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# In it together: Asylum, multiculturalism and grassroots integration in twenty-first century Britain

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## **Introduction**

For much of the twenty-first century, immigration and cultural diversity have rarely been far from the top of the political agenda in the UK. Throughout the 2000s, numerous opinion polls seemed to suggest that for a significant proportion of the population, immigration (and specifically asylum) was one of the most pressing issues facing contemporary British politics (Finney and Peach 2004, p.10). These concerns about the nature and scale of immigration were often linked to questions of identity and national belonging, with many believing that cultural diversity posed a threat to both national security and national collective solidarity (Lowles and Painter 2011).

A number of domestic and international events further intensified this preoccupation with the supposedly problematic integration of minorities into British culture, including the riots which unfolded in the North West of England in 2001 and the terrorist attacks perpetrated by Islamic extremists in New York, Madrid and London in 2001, 2004 and 2005 respectively (Saeed 2004; Kundnani 2007). Following these events, it was frequently argued that the legacy of immigration accompanied by decades of state-sponsored multiculturalism was, in the words of Sir Trevor Phillips, Chair of the Commission for Racial Equality, a fragmented

society that was ‘sleepwalking to segregation’ (Phillips 2005). Such attitudes, which dominated public discussions of migration and diversity, manifested themselves politically in a raft of measures designed to place greater emphasis on citizenship, so-called Britishness and the integration of minority groups in mainstream British society. This represented a move away from multiculturalism and towards community cohesion (Commission on Integration and Cohesion 2007; Pilkington 2008).

The purpose of this article is to examine the experiences of asylum seekers and refugees (particularly the former group) in relation to wider debates about multiculturalism and integration during the period described above.<sup>1</sup> Divided into two parts, it begins with an examination of the racialised and exclusionary discourses, marked by and productive of specific ideologies around race and nation, which have shaped these debates and can be identified in contemporary policy and rhetoric.<sup>2</sup> Drawing upon ethnographic research conducted in the North of England, the article then proceeds to a discussion of the experiences of asylum seekers and refugees themselves in relation to these discourses, with a specific focus on the institutional processes which foster or undermine their integration in British society. It is hoped that the research demonstrates the ways in which some asylum seekers, in spite of

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<sup>1</sup> An asylum seeker is someone who has applied for leave to remain in the UK on grounds of political asylum. A refugee, by contrast, is someone whose application has been accepted and has been granted leave to remain in the UK.

<sup>2</sup> The term ‘race’ which is used throughout refers to the ‘organising category of those ways of speaking, systems of representation, and social practices (discourses) which utilise a loose, often unspecified set of differences in physical characteristics – skin colour, hair texture, physical and bodily features etc. – as symbolic markers in order to differentiate one group socially from another’ (Hall 1992, p.298).

media hostility and state coercion, have developed strong social links and bonds within the host society and have become much loved members of the communities in which they live – evidence, perhaps, of an organic, grassroots form of integration and multiculturalism which, far from being a threat to so-called British values, are a longstanding but largely hidden feature of British history (Fryer 1984; Fekete et al. 2010).

### **Methodology**

The research upon which this article is based forms part of a doctoral thesis which investigates the themes of asylum, immigration and the politics of integration and cohesion, with a specific focus on how these debates and processes have played out in the lives of individuals and communities in the North of England. Coming from a background in cultural studies, the researcher has adopted a number of theoretical and methodological approaches with the hope of shedding some light upon the hugely complex and multi-faceted aspect of human experience, that is, migration. The research looks specifically at what Maggie O’Neill refers to as the ‘asylum-migration-community nexus’, that is ‘the complex relationship between migration, asylum and communities/community formation and processes of belonging’ (O’Neill 2010, p.11). As O’Neill (2010, p.11) comments, ‘processes of integration, belonging and community formation are complex and include structural, agentic, relational and psychosocial aspects’ and as such require an interdisciplinary approach to study. In this, O’Neill echoes the views of migration researchers Stephen Castles (2003) and Phillip Marfleet (2006), both of whom affirm the importance of refugee and migration studies’ interdisciplinary nature, gleaning insights from geography, history,

politics, philosophy and more.

Furthermore, the research was inspired by O’Neill’s call to ‘explore the possibilities for researching the asylum-migration-community nexus using critical theory that engages with meaning making and the relational and community-based aspects of lived experience for people situated in the asylum-migration nexus’ (O’Neill 2010, p.96). Given that one of the aims of cultural studies is to ‘explore meaning in relation to the construction of social and cultural identity’ (Gray 2003, p.17), it could be argued that cultural studies as an interdisciplinary field of enquiry has much potential in terms of its possible contribution to our understanding of the asylum-migration-community nexus. Indeed, cultural studies’ concern with culture as ‘constitutive of and constituted by the “lived”, that is the material, social and symbolic practices of everyday life’ (2003, p.1) certainly influenced the qualitative approach adopted in this research.

The sections on race relations which appear below provide an historical overview of the concept of race and its relevance to the development of multiculturalism in the UK. These ideas are then contemporised with reference to the emergence of community cohesion, a new policy agenda in which the issues of asylum and immigration are linked specifically to questions of culture, identity and national belonging. Finally, lived experiences of asylum and integration are presented and analysed using material collected in an ethnographic study of the asylum-migration-community nexus. As will be shown, the methods used in this study drew inspiration from sociological approaches to research, namely those associated with institutional ethnography (Smith 1988; 2002) and autoethnography (Chang 2008; Reed-Danahay 1997).

In keeping with the methods of institutional ethnography, in-

depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with a small number of asylum seekers and refugees with whom I had previously worked in a professional capacity. Although Spradley (1979) warns of the dangers associated with such personal familiarity, it was judged that the advantages of interviewing subjects to whom I was known personally, such as pre-established relationships of trust and rapport, far outweighed any possible disadvantages. The respondents were aged between 21 and 30 years of age, and included three females and two males from five different countries. Two had been granted leave to remain in the UK, while the other three were awaiting a decision on their asylum application. All identifying information (such as names) has been changed or removed in the extracts which appear below, in order to preserve the respondents' anonymity. Although this sample was not representative of asylum seekers and refugees in the UK as a whole (Marfleet 2006), it was more than adequate for the purposes of this study: to paraphrase Smith, the aim of institutional ethnography is not to generalise from a small number to the characteristics of a larger population, but to explore how institutional practices penetrate and organise the experiences of individuals in the asylum-migration-community nexus (Smith 1988, 187).

Interviewees were asked to describe their experiences in the UK from arrival onwards. In addition to these partial life narratives, interviewees were also asked about how settled they felt in their current location and present circumstances, and to identify which factors made them feel this way, and which organisations and services they had encountered since their arrival. Interviews were transcribed in full and the material was not coded (Smith 1988, p.190) but rather interrogated in order to explicate the social organisation of the

relationship between individual respondents and the asylum-migration-community nexus. A further series of interviews was conducted with key stakeholders in the asylum-migration-community nexus, each of whom was asked about their role in the social organisation of asylum and integration. Interview material was supplemented by data collected over the course of two and a half years as a worker for a refugee-supporting charity, drawing on personal memory data and retrospective field notes of the type found in autoethnography (Chang 2008; Reed-Danahay 1997). Taber (2010) has noted, for example, how the methods of institutional ethnography and autoethnography can be combined in a particularly useful manner when the researcher herself is professionally implicated in the institutional setting under examination. Although professional obligations made the practice of participant observation unfeasible due to time constraints, ethical considerations and other logistical factors, a wealth of textual material was amassed (including cultural texts produced by young asylum seekers and refugees in community projects) which was suitable for analysis and which provided a wealth of information with which to examine the lived experiences of asylum seekers and refugees in the asylum-migration-community nexus.

### **Race Relations and Migration in Context**

Central to the concept of integration as it has evolved in UK policy down the decades is the notion that the division of human societies by race, culture or ethnicity is a natural and inevitable state of human affairs and a source of conflict that must therefore be managed by the state. Whatever the state's chosen strategy for managing relations between these groups, these have invariably been informed by

assumptions about what constitutes racial and cultural group difference and to what extent such differences are fixed and unchanging or fluid and contingent.

To this end, from the first post-war migrations to the UK in the late 1940s and 1950s to the arrival of refugees and economic migrants in the 2000s, strategies to manage the settlement and integration of migrants and minorities alongside the host culture have been known variously as race relations, community relations and more recently as community cohesion policies. Indeed, the very fact that such policies first came about in response to the settlement of non-white migrants is telling, for it is impossible to understand contemporary agendas around the integration of asylum seekers, refugees and other migrants without first understanding the conceptual frameworks from which these ideas emerged. This means examining the history of relations between so-called racial groups and tracing the development of the ideas of race and racism themselves.

In spite of its apparently timeless quality, the concept of race is only a fairly recent development in world history (Banton and Harwood 1975). As Banton (1977) observes, the division of human beings into different racial groups occurred over the course of five centuries during which race and associated words indicating commonality of descent or character were honed into ideologies which linked a person's intellectual and cultural capacity with their belonging to a particular racial group. Whilst it is now widely acknowledged that race is a socially constructed category rather than a scientifically valid biological one (Smedley and Smedley 2005), for many centuries the existence of fixed and distinct racial types and subspecies were seen to be common sense (Banton and Harwood



1975).

The emergence of race as a meaningful social and biological category was intimately bound up with the politics of colonialism, slavery and early capitalist development. The Marxist critic Oliver Cox, for example, argued that the origin of modern race relations could be traced specifically to 1493–4:

This is the time when total disregard for the human rights and physical power of the non-Christian peoples of the world, the coloured peoples, was officially assumed by the first two great colonizing nations [Spain and Portugal] (2000, p.72).

Cox argued that since the exploitation of non-white workers in this manner consigned them to employment and treatment that was degrading, it was all the more likely that the exploiters would see these phenomena as a result of a natural order in which those workers were inherently degraded and degenerated. Thus the pattern was set for what would later be known as racism and race relations.

The legacy of such encounters and their continuing resonance in debates around race and immigration has been profound. A number of the most significant contributions to the study of racism and race relations in Britain have pointed to the influence of imperialism and colonial imagery in shaping British racisms and constructions of the racial Other (see, for example, Hartmann and Husband 1974; Hall et al. 1978; Gilroy 1987; Miles 1989; Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992). Stuart Hall (1992), for example, was one of a number of writers who observed from the 1980s onwards that biological notions of race had been replaced by cultural definitions which drew upon discourses of national belonging and identity to exclude mainly non-white migrants from membership of the national

collectivity. As Martin Barker explained: ‘You do not need to think of yourself as superior – you do not even have to dislike or blame those who are so different from you – in order to say that the presence of these aliens constitutes a threat to our way of life’ (1981, p.18). Paul Gilroy (1987), meanwhile, observed that the imperial lexicon – the language of war, invasion and appeals to ‘John Bull’ patriotism – was a distinctive feature of popular racism and anti-immigrant sentiment in late twentieth century Britain. By the early twenty-first century, this new cultural racism was just as applicable to Muslims and asylum seekers as it once had been to colonial subjects and former Commonwealth migrants.

### **Race Relations in Post-War Britain**

The legacy of colonial rule and the racism it engendered can also be detected in the race relations policy framework developed in post-war Britain following the arrival of workers recruited from former British colonies. It was initially expected that new arrivals from places such as Jamaica, India and Pakistan could simply be assimilated by the host society; in fact, they were met with a wall of hostility and discrimination (ranging from exclusion in housing and employment to street-level violence and verbal abuse) to which the newcomers’ response was community organisation, self-help and political mobilisation (Afridi and Warmington 2009, pp.14-6). Historian Peter Fryer describes how, in the aftermath of widespread anti-black rioting in 1958, the establishment decided ‘the problem was not white racism, but the black presence; the fewer black people there were in this country, the better it would be for “race relations”’ (1984, p.381). Measures to curb immigration were accompanied by attempts to outlaw racist discrimination and to promote the

integration of new migrants within British society. As Labour politician Roy Hattersley put it: ‘Without integration limitation is inexcusable; without limitation integration is impossible’ (Sivanandan 1976, p.79). Home Secretary Roy Jenkins, meanwhile, defined integration ‘not as a flattening process of assimilation but equal opportunity, accompanied by cultural diversity, in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance’ (Sivanandan 1976, p.80). Thus began the era of what was later termed multiculturalism.

A number of writers have observed the influence of colonial policies on the model of multiculturalism implemented in post-war Britain. Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis (1992, p.158), for example, note that the first generation of British ‘race relations experts’ received their training in the colonies of the British Empire, where ‘they ruled through a stratum of local leaders and chieftains without too much intervention in the “internal affairs” of those they ruled’. Ambalavaner Sivanandan (1976, p.84) of the Institute of Race Relations has described how the Community Relations Commission, set up in 1968, ‘succeeded in saturating the key areas of society with information, advice and literature explaining West Indian and Asian peoples to white groups and individuals in positions of influence’ and created a ‘black bourgeoisie’ that was directly complicit in this new form of ‘domestic neo-colonialism’. Umberto Melotti (1997) too has characterised the type of multiculturalism practiced in Britain as being a particularist, ethnocentric extension of British colonial policy. This tendency became particularly pronounced under the Conservative governments of the 1980s following further urban uprisings in London, Birmingham, Liverpool and other cities across the UK in 1981 (see Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992, pp.182-194).

What these writers share in common is a critique of multiculturalism as a government policy which is largely valid as a political critique of the state but which seemingly overlooks the possibility of everyday life in Britain being multicultural in a wider sense (Mahamdallie 2011). Writers such as Jenny Bourne (2007), on the one hand, have correctly argued that an important distinction can be made between multiculturalism that occurs organically and a bureaucratised form of multiculturalism promoted by state directives. The former, it is argued, emerged as a result of the ‘struggles that black communities waged against decades of racial discrimination in employment, housing, social services etc.’ (Bourne 2007, p.3), while the effect of the latter was often to purify and fossilise ethnic and cultural differences and defuse meaningful resistance against structural racism and economic disadvantage.

Nevertheless, from the early 2000s onwards, multiculturalism came under increasing attack from the left and the right, gradually to be replaced by the concept of community cohesion. Anthropologist Ralph Grillo (2007) has identified the publication of the Cattle Report in 2001 as a seminal moment in the development of a ‘community cohesion’ discourse, whose ‘key motif’ was the supposed self-separatism of minorities and the absence of a set of common national values to which they were required to adhere. According to Grillo, the report – which mentioned ‘cohesion’ 162 times and ‘multiculturalism’ not at all – fed into an increasingly prevalent discourse which constructed multiculturalism as having a divisive character inherent in its institutionalisation of difference and undermining of ‘cohesion’, ‘common values’, ‘common aims and objectives’ and ‘common moral principles and codes of behaviour’ (Grillo 2007, p.986). Grillo hints at one potential outcome of such a

discourse: that any kind of cultural difference at all (and, by extension, any minority group marked by that difference) may come to be seen as ‘unBritish’.

Furthermore, as sociologist Andrew Pilkington (2008) points out, the community cohesion agenda – particularly as championed by the Commission on Integration and Cohesion in its flagship report *Our Shared Future* (2007) – seemed purposively narrow in the scope of its investigation, particularly in its overlooking of the extent to which government policies on a range of issues may also have played a role in the undermining of a cohesive society. In this respect, community cohesion bore many of the hallmarks of what Arun Kundnani (2007) referred to as the ‘new integrationism’ – or assimilation under another name.

### **Asylum, Integration and Community Cohesion**

The linking of asylum and refugee issues with wider discussions around immigration and the integration of minorities was enthusiastically promoted throughout this period by a tabloid media which characterised the majority of asylum seekers as ‘bogus’ welfare claimants and potential terror suspects (see, for example, Article 19, 2003). Such concerns were reflected in the Labour government’s 2002 White Paper *Secure Borders, Safe Haven: Integration With Diversity In Modern Britain* (Home Office 2002), which drew an official link between economic migration, asylum and questions of national belonging and identity.

The Labour government’s commitment to integration and cohesion for refugees manifested itself in a National Strategy for Refugee Integration (Home Office 2005), based on a Home Office consultation document written by Alastair Ager and Alison Strang

(2004). Ager and Strang (2004, pp.3-4) identified three domains through which integration was experienced by refugees: social bonds (connections between individuals within a national or cultural community), social bridges (between refugees and members of other communities) and social links (contact with mainstream institutions). Notably, this integration strategy was tailored towards refugees whose leave to remain in the UK had been granted, and not asylum seekers whose leave to remain in the UK was temporary as they awaited a decision on their asylum application. However, Ager and Strang comment that their integration framework for refugees ‘could – with modification – be used to consider the experience of asylum seekers, of economic migrants, and of other groups’ (2004, 8). Indeed, what becomes clear from the research is how some asylum seekers, through their engagement with various institutions of civil society, have been able to develop social bonds, bridges and links in a way that is largely consistent with this integration strategy.

### **Asylum and Integration: An Institutional Ethnography**

As outlined in the research methodology, the study sought to examine the experiences of asylum seekers and refugees in the North of England in order to explicate from their accounts the influence of different institutions in the social organisation of their experiences and the extent of their integration within British society. Textual material from the asylum-migration-community nexus and follow-up interviews with subjects who worked within the nexus provided added insight into the bureaucratic and administrative structures in which integration and cohesion policies were embedded (Smith 1988, p.201).

Analysis of the material generated from in-depth interviews and the collection of cultural texts and documents yielded a number of interesting findings. The key points to emerge from the research, each of which will be explored in further detail below, can be summarised as follows: the British government seems to be at best wary and at worst openly hostile to the integration of asylum seekers in British society, for their presence in the UK is assumed to be temporary until a positive decision has been made to allow them to settle permanently; to this end, the institutional power of the state is substantially geared towards keeping asylum seekers under close surveillance and control, often hindering the development of the social bonds, bridges and links necessary for integration to take place, and fuelling the kind of hostility and stigmatisation promoted in media discourse (Kundnani 2007). Nevertheless, asylum seekers continue to enjoy certain rights and freedoms which enable them to actively construct social relationships consistent with the government's integration framework for refugees. Furthermore, these relationships are often developed through engagement with the institutions of civil society to which asylum seekers have differential access at various stages of the asylum process. What this highlights is the way institutions as diverse as law courts, schools, voluntary community associations, and independent charities operating within official policy frameworks, are all sites of ideological struggle over the extent to which asylum seekers should be included or excluded from mainstream British society. Each of the asylum seekers interviewed in the course of this research were actively engaged in that struggle.

The British government's wariness of the integration of asylum seekers is discernible in the absence of a strategy to promote their integration in contrast to the situation of refugees. This was

acknowledged by the Minister for Citizenship, Immigration and Nationality, who asserted in a foreword to the government's National Strategy for Refugee Integration that 'no one can sensibly deny that much valuable integration activity occurs among asylum seekers' but since 'some two-thirds of them will not in the end be given the right to remain' in the UK, the strategy was founded on the belief that 'integration can only begin in its fullest sense when an asylum seeker becomes a refugee' (Home Office 2005, p.3). However, as the document later states:

It is quite true to say that 'integration begins on day one'. Asylum seekers will learn much simply from being in Britain and from their contacts with officials, voluntary workers and neighbours; their knowledge of English will improve; and many of them will benefit from the Government's Purposeful Activities for Asylum Seekers Fund. All this is to be welcomed. But integration in its fullest sense can take place only when a person has been granted refugee status so that they can make plans, including those for employment (Home Office 2005, p.14).

Interestingly, the Home Office here acknowledges that some asylum seekers do achieve a measure of integration in spite of the restrictions placed upon them (such as denial of their right to enter employment). Although the document states that a limited degree of integration is 'to be welcomed', there is evidence that asylum seekers' contacts with 'officials, voluntary workers and neighbours' can contribute to the building of relationships and support networks that are potentially problematic for the Home Office. This became evident during one interview with a senior regional manager at UK Border Agency (UKBA), in which the tension between providing good customer service to clients (i.e. asylum seekers) and upholding



potentially exclusionary immigration rules was discussed in some detail:

We are very much like the police in some ways, because we're trying to keep the community going [...]. However, as soon as someone is, you know, not here legally, we are obliged by law to try and get them to go back home, which again comes down to people's perceptions. A lot of people would say: 'Oh yes, I quite agree with that.' But when it's the person that lives next to them, no it isn't: they want them to stay.

This would suggest that some of the institutional practices designed to regulate the lives of asylum seekers in the UK, including compulsory dispersal accompanied by regular reporting (Hynes 2006), can in fact open space for the building of social bonds, bridges and links which culminate in challenges to the authority of the very immigration rules these regulations are intended to serve. For example, among respondents interviewed for this research, this was found to be particularly true of asylum seeking families whose children attended local schools in the areas where they had been dispersed. Efforts by the Home Office to remove families whose applications for asylum had been refused were met with resistance from the families themselves in alliance with concerned teachers and other education professionals. One school head teacher interviewed as part of the research described in eloquent terms the type of scenario that may prove difficult for the Home Office, namely the plight of a family at risk of deportation whose school rallied to their support with a mass campaign involving students, staff, parents, local media and local politicians. The philosophy underpinning the school's decision to mount a campaign against the Home Office's actions was described thus:

I think probably one of the best ways of dispelling myths, rumours, false views is actually meeting real people, real examples. And so yes, I'd like to think the school gave them a lot of support. But their presence in the school was a good thing. And the other children, and other children, you know, a child with a physical disability, a child in a wheelchair, it's good for the school community. Because out there, there are people who are asylum seekers, there are people with disabilities. And if schools become little enclaves of only the normal, well you're not in a wider sense educating the children for the diversity that does exist in humankind.

Here the head teacher makes the case that personal contact can override a general hostility to migrants that may exist in the wider culture, an argument for which some supporting evidence has been found in other research into attitudes towards asylum seekers and migrants (see Finney and Peach 2004). Furthermore, this highlights the kind of ideological struggle which can occur within and between the ideological state apparatuses (Althusser 1971; Smith 1988), including state education institutions such as secondary schools: according to this account, some teachers at the school were evidently motivated by a set of experiences and values (including the school's strong sense of self-identity as a Catholic school) which led them to question both the anti-asylum consensus of the wider culture and the coercive actions of the repressive state apparatuses. This was embodied in the head teacher's commitment to promoting awareness among students of human diversity and equality – an echo, perhaps, of the state multiculturalist policies introduced to British institutions in the 1970s and 1980s (Sivanandan 1976).

It also emerged from the interviews that educational institutions such as schools, colleges and universities were important

spaces for the development of social relationships which made integration possible, and that restrictions placed upon access to education clearly had an impact on the ability of young asylum seekers to build and maintain social bonds and bridges. Although all asylum seekers of school age are eligible for secondary school education (Arnot and Pinson, 2005), many of those who wish to progress to further and higher education are prevented from doing so by the high cost associated with their status as international students – however, many colleges and universities use discretionary powers to waive fees for asylum seekers in receipt of government support (Refugee Council Online 2007). Once individual institutions had granted such access, they became arenas where barriers to integration were experienced, as well as drivers of integration. One interviewee, a young female asylum seeker from Pakistan, described her own and her sister's experiences at a local college:

When we started doing Hairdressing Level 2, even my tutor was racist. A hidden racist! And we suffered a lot. When we had to go to sign, and when sometimes we were a bit late, or had to take a day off, she behaved really badly with us. You have to have eighty per cent attendance, if you take a day off every four weeks it makes no difference, but she still treated us badly. After a year, when it got to Level 3, I said to my sister don't let that lady who's attitude is not good ruin your life. Every time I had to drag her [...]. When she got there, she had to apply for funds because you can't do the course if you haven't got the tools. There were all people sitting around. A lady from the welfare department came in, and when Aminah gave her the form she ripped the form up in front of everybody and said I'm not going to give this money to every asylum seeker, these kinds of words.

As well as reflecting wider cultural prejudices against asylum seekers, this could represent an institutional failure on behalf of the

college concerned, particularly if the member of staff in question was unaware or intolerant of the restrictions placed upon asylum seekers such as those cited, i.e. the necessity of reporting to a police station on a weekly or monthly basis, and the low levels of financial support provided by UKBA. The interviewee later commented that the situation improved after she reported the incident; however, what was more important in her eyes was how her own behaviour changed people's perceptions of asylum seekers and Muslims and led to improved dialogue between themselves and others:

We did the course; we suffered a lot, a full year. When we got to Level 3, our tutor, she saw us doing the work, and there was a national competition, she said I want you girls to come and participate in the competition. We always like trying to create things, we did jewellery with glitter, we got second prize, and everybody thought our work was marvellous. When we got back our head of department arranged a party for us, and presented us a bouquet and said it made her feel really happy [...]. And after that everybody changed [...] I was so happy. We struggled really hard for two years but we made a way for the people who come next.

In this account, the college's decision to waive fees and grant access to a hairdressing course provided the young women with an opportunity to engage in creative learning in a space where they were able to construct social relationships with teachers and fellow students from the host community. Although this process was far from straightforward, with racism encountered along the way, the respondent expressed her feeling that their willingness to engage with the course meant that they were able to overcome such barriers, finding common ground with other students in their talent for hairdressing and beauty therapy. The feeling of having changed

people's perceptions and helped to pave the way for others of difference to feel more accepted in the future was a point of immense pride for this interviewee – and a positive integration experience in which social bonds and bridges had been developed. Another interviewee, this time a young male asylum seeker from Iran (who studied the same course at a different college), told of a more straightforwardly positive experience with fellow students:

Last year when I went to the class, I was quite shy, you know, it was my first course with English people. And they start asking my name, and they invite me for Christmas dinner. They're really friendly [...] When I start to talk wrongly or incorrectly, nobody laughed at me, and then I started to talk, talking in class [...] That's really good, when I say something wrong, they don't laugh, this is really good.

The importance of social encounters like these should not be underestimated, especially given the isolation and depression faced by many young asylum seekers whose access to social networks is limited (Fountain 2004, pp.107-9). As discussed above, the existence of such relationships can also lead to a more overtly political form of integration, as in the example of one interviewee whose school and college friends actively intervened in large numbers in her family's anti-deportation campaign. Such instances prompted a manager from one refugee-supporting charity to comment:

I think UKBA do not want our clients to meet British people and they don't want British people to meet asylum seekers [...] because once you do have contact, you realise they're human beings just like you and I. They could be your brother, your sister, your mum or dad, your children, your best mates, you know.

Although it is doubtful whether any British government could

ever feasibly hope to forcibly detain the UK's entire asylum seeking population simultaneously, it is nevertheless likely that UKBA's preferred option would be to limit the amount of contact between asylum seekers and the host community at the very least by increasing the speed of the asylum process to begin with.

## **Conclusion**

The above research points to the possibility of a form of integration (Fekete et al. 2010) which sometimes takes place when asylum seekers engage with (and are engaged by) the key institutions of civil society and the ordinary people who dwell within them. The spaces which are opened up by the possibility of accessing educational and social opportunities – from schools, colleges and universities to voluntary drop-ins, language classes and youth and community organisations – should not be undervalued or underestimated, for it is this terrain upon which positive integration is fostered and struggles for social justice and democratic rights are initiated. These encounters are sometimes built around what Sivanandan (1990) refers to as 'communities of resistance', as in the case of the anti-deportation campaigns cited above, in which school teachers, students and parents rallied to the cause of families at risk of removal following negative asylum decisions.

However, the question of whether such marginalised campaigns can be sustained, let alone broadened, remains doubtful. Stuart Hall (2011) recently observed that the Conservative-led Coalition government's programme of spending cuts and ideologically-driven reforms would deal a particularly severe blow to women, for 'cutting the state means minimising the arena in which women can find a voice, allies, social as well as material support; and

in which their concerns can be recognised'. The same may be said of asylum seekers and other migrants, whose sources of social and material support are being drastically reduced (Gibbs 2010). However, not all the signs are gloomy: for example, the labour movement which emerged in its hundreds of thousands on a march against the government's austerity agenda on 26th March 2011 was not the 'white working class' of media convention but rather a vibrant, inclusive, multicultural mass of citizens committed to the principles of public service and civic participation. It is in such struggles that progressive integration is fostered while cultural diversity can flourish.

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