

## Slow violence in the UK asylum system

An interview with Jonathan Darling on his book  
»Systems of Suffering: dispersal and the denial of asylum«

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**Abstract:** In summer 2022 the UK government made the headlines for violent measures on refugees. Then Home Secretary Priti Patel announced plans to deport refugees to Rwanda (Williams 2022). While deportation and detention often attract the attention of journalists and activists, more subtle forms of everyday violence in the UK asylum system remain side notes, says geographer Jonathan Darling. With his latest book »Systems of Suffering: dispersal and the denial of asylum« (2022, Pluto Books) he offers an evidence-based account of the *slow violence* of distributing and accommodating asylum seekers. In this interview, Jonathan talks about *dispersal*, the main concept developed through the study and embeds it within a politico-administrative environment increasingly shaped by market-orientation and outsourcing. He provides a thorough account of how this system affects refugees and asylum seekers while being aware of the agency that remain for these and for grassroots initiatives. It is refreshing that Jonathan is not satisfied with a negative critique of a cruel system. Instead he develops an eight-point proposal for systemic change that foregrounds ›collaborative care‹. The interview took place in November 2022.

**Keywords:** refugee distribution and accommodation, neoliberalism, United Kingdom, agency, collaborative care

**Stephan:** To begin with, Jonathan, I want to ask you, what was your motivation of studying the accommodation and distribution of refugees and asylum seekers in the UK?

**Jonathan:** I came to this topic because I've done some previous work for a number of years on sanctuary movements and sanctuary organisations in the UK and a little bit in Europe. In the conversations that I was having with people in the asylum system, one of the key things that people were talking about was their housing conditions and the things that brought them to those cities, which was partly their journeys to flee conflict and persecution, but also the system that the government had in place to distribute people across the country whilst they're awaiting decisions on their asylum status. I then became interested, on what basis does that system operate? How does

it work? How do people experience it? And are there significant differences if you're distributed to Sheffield, Newcastle or somewhere else? So, I came to it through previous research and arrived at this question of *dispersal*, this is the system that I'm talking about and that is at the heart of the book.

**Stephan:** You start the book with two anecdotes and they are about the asylum-seeking market. What do you mean by that and why is it important for the book to start with?

**Jonathan:** The asylum-seeking market has two meanings. One of them is the meaning that opens the book, which is a statement from a representative of the international security outsourcing firm G4S<sup>1</sup>, who said in evidence to a parliamentary committee in the UK that his company was working in the »asylum-seeking market«, by which he referred to the contracts that that company had to accommodate and support asylum seekers in Britain. I was quite struck by this statement: On the one hand, because I think it was the first time that there was any public discussion or recognition that this was a market. And, on the other hand, there was no real response. The statement was made, but there was no kind of political pushback. There was no press coverage or even really much activist response initially. And I was interested in why that was the case, because in effect, this was an admission that this company was taking highly vulnerable individuals and marketising the support for them and this had become normalised and unquestioned as a way to provide accommodation and support and I wanted to explore how that has happened and how profit making had become so central to asylum support. The importance of the asylum market in the work that I was doing was that the accommodation of asylum seekers in the UK used to be provided by the state through local government. And since 2012 it has been provided still by the state, but contracted and outsourced to private companies and private landlords. That is quite a different relationship. And it is that marketisation, this sort of production of profit from vulnerability that I think is quite distinct here. And I was trying to speak to that with that phrase.

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1 | G4S are a multinational security contractor based in Britain and with a range of international contracts for security services, including a central role in international migration industries. In the UK, G4S hold contracts to run a number of immigration detention and removal centres and to coordinate deportation flights from the UK. From 2012-2019, G4S held a contract to provide asylum accommodation and used a range of subcontracted private landlords to deliver this housing.

**Stephan:** Let's get to the to the main concept that you develop in the book, which is the concept of *dispersal*. What is *dispersal*?

**Jonathan:** *Dispersal*, on the one hand, is a policy. It was announced in the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act, but it actually started in 2000. And what it does in effect is that if you arrive in the UK to seek asylum, you will normally be accommodated, certainly in theory, for the first week or two in an initial reception centre somewhere in the south of England. And then you will be dispersed or distributed across the country to towns and cities where there is accommodation. And you will stay there until the state has made a decision on your asylum claim. It is a similar system to others in many European countries. Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium have varying *dispersal* systems, the nuances of which are slightly different. One of the key facets of the UK system is that historically it has always involved accommodation in the community. So that has meant sharing a house with other people in the asylum system or maybe sharing a flat. But doing so alongside other UK residents in towns and cities as opposed to more segregated or camp like accommodation and specific reception centres that we see in some European countries. *Dispersal* is that process, and it's important to point out here that this is a process that people in the asylum system don't have a choice in. The only choice is that you can completely opt out of *dispersal* and say you don't want accommodation, but by doing so you have to provide your own accommodation. That is an option that is only open to a very small number of people, particularly those with very strong social networks or family connections. Anyone else has to be dispersed. And if you opt out of accommodation, you also opt out of support. That means you are no longer eligible for any financial support from the state. People are tied into this system and the way that it operates as a governing mechanism, is that people have no choice about where they're sent. You might arrive in the south of England and be put on a bus to Glasgow in Scotland or to Newcastle in the north of England or to Birmingham or Cardiff. And again, you have no influence over that decision-making. It is a means of tethering people to specific locations and making sure that you're able to control and regulate their mobility. And it also represents a means of making it potentially easier to detain and deport people through the immigration and asylum process. So that's sort of its function.

**Stephan:** What is the second feature of *dispersal*?

**Jonathan:** One of the arguments I make in the book is that *dispersal* also has a kind of social function as well. It's a distribution of different types of worth, social worth and moral value. There's a kind of political and governance function which is fixing

people and moving people around, but it's also a set of social and cultural messages that are attached to it, that people in the asylum system are in a parallel system to forms of mainstream welfare and entitlement. By being able to shunt people around and move them without their say in that process, you're conveying a message about the value of those individuals and the ways in which the state can afford to treat them, that they're not worthy of the same forms of dignity and respect that other residents or citizens would be.

**Stephan:** In the book you write that *dispersal* actually doesn't attract the same attention in media and also activism compared to deportation and detention. Why does *dispersal* get so much less attention?

**Jonathan:** I think there's a number of reasons. One is that it's less of a spectacle. *Dispersal* is part of everyday life in many ways. So for the vast majority of people in the asylum system in the UK, they will be dispersed and they will be living at some stage of the process in *dispersal* accommodation. It's something that really affects a large number of people in that system. But as a result, it's therefore very normalised. The forms of suffering that I write about in the book are much slower, reflecting Rob Nixon's (2013) idea of »slow violence«. But they're also very banal and every day. Compared to the much more overt and in some ways eventful suffering and violence of things like immigration detention and deportation, particularly thinking right now in the UK context of things like the Rwanda policy to deport people very violently out of the country, the everyday banality of really poor housing conditions, of not having a choice over these things, it becomes easier to overlook those conditions and experiences. But part of the argument that I make is that we really shouldn't be overlooking these forms of everyday violence and harm because, a) they affect a large number of people and b) they're the conditions within which really significant concerns around mental health develop. I think it's hard for media and activists in some ways to focus solely on those factors because they do become normal elements of everyday life and also because they're tied into systems of disadvantage, of poverty and of poor housing conditions and a lack of support from the state that extends far beyond asylum. It's important to recognise that whilst the poor housing conditions of people in the asylum system are significant, there are also thousands of private rented tenants across the UK who also live in very poor accommodation conditions. Part of the argument here is that we also shouldn't detach these out. Thinking about the rights of asylum seekers to adequate accommodation, to dignity and to safety should also be a conversation about how can the rights of tenants who are also suffering those same forms of disadvantage, how can we kind of draw those connections?

**Stephan:** Can you give examples of the sort of violence asylum seekers experience in the accommodations and during *dispersal*?

**Jonathan:** Rob Nixon talks about violence that is accumulative, that occurs over a long duration of time, and that builds slowly almost in the bones of people. It's about continual frustrations, continual living in conditions that wear one down, that grind people into exhaustion and experiences of withdrawal. I write about this in a chapter where I talk about the ways in which asylum seekers that I spoke to and worked with in a number of cities talked about withdrawing from the world that they were living in and isolating themselves. We know this from a lot of evidence around social isolation and the mental health effects of living in poor conditions. It's really important to recognise that whilst people may endure these conditions, the idea of endurance has a cost and that is that we produce endured subjects with these systems and forms of violence. By endured I mean people who are hardened to these conditions and therefore not able to interact in the same way that they would otherwise be. If you speak to asylum advocates anywhere in the world who work on a daily basis with people who've been through these quite harmful and bureaucratic systems, one of the things that they will tell you is that people change as a result of that, that they are not the same person at the end of that process as they were at the beginning, and they're often diminished by it and really quite scarred by that experience. So that's one of the things that I was working through and getting at with this notion of *slow violence*. In terms of what that means practically. I have a chapter where I talk through the experiences and narratives of people in the asylum system talking about these forms of harm. And there are many different ways in which this manifests itself. It might be the continued ignoring of complaints about faults or issues within accommodation. It might be the disregard that is shown to you by accommodation providers that are outsourced companies who are still paid by the state and therefore in theory at least have a responsibility to people to provide for them and to show care and concern to them. And it's very rare that that was the case in the evidence that I collected for the book. It's also down to really minor things that become dripping taps of frustration. The fact that someone's boiler is broken and that you can't get through to the company to come and fix that for weeks. You're living in freezing conditions. Or the fact that you might have an infestation of rats in a house. But again, you can't get that dealt with. And this sense of deferral, of being constantly put off by that company and being expected to just live in those conditions. It's that wearing down of people and the denial of any dignity that I think is really important. And then, of course, there's also much more overt forms of violence as well. I do talk

in the book about the fact that *dispersal* also exposes asylum seekers and refugees in the UK to forms of racist violence and to harassment. There are a number of cases where people talk about the gradual development and progression from racist slights in public through to much more overt forms of racist language and in a number of cases, physical violence and attacks. So the focus I draw on slow and distributed forms of violence is not to diminish or neglect those forms of overt, or what we might think of as sharp violence. Rather, it is to note how they exist within, and partly draw strength from, a context of everyday banal forms of violence and harm.

**Stephan:** How do asylum seekers and refugees resist within that system? It seems like resistance is very hard.

**Jonathan:** There's a massive power asymmetry in operation, but that doesn't mean that forms of resistance and agency are not present. For asylum seekers and refugees themselves, there were two key critical forms. One was forms of collective care and concern for one another, reflecting the forms of mutual support that were able to emerge within communities of asylum seekers and refugees who were in *dispersal*. And importantly, and I saw this a little in Glasgow, ways that those senses of care and community were trying to draw connections to other groups that were in varying ways disenfranchised in the city, thinking about how groups who were facing displacement or homelessness for a whole series of other reasons, including gentrification, how they might be connected up with asylum seekers and refugees around their shared concerns in terms of the conditions that they were living, trying to forge those sorts of connections of solidarity. But the key mechanism were the forms of self-organised support and concern for one another. Doing things like forming groups who would sign in and out of immigration reporting so that you could keep a track of whether people had been arrested or detained and trying to inform legal advocates around those occasions. The other main mechanism of resistance and agency was pulling together reporting and monitoring of accommodation conditions. Pulling together information about: How poorly is a housing contract or a landlord responding to complaints? How long is it taking them to do things? And within that what can we collectively do to evidence that poor provision and to put that in front of people that might make a difference. One of the examples that I talk about in the book is from Northern Ireland, from a group of refugees who'd self-organised and who used their skills and experiences as journalists to document over a one-year period experiences of poor accommodation. They showed how that was linked to certain types of providers and landlords. The delays that had been experienced around getting responses to complaints. And then collating that together and putting that in front of

the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Home Office and others, with the idea being that this was a way to try and effect change even at a small level. And I think those kind of mechanism—whilst again weaker in this power asymmetry than the state for obvious reasons—they are important because they also convey a message of being able to do something. That sense of agency and retaining that within a context in which so much of the sense of your own autonomy and your decision-making is completely taken out of your hands. Having those opportunities to express agency, becomes really important. And, that's not just the case in the UK asylum system, that's something that we know from refugee work across the world.

**Stephan:** Talking about agency. The title of the book »Systems of Suffering« might contribute to the discourse of victimisation or to portraying refugees as having no agency. Why did you still stick to this title?

**Jonathan:** It's a very good question and one that I've mulled over at length. The reason that I wrote about the title in the book was precisely the kind of bind that I felt between wanting to convey and recognise agency. But at the same time, I want to convey a sense of those power asymmetries. Agency isn't equal to the size and scale of the structures that are operating here. Those structures are so significant and they do dominate the discourse in some ways. And this is a book fundamentally about the harms that are done by this system and structure, the way that those harms are often overlooked and so calling it out in those terms was important. To say that *dispersal* is about harm and suffering was important. And whilst there may be elements of resistance and important modes of care as well, these are not the primary characteristics of this system. It's not a totalising system, I'm not suggesting that at all. But fundamentally in its current formation it is creating these conditions of harm and of violence. And so for me, it was important to have that quite upfront and to be clear that *dispersal* is a mechanism that should be thought of in similar terms as aspects of detention and deportation. It may not be as overt, but I think its cumulative effects do have a similar violence to them.

**Stephan:** Other important actors at the local level are refugee support organisations. You find that austerity, the outsourcing, and privatisation of accommodation really outplay imaginaries of an alternative system or organising a national campaign around this topic. How does that happen?

**Jonathan:** One of the tensions here is that you have a situation where in the UK you have seen a convergence since 2012 between significant cuts to public services and

the hardening of a hostile environment towards migration. And obviously, the Brexit referendum didn't help in any way in those discussions. What that meant was that you saw cutbacks to all forms of social support, not simply asylum, but also things like universal credit and forms of support for people who are on welfare entitlements, disability support, all these kinds of elements of what the state does to form a safety net and baseline foundation for a whole range of different groups within society. These forms of social support were being cut back at the same time as funding for charities and small organisations that support migrants and all manner of other groups within society were also being cut. The austerity context therefore makes the work of charitable support organisations harder in two ways. One, because it increases demand on them because the safety net is otherwise being dismantled. Secondly, because they themselves are facing cuts to their funding and capability. So you have increasing demands from people in the asylum system who are living through these conditions of violence and of harm that we've talked about and wanting to seek support and help from refugee support organisations who are themselves finding it very difficult to maintain their normal functioning. All of that brought together means that those organisations spend a lot more time doing quite basic things, like chasing up complaints about broken boilers or infestations of rats or whatever else it might be that on a day to day level is relatively minor. Obviously, it's incredibly important to the people living in those conditions, but it means those organisations don't have the scope to think longer term about, what policy change they might need to be advocating for. How can they collectively, as a sector, coordinate and plan policy campaigning or advocacy campaigning? Austerity doesn't create conditions in which pushing for coherent change or policy reform is easy. In some ways it's never been easy to do that. But austerity conditions make it so much harder when you're constantly worrying about whether you'll be able to fund that organisation into the future. The capacity to then think, what policy plan do we need to be advocating in five years' time in order to affect government, becomes incredibly difficult to sustain. It's one of the reasons why austerity measures serve to contain and control attempts to reform or transform public policy.

**Stephan:** Let's keep talking about systemic change. Can you point out some initial steps for systemic change in this really hostile environment? How do you envision that systemic change to come about?

**Jonathan:** In the conclusions of the book, I make a series of proposals or propositions for change that are deliberately aimed at slightly different temporalities. From the immediate to the much longer term, from the quite banal to the more utopian.



My view about transformation and political change has always been that you have to look for multiple avenues and multiple perspectives to try and affect that change. And seek progress where you can find it within those. With that in mind, some of the immediate things are setting up forms of clear and accountable monitoring of accommodation standards within asylum accommodation. Making sure that the people who are accommodated have a voice within that process and that their voice is taken seriously and it's acted on. Slightly more long-term would be to look at ways to change the current accommodation model and to in-source the work of accommodating people in the asylum system. To bring this back within the responsibilities of the local state rather than outsourced companies. And that isn't to say that local government is alone the answer or that previous accommodation under local government was perfect. It was often very poor. I'm not romanticising the early days of *dispersal*, but what local government provision offers is two things. One is that it provides a context in which the local state is drawn back into the lives of people in the asylum system in a way that it's been able to absent itself from. And secondly, it conveys a really important message as there's a symbolic politics to this. By outsourcing this and passing it to private contractors the government is saying we don't need to worry about this anymore. We're going to pay these people to do this on our behalf. And that's it. And that is a different message to »these people are the responsibility of the local state or local government and a series of statutory agencies, just as you or I, the citizens of this town or city are as well.« It's a means of pushing back against dividing off these forms of responsibility. Symbolically, it's incredibly important to make that move. And then more broadly, it conveys a message about what the state should be doing. The restructuring of the state in Britain and in some Western European contexts as well, has seen a slow diminishment of responsibility from the state, passing that responsibility to individuals and saying, actually it's up to you to provide for yourself. Cutting away what, as citizens, our expectation of the state are, such that we no longer even expect it to be able to do certain things for us. And I think we really need to be reconsidering that and saying, well, actually the state should have certain responsibilities and it should be providing support for people. The UK government have international obligations around asylum and refugee accommodation and support and it should be meeting those and not just in a way that barely keeps people alive. There's a responsibility here around dignity and around people's rights that is more important than simply a position of survival.

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in the UK. He co-edited with Harald Bauder the volume »Sanctuary cities and urban struggles« (2019).

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