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Lucy Mayblin

Oxford Monitor of Forced Migration Volume 1, Number 1, 2011, 31-34.

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Beyond the Hostile State: Imagining Universities of Sanctuary

Lucy Mayblin

The official reception of asylum seekers in Britain in 2010 has not been characterised by hospitality. Instead, a restrictive immigration regime has attempted to limit the rights of those seeking asylum. Yet the state is only one (albeit a powerful one) actor that extends or retracts the hand of hospitality to asylum seekers. This article looks beyond the hostile state and explores how universities might act as sites of hospitality for refugees and asylum seekers. The idea of ‘universities of sanctuary’ has emerged out of the City of Sanctuary movement; it remains embryonic—as only two universities are actively pursuing it. This article gives some background to the idea and provides two case studies of UK institutions that have, in very different ways, taken up the idea. Finally, I argue that these institutions are a guiding light for others and suggest that the aspiration of universities of sanctuary is not necessarily as impracticable as it might first appear.

As in many countries in Europe, North America and Australasia, access to the right to claim asylum in the UK is severely restricted. Strict border controls, safe country lists, narrow definitions of persecution, increasingly limited appeal rights and unrealistic requirements of evidence are just some of the ways in which the British state, like its neighbours, tries to prevent people from claiming asylum or from being successful if they do manage to make a claim. Add to this the proliferation of arbitrary detention without charge, laws making it illegal for asylum seekers to work, welfare support measuring 60 percent of what is deemed the ‘poverty line’ for citizens, tagging, compulsory biometric ID cards, and endemic racism and discrimination in the institutional framework of the asylum system (see Bohmer & Shuman, 2008; Sales, 2002; Hassan, 2000; Squire, 2009); all of this amounts to a far cry from the sentiments surrounding the 1951 Geneva Convention (UNHCR, 1951).

While a whole range of NGOs, academics, lawyers, left wing politicians, and activists lobby the government for a change to the asylum regime, there are those who seek to circumvent state hostility through social solidarity. Social movements such as ‘No Borders’ and ‘No One is Illegal’ have for some years sought to challenge the government-enforced separation of citizens from those without citizenship status. They do this through both campaigning and the principles of their organisation: no distinction between people on the basis of legal status, skin colour, or nationality (NoBorders UK Network, 2010). In the past five years, these radical social movements have been joined in Britain by a more mainstream movement of citizens seeking not necessarily to challenge the existence of borders and immigration controls—but to make the places in which they live more welcoming to asylum seekers and refugees. One example is the City of Sanctuary movement, which began in 2005 in Sheffield, England. While only one other British city (Swansea) has been granted the official badge of ‘City of Sanctuary’, grassroots projects in Leicester, Glasgow, Coventry, Bradford and numerous other places have since adopted the title (City of Sanctuary, 2008).

In practical terms, City of Sanctuary involves starting projects, bringing people and organisations that are already doing work to help asylum seekers together, getting the local city council to commit to the label ‘City of Sanctuary’ and endorsing its

sentiments (a significant barrier for some cities gaining the Sanctuary badge), and encouraging businesses and other organisations in the city to pledge to do their bit. In her research on the City of Sanctuary movement, Vicky Squire (2009a) argues that the movement challenges the assumption that refugees always encounter hostility from their 'host' communities and through their innate separateness require 'integrating' into the wider community. The strength of such acts of solidarity, she argues, lies in their 'ability to mobilise those who are excluded from mainstream politics, as well as in their ability to translate their demands in terms that are broadly acceptable to mainstream politicians and/or public opinion' (Squire 2009a:2).

A wide range of individuals and organisations are included in the concept of the 'host' community. At the City of Sanctuary national conference in Birmingham, England in September 2010, it was proposed that organisations fostering ties across the boundaries of immigration status might include universities. Thus the idea of universities of sanctuary crystallised.

This is the vision, as presented by Sarah Eldridge of City of Sanctuary at the national conference, that universities could be places where asylum seekers and refugees are welcomed and supported—as part of a broader project of making the places where they find themselves living more welcoming. But let me be clear: this ambition is far from established. There are currently two universities in Britain practically pursuing the idea, and one of those has only been attempting to do so since May 2010. Yet the fact remains that the seeds of an important idea are growing in these universities. It is an idea that challenges head-on the meta discourse of hostility toward asylum seekers, which has buttressed an asylum regime designed to keep the displaced out rather than offer them sanctuary. If it takes off, solidarity through universities of sanctuary would exist at the intellectual heart of society, where the civil servants, business leaders and politicians of tomorrow are educated. In what follows, I report on the two pioneer projects.

The first project was launched in December 2009 at the University of the West of England (UWE) in Bristol. Its name is the Refugee and Migrant Support Hub (RMS Hub), and it was the brainchild of Dr Ibrahim Seaga Shaw. It began in 2008 with a Council for Assisting Refugee Academics (CARA)-funded research project, which focused on the existing and required structures for making the university more welcoming to refugee academics (RMS Hub, 2009). The Hub, established in response to this work, provides support for refugee and asylum scholars (and potential scholars), research, training, and knowledge exchange. Hub staff members liaise with faculties and departments across the university, providing a single point of access to facilitate academic and educational opportunities for scholars at risk and forced migrants who might be the scholars of tomorrow. They also offer tangible help on bursaries, fee waivers, and the transferability of qualifications obtained abroad. In June 2010 the Hub hosted a conference on 'Education without Borders' as part of Refugee Week. Outreach work beyond the university with community groups and NGOs who work with asylum seekers and refugees also helps to attract attention to the opportunities offered by UWE (RMS Hub, 2009).

At the City of Sanctuary conference in 2010, Sarah Eldridge reported on her work with Sheffield University. She described how a small group of staff, students and City of Sanctuary activists in Sheffield, inspired by the work of the RMS Hub, got together to discuss the possibility of creating a University of Sanctuary associated with the City of Sanctuary project. The group in Sheffield contacted the university

group Student Action for Refugees (STAR) and organised an open meeting for STAR reps and other interested parties. The initial meeting was small, but over time word got around, and volunteers started to get in contact with the initiators. In the next three months, the group managed to get the University to sign up to be on the list of CARA-affiliated organisations. Ideas being floated are bursaries for asylum seekers and refugees to study at the university, fee waivers for asylum seekers, and the policy of charging asylum seekers domestic fee rates as opposed to the international fees to which many are currently exposed to. Allowing asylum seekers and refugees to use university facilities such as the library free of charge is another possibility. The potential for law students offering their skills through legal advice and research (such as country situation reports) has also been touted. Students and established academics acting as mentors and increased prominence of the work of CARA in the institution are possible. The expansion of volunteering opportunities with refugee supporting organisations is another activity, and awareness-raising amongst the staff and student body through special events, campaigns and training sessions would facilitate myth-busting on asylum related issues.

There are clearly challenges and barriers to this aspiration becoming a reality, not least of which is funding. Within the context of the financial crisis and changes to university funding, UK universities are cutting costs wherever possible, meaning that funding support for refugee and asylum seeking scholars might not be a top priority for British universities. The Bristol-based Hub obtained outside funding, but this might not be possible in other places. One idea suggested in Sheffield is getting the alumni association to propose that members fund or partly fund a refugee scholarship in a particular department. Collaboration with public and private organisations for vocational courses is also a possibility. Yet much of the potential of creating a University Sanctuary lies not in simply funding places on courses but in a whole range of activities that make the university more welcoming and raise awareness of asylum issues amongst the university community. Such activities do not need to cost anything. With the badge saying 'we are a university of sanctuary' comes a challenge to staff and students to work creatively with their institution to take the idea forward.

UK universities are already tremendously diverse organisations. Both employees and students come to British universities from a wide range of countries and institutions and are consequently geared up to welcome staff and students from all over the world. This is particularly the case for students, with most universities now having a dedicated 'international office'. These scholars may at present largely represent a wealthy and privileged group of people, but there is no reason that the knowledge gained in welcoming and supporting such members of the university community could not be extended to those who may be less privileged. Universities also have a wide range of humanitarian campaign groups and large volunteering units within them. The tools are there already to facilitate mobile solidarities, which look beyond the narrow conception of Britain as an island that must be protected from a refugee invasion that threatens our way of life. It is up to us to use these tools.

Lucy Mayblin is a second year PhD student in the Sociology Department at the University of Warwick. Her research focuses on the relationship between Britain's colonial history and modern day asylum policies.

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