

Solidarity Activism, Campaigning and Knowledge Production: Challenging Refugee Inc.¹ The Case of G4S and Corporate Asylum Markets.

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Introduction

Activist research is a powerful tool to resource popular education and mobilisation in social movements. Since 2012 I have been researching and campaigning alongside tenants in asylum housing contracted to G4S, the world's largest private security company, in Yorkshire and the North East of England. Data collected from fighting housing cases and from discussions with asylum tenants has been the basis for campaign articles published on <https://www.opendemocracy.net/> and the Institute for Race Relations news <http://www.irr.org.uk/>; for reports, press releases and written evidence and briefings for the Westminster Parliamentary Home Affairs and Public Accounts Committee investigations into asylum housing in 2013 and 2014.

The courage of asylum tenants in resisting and protesting against the conditions forced upon them in asylum housing, as part of the UK government's 'reception policy', has enabled activists and campaigners in the **South Yorkshire Migration and Asylum Action Group (SYMAAG)** and other asylum rights organisations to challenge the private security companies who were given the outsourced COMPASS² contracts for asylum housing in June 2012 by the U.K. Home office - a contract worth £620m, the largest contract they had ever given.

¹ 'Refugee Inc.' is part of the title of an article in the Wall Street Journal. Clark S., Mesco M. and Troianovski A. (2015) 'The Growth of Refugee Inc.' Wall Street Journal, 14
² Commercial and Operational Managers Procuring of Asylum Support Services.

Campaigning against G4S has demonstrated that the activist research process can itself become an integral part of a social movement educational process, rooted in community-based research, creating and mobilising ‘really useful knowledge’ for action by social movements in communities. This knowledge production is built on the notion that interviews, and group discussions with, and alongside, refugees and migrants, can not only be transformed into leaflets, posters for demonstrations, workshops, newsletters and websites but also can develop theory and knowledge to ‘change the world’ (see Bevington and Dixon 2004).

The resisting voices of asylum tenants in the data constantly return to themes of respect, humiliation, rights, and demands for treatment, ‘like anybody else’. The whole point about really useful knowledge production in a campaign of this kind is that it is designed around statements which are known to be ‘going public’. The aim is to ‘re-map’ (see Tyler 2012) the position and status of refugees to influence wider ‘common sense knowledge’, and to change public political perceptions. This knowledge is produced to be used collectively.

This critical research process and solidarity campaigning by SYMAAG (as part of a much wider UK and international network of migrant and refugee social movement organisations) has begun to lay bare the nature and purpose of ‘reception policies’ in the UK, and the linkages to the rapid development of the UK as a neoliberal state, including the commodification and marketization of the process of claiming asylum, and the emergence of primary and secondary ‘asylum markets’ in Northern Europe.

Donna Red Wing in 2010 pointed to a new mantra of the private security corporations developing their prisons and immigration detention markets - “Every prisoner a profit centre: every immigrant a business opportunity” (Red Wing 2010) The G4S model has now been taken up by a new generation of corporate interests developing asylum markets across Northern Europe.

Asylum housing and reception policies as ‘deterrence’

Since the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act, asylum housing has meant social housing with a twist: asylum tenants have been stripped of all rights under existing UK housing legislation.³ John Major’s Conservative administration of the 1990s cut welfare ‘support’ for asylum seekers (administered by the National Asylum Support Service) to levels below standard benefit rates - a policy subsequently continued and tightened under the Blair and Brown governments. As barrister Frances Webber has put it:

Whereas the Tories had simply closed off parts of the welfare state to migrants and asylum seekers, Labour came up with a system of institutionalised inhumanity. It accepted responsibility for providing support but its anxieties to appease the right wing press and to create opportunities for the private sector created a monstrous system which had a lot in common with the workhouse; bare subsistence and a deterrent system of coercion, control and stigmatisation. (Webber 2012)

Asylum housing policies and procedures in the U.K. have been firmly anchored in this ‘deterrent system’ since the early 2000s. By the end of Labour’s period in power, Squire concluded:

Rather than providing a support service for asylum seekers in the UK the analysis shows how dispersal entails a rendering of asylum support as a technology of punishment... Part of a wider rationality of deterrence that selectively moves through processes of criminalisation and securitisation towards abjectification (Squire, 2009).

How to use housing to hurt people

³ There is a residual right under Landlord and Tenant law to contest eviction from asylum properties throughout the UK, including Scotland where the law is slightly different.

On 25 May 2012 Theresa May, now the British Prime Minister, told the *Telegraph* newspaper:

The aim is to create here in Britain a really hostile environment for illegal migration...Work is under way to deny illegal immigrants access to work, housing and services, even bank accounts.

The Immigration Acts of 2014 and 2016 were to follow.

In April 2014 I wrote a piece for Open Democracy called “How to use housing to hurt people: Britain's hostile environment for asylum seekers”. It had become clear that the U.K. government’s deterrent reception policies had become even more extreme, and disturbing conditions in detention centres and squalid asylum housing conditions were linked to them.

G4S: pioneer of outsourcing detention centres, prisons and asylum housing in the UK

G4S and its outsourcing and privatising of detention centres actually led the way for, and predated, the emergence of the UK private prison estate, itself the first in Europe. By 1988 nearly half of all detained migrants were held in privately managed facilities. By 2011 in the U.K., 80% of the 3,034 people in immigration detention centres were privately detained, and from June 2012, 100% of people in asylum housing, or ‘low security accommodation’, were living in properties outsourced to PSC’s.

Outsourcing in the UK is highly profitable. Rupert Soames, grandson of Winston Churchill and CEO of Serco, another private company in the public services market, told *BBC Radio 4* ‘s *The Bottom Line*’ in June 2015 that the new outsourcing market ‘makes Britain now to public service provision what Silicon Valley is to IT’. Serco had seized the chance to extend its contract for the controversial and scandal-hit Yarl’s Wood detention centre for another seven years in 2014 and continues to hold

the COMPASS contract for asylum housing in the North West of England, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

In Parliamentary hearings in February 2015 prompted by a *Times* expose of Jomast, a G4S contractor on Teesside, who were painting asylum housing doors red and exposing tenants to racist attacks, it emerged that Stuart Monk (owner of Jomast and personally worth £175m) and his company were estimated to be receiving £8m over the next year from public funds for housing 2,646 asylum seekers. He defended his business practice, saying that he was supplying a ‘product suitable for an asylum seeker.’⁴

In the hearings, James Vyvyan Robinson, CEO of another COMPASS contractor, Clearsprings, admitted that his salary was over £200,000 and that Graham King the founder and chairman of Clearsprings, had taken £960,000 out of Clearsprings in the last financial year.

Commodification and marketization of asylum: ‘asylum markets’⁵

Across the EU ‘reception’ policies for asylum seekers and refugees are currently in total chaos, with widely differing national public policies on asylum and migration. The large numbers of refugees entering countries like Austria, Germany, Denmark and Sweden have exposed the fact that reception and detention centres and refugee housing have now also been outsourced by national governments to international companies and corporations, creating a market as well as secondary markets in what Daniel Trilling has described as the European ‘Migrant Industrial Complex’ (Trilling 2015), and the *Wall Street Journal* of 14 September 2015 called “Refugees Inc.”.

⁴ I have written extensively for the Open Democracy website on Jomast and the ‘red doors’ and Parliamentary hearings with Clearsprings in 2016. These pieces can be found at <https://www.opendemocracy.net/author/john-grayson> and are not referenced in detail in the text.

⁵ Following sections of the paper owe much to my article for IRR News 25 February 2016 ‘The Corporate Greed of Strangers’.

In Scandinavia, as the ‘welfare’ state has been shrunk, the private sector has moved in. Already in 2012 Göran Dahlgren, a former head civil servant at the Swedish department of health, said that ‘almost all welfare services are now owned by private equity firms’. Sweden’s outsourcing of health and welfare had produced the largest market of this kind in Europe, relative to the size of its economy, with deals worth almost £3bn agreed in 2012 (mainly in healthcare) in what had previously been one of the world’s most ‘socialised’ medical systems. Private equity firms are now buying and selling not only health centres and hospitals but also detention centres and asylum housing across the region. This market is linked to the integrated outsourcing market which G4S exploits in the UK.

In the UK asylum housing market, the picture is one of private landlords and private housing companies making excessive profits from asylum tenants’ poor quality and overcrowded properties. Throughout 2014 and 2015 a similar pattern has developed in Sweden, with large profits being linked to extremely poor housing conditions for refugees. The Swedish migration agency believes housing for asylum seekers will have cost 3 billion Swedish Krona (SEK) (around £242.5 million) in 2015, excluding the cost of looking after unaccompanied children. In the first eight months of 2015, the government paid out 894 million Swedish Krona, around £73 million, to 50 different companies for housing. Several of these companies are owned by private equity firms that have branched out after two decades of profiting from Sweden’s privatised residential care and health care market, all financed from public funds and tax revenue.

European homecare and the ‘grim choreography’ of Germany’s asylum market

In Germany, which opened its borders to around 1.1 million refugees in 2015, the financial daily *Handelsblatt* pointed out on 7 August 2015 that ‘An entire refugee industry has emerged that helps the government cope with this massive onslaught, at least to some degree’. The German Interior Ministry estimated that the government and state governments in 2015 could incur costs of between €11 billion to €14 billion

for 900,000 refugees. In February 2016 the cost to the federal government alone was estimated at €55 billion over the next four years. These ‘costs’, of course, translate into new contracts for the refugee industry.

Germany currently has a huge variety of refugee reception centres or shelters, in converted public buildings and factories, budget hotels and former military camps. The German newspaper *Der Spiegel* on 6 October 2014 described “a grim choreography” unfolding in reception centres across the country with “horrific images from a German asylum homeand even the use of right-wing extremists as guards.” These images were from a ‘refugee shelter’ or hostel run by the private company European Homecare, and a private security company SKI, and showed a SKI guard with a neo Nazi tattoo with his foot on the neck of a handcuffed refugee.

Priska Komaromi has also argued that the involvement of security companies in the German asylum market means far right activists are embedded in refugee hostels and accommodation contracts. She quotes a recent German Secret Service estimate that;

One in ten neo-Nazis known to the intelligence services in the state of Brandenburg are employed in the private security industry. This is not simply a case of occasional negligence or incompetence of an overstretched state and the respective municipalities struggling to cope with the growing number of asylum seekers. Rather, it is an inevitable outcome of outsourcing care to a largely unregulated and highly volatile private security sector. (Komaromi 2016)

ORS Service AG in Austria and Switzerland

ORS Service AG is based in Zurich, Switzerland and was set up as a private company to work with the Swiss federal government from 1991 to house asylum seekers. In 2011 ORS Service outbid European Homecare for the federal contract in Austria for reception centres under the responsibility of the Ministry of Interior. By the end of

2014, they were providing 12 reception centres, including tent camps in Salzburg and Linz, and were being paid around 22 million Euros by the federal government. In 2015 ORS also had five reception centres around Munich in Germany.

On its home territory, ORS Service works in partnership with the Swiss Securitas private security company in delivering a very controversial reception and accommodation policy which has included remote locations and housing asylum seekers underground in wartime military bunkers. (humanrights.ch 2015).

European asylum markets owned in the City of London

ORS Service, with its reception centres, camps and military bunkers in Switzerland, Austria and Germany, has regularly been sold in the developing global secondary asylum markets. The company has been sold three times since 2005 to private equity companies. London-based private-equity firm Equistone Partners Europe Ltd bought the business for an undisclosed sum in 2013. The Equistone annual report in 2013 touted the acquisition as a new opportunity with ‘promising organic and acquisitive growth potential’. (Greenfield 2015).

Equistone currently controls two buyout funds worth close to \$4 billion. The private equity firm was part of Barclays Bank until 2011. Thus it is that the London capital markets buy and sell the management of underground bunkers for asylum seekers in Switzerland and overcrowded and unsanitary refugee camps in Austria.

Challenging corporate power and the politics of the business state

SYMAAG’s activist research and campaigning with asylum tenants has also exposed the privileged position of companies like G4S in the UK ‘Corporate Welfare State’, and the company’s links with governing elites (former Labour Home and Defence Secretary John Reid has been on the G4S Board, as has Lord Condon, former Met

Police Commissioner, and currently Adam Crozier former head of the Post Office and head of ITV). In April 2016 SYMAAG organised a day school for around 80 activists in Sheffield with the StopG4S network with the theme ‘KNOWLEDGE FOR ACTION AGAINST G4S: we CAN and we WILL challenge corporate power!’ The solidarity campaigning of SYMAAG (a volunteer organisation of asylum seekers, refugees and local activists) sets out above all to raise the voices and the traumatic lived experience of refugees and migrants within asylum markets.

In 2015 Europol, the criminal intelligence agency of the EU, estimated that 1000 unaccompanied refugee children simply disappeared in the outsourced asylum markets of Sweden, and perhaps 10,000 across Europe as a whole. There were 222 refugee shelters burned down in Germany in 2015. In March 2015 the UK’s Institute for Race Relations published ‘Unwanted, Unnoticed’, a report documenting 160 asylum and immigration-related deaths within EU member states in the five years up to December 2014. Their findings provide a grim reminder of the need for solidarity, campaigning and knowledge production in this field.

In freezing, damp, squalid or overcrowded reception centres, asylum seekers die of preventable but untreated disease.... Asylum seekers forced to live in camps die crossing unsafe railway tracks to get to shops. They die of dangerous restraints applied to shut them up and force them down during deportation, or of punishment beatings by guards. They die at the hands of cellmates with untreated psychoses. Sometimes they die in violent encounters with police. But most of all, they die at their own their own hand, of despair. (Abu-Hayyeh and Webber 2015)

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NOTE

I have not referenced any of my activist research articles for independent media.

These can be found at <https://www.opendemocracy.net/author/john-grayson> and at <http://www.irr.org.uk>