government's hostility. Inflammatory language creates a powerful discourse of fear that cannot be disentangled from colonial histories, which the second blog considers in more detail. [14]

Exclusion of people seeking asylum from protection and resources to meet basic human rights is justified through the construction of migrants as undeserving. In the same way that those claiming benefits have been denoted as the underserving poor who 'cheat' the system to enable austere cuts to welfare funding, people seeking asylum are placed at the bottom of the hierarchy of access to welfare resources and sympathy. [15]


Image 2: Collage of tabloid headlines vilifying people seeking asylum. Source: Hope Not Hate, (2023), cropped from original.

Former Home Secretary Suella Braverman stated she believes “people coming here illegally do possess values which are at odds with our country. We are seeing heightened levels of criminality when related to the people who’ve come on boats related to drug-dealing, exploitation, prostitution”. [16]

Those in power work to exclude not-yet-citizens by ‘othering’ them to the point of dehumanisation. “The culture and language of dehumanisation”, as one research participant shared, “is leading into these policies of state violence and [is] resulting in cycles of destitution, poverty and turmoil for people”.

By categorising people seeking asylum as illegal, a prefix that breaks the 1951 Refugee Convention which protects the right to claim asylum and accepts irregular means may be taken to flee to safety, people’s genuine need for safety from persecution, war zones, and discrimination risks becoming delegitimised. [17]

Overall, austerity entrenched levels of inequality within the UK which have decreased the protection and resources available to people seeking asylum in the UK, while simultaneously blaming people seeking asylum for such erosion of public services. The deeply engrained racism and slow violence of exclusion will be further explored in the following blog.

**Image References:**

Image 1: Delahunty, S. (2021). Kenmure Steet: A ‘small victory’ in a hostile environment. Third Sector. [Online] Available at: Add a little bit of body text Last accessed: 11th Feb 2024

Image 2: Taylor, D. (2022). Two-thirds of UK asylum seekers on small boats had hypothermia or injuries. The Guardian. [Online] Available at: Add a little bit of body text Last accessed: 10th Feb 2024

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Image 1: Group of men waiting behind fencing to enter a marque using blankets to stay warm.. Source: Taylor, D. (2023).

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The previous blog introduced the concept of slow violence to describe mundane, normalised processes of uncertainty, poor conditions, and human rights abuses which compile to injure mentally, physically, and legally those within the asylum system. Exclusion of people seeking asylum is often founded upon colonial racism and tropes that frame migrants as a threat to 'Britishness'. [1],[2]

This blog will explore the failures of asylum system accommodation and the growing fear of destitution people face through the lens of necropolitics, a theory developed to analyse power and the governance of death.

**Necropolitics**

People seeking asylum are frequently constructed as the 'undeserving poor' because of and reinforced by racist stereotypes and characteristics, such as criminality, used by the state and the media, as explored in the previous blog. The notion of an 'enemy', an exclusionary 'them' versus 'us' discourse, is an exertion of biopower – in this case, the state's ability to govern life through subtly coercive power mechanisms. [3],[4]

Foucault's theory of biopower has been extended by Mbembe, who focuses on the "lethal underside of biopower": necropolitics. Mbembe argues that the most powerful expression of sovereignty lies in the power to govern death. [5], [6]

Conditions to create precarity and reduce people to the condition of the "living dead" are levelled against certain communities, which is where racism is present within his conceptualisation of necropolitics. [7]

Considering the migration system through a necropolitical lens, migrants' lives are governed by death. [8] For example, the violent and exclusionary borders and camps of Europe that force people to take increasingly dangerous journeys out of desperation, creating unnecessary death for those who never reach dry land again.

Racism is a central factor of Mbembe's theory. Hostile policies, first overtly introduced in 2012 (although built upon previous politics), embedded racial borders within the fabric of everyday life. [9] Those perceived to be 'Other' were excluded based upon colonially informed arguments about differential human worth and treated within a separate set of values and conditions. [10]

Slow violence, Nixon's theory introduced in the previous blog, is both the way necropolitics operates and its effect within everyday lives 11 . Immigration is often conflated with a state of crisis, emergency, and exception, however, the very normalisation of abhorrent conditions within the asylum system is a crisis in itself.

Many interview participants spoke directly or through examples of the violence of inaction, lack of care, and failure by the state to provide daily basic rights to those seeking asylum. Based on their narratives, I explored how necropolitical slow violence creates a politics of erosion – an erosion of people's agency, self-worth, physical condition, mental health and resilience, and the continual chipping away of a person's hope. This was often experienced within asylum accommodation.

**Accommodation**

Asylum accommodation includes hotels, barges, and disused military sites. The large backlog of cases of asylum (161,000 people awaiting an initial decision) has been inadequately processed over many years and is having a knock-on effect on housing timescales. [12] The number of cases taking longer than six months to receive an initial decision has increased nearly ten-fold since 2016 and with increasing numbers of new cases, people are living for longer periods in unsuitable temporary accommodation. [13]

In their report into asylum accommodation, Refugee Action describes the system as "de-facto detention" wherein people are segregated from communities and have restricted communication and access to resources and services due to the spatial and socio-economic architecture of the system. The report found 71% of people surveyed living in asylum accommodation were experiencing mental health issues, and 75% were experiencing hunger and malnutrition within the care of the state. [14]

During interviews, participants who have worked alongside people within temporary asylum accommodation expressed deep concerns about living conditions which ranged from significant health deterioration including weight loss and trauma-related mental health conditions, anxiety due to uncertainty and long periods of waiting, fear of deportation and destitution, and suicide.

Austerity and privatisation have created instability, liminality, and a focus on profits over people within asylum accommodation and the broader housing market itself. [15] For over 10 years the government has outsourced asylum accommodation to several firms such as Serco and Clearsprings and has created a market out of failing to provide basic human rights to some of the most vulnerable people in society, who are themselves framed as a burden. [16]

**Destitution**

One of the most concerning trends which arose from my research and interviews with those working in this sector was a fear of becoming destitute for many living in the asylum system. Defined as the "deepest and most damaging form of poverty", destitution is when people are unable to afford necessities such as food or clothing. [17] People seeking asylum are at risk of destitution throughout the asylum process largely due to delays and problems receiving support in addition to not having the Right to Work. [18]

Refugee Action found that, of the people seeking asylum surveyed, over half faced destitution while receiving Home Office support, meaning the very system supposed to help is pushing already highly vulnerable people into deep poverty. Furthermore, low-quality housing that is often geographically and socially isolated excludes people from participating in community. As one participant explained, their charity was campaigning against "people being moved far out of cities and taken to space they've never known before and [on a] no-choice basis" which in turn reinforces a racially loaded and exclusionary narrative around a lack of 'British values' and willingness to integrate.

Many asylum and refugee-supporting organisations voiced their opposition and concern at the announcement and implementation of the Illegal Migration Act (IMA) which became law on 20 July 2023.

The IMA prevents those arriving through 'irregular' means, such as via a small boat, from having their asylum claim considered by the Home Office. They will instead be "detained and then promptly removed" , despite the Home Office's statistics showing that 3 in every 4 people who have crossed the channel in 2023 would qualify for refugee status if their claim was processed. [19],[20]

The IMA not only effectively extinguishes the right to seek asylum, but is likely to create greater disengagement with the system by forcing people to go 'under the radar' to avoid detention and deportation. Those working in the sector warn this legislation could increase homelessness, as well as further expose vulnerable people to exploitation and destitution. [21],[22]

But with many charities and care providers already stretched beyond sustainable means due to austerity's depletion of their capacity to care and the already high demand, their ability to stop people from falling through the "tattered social safety net" is a serious cause for concern. [23]

The asylum system has been constructed to exclude those seeking safety from accessing basic human rights, security and community. A person's agency and resilience are continually worn down by every stage of the asylum system, particularly due to the conditions of accommodation which often leave people with very little hope.

The final subject of this blog, particularly the issue of destitution and the overwhelming pressure on independent organisations to manage the failure of the system, has raised questions of responsibility, resistance, and whether there is hope to be found within such a broken system. The final blog in this series will discuss work and campaigns currently taking place to secure human rights and lobby change to a system failing on all fronts.

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Image 1: A crowd of people holding signs written on cardboard that read: ‘safe and legal routes now’ and ‘no-one is illegal’. Source: Mundy, J.(2023).

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The previous two blogs have introduced the idea of slow violence as a way to examine the failure of the Home Office to grant protection and basic human rights, and the necropolitical effects of such neglect.

In this blog, I explore questions of responsibility, accountability, and sustainability – how the relationship between the state and people seeking asylum has changed; is the Home Office taking responsibility and how can it be held accountable; and what needs to change for the battle against a “cruel and discriminatory”, “unworkable” system to transform to one altogether less hostile and violent. [1]

**Normalisation of precarity**

Austerity policies are one of the major underlying factors in the normalisation of precarity, inequality, and poverty in the UK. The Joseph Rountree Foundation recently published a report revealing more than 1 in 5 people were in poverty in 2021/22 (14.4 million), and the number of those facing destitution has risen a staggering 148% in just five years. [2] Housing costs are a major factor pushing people into poverty in the UK, with a third of social renters and half of private renters being pushed into poverty after housing costs are factored in. [3] News headlines and campaign groups continue to expose the prevalence of mould and poor housing conditions affecting the health of tenants, particularly ethnically minoritised communities who are statistically more likely to suffer health complications caused by poor-quality housing. [4]

Asylum accommodation also puts inhabitants’ mental and physical health at risk. Hotels are overcrowded, many have rodent infestations and mould, no privacy, inedible food, and even conditions meaning children are too afraid to sleep. [5] Tragic headlines have shown how damaging and unsafe the system is: one-third of people were placed on suicide watch in Brook House detention centre in 2020 [6] , and an Albanian man recently died of suspected suicide while being housed on the Bibby Stockholm barge in Dorset. [7]

If neoliberal austerity has changed the relationship between citizens and the state, the extremities of such changes have been experienced in the relationship between not-yet- or denied-citizens and the state.

The privatisation of accommodation means that accommodation units are operated as for-profit businesses, resulting in broken chains of responsibility for abhorrent conditions. The lack of accountability within the accommodation system is a major issue meaning that unliveable conditions and tragic outcomes continue to exist while the government and private contractors continually shift blame around, even displacing it on people seeking safety themselves.

In May 2023, the government announced its intention to remove basic housing protections for people within the asylum system in privately rented properties in an attempt to move people out of hotels. [8]

Such legislation would have likely created overcrowding, unsafe utility standards creating fire risks, and create knock-on impacts such as community tension and homelessness. [9] The mindset of austerity runs deep within Conservative politics – stripping those who are vulnerable of their support systems and basic living standards is a reoccurring pattern. These plans illustrated, yet again, the Home Office's disregard for people's lives.

In a somewhat rare moment of triumph for human rights amidst a hostile hegemony, the draft legislation was recently withdrawn (Feb 2024) after resistance from organisations who signed a letter and 8 people currently in asylum accommodation launching a legal challenge [10] . Within the letter, the authors drew attention to the systemic causes of strain on the system: the ban on work for people seeking asylum and "excessive delays in asylum-decision making", both of which lie firmly in the hand of the Home Office and not those trying to claim asylum.

This win demonstrates the power and importance of collective resistance and resilience against the violent hostility of the Home Office.

**Role of the third sector**

Charities and independent organisations have become a lifeline for so many people seeking safety in the UK and form a powerful network of resistance against the erosion of human rights. The work of organisations to advise and fight for the rights of people at the mercy of Home Office policies contributes a huge amount to the wellbeing of people within the system and helps build community and connectivity.

The majority of participants expressed a deep sense of injustice at the treatment and slowly erosive violence people seeking asylum undergo when they arrive in the UK. When asked what they would like to see change, participants' visions and campaign strategies centred around the right to safe and legal routes and employment, the importance of community, and the role of individual citizens in changing the narrative.

**Safe routes and employment**

At present, there are no safe or legal routes to claim asylum in the UK. [11] [12]

This forces people into making dangerous journeys and (re)produces the 'crisis' of 'illegal' migration. In addition to the immediate creation of safe and legal routes, legislative change is necessary to allow people within the asylum system the right to work. Campaigns such as Lift The Ban present the benefits of such a change, of which 82% of the British public agree would be a positive decision to enhance community cohesion, socio-economic outcomes for migrants and the national economy, and improve mental health. [12]

Without the right to work, one participant described the system as one designed to "…hold people in this state of limbo with very little agency around their own lives, very little choice, and ensuring people are living in the state of, just like surviving, rather than actually being able to live." To return to the theories introduced in previous blogs, this illustrates the politics of slow violence in which a person's life is stripped back to extreme poverty and precarity.

**Community**

The importance of community, place, and belonging emerged as a strong theme within the research; many participants argued that the structure of accommodation deliberately prevented people from building and establishing connections and networks of support.

Both the spatial and social isolation of accommodation, such as the Bibby Stockholm barge, means that while people wait for their claim to be processed – if, indeed, they are entitled to this instead of immediate detention or deportation under the IMA – they are unable to develop networks that may enable greater resilience when they enter the job and housing market.

One participant argued that although the government should take ultimate responsibility, local communities also hold the power to change their local landscapes: "[it's] our society and our community, so it's our responsibility collectively as well."

This participant was involved in a community space that facilitated opportunities for migrant women to develop connections and networks, which they found enabled women to be more resilient to future changes.

**Narratives and curating space to share**

The language, framing, and narratives used to report and describe people and the system of asylum are also fundamental to the future of immigration within the UK. If people were to become more accurately represented as individuals with skills, personalities, stories and, ultimately, agency, there could be a transformation in the discourse and policies governing immigration. If campaigners, academics, and publics continue to work to shift government attitudes away from hostility and towards humanity and human rights, outcomes for the lives of people seeking asylum could be transformed.

The voices of people seeking asylum themselves are fundamental to transforming the system. Many of the research participants worked in environments which curated interactions and interconnections between residents, newcomers, people seeking asylum, and policymakers. These spaces were vital in allowing the sharing of experiences of migration with those willing and ready to listen and implement changes.

Transformation of the UK asylum system is not only a legal necessity to comply with international human rights law, but a moral imperative for the rights and lives of those seeking a new chance at life.

**Acknowledgements**

*Thank you to my supervisor Dr George Palattiyil and to all those who so generously gave their time and experiences in interviews. Thank you to the RGS, Sarah Marie Hall, Elizabeth Ackerley and Santiago Leyva del rio for curating this space to share and develop ideas.*

**Image source**

Mundy, J. (2023). Falmouth's 2nd protest against the Bibby Stockholm vessel being modified by AP to hold 500 refugees. Alamy Stock Photo. [Online] Available at: https://www.alamy.com/falmouths-2nd-protest-against-the-bibby-stockholm-vessel-being-modified-by-ap-to-hold-500-refugees-image554133347.html Last accessed: 10th Feb 2024

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