

## **Book Review: *Systems of suffering: dispersal and the denial of asylum* by Jonathan Darling**

Norman Ginsburg, London Metropolitan University, UK

Jonathan Darling. *Systems of Suffering: Dispersal and the Denial of Asylum*. London: Pluto Press, 2022. 237 pp. £19.99 (pbk) ISBN 9780745340487

<https://doi.org/10.1177/02610183231213518>

© The Author(s) 2023

Sage Journals

This is a useful, forthright and critical account of the UK's regime for accommodating those asylum seekers who are not held in detention. Rather than offering a dry overview with statistics, and lots of administrative and policy detail, the story is enlivened and underpinned by direct testimony from asylum seekers and support workers in four cities – Glasgow, Cardiff, Sunderland and Birmingham. As the title indicates, the pervasive theme is that the regime inflicts 'systems of suffering' or structural violence, which sustain a hostile environment for asylum seekers.

The book documents UK government efforts since the mid-1990s to 'disperse' asylum seekers from expensive accommodation in South East England to places with relatively low cost or hard-to-let accommodation in areas of industrial decline including South Wales, Clydeside, the West Midlands and the North East of England: 'Dispersal to areas of socio-economic disadvantage without prior community preparation, married to a lack of knowledge and expertise in addressing the social, legal or psychological needs of those in the asylum system, left individuals exposed to harm' (p. 61). In 2012 provision of accommodation and support services was privatised by the coalition government, on the dubious premise that centrally funded, privatised provision would be more cost-effective and efficient, whatever that means in this context. This provision had largely been the responsibility of local authorities, housing associations and support organisations. Responsibility for accommodation was handed over to three private, corporate contractors with the whole of the UK carved up between them, and for support services to one new provider Migrant Help.

Chapters on 'outsourcing asylum' and on 'the retreat of local government' demonstrate that privatisation 'further removed decision-making and government from direct [and accountable] responsibility for experiences of dispersal' with a 'diminishing service' and hopelessly inadequate complaints processes' for asylum seekers (p. 92). Local authorities became marginalised in their engagement with local asylum seekers, as their accommodation was removed from public oversight.

Chapters on 'dismantling support' and 'enduring asylum' vividly convey the desperation and exhaustion increasingly experienced by asylum seekers across the four cities. Dispersal and privatisation have often created 'a carceral experience, one associated with confinement, insecurity and cumulative harm' (p. 185).

Yet as the penultimate chapter shows, there is resistance, dissent and self-organisation, or what the author describes, following Foucault, as 'counter-conducts of care'. Much of this revolves around drop-in centres, which mitigate the isolation of individuals and families by networking with refugees and volunteers: 'everyone is obliged to care in some way, as everyone present requires the support of others' (p. 176) in providing social and basic needs support such as food banks.

The author's approach is that of a critical, social geographer. Hence there is a strong emphasis on geographic 'dispersal' which is portrayed as the central element of policy. But the impact of dispersal as such is not really unpacked much in terms of diverse local politics and communities, and the links (or lack of them) between co-ethnic groups in different locations. Apart from housing, other aspects of policy and the suffering it causes are not explored all that much, including the meeting of basic needs such as health, health care, maternity and child care, income and education. There is some fairly brief discussion of experiences of racism and of ethnic tensions, but not really any mention of gender and family issues. Perhaps it is expecting too much to cover more of these aspects in a fairly short book which focuses largely on housing.

The author's theoretical lens is to interpret the regime as 'a system of social and spatial ordering' which 'produces forms of 'slow' or 'vernacular' violence that sustain harm in cumulative ways' (p. 184). This is used pervasively without being overdone or heavy, which is impressive. The chapter on 'counter-conducts' moderates appropriately the functionalism implied by Foucauldian concepts. The book ends with eight entirely reasonable 'starting points' for positive reform of the system including independent scrutiny and decommodification of asylum seekers' accommodation. Sadly the direction of policy since the book was completed has been in a more harmful direction as the government tries to incarcerate them in former military bases, offshore barges and Rwanda. It is alarming to reflect that much of the electorate and the political class would regard the suffering of asylum seekers documented in this book as 'good' social policy in demonstrating that asylum seekers are not welcome in the UK and should be deterred.