Welcome to Britain

Anti-immigrant populism and the asylum invasion complex

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Imogen Tyler looks at how the manufacture of an asylum invasion complex within the public sphere aided the passing of UK legislation that reconstituted the refugee as a "national abject". That is, as a (likely bogus) asylum-seeker subject to destitution, detention and exclusion.

In May 2003, Abas Amini, a Kurdish-Iranian asylum seeker, stitched up his mouth, ears and eyes in protest against a decision by the British government to deport him. 30-year-old Amini had been repeatedly detained for his political activism in Iran, spending a cumulative total of six years of his life in prison. A poet, atheist and a member of an underground communist organisation, he had been involved in a Kurdish resistance movement from the age of 12, but in later years his primary act of protest was the writing of poetry critical of the Islamic Republic, which he distributed at social and political gatherings. Amini was well known in Iran for his dissenting verse about figures in the regime such as Ayatollah Sadeq Givi “the hanging judge”. During periods of imprisonment in Iran, Amini suffered long spells in solitary confinement, beatings (often on the soles of his feet) and mock executions where he was suspended off the ground, on some occasions for more than two days. Amini escaped from prison and a 22-year prison sentence in June 2001, after friends bribed a guard to release him. Leaving his wife, children and siblings behind in Iranian Kurdistan he escaped across the border to Turkey and then crossed over to Greece, where he stayed for several months. “He then hid on a boat going to Italy and took a train to France, locking himself in the toilets for most of the journey north. He reached England by strapping himself to the bottom of a truck going through the Channel Tunnel” (Hodge, 2004).

Despite the stop-overs en route to Britain, Amini’s lawyers felt his claim for political asylum in Britain would be straightforward. Not only was Amini known to be a vocal opponent of the regime in Iran, he had medical evidence of the torture he had endured in prison. He waited for two years to hear if his application for political asylum was successful, during which time his case was adjourned five times. In the spring of 2003, he was finally granted leave to remain, but a few weeks later he received a letter informing him that Home Office had launched an appeal against the decision of the immigration
court. Destitute and facing deportation Amini, in his words, “couldn’t take any more […] the pressure on me was so huge that I got to the point where I thought there was no hope” (in Branigan, 2003). Amini made the decision to die in Britain rather than be returned to detention and torture in an Iranian prison: “I would rather die like this gradually, a thousand times than face the injustices, the oppression, the lack of any human rights or any humanity I was facing in Iran” (in Lyall, 2003). So he found himself, standing before a mirror in his Nottingham home, needle and thread in his hand, determined to communicate and protest his abject situation.

If Amini’s protest began as a singular act of revolt, it rapidly garnered wider support as 200 people gathered in solidarity in the street in front of the modest terraced house in which he lived. His home was transformed into a shrine for anti-deportation activism, adorned with printed and handwritten posters and banners, declaring “Abas Amini is our friend”, “FREEDOM”, “EQUALITY”, “HUMANITY has NO BORDERS”. The Federation of Iranian Refugees, together with other migrants, asylum advocacy groups and human-rights activists, briefly transformed this small part of Nottingham into a place of resistance to protest the incremental erosion of the rights to asylum within the British state.

Since Britain began to institute its inhumane asylum system in the 1990s, lip-sewing, hunger strikes self-harm and suicides have become ordinary features of national life for those caught in the “abject diaspora”, the “deportspora” at the borders of the British state (Nyers, 2003: 1070). Indeed, there have been hundreds of protests by asylum-seekers in Britain, but few of them have received any significant mainstream media coverage.

There was nothing exceptional then about Amini’s case or his protest, except for the extraordinary media attention it garnered. For his protest not only gathered local support but attracted significant national and international news coverage and it continues to have a considerable documentary after-life in activist publications, newspaper stories, photographs, theatrical plays, art works and exhibitions, in academic writing on migrancy and citizenship, and in scholarly work on abject aesthetics and body-protest. In short, through this protest, Amini became “an international cause célèbre” for those who oppose the British government’s systematic erosion of the rights to asylum.

Writing here a decade later, I want to consider Amini’s protest as a political parable through which to examine the constellation of historical, political and economic forces which gave rise to the fabrication and institution of an “asylum invasion complex” within the British state. This mapping of the asylum-invasion complex will focus on the public stigmatization of asylum-seekers as revolting subjects during the period of New Labour government (1997-2010), but speaks to current worsening social and economic conditions and rising xenophobia against irregular migrants across Europe.

The invasion complex

One of the most powerful British national myths is that this state has an ancient and proud history of granting asylum to foreign nationals fleeing religious or political persecution. Despite the continued repetition of this myth, in reality those welcomed to Britain, and those banished from its territorial space, have long been classified,
differentiated and hierarchized along class, ethnic and racial lines according to the prevailing ideological, political and economic climate of the time. It was in the Victorian era that the myth of the “ancient right of asylum” became embedded in national life, as part of Britain’s self-fashioned imperial identity as a Paternalistic, liberal and civilizing force in the world (see Porter, 1979). In the face of international pressure to deport a number of high-profile political asylum-seekers in 1853, a Times editorial pronounced:

Every civilized people on the face of the earth must be fully aware that this country is the asylum of nations, and that it will defend the asylum to the last ounce of its treasure, and the last drop of its blood. There is no point whatsoever on which we are prouder and more resolute [...] We are a nation of refugees. [...] all Europe knows and respects the asylum of these isles (in Porter, 1979: 7)

Karl Marx, then a German political refugee who later died stateless in London in 1883, is retrospectively celebrated as one of those dangerous political agitators whom foreign governments called on Britain to expulse. In a letter published in The Spectator, The Sun and The Northern Star in 1850 in response to a proposed revision of the 1798 Alien Bill which would allow the British government to deport undesirable foreign nationals, Marx (along with Friedrich Engels and August Willich) described “the long-established reputation of England as safest asylum for refugees of all parties and of all countries” (Marx, Engels, & Willich, 1850).

A campaigner for the rights of refugees, Marx was highly critical of what he perceived as the erosion of rights to asylum in Britain. In particular, he was concerned with the double-standards around the promotion of a liberal rhetoric of asylum, and the British government’s imperialist policies which were producing increasing numbers of political and economic migrants. Given his politics, Marx was most concerned about the impact of internal migration from the wider British Isles to English industrial towns and cities, which he perceived to be creating ethnic divisions and hatreds within the proletariat population. Hence, he focused his critical attention on migrations effected by the pauperization of rural peasants in England and the Scottish highlands, and on the mass evictions, religious and political persecution of Irish peasants (Ireland was then under English rule).

As Marx notes in an 1853 New York Daily Tribune article titled “Forced Emigration”:

Begin with pauperising the inhabitants of a country, and when there is no more profit to be ground out of them, when they have grown a burden to the revenue, drive them away, and sum up your Net Revenue! (Marx, 1853)

As Marx argued, while up to 2,000 upper and middle-class political refugees (like him) lived relatively freely in the London during the nineteenth century, largely tolerated by the Government and frequently mobilized in boastful political rhetoric as evidence of British liberalism, the vast majority of migrants were treated with suspicion and ruthlessly exploited by industrial capitalists. Migrants from Ireland were undoubtedly the most widely despised, criminalized and stigmatized group in this period. As a Times editorial on Irish immigration to the English mainland put it:
Ireland is pouring into the cities, and even the villages of this island, a fetid torrent of famine, nakedness, dirt and fever. ...Who knows how soon every suburb, and even every court and lane of this city, may exhibit, or rather conceal, within narrower limits, and in more frightful accumulation, the horrors of Sligo, Bantry, Scull, and Skibbereen? (The Times, 1847: 4)

This nineteenth century migrant invasion complex imagined Irish immigrants as a catastrophic natural disaster, a fetid torrent of diseased bodies overwhelming the borders of the national-body. In fact, Marx and Engels were also guilty of reproducing essentialist pejorative and stigmatizing stereotypes about Irish migrants in their writings. However, they were also pivotal in exposing the gaps between political rhetoric, policy and practice around asylum and migrant labour in the nineteenth century. As Engels argued, the English industrial revolution was dependent upon “the numerous and impoverished population of Ireland a reserve at command” (Engels, 1887). As we shall see, this argument prefigures contemporary debates about neoliberal economics and cheap migrant labour, and the ways in which migrant labourers are (better) exploited through their stigmatization and criminalization (De Genova, 2011). Marx and Engels also highlighted the central role of the news media in inciting ethnic hatreds and antagonisms towards migrants, particularly amongst an indigenous (white) working class. As Marx wrote:

Every industrial and commercial centre in England now possesses a working class divided into two hostile camps, English proletarians and Irish proletarians. The ordinary English worker hates the Irish worker as a competitor who lowers his standard of life. [...] He cherishes religious, social, and national prejudices against the Irish worker. [...] This antagonism is artificially kept alive and intensified by the press, the pulpit, the comic papers, in short, by all the means at the disposal of the ruling classes. This antagonism is the secret of the impotence of the English working class, despite its organization. It is the secret by which the capitalist class maintains its power. And the latter is quite aware of this (Marx, 1870, my emphasis).

What Marx identifies here is the ways in which ill-feeling towards migrants was deliberately incited and inflamed in media discourses and by community leaders, as a way of both assuaging class-based political grievances against factory owners and more thoroughly capitalizing native and migrant workers.

This Irish invasion discourse portended a major shift in British immigration policy at the turn of the twentieth century, when a considerable political and popular backlash gathered steam against both impoverished migrants (primarily Jewish immigrants from the Pale of Settlement) and the sheltering of political asylum-seekers. The Aliens Act of 1905 introduced new immigration controls into British law, bestowing the state with powers to register, refuse entry to and deport undesirable migrants. The day after the act was passed an effusive editorial in the Manchester Evening Chronicle stated that, “the dirty, destitute, diseased, verminous and criminal foreigner who dumps himself on our soil and rates simultaneously, shall be forbidden to land” (Editorial, 1905: 2). The same politics of disgust still shapes contemporary media representations of the diseased and
criminalized bodies of “illegal” migrants pressing at the borders and “swamping” schools, hospitals and communities. To take one example from Britain’s best-selling newspaper The Sun in 2003, a few months before Amini’s protest: “BOGUS asylum seekers are bringing HIV, TB and hepatitis B to our shores” (The Sun, 2003). Or a more recent example from 2014 which speaks to current conditions of austerity across Europe: “Asylum cheats make £1.2m a year with fake poverty claims” (The Express, 2014). Since the mid-1990s, the figure of “the asylum-seeker” has been reconfigured from a mythic figure worthy of state-hospitality into an exemplary “national abject” (Tyler, 2013). As the philosopher Giorgio Agamben suggests, “the paradox here is that precisely the figure that should have incarnated the rights of man par excellence, the refugee, constitutes instead the radical crisis [of the concept of rights]” (Agamben, 1995). How and why did this happen?

The fabrication of the asylum seeker

The United Kingdom is a signatory to the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. The Convention was initially conceived as a protection for European refugees displaced by World War II, but a 1967 Protocol radically expanded its global scope. According to Article 1 of this convention, a refugee is a person who:

Owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country (UNHCR, 2012).

Whilst the term “refugee” has a specific international legal genealogy, the term “asylum-seeker” only began to gain significant political, legal and popular currency in the UK in the 1990s. In contrast to the term refugee, which names a (legal) status arrived at, the concept of the asylum-seeker invokes the non-status of a person who has not been recognized as a refugee. Asylum-seekers are thus people paradoxically classified as pending recognition as a class. It was by inscribing the category of asylum-seeker in British law, through the enactment of a series of punitive asylum laws and policies, and through the simultaneous constitution of the figure of the bogus asylum-seeker in public culture, that Britain was able to manoeuvre around the rights of the refugee and its international obligations as a signatory to the 1951 convention. Empirical evidence suggests that even though a minority of asylum claims are weak or deceitful, the majority of migrants seeking asylum have come from countries “where human rights violations and conflict are pervasive” (Schuster in Gibney, 2011).

According to national statistics, asylum applications in the UK rose from 4,256 in 1987 to a peak of 84,130 in 2002 (Gibney, 2011). This dramatic rise was a consequence of a series of conflicts: in 2001 for example, people fleeing from conflicts in Iraq, Iran, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Sri Lanka, Somalia and Afghanistan made up nearly half of the total of applications. All conflicts which British military interventions, British foreign policies and British arms manufacturers played a part. The issue of asylum came to dominate the political agenda of the New Labour Government (1997-2010) as asylum figures began to rise as a share of net migration (Spencer in Gibney, 2011). Indeed between 2001 and 2004, the Prime Minister Tony Blair held more meetings about the
issue of asylum than any other single issue except Iraq (which was invaded by the US and UK in 2003) (Gibney, 2011). During this period the Government was trying to redesign immigration policies in ways which would attract more migrant workers to Britain in order to sustain economic competitiveness in the global marketplace. Attempts to implement “managed migration” policies which would open Britain’s borders to migrant workers were politically unpopular, with claims made from the political Left and Right that neoliberal economic policies were pulling too many migrants to Britain, driving down wages (as intended), creating unemployment, putting a strain on welfare and education systems, and deepening ethnic and racial tensions. The “refugee crisis” presented a political opportunity to steer the immigration debate away from the issue of migrant workers, towards refugees, a class of migrants who, through processes of legal (re-)classification and the institution of draconian policies that would exclude them from state welfare systems, and bar them from paid work, would be construed as the major “immigration problem” of the time.

The New Labour government introduced six major pieces of asylum legislation variously aimed at accelerating the asylum process, expanding detention capacity, increasing deportations (through fast-tracking), and enforcing destitution on failed asylum-seekers ostensibly in order to encourage them to return to countries of origin (Gibney, 2004; Gibney, 2011). Not only was there little mainstream political opposition to the incremental introduction of this new asylum regime, but the Conservative opposition appealed throughout this period for even harsher measures to be implemented, including the adoption of the Australian policy of detaining all asylum-seekers on arrival. The New Labour Government initially rebutted rightwing calls for mass detention, but following the US terrorist attacks in September 2001 this was adopted as policy: “Detain all asylum-seekers” screamed a Sun newspaper headline in January 2003, amidst claims that “Ministers were urged to lock up all asylum seekers after September 11 to prevent other terror strikes” (Cecil, 2003). After the 7/7 London bombings of 2005, The Daily Express ran with headline “Bombers are all sponging asylum-seekers” the sub-headline read “Britain gave them refuge and now they want to repay us with death”. In actuality, none of the bombers where or had been asylum-seekers.

In the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Bill (2002) the Government committed itself to the massive expansion of its immigration detention capacity. In what home secretary David Blunkett described as an “end to end system” it was proposed that all asylum-seekers arriving in the UK be imprisoned in “induction centres” once processed they would be moved either to “accommodation centres” or “removal centres” from which they would be deported. Within this regime of continual imprisonment, it was imagined that most asylum-seekers would never set foot on British soil proper.

During their administration, the New Labour government was also at the vanguard of European Union attempts to “off-shore detention”, through the creation of “regional protection zones”. Tony Blair was a key architect of “Fortress Europe” policies, which saw the emergence of extraordinary transnational partnerships and regional confederacies to manage irregular migration from the Global South through the lifting of arms embargoes and the development of new trade deals with (primarily North African) states bordering Europe.

As a consequence of the asylum laws introduced under New Labour, if you arrive in the
UK today to claim refugee status under the 1951 Convention, you enter an extremely complex bureaucratic system. During the period while you are waiting for your application to be processed, you are given “temporary admission” to the UK which means that, while your physical presence is lawful, you are “legally considered not to have entered the country” (Sawyer and Turpin in Gibney, 2011). This paradoxical status not only enables border officials to speed up removal in the event of a failed claim, but conversely makes your status in terms of the rights and protections of the state radically uncertain. As the geographer Alison Mountz describes it, migrants are “treated as though they are walking through the long tunnels of an international airport” (2010: xiv); they are not yet landed. This ambiguity was made possible through the institution of the asylum-seeker as a legal category and is conferred upon migrants through a series of surveillance and control technologies: you are issued with an asylum-seeker’s identity card (“smart cards” that carry fingerprints and photographs), you have to register at regional border and immigration offices sometimes more than once a week, you are subject to detention, dispersal and electronic tagging, you are barred from access to paid work, “confirming public stereotypes that asylum seekers are simply a drain on the public purse and do not contribute to society” (Gibney, 2011). You have limited access to health care, social housing and economic support and, unless you are a child, have no access to state education. In these ways asylum-seekers are locked within interstitial processing zones, struggling through a process which they hope might end with them actually legally disembarking on sovereign territory (Mountz, 2010). Deprived of recognition and rights, asylum seekers find themselves in a state of suspension outside of regimes of citizen rights.

Through the implementation of a series of legal strategies and policy manipulations, the ability of an asylum-seeker to mount a successful case or appeal for leave to remain has also become increasingly precarious. Since 2005, even if an initial asylum application is granted, it applies for only five years, after which the case will be reviewed, with the ever-present threat that “[t]his may lead to your status being revoked and removal from the UK” (Home Office, 2012). If your asylum claim is refused, your situation becomes rapidly dire. All benefits and housing are automatically removed after twenty-one days (unless you have children). As a consequence there are “hundreds of thousands of people currently living in the UK” who are unwilling or unable to return to their countries of origin but have no access to state welfare and no means of legally securing a livelihood through paid work (Crawley, Hemmings, & Price, 2011). The public was told that this legislation, while harsh, was necessary and was driven by a deterrence agenda which sought to diminish asylum “pull factors” to the UK. A decline in asylum applications, to 17,916 in 2010, is often cited as evidence of the positive impact of these deterrence principles (Gibney, 2011).

**Soft touch Britain**

Didier Bigo argues that “the securitization of immigration” is legitimated by a consensus that the nation-state is a vulnerable, precarious body “over whose boundaries control is sought” (Bigo, 2002: 65). The legislation which reconstituted the refugee as a national abject was made possible by the manufacturing of an asylum invasion complex within the public sphere. This invasion complex hinged on the accumulation of political and media representations of Britain as a “soft touch”. Until its solicitation as a metaphor for the emasculated nation-state (see Mountz, 2010), “soft touch” was a term ordinarily used to
describe a person who is naive, gullible and easily imposed upon, somebody who might be swindled or taken advantage of. From the early 1990s onwards, the repeated citation of images and metaphors of national softness invoked an image of Britain as a feminized and disabled body. The three main beliefs condensed in this idea were that Britain’s borders were too porous, that sovereign self-determination was being disabled by “insane” liberal human rights laws, and that citizens where too easily affected by the (bogus) suffering of others. As the idea of “soft-touch Britain” circulated with increasing frequency and strength it incited and sanctioned public fear, anxiety, and disgust against refugees which would, in the space of a decade, completely transform the very meaning of asylum.

It is easy to track this amplification through citations of “soft-touch Britain” within British newspapers and political commentary. For example, in October 2000, the BBC drew upon the results of a Mori poll which presented evidence that “Eight out of ten believe that refugees come to Britain because they regard it as ‘a soft touch’”, and that “Too much is done to help immigrants and asylum seekers” (BBC News, 2000). In February 2001, a headline in The Sun stated that Britain is “a soft touch for every scrounger on the planet” (Travis, 2000) and a Daily Mail headline claimed that “Britain is seen as the softest of soft touches” (The Daily Mail, 2000). This rhetoric of softness was voiced by powerful political actors and public figures within the state as they jostled to be seen as the “toughest” through repeated accusations of the “softness” of their opponents. In April 2000, for instance, Leader of the opposition Conservative Party, William Hague declared that the Labour Government had turned Britain into “the biggest soft touch in the world” and promised to imprison all asylum applicants on their arrival at the borders (in Barkham, 2000; and see Hague, 2001).

Media theatrics

The scale of the disgust directed against asylum-seekers in newspapers was extraordinary. A 2006 report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees detailed that The Sun, Daily Mail, Daily Express, Daily Star (and their three Sunday editions) had together produced 8,163 scare stories about asylum-seekers in the five years from 1 January 2000 to 1 January 2006 (Guterres, 2006). The negative coverage of asylum-seekers peaked in around 2003, a year in which the Daily Express ran 22 front-page asylum-scare stories in one 31-day period (Migrant and Refugee Communities Forum, 2011). In the same year The Sun began a campaign to “Stop the asylum madness” which instructed readers to cut or print out and sign a petition to the Government to stop “the asylum meltdown”.

THOUSANDS of angry Sun readers yesterday rushed to join our campaign to save Britain from asylum madness. Our office was flooded with emails, faxes and petition coupons demanding the Government acts now to stop the country from being a soft touch for illegal immigrants. In our Read This And Get Mad article we told how 1,500 illegal immigrants get into Britain every WEEK. [...] Gerald McTaggart said: “When is Blair and Blunkett going to stop these parasites from entering our country. The only reason they are coming here is to get as many free handouts as possible.” [...] TORY leader Iain Duncan Smith warned last night that many refugees have terror links. Visiting a West London school, he said: People are coming out of the asylum system who have terrorist backgrounds. It’s a real
The confusion of categories of migrants in this extract is telling. The torrent of anti-refugee publicity over this decade produced the new figure of the “bogus asylum-seeker”: refugees, “illegal immigrants” and terrorists where are rolled together into one revolting parasitical figure. According to Hansard, the edited verbatim report of proceedings of both the House of Commons and the House of Lords, there were approximately 512 references to bogus asylum-seekers in the Houses of Commons and Lords in between 1991 and 2005. While some MPs and Lords were contesting the use of this phrase, and expressing concerns about the racial tensions it was creating in communities, the vast majority employed the term in a pejorative way. By way of contrast in the 1980s, there were only 8 mentions of “bogus asylum-seeker” recorded in Hansard. Indeed, the consensus between the two main political parties on the issue of asylum was striking. For example on 1 January 2001, the MP (now Lord) Michael Heseltine wrote an “exclusive” article for The Mail in which he stated that:

As Deputy Prime Minister [in 1995-97] ... I came to three stark conclusions. The first is that a very large number of those seeking asylum are cheats, quite deliberately making bogus claims and false allegations in order to get into this country. [...] The second was that the demands on scarce housing and medical care made by dishonest “economic migrants” was likely to stretch the patience of voters and I could well understand why. The third was that the problem of phoney asylum-seekers was likely to grow as the impression spread that this country was a soft touch. Above all, I could see no reason why my most vulnerable constituents – honest and hard-working people who had paid their taxes all their lives – should be pushed to the back of the queue for housing and hospital treatment by dubious asylum-seekers (Geddes, 2005, pp. 331-332).

It is not simply that the asylum-seeker became a scapegoat for public grievances but that fear-inducing speech constituted the figure of bogus asylum-seeker. It was this inflammatory but authoritative language that legitimated the consensus that society was under siege.

In a submission to the 2011 Leveson Enquiry into the culture, practices and ethics of the British press, the Migrant and Refugee Communities Forum detailed how a million “asylum madness” petitions from Sun readers “were periodically taken in a large number of sacks, with Sun photographers in tow, and dumped at the Home Office” (Migrant and Refugee Communities Forum, 2011). The Home Office wouldn't have been surprised to receive these sacks of petitions; it is an open secret that Downing Street press officers not only knew about The Sun’s anti-asylum campaign before Sun readers did, but that the Government was working in concert with the tabloid press (Dean, 2012). Together, figures in the highest level of Government joined forces with corporate news media organizations to ratchet up public fears about an imminent asylum catastrophe. Asylum fear stories sold newspapers and were a means of authorizing what Eiko Thielemann describes as a “competitive downgrading of refugee protection standards” (Thielemann, 2004: 47). The figure of the bogus asylum-seeker transformed public perceptions of refugees and came to be inscribed on migrant bodies in everyday spaces as they were increasingly perceived as suspect foreign bodies.

The neoliberal economics of illegality

Neoliberal policies such as privatization, deregulation, unrestricted foreign investment
and the contracting-out of state-run services, are dependent upon the porosity of borders to flows of capital including the availability of precarious migrant labour. Thus there is a major discrepancy between policies aimed at curbing immigration and the sustained demand for cheap migrant labour. It is in the context of this “double agenda” of state-formation and economic management, securing the borders and opening the borders, that refugees became scapegoats. The manufacture of “the asylum problem” was an attempt to manage and assuage public opinion. The abject reclassification of the asylum-seeker, in concert with the institution of concrete policies of destitution, detention and exclusion directed towards this population, has been capitalized upon, politically and economically, in three central ways:

1. The punitive treatment of asylum-seekers and other unwelcome classes of irregular migrants has been employed rhetorically to symbolize territorial sovereignty and strengthen the affective ties of national belonging in the face of the erosion of the welfare-state. The securitization of state borders is most visibly evident in the mushrooming of for-profit immigrant prisons which operate as “performances of political closure designed to assuage those made vulnerable by [a] neoliberal economic trajectory” (McNevin, 2007: 611). That is, the abject figure of the bogus asylum-seeker (often conflated since 2001 with the figure of the Muslim terrorist) became increasingly constitutive of public articulations of national belonging.

2. The implementation of asylum laws has proved enormously costly, labour-intensive and profitable. The securitizing of asylum has opened up significant “asylum markets” enabling global securities conglomerates to penetrate further into the economic and social fabric of the nation-state (Grayson, 2012b).

Activist John Grayson has detailed the ways in which “Private security firms have come to dominate detention, transport and escort services for asylum seekers, displacing politically accountable public provision” (Grayson, 2012a). Despite many complaints and official reports about the degrading and inhumane treatment of migrants within private for-profit detention centres, and alarming numbers of incidents of self-harm, suicides, riots, fires and hunger strikes, the tenders granted to these companies by the Government have continued to mushroom: It is estimated that the private security business in the UK is now worth 3.97 billion pounds sterling per annum (Grayson, 2012a; Krahmann, 2009). Whilst the political rhetoric of austerity economics justifies this out-sourcing in terms of cost-benefit considerations (those employed by private companies are paid lower-wages than public sector workers), in actuality detaining asylum-seekers costs significantly more than detaining citizens in state-run prisons. The marketization of asylum created a precedent for the further out-sourcing of previously state-run and state-accountable services and industries. G4S, for example, is now involved in the running of education services, prisons, police services, forensic crime services and hospitals. In short, asylum seekers were not only political scapegoats but also experimental subjects in a programme of neoliberal economic reform.

3. Despite the huge amounts of tax-payers” money which is handed to multi-
nationals to manage the borders, most failed asylum-seekers and irregular
migrants determined to be illegal are not deported but remain in limbo “under excruciatingly vulnerable socio-political conditions” (De Genova, 2011). The gap between labour demands and the tightening of citizenship regimes, and border and immigration controls, has led to a substantial increase in irregular migration to Europe. As Hein De Haas argues “policies to “fight illegal migration” are bound to fail because they are among the very causes of the phenomenon they pretend to combat” (2008: 16). This recalls Marx and Engels’s account of the dual political and economic function of the vilification of Irish migrants in the nineteenth century, who, through incessant stigmatization became a political scapegoat for “native” workers’ rage against their own exploitation, held responsible for driving down wages while constituting a highly exploitable labour force for industrial capitalists. “IMMIGRANTS have snatched 160,000 jobs from British-born workers in just five years” detailed a recent Express headline (Express, 2014).

Conclusion: Fearless speech

I began this essay with Abas Amini, whose protest, in 2003 at the height of the asylum invasion complex, provocatively staged the violent political economy of asylum which had transformed failed asylum-seekers into “human waste”. Some refugee organizations express disquiet about forms of protest which spectacularize state violence suggesting that “the more outlandish the trauma” the harder it is to get “the public” to relate to asylum-seekers as human like them (see Gill et. al, 2012: 28). From this perspective, a focus on trauma and violence and the divisive debates generated by radical actions such as Amini’s are perceived as a hindrance to the work of migrant and refugee advocacy and activism. In one respect these criticisms are correct in that Amini generated exactly the kind of deterrent publicity which the New Labour Government sought. However, Amini refused to be the abject other of the British state, or a (passive) object of humanitarian protection. Rather, by acting out his abjection, he challenges us to confront him as a political actor, a migrant activist. Through “grotesque mimicry” Amini wanted to make the everyday violence of xenophobic discourses and practices visible in another register (Bhabha, 1983: 27). His intention was to communicate the juridified state of dispossession he found himself in by transforming his abjection into a form of political speech (see Rygiel, 2010). As one newspaper headline put it, “He found his voice by stitching up his lips” (Branigan, 2003). This protest was an expression of being made abject and a refusal of its mummifying effects. At the height of asylum invasion hysteria, Amini insisted that his face was a true face of Britain.

After 11 days of protest and after the British Government withdrew its appeal, Amini allowed the stitches to be cut open stating to a journalist that “getting rid of the stitches to open my mouth is not a sign of surrender. I want to stay alive to continue the struggle” (BBC News, 2003). An astute and seasoned activist, Amini was intent on capitalizing on the publicity his protest had generated, Amini wrote a poem to mark the occasion, which was spoken on his behalf to the friends, supporters and journalists who gathered outside his home.

He sewed up his lips so he could speak out.
He sewed up his eyes to make others see.
He sewed up his ears to make others hear
You whose eyes, ears and mouth are free can hear and speak out.  
(Hodge, 2004)

The third person grammar of Amini’s poem reflects the fact it was intended to be read out by somebody else. Amini could barely speak after 11 days with limited fluids and no food. However, the use of “he” also meant that his poem could be spoken by the many hundreds of thousands of others living in unbearable and prolonged states of radical uncertainty as they await the outcome of claims for refugee status or languish in destitution in the hidden enclaves and internal borders of the state. Further, as is clear from the final sentence of the poem asking the reader/listener to “speak out”, the poem is intended to move others to action.

The possibilities of resistance to migrant abjection lie not in singular acts of resistance but in the building of wider communities of struggle that question the inclusive/exclusive logic of citizenship, the economics of illegality and the global marketization of migration. It was not Amini’s protest but the publicity which it generated that transformed him into a counter-political figure of resistance against the injustice of Britain’s asylum laws and policies.

The after-life of Amini’s protest is testament to the ways in which the “theatricalization of political rage” (Butler, 1993: 233) can trouble prevailing forms of common-sense about the meaning of democracy and rights. Whilst Amini was immobilized at the borders of Britain, his protest crossed borders and freely travelled the globe.

The artist Phil Collins’s photograph of Amini, abbas amini 2003 was displayed in galleries across the world his story was retold in Alan Lyddiard’s travelling theatrical production 1001 Nights Now in 2005, and he appeared in Tony Harrison’s play Fram in 2008. Fram appropriately explores the ability of art and poetry to communicate horror and injustice and effect social change. Fram centres on draws on the extraordinary life of Fridtjof Nansen, the Norwegian explorer and humanitarian campaigner who became the first High Commissioner for Refugees for the League of Nations in 1921. In Fram, Harrison depicts Amini as a tragic figure of mythic proportions, a messenger who haunts and exposes the failure of refugee politics, singing through sewn-lips as he ascends to the after-world of poets.

While protests like Amini’s might register as little more than minor disturbances within the public sphere, the restaging and repetition of these acts form part of a critical practice of counter-mapping which creates an unravelable fabric of political resistance within the state and beyond its borders. It is the accumulation of “small acts” which strains against the invisibility and inaudibility of abject lives within the borders of the British state and beyond.

Bibliography


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