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Refugee urbanism: seeing asylum “like a city”

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how asylum might be understood from an urban perspective. The paper focuses on a range of conceptual interventions mobilized around the notion of ‘seeing like a city’, which foreground the pragmatic and compositional nature of urban politics. These debates are placed in conversation with discussions over the changing nature of relations of power, to examine the dispersal of asylum seekers in the UK, arguing that current research on dispersal has tended to focus too exclusively on the regulatory and sovereign aspects of this policy. In doing so, such research has overlooked the urban manifestation of dispersal as a process that has created new knowledges and forms of expertise, whilst being sustained through spatially complex relations of present authority and distant accountability. In exploring these relations, the paper argues that a focus on ‘refugee urbanism’ may open productive new avenues for critically exploring urban asylum.

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It’s 2014 and I’m sitting in a café talking with Anna, an asylum seeker originally from Eastern Europe, who has lived in Glasgow for two years. She is accommodated as part of the UK’s policy of dispersing asylum seekers across the country. We’re discussing the housing conditions she and her two children have faced. She tells me; “I have changed house three times, because I always had problems. Sometimes with the boiler, very bad conditions, but you can’t call Scottish Gas, you need to call Orchard and Shipman. This Orchard and Shipman are doing nothing . . . then I had problems with the roof, because water started to leak from the roof and I started to call them, call them, and no one come and so I moved my children to another room, because I was worried. And one day it collapsed, the roof collapsed, it was impossible to stay there and they told me that urgently we need to move. You can’t choose where you are to move, and they moved me at the other end of Glasgow. We suffered at this place . . . we knew no one and had no idea where to go. I was calling, have you repaired, have you repaired? No, no, no, no . . . after five months of me calling, of Refugee Council calling, Home Office, Serco, Orchard and Shipman, they repaired and I was very happy. They told me leave your stuff because you will be returned. But five months I need some stuff. So I took a taxi . . . I open the door and what I see, someone else lives there and I lost my stuff”.

Anna’s words reflect many of the disciplinary attributes often associated with dispersal: the enforced mobility to Glasgow; the disruption to social networks of a move across the city

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without any choice; the frustrations of poor housing conditions; and a lack of response to complaints. In this sense, the experiences of Anna and her family form part of a repeated pattern of ill-treatment of those seeking asylum in the UK (see Home Affairs Committee, 2018; National Audit Office, 2014; Scottish Refugee Council, 2014). Read in this context, Anna's account is one among many. This account emerged during research that explored the relationship between asylum seekers and cities in the UK, centered around the changing nature of dispersal as a policy to accommodate asylum seekers (Darling, 2016a). Anna's account clearly speaks to a story of asylum seekers accommodated as a means of regulation and control, and subject to inadequate and at times unsanitary conditions. In this reading, asylum seekers are managed, monitored, and controlled according to conditions defined by the sovereign authority of the Home Office, an authority actualized in and through cities like Glasgow.

Whilst Anna's account reflects the disciplinary role of dispersal, this is only one reading, for her account also presents a more complicated engagement with the city. Beyond the sovereign imposition of dispersal, we might consider the multiple authorities at play in mediating accommodation, in lodging and responding to complaints, and in advocating for Anna's rights. We might also attend to the socio-material infrastructures that frame Anna's experiences of security in the city, and the materials that compose and deconstruct her flat – from the inadequate heating system, to the bulging ceiling as water accumulates. Anna's experience goes beyond an image of dispersal as a regulatory device and of asylum as a matter of sovereign authority alone. Rather, it reflects asylum when read through the complexity of how urban worlds are composed, contested, and conceptualized. In this paper, I explore how we might examine these urban connections as a means to disentangle the relations between “the claims of sovereign power” and “the *techniques* and *projects* that seek to actualize those claims” (Dunn & Cons, 2014, p. 105).

Recent years have seen a growth of work examining the relationship between refugees and cities in the global North. This trend might be argued to reflect two connected factors. First, the so-called “refugee crisis” in Europe has led to growing numbers of asylum seekers and refugees in cities across the global North, prompting a range of critical accounts of urban accommodation, regulation, and rights claims (Depraetere & Oosterlynck, 2017; Koptyaeva, 2017; Kreichauf, 2018; Nordling et al., 2017). Second, there has been an emergent interest in whether theories of urban diversity reflect the specificities of how asylum seekers and refugees interact with cities (Darling, 2017). This demands a move beyond generalized accounts of urban migration patterns, to situate the specificities of refugee subjectivity in relation to a range of urban issues, including housing informality (Sanyal, 2014), racialized inequality (Lancione, 2016; Picker, 2017), contestations over urban resources (Maestri, 2017), and the rise of urban sanctuary movements (Bagelman, 2016; Bauder, 2017; Darling and Bauder 2019).

It is my contention that despite growing attention, these discussions continue to lack conceptual frameworks within which to explore urban refuge. This is because they often begin from a perspective of examining *either* refugee subjectivities and forms of agency, *or* examining urban forms of governance, policy, and claims-making. The intersection of these points of governance, agency, subjectivity and urbanity, is rarely at the forefront of analysis, and it is this configuration that I develop in using the term “refugee urbanism”. Refugee urbanism is not intended to imply a generic urban refugee experience, but rather to point to the conjuncture of factors that shape how refugee subjectivities intersect with, are remade by, and themselves

serve to constitute and rework, the urban. Refugee urbanism denotes an analytic configuration that goes beyond the study of “urban refugees”, as this work often prioritizes one or other of its constituent terms (Darling, 2017). Refugee urbanism asserts that the intersection of such terms matters, both conceptually and politically. In proposing an approach focused on refugee urbanism, this paper offers one provisional framework for studying the political contestations of asylum through the specific politics, conditions, and constraints of the urban. To do so, I focus on a body of work that has mobilized the notion of “seeing like a city” as a means to understand and explore urbanism as a way of life (Amin & Thrift, 2017; Valverde, 2011; Magnusson, 2011). This work challenges assumptions of singular or coherent sovereign authority, and views politics, from the perspective of the city, as entailing not only a multiplicity of authorities vying for influence, but also the necessity of negotiation among and between these varied authorities. Seeing like a city names an approach that accounts for the restlessness of urban change, with orders being perceived as moments of brief stabilization within conditions of flux. Building on this approach, I argue that seeing like a city might be productively placed in conversation with recent work in geography exploring the changing spatiality of power relations (Allen, 2016). I, therefore, argue that advancing an approach to urban asylum orientated around seeing like a city, may better apprehend the complexities of how government is both enacted and contested.

In considering what seeing like a city may offer to an understanding of urban asylum, the paper draws on an empirical project exploring the relationship between asylum seekers, dispersal and urban governance in the UK (Darling, 2016a). Focused on four cities (Birmingham, Cardiff, Glasgow and Sunderland), this project involved 105 interviews with stakeholders in the asylum accommodation and support sector to critically examine the changing nature of dispersal and its effects on refugees and asylum seekers. These interviews included local authority representatives, councillors, service providers, support organizations, third sector groups, refugees and asylum seekers. Empirically, this paper focuses on negotiations around the provision of dispersal accommodation and draws on anonymized interviews from the Glasgow fieldwork, together with media reports collated as part of a local media analysis, tracing narratives of dispersal from 2000 to 2015.

The paper develops as follows. I begin by outlining the main elements of Magnusson’s (2011) account of “seeing like a city”, alongside discussions of the phrase by Amin and Thrift (2017), and Valverde (2011). In each case, seeing like a city highlights an attachment to the complexity of governing the urban. I then develop this framing further through arguing that to “see like a city” entails an engagement with the changing nature of power relations (Allen, 2016), which considers authority as not simply multiple but as expressed in multiple relations of “reach”. With this confluence in mind, I explore the dispersal of asylum seekers across Britain. In reflecting on what seeing like a city may offer to an understanding of urban asylum, the paper concludes by discussing what forms of political potential it brings to light.

Seeing like a city

In discussing recent debates in urban political theory, Rodgers et al. (2014, p. 4), argue that there is a longstanding tension between two theorizations of urban politics;

on the one hand, there are concerns for a politics that goes on in cities, which is contained at certain scales, or emerges from specific territories and spatial environments; on the other

hand, there are concerns for a looser politics of cities, which might exceed, extend beyond, filter through or problematize particular scalar configurations.

This relation between a politics *in* the city and a politics *of* the city is one that runs through different mobilizations of “seeing like a city”. A common aspect of these accounts is to examine how dimensions of urban life – sociotechnical infrastructures in the case of Amin and Thrift (2017), and land use regulations in the case of Valverde (2011) – express both the everyday politics of cities and a wider political ontology with implications for how political practices, relations, and contestations are understood beyond urban debates. This perspective reaches its fullest extent in Magnusson’s discussion of the “politics of urbanism”.

The starting point for Magnusson’s (2011, p. 50) version of seeing like a city is to view the city as a “political production” that is always in the process of being made. In this sense, Magnusson is the most explicit of the authors working with this term in framing “seeing like a city” as a political ontology first and foremost. Magnusson (2011, p. 2) argues that our political tendency is to “imagine things from the viewpoint of a sovereign government or a sovereign people”, and thus to “see like a state” after James C. Scott (1998). This is a tendency that is perhaps most prevalent in work on forced migration, where the framework of the nation-state and its claims to sovereignty, security, and the right to delineate citizenship, has understandable prominence despite critique (Gill, 2010; Mountz, 2010). This is a perceptual orientation that attempts to classify and categorize in an effort to ensure coherence, to maintain a hierarchy of authority that is both top-down and neatly arranged. Of course, as Scott (1998) and others have noted, the realities of state projects are far from such an idealized account, yet underpinning such realities remains a set of perceptual assumptions over where authority resides, how it is expressed, and what it seeks to achieve. In this way, Scott argues that seeing like a state seeks to reduce contingency and render life legible, thereby “impoverish[ing] everyday life” (Taylor, 2013, p. 800). In this context, Magnusson’s *Politics of Urbanism* is less a book about urban governance, and more an argument for a political ontology that contests a singular or wholly authoritative orientation toward governing.

Magnusson (2011) thus argues for an account of politics that foregrounds multiple claims to authority. Drawing on Foucault’s (2003) discussion of government as the ability to shape the conduct of others, Magnusson argues that;

urbanism implies proximate diversity, complicated patterns of government and self-government, a multiplicity of authorities in different registers, the infinite deferral of sovereignty, self-organization and an emergent order that, though chaotic, is by no means anarchic. (Magnusson, 2014, p. 11)

This account of “urbanism as a way of life”, emerges from a long tradition of urban thought that has examined the characteristics of urban forms of life (Lefebvre, 2003; Wirth, 1938). By placing these discussions in conversation with Foucauldian discussions of governmentality, Magnusson argues that it is in the negotiations of urban life that we might see forms of governmentality and rule most vividly expressed, challenged, and experimented with. In considering the city as a site of governmentality, Magnusson advocates a political ontology that reflects contingent forms of governing;

To see like a city is to accept a certain disorderliness, unpredictability, and multiplicity as inevitable, and to pose the problem of politics in relation to that complexity, rather than in relation to the simplicity that sovereignty seeks. (Magnusson, 2011, p. 120)

The implication is that whilst multiple political authorities interact, they are never able to fully control or fully predict potential challenges or outcomes. “Seeing like a city” entails recognizing the limits of government created by the complexities of urban life, and in response not seeking a simplification of that complexity by imposing upon it a singular lens of authority or legibility. Magnusson’s (2011) account of “seeing like a city” is thus one that eschews any straightforward answers to political questions, be they of rights, authority, or identity. Taking such a politics seriously implies a need to stay with the process of constructing temporary orders and examining their stabilization through diverse forms of power in urban life.

A similar sensibility toward the complexities of government is evident in Valverde’s (2011) mobilization of “seeing like a city”. In examining land use legislation, she argues that a modernist approach to land use did not wholly replace prior modes of regulating urban space. Rather, she demonstrates how alternative logics continue to surface within urban regulations in different ways. Valverde (2011, p. 280) argues that “governing urban disorder through embodied, experiential, and relational categories is a necessary component of contemporary urban governance”, indicating not a transition from seeing like a state to seeing like a city, but rather a creative engagement between these political ontologies. Valverde thus highlights that the notions of seeing like a state or a city do not name unwavering forms of government, they name tendencies toward governing arranged around particular assumptions of authority, knowledge, and hierarchy. These forms of governing are grounded in political ontologies that begin either with the state or with the city as their focus of attention. As such, Valverde (2011, p. 281) presents seeing like a city as centered on “the flexible relation between knowledges” in governing. She develops the term to indicate a “pragmatic approach that uses both old and new gazes, premodern and modern knowledge formats, in a nonzero-sum manner and in unpredictable and shifting combinations”. Just as Magnusson (2011) argues that seeing like a city better reflects the realities of urbanism as a way of life, so Valverde (2011, p. 291) argues that seeing like a city better captures the pragmatic compromises associated with urban development. The compromised nature of authority in this mobilization of seeing like a city resonates with critical discussions of the improvised nature of governance in contexts of bordering (Burridge et al., 2017; Dunn & Cons, 2014; Sanyal, 2018). For instance, Dunn (2012) highlights how an “adhocracy” of improvised solutions and guesswork shape humanitarian governance in practice, drawing attention to the limits of authority claims, and presenting a model of sovereignty that is “aleatory” in nature (Dunn & Cons, 2014).

Unlike Magnusson, Valverde (2011) is less concerned with expanding the reach of this urban politics to encompass wider patterns of government. Rather, her lens remains focused on techniques of government *within* cities and what these may tell us about evolving systems of urban regulation. Two points are significant here. First, is the pragmatism that Valverde associates with seeing like a city as a political ontology that requires the incorporation, negotiation, and reworking of different frames of perception and governance, and that often produces imperfect compromises and improvisations.

Second, is the aleatory nature of authority that demands pragmatism in the first place. In this way, Valverde's account highlights that it is in the gap between governmental planning and the actualization of such plans, that the realities of urban politics often intervenes (McFarlane, 2011; Zeiderman et al., 2015). This is valuable in the context of refugee urbanism as it draws attention to the "conjunctural" nature of power and its exercise (Dunn & Cons, 2014, p. 102). Focus is thus drawn to how the conjuncture of multiple claims to, and intensities of, authority, lead to "shifting landscapes of unpredictable power with which both the governed and the governing must contend" (ibid, p. 102). In contending with such instability and adhocery, efforts to establish order and control present opportunities for varying forms of response, as the "overlaps and dissonances between competing modes of sovereignty or projects of rule create navigable channels" for both the governed and the governing (Dunn & Cons, 2014, p. 100). This interplay between "navigable channels" of responding to authority, and efforts at ordering and controlling urban life, offers a further means to examine the temporary stabilizations that are at the heart of seeing like a city as a political ontology. In this vein, seeing like a city represents an entry point into the pragmatism of navigating complexity without submitting to an image of either totalizing control or complete instability.

It is to these gaps that Amin and Thrift (2017, p. 3) orientate their account of seeing like a city, as a means to apprehend "the combined vitality and political economy of urban sociotechnical systems". In exploring the sociotechnical arrangements that sustain life, Amin and Thrift (2017, p. vii) argue that seeing like a city entails recognizing and responding to "the ontology of spatial 'throwntogetherness'" that Massey (2005) suggests is fundamental to relational urbanism (Massey, 2007). Such "throwntogetherness" names a situation of heterogeneous elements juxtaposed to produce relational connections that bring diversity into proximity. Throwntogetherness demands negotiation on multiple levels, from questions of responsibility for relations of implication (Massey, 2007), to the challenges of encountering difference as a disruptive and potentially transformative part of urban life (Wilson, 2017; Darling & Wilson, 2016). In this relational imaginary, seeing like a city is positioned as a means to apprehend the juxtapositions of order and discipline, discretion and disposition, and the material and the affective, which shape how sociotechnical systems influence urban life, and which forge particular types of infrastructural politics. Thus, just as Magnusson and Valverde mobilize seeing like a city as an account of political practice, so Amin and Thrift (2017, p. 120) argue that urban infrastructures are "political in every way: governed in favour of particular interests, biased in their affordances and allocations, shot through with calculative logics and mechanisms designed to distribute unevenly". As a result, political questions, when seen like a city, are centered on how we deal with this complicated, unpredictable, and often shifting sense of order.

There are three implications of this proposition for exploring urban asylum. First, and perhaps most obviously, it implies that it is not productive to rely upon sovereign claims to authority or to seek in them solutions to political challenges. This is not simply because such claims have been most readily associated with the violence of the state, although this is clearly significant when considering the lives of asylum seekers (Gill, 2010). Rather, it is because relying upon sovereign authority risks dismissing a much wider range of claims to authority and influence, which themselves negotiate, mould, and influence claims to sovereignty. Second, it implies that authority is not a zero-sum game, but rather that

authority is produced in different collaborations and contexts, and may intensify and diminish at different points. Finally, seeing like a city demands an appreciation of uncertain and unexpected relations of government and authority, of how lives may be governed in ways unanticipated and perhaps unintended by those assumed to be “in control”. Not only are urban authorities “constantly responding to problems that they cannot quite control”, but in doing so they “interact in ways that lead to unpredictable results” (Magnusson, 2015, pp. 25–26). Read as such, seeing like a city focuses attention on the variety of actors who may be involved in sustaining, and contesting, an imaginary of sovereign authority.

Powers of reach

Before moving to consider the application of this approach, there is a need to consider the complexities of how authority is spatially produced. This entails a concern with the spatial nature of political relations and is necessary because, as Keil (2013, p. 796) argues in relation to the politics of urbanism, without accounting for the position of the urban as part of a wider set of relations, there is a danger of a “parochial localism” to this urban politics. It is not simply that authority is more multiple than an account of sovereignty may describe, but that it is expressed in more complex ways, forged through spatialities of folding and embeddedness. To develop a critical account of refugee urbanism, it is therefore not enough to note that cities are compositional arrangements of multiple authorities, in part because such an account of multiplicity is present in a range of work on governance, assemblages, and globalization (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Ferguson & Gupta, 2002; McFarlane, 2011). Rather, this requires both an examination of how those arrangements are embedded within, and enacted through, spatial relations, and a consideration of the varying intensities of governing and being governed that are brought to attention through urban conjunctures of governance, agency, and subjectivity.

The multiplicity of seeing like a city resonates with discussions over how authority is dispersed, rescaled, or “stretched” through new spatial formations and assemblages (Allen & Cochrane, 2010; Sassen, 2006). At the same time, such “unbundling” resonates with critical discussions of immigration enforcement as constituted through an array of contingent practices and authorities “constantly ‘in formation’ across a multiplicity of locations”, rather than a coherent or coordinated model of state authority (Coleman, 2011, p. 309; Burrige et al., 2017; Mountz, 2010). However, Allen (2016, p. 21) argues that the concern with the rescaling of authority noted in much of this work, is often too blunt to account for how expressions of power have developed, as it remains tied to a topographic imaginary of spatial relations. In response, Allen (2016, p. 35) argues that exploring the critical possibilities of topology offers

an opportunity to think again about what it actually means to say that events elsewhere are enfolded or woven into the political fabric of everyday life, or how it is that actors are able to make their presence felt in more or less powerful ways that cut across proximity and distance.

In seeing like a city, what “emerges is an understanding of the state as something that is perpetually in a position of becoming, whose institutional forms and capacities are always both transient and historically and geographically contingent” (Haughton et al., 2013,

p. 220). At the same time, there is a demand to look beyond the contingencies of the state to those other political actors, formations, and “arts of government” that are stabilizing temporary political orders. For Allen and Cochrane (2010, p. 1078), such orders are maintained through topological relations of influence and intensity that register power as a continuous, but transformed, presence in urban life. Presence in this sense may be physical or relational, as organizations may choose to be physically present but relationally distant, and in doing so may place themselves beyond reach as a means to displace or evade responsibility (Allen, 2016). Presence thus expresses the intensity of power relations, as influence is enacted over the conduct, decisions, and practices of other actors, agencies, and institutions. The city in this account is perceived as an arena in which diverse actors can make their presence felt, reflecting a “more *transverse* set of government interactions” (Allen & Cochrane, 2010, p. 1076, original emphasis), centered on the “ability to place others *within or beyond reach*” (Allen, 2016, p. 48, original emphasis).

In arguing for an approach to urban asylum orientated around refugee urbanism, I am arguing that we may better apprehend the complexities of how government is enacted by focusing on both the multiplicity of authorities *and* the relations of authority (and the forms they take). It is with this orientation that I now turn to consider the dispersal of asylum seekers in the UK.

Dispersal and the city

Since 2000, the UK has operated a dispersal system for the accommodation of asylum seekers. After an initial period in temporary reception centers, asylum seekers are relocated to cities across the country to be accommodated whilst awaiting decisions on their asylum claims (Robinson et al., 2003). This system is almost exclusively an urban phenomenon, reflecting both the location of available low-cost housing and a presumption that for those successful in gaining refugee status, integration will be easier in more diverse urban centers. Yet work on the UK’s dispersal system has failed to fully consider its urban character, preferring instead to focus on the regulatory basis of dispersal and its role at the heart of a policy of deterrence. In doing so, such discussions have overlooked how the conditions of urban life shape refugee experiences, and how cities and their politics are reworked not just by the presence of refugees, but by the presence of claims to authority, sovereignty, and governance that come with attempts to order mobility at different spatial scales. In the UK context, the regulatory role of dispersal means that the location and type of accommodation provided is on a “no choice” basis, and this lack of autonomy has been argued to mean that dispersal serves to further marginalize and socially isolate asylum seekers (Bloch & Schuster, 2005; Gill, 2009; Hynes, 2009). In this respect, the UK system bears similarities with dispersal policies in a number of other European countries (Robinson et al., 2003; Wren, 2003; Hamann, this special issue), with a key distinction being that in the UK dispersed asylum seekers are accommodated among urban communities rather than in segregated reception facilities. The UK might thus be argued to have resisted the urge, noted by Kreichauf (2018), for the “campization” of refugee infrastructure across Europe.

Through this more community-orientated model, accommodation for asylum seekers was, until 2012, provided either directly by local authorities, or through mixed consortiums that retained local authority involvement. In 2012 however, the Home Office

signed a series of six centralized contracts passing accommodation and support to three private contractors – multinational companies G4S and Serco, and the accommodation partnership Clearel. These contracts were announced in the context of a government-wide austerity drive, and thus became a key means through which the then UK Border Agency sought to make “efficiency savings”, whilst simultaneously removing local authority control over the process (Darling, 2016a, 2016b).

Dispersal has its origins in New Labour’s investment in social infrastructure, and whilst never well funded, the policy did initially offer money to local authorities willing to work with the Home Office. It was first announced in the 1998 *Fairer, Faster, Firmer* White Paper, where it was described in the following terms;

The administration of a new support scheme for asylum seekers . . . will require new national machinery to plan and co-ordinate provision, obtaining information from around the country and purchasing places either directly or by contracting with local agencies. Asylum seekers would be expected to take what was available, and would not be able to pick and choose where they were accommodated, but where possible placements would take account of the value of linking to existing communities and the support of voluntary and community groups . . . This nationwide approach will help to relieve the burden on provision in London, where the majority of asylum seekers are currently concentrated (Home Office, 1998, p. 8.22).

Framed in this language of a “new national machinery” to accommodate asylum seekers, dispersal can be read as an imposition of new demands and expectations on local authorities and communities. It is this approach to examining dispersal that has orientated much prior work, focusing on dispersal as an expression of sovereign authority and the capacity of the state to regulate the lives of asylum seekers (see Bloch & Schuster, 2005; Darling, 2011; Hynes, 2009; Phillips, 2006). Dispersal in such work tends to be positioned as an expression of a politics of deterrence that centers on a desire to ensure the discomfort of those accommodated (for notable but localized exceptions, see Spicer, 2008; Wren, 2007). As such, critical attention has remained on the logics and expressions of this “machinery”, viewing dispersal as a process that maintains the kind of classificatory work associated with seeing “like a state” as a means to render mobility legible and manageable (Scott, 1998). Such work is critically important, not least in highlighting the often repressive nature of dispersal as a technology of control. However, this presents only one perspective, and it is in this context, that I argue the insights of refugee urbanism may be productively mobilized.

The imaginary of dispersal as a policy practiced through a “new national machinery” of state and non-state actors working together to procure properties, provide support, and distribute populations, has a clear spatial dimension. For alongside the centralized imposition noted above, this “machinery” implies a power of distribution that is spatially “extensive” in Allen’s (2016) terms. This is a power to assign positions and to place bodies, which extends outwards from the centralized bureaucracy of the Home Office in Croydon, and seeks to distribute asylum seekers geographically to avoid the “overburdening” of London. Dispersal in this reading is partly an expression of sovereign authority, but also an inherently spatial and biopolitical matter of ordering populations (see Hannemann, this special issue). In Levine’s (2015) terms, we might think of dispersal as an ordering principle or “form”. For Levine, it is “the work of form to make order” (Levine, 2015, p. 3), and it is this that makes form political, as attention is drawn to

a series of “ongoing contests over the proper places for bodies, goods, and capacities” (ibid; Rancière, 1999). Dispersal is an assertion of this “proper place” for specific types of bodies, yet in the imaginary of the “national machinery” the spaces in which bodies are distributed are undifferentiated, decontextualized, and largely absent. Dispersal becomes a process of extending power across the seemingly undifferentiated landscape of a “national approach”. Whilst this may express the intended scope of dispersal as a distributive form, the realities of practicing such a form often involves instabilities as other logics come into contact with dispersal. It is these more contested foldings of power that are overlooked in focusing on the spatial extension of dispersal alone.

One starting point to address these contingencies is to consider dispersal as a political process that is productive in a number of ways. For, in establishing a system for accommodating asylum seekers, dispersal demanded the creation of new forms of knowledge, practices of support, and policy expertise among cities that had, until 2000, very little contact with forced migration. Prior to 2000, asylum seekers were able to seek support from local authorities of their choosing, leading many to rely on social networks in London. Thus, whilst asylum seekers were urban subjects in the UK before dispersal, their presence was often confined to a very limited range of urban settings. Whilst in theory, dispersal was established as a policy to ease a perceived “burden” on the south east of England, the reality has been one of significant regional and local disparities (Home Affairs Committee, 2018). In its earliest guises, this disparity came from a distribution of local authorities able to enter into agreements with the Home Office to accommodate asylum seekers. This required local authorities to have existing and available social housing stock that could be used at relatively short notice. The result was a landscape of dispersal focused on deindustrialized cities across the north of England, Scotland, and Wales. Cities like Glasgow, Leeds, Sheffield, and Newcastle viewed dispersal as a way to both meet a demand from the Home Office for accommodation, and enable otherwise hard-to-let social housing to generate an income.

Many of these cities were not accustomed to the support requirements of asylum seekers and were themselves suffering from pressures on social care and support services (Darling, 2016a, 2016b; Phillips, 2006). In this context, the “new national machinery” of dispersal led to the establishment of refugee community organizations across the UK, focused on supporting the needs of newly arrived asylum seekers (Griffiths et al., 2006). At the same time, dispersal in practice rapidly became entwined with a parallel process of reporting, through which asylum seekers were required to regularly register their presence with an immigration reporting center or, more often, with a local police station (Burrige & Gill, 2017). This regulatory mechanism has served to not only restrict the mobility of asylum seekers, but together with the variable landscape of legal support across dispersal cities, has exposed asylum seekers to greater risk of detention and deportation (Fisher et al., 2019). If we consider dispersal as a form in Levine’s (2015, p. 3) terms, as an “arrangement of elements” that orders, shapes, and distributes lives and social worth, then part of this process was the construction of an architecture of support and reporting at the urban level to maintain and reproduce this very system of ordering.

Considering dispersal as a productive “art of government” that has created the conditions for new forms of knowledge and expertise has value. However, this gesture still remains entangled with a sovereign view of dispersal as a disciplinary form that is territorial in its orientation, and spatially extensive in its expression of authority. To

move beyond this, there is a need to consider how dispersal alters as its conditions of ordering and distribution fluctuate.

Negotiating dispersal

To see dispersal “like a city” is to focus on the multiple claims to authority and influence that may be argued to shape dispersal, and to consider how authority is embedded in relations that are not simply “extensive” in spatial terms (Allen, 2016). A more uncertain and complex narrative on dispersal offers insights that a concern with dispersal as a disciplinary form obscures. To make this case, I want to consider an example drawn from Glasgow, building on the experiences of Anna with which I opened this paper.

At the end of July 2018, Glasgow became the focal point for media scrutiny of the UK’s treatment of asylum seekers and refugees.¹ The attention centered on an announcement from the international services firm Serco that they would be restarting a controversial programme of lock-changes on properties used to accommodate asylum seekers in the city, as a means of forcibly evicting those who had reached the end of the asylum process. Despite Serco arguing that only those asylum seekers who had their claims rejected would be evicted, asylum advocates asserted that the poor decision-making record of the Home Office would inevitably mean that individuals qualifying for refugee status would be made homeless (see Shaw & Kaye, 2013). The subsequent weeks of public debate, demonstration, and dissent drew attention to two prominent factors in UK asylum policy – the outsourcing of housing away from urban authorities, and the production of destitution among asylum seekers in the hope of forcing them to leave the country.

In the wake of Serco’s announcement, a number of responses emerged, illustrating the role of multiple political actors seeking to negotiate the position of asylum seekers in the city, albeit for potentially contrasting reasons. First, the local authority appealed to the Home Office, warning of a homelessness crisis on its streets if the policy was followed. Whilst politically significant, this intervention was nevertheless limited as the council is legally prohibited from housing asylum seekers (Brooks, 2018). Second, a range of refugee rights’ groups, legal advocates, and campaigners, staged public demonstrations in the city, burning eviction notices and asserting the right to remain. These demonstrations raised public awareness of the case, but also called for action from the council and housing providers to step in to avoid a homelessness crisis. Third, a housing association sub-contracted by Serco responded after public pressure, announcing that they would refuse any request from Serco to change locks. In doing so, their director of operations stated that they had;

written to Serco advising that as per the terms of the lease agreement they require our written permission to alter fixtures and fittings, and advised Glasgow city council that we will rehouse our local Serco tenants if evicted (cited in Brooks, 2018).

In doing so, this housing association was mobilizing what was locally known as the “flipping model”, whereby a Serco occupancy agreement is converted into a temporary social housing tenancy without the occupant having to relocate (Brooks, 2018). Flipping was a discretionary practice far more common under previous models of public provision of accommodation. Local authorities could convert a property from dispersal accommodation to social housing at the point at which an individual received refugee status or

required emergency accommodation following refusal. From the local authority perspective, the value of “flipping” was in allowing an individual to remain in a property without relocation or homelessness, thus allowing time for longer-term solutions to be found. Since 2012, however, such discretion over housing has largely been lost as Serco and other private providers have no incentive to work with local authorities in such a way, and see the practice as a loss of potential income (Darling, 2016a).

Following this period of pressure, Serco were forced to pause the decision to change locks and are, at the time of writing, seeking legal advice alongside the Home Office, as to how to proceed. This is a moment of reprieve rather than a victory for those supporting the rights of asylum seekers in the city. Nevertheless, it draws attention to “how all of the apparent seamless accomplishment of urban change are full of messy encounters, deals, and protracted and often failed negotiations, and that high-speed urban remaking is often full of holes to be occupied and shaped” (Simone & Pieterse, 2017, p. 181). It is the messiness of this urban politics, its holes and failed negotiations, that is overlooked by a concern with dispersal as a disciplinary form. With this in mind, I want to consider three ways in which “seeing like a city” might illustrate different dimensions of the Glasgow case, drawing on the three implications of “seeing like a city” discussed previously.

Claims to authority

First, we might see a range of competing claims to authority in effect in Glasgow. Here Serco enters into a new domain of operations – asylum housing – as an actor without prior experience. Whilst supported by the Home Office, it quickly became clear that Serco were not able to pursue their policy of lock-changing without the assent of other actors. As Allen (2016) argues, for authority to be effective it has to be recognized and responded to by others. The authority of Serco relied on the adherence of a range of sub-contractors tasked with putting lock-changes into practice. As a result, Serco’s ability to push through such a policy was questioned, as other actors began to assert their own claims to authority, including the local authority’s appeal to the Home Office, the refusal of housing associations to meet the terms of their contract, and the mobilization of public protests and media coverage of the evictions (BBC, 2018). The halt in lock-changes that arose might thus be read as an expression of an urban politics that is necessarily negotiated.

It is precisely this negotiated character that Magnusson (2011) and Valverde (2011) draw to the fore, arguing that whilst there is often a pragmatism to urban politics, there is also a restlessness as issues are rarely “settled”, but rather present temporary compromises (Simone & Pieterse, 2017). The discretionary practice of “flipping” properties in place in Glasgow prior to 2012, was one such temporary stabilization. It did not address the challenges of refugee homelessness or the use of destitution as a policy tool directly, but offered a negotiated means of temporarily mitigating these effects. Addressing homelessness was a deferred issue. It is this deferral that an approach to seeing like a city brings to the fore, to argue that in a context of multiple authorities, deferral and the temporary stabilization of a set of rights is inevitable. To focus on multiple authorities is not to suggest that such authorities are equal or to dismiss the hierarchies of power through which dispersal operates. Rather, the point is to reflect on how those assemblages of

authority, rule, and dissent, operate in and through the city, and how they exceed an image of dispersal as a disciplinary form that extends “into” a city like Glasgow.

Intensities of authority

The second insight to draw out, is that whilst seeing like a city may focus on how multiple authorities shape dispersal in practice, these are often spatially diffuse actors and rely upon a range of spatial tactics to produce their authority. The Glasgow case thus illustrates the topological maintenance of relations of authority as a politics of “reach” enables physically distant authorities to shape negotiations in the city. In this context;

Reach . . . is a form of relational distance – a space composed by the stretching, folding and distorting of relationships to achieve certain ends. As such, reach can be leveraged topologically in a variety of distinctive ways by cutting across proximity and distance to register a powerful presence of one particular kind or another. The quieter, more muted registers of power, increasingly privileged by institutions and social groups alike, arguably owe much to such leverage. (Allen, 2016, p. 49)

These topological relations of “reach” were reshaped with the privatization of asylum housing in two senses. First, in the ways in which different actors are brought into relational proximity despite physical distance. The outsourcing of dispersal to a series of private security contractors and their sub-contractors offers a means through which direct governmental authority may be physically absent from the negotiations of dispersal in urban life in Glasgow. Yet despite this, government still reaches into such negotiations to shape and direct them. This describes a process whereby “government initiatives are ‘detached’ from the centre and ‘lodged’ in subnational institutions and agencies to secure compliance”, resulting in authority being “not so much consented to as embedded” in new actors (Allen, 2016, p. 50). The effect, Allen (*ibid*) suggests, is to “stabilise a pattern of authority at arm’s length, by aligning local rulings and directives with those of the ‘centre’”, and forging a mediated “immediacy of presence” for those “who by and large are detached”. In Glasgow, whilst the physical presence of Home Office officials, or even representatives of Serco themselves, may have been absent, these actors were “co-present in [the] power arrangement taking shape” (*ibid*, p. 43), as they directed negotiations, shaped contractual obligations, and influenced discussions through mediated relations with sub-contractors, local authorities, and local media. In this way, government is able to bring the issue of asylum dispersal in Glasgow into relational “reach” whilst remaining physically distant from its effects in the city. As a topological reading implies, we see a process in which the expression of power is able to “change yet nonetheless remain the same” (Allen, 2016, p. 13), as despite the multiplicity of claims to authority evident in Glasgow, government still retains a significant, but not all-encompassing, capacity to shape negotiations.

The second effect of outsourcing is in this relation of retained authority but increasing distance. The very practice of outsourcing represents not just a transfer of responsibility and accountability from government to private sector contractors, but also a process of “lengthening” the pathways of mediation between an issue and the government (Darling, 2016a). Thus, a politics of “reach” may also act to place political concerns “out of reach” through “*stretching out* the exchanges between actors” (Allen,

2016, p. 54, original emphasis). The mediating role of private forms of authority is evident in the manner in which Serco and their sub-contractors became the focus of political and public anger, rather than this being directed at the decision-making of the Home Office and the use of destitution as a policy tool in the first instance. As with a number of other scandals involving the conditions of asylum accommodation in the UK, the Government is able to remove their proximity from questions of accountability by creating a relational distance. By investing private actors with authority as a means to “reach” into dispersal locations while remaining physically distant, the state is able to displace their own authority from such contexts and displace their responsibilities for asylum seekers. A focus on seeing like a city is fundamental to drawing out this uneven landscape of *displacing and emplacing* authority by considering how authority “emerges” in and through different urban contexts and compositions (Magnusson, 2011, p. 36).

Unintentional effects

Seeing like a city may also focus attention on the often unintentional effects of dispersal, and how these present opportunities for dissent within the topological workings of power. For example, in the Glasgow case, dispersal has produced not just the development of the skills and expertise noted earlier, but also a more assertive politics of dissent that demands rights for asylum seekers. Thus, in 2009, activists in Glasgow and Bristol founded the “Dignity not Destitution” campaign, aimed at challenging government policy on the removal of support for asylum seekers after decisions on their status have been taken. In opposing the use of destitution as a deterrent within the asylum system, the “Dignity not Destitution” campaign argued that asylum seekers should be provided with sufficient support so that they can meet their essential living needs and be given permission to work if their case hasn’t been resolved within six months. The campaign was focused on addressing demands to national government *through the city* as a conduit for advancing a refugee rights agenda. Through public demonstrations, lobbying of councilors, and public petitions, the campaign focused on galvanizing support within urban authorities and mobilizing this against “central” government (Darling, 2016). One unintended consequence of dispersal is therefore that dispersal produced the conditions within which such opposition to government policy could be fostered, and alliances of interest between activists, local authorities, and asylum seekers could be forged. In the latter instance, campaigns and dissent emerged in large part through the collaboration of citizen and non-citizen activists, with a lens of solidarity focusing on points of shared exclusion, most notably the ways in which state-led austerity enacts violence across the city (Darling, 2016b). From efforts by asylum seekers to monitor and record their inadequate and unsafe housing conditions, to anti-deportation activism in support of fellow asylum seekers, forms of “minor” politics of registering dissent and seeking recognition of political presence, were often the starting points on which such campaigns were built (Darling, 2017; Squire and Darling 2013).

Dispersal also produced cultural effects that exceed the form of a disciplinary practice. In 2015, the charity “Refuweegee” was established in Glasgow aiming to provide a welcome to asylum seekers and refugees through a series of volunteering opportunities, the distribution of donated household items, and the provision of welcome packs to all

new arrivals in the city (Refugweegee, 2017). A “refuweegee” is defined as “a person who upon arrival in Glasgow is embraced by the people of the city, a person considered to be local”, under the banner “We’re all fae somewhere”, communicating a message that what matters is not the process that placed asylum seekers and refugees in Glasgow, but their presence in the city here and now (Refugweegee, 2017). Dispersal created not just conditions for dissent, but also conditions for the emergence of fragile and often temporary cultures of welcome in everyday urban life (Darling, 2018; Gill, 2018). Seeing like a city allows for these uncertain effects of dispersal to come to the fore, wherein the cultural responses of Glasgow, together with its political histories of solidarity and internationalism (Featherstone, 2012), combine with the lived realities of dispersal to present opportunities for challenging dominant narratives of asylum as an issue of securitization, regulation, and suspicion. Taken together, these two cultural and political claims speak to the importance of political “experiments at the level of everyday life”, as Simone and Pieterse (2017, p. 9) assert. For them, urban politics is not about the establishment of an all-encompassing framework of dissent or political antagonism, but rather of more prosaically exploring how “topological resonances” between actors, ideas, issues, and materials, may “open up the possibility of new linkages among things usually kept apart” (ibid, p. 10). These resonances are the relations of intensity, reach, and influence that we see topologically reproducing power in the assemblages of dispersal, yet they also offer folds of activism, solidarity, and alliance, between political causes and campaigns, such that the issue of destitution in Glasgow becomes a point of learning for asylum advocates elsewhere in the UK. In this way, the urban intra-actions of powerful relations are made vulnerable to deformation and appropriation in new directions.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have explored how urban asylum might be approached by employing an emergent set of debates on what it may mean to see like a city. This approach foregrounds the incomplete nature of claims to authority, and resonates with a view of the nation-state as an assemblage “that is perpetually in a position of becoming, whose institutional forms and capacities are always both transient and historically and geographically contingent” (Haughton et al., 2013, p. 220). More than this, seeing like a city highlights the political possibilities of the urban to challenge the remaking of sovereign authority, and views diverse patterns of everyday urban life as a resource from which to build such possibilities. To more fully account for refugee urbanism though, I have argued that seeing like a city as a political ontology should be supplemented with a critical appreciation of the relations of intensity, reach, and influence that shape how conjunctures of urban governance, agency, and subjectivity co-constitute “urban refugees”. Critically, as the context of dispersal illustrates, the possibilities that seeing like a city highlights in its account of the “navigable channels” of responding to, and resisting, governance are not equally or evenly spread. Rather, the capacity to respond to the governmental impulses of multiple authorities and select one’s own path through these, is a privileged position. What seeing like a city may help to expose, is the ways in which decisions over that inequality are made not by a singular authority, but by the interaction of a multitude of sources of government, influence, and authority. Such multiplicities involve the folding in and

stretching out of power relations and claims, such that cities are spaces of unpredictable effects and politics.

There are of course limits to “seeing like a city”, not least in the risk of romanticizing how authority may be produced through collective claims-making and prospective self-government (Magnusson, 2011, 2015). Nor should this be read as an argument that dismisses state sovereignty or authority as of real significance in refugee politics (Darling, 2017). Indeed, focusing on dispersal presents a critical challenge to the concern with transformation and instability that seeing like a city tends to foreground. For whilst in this political ontology orders may be seen as temporary stabilizations in aleatory conditions (Dunn & Cons, 2014), it is important to recognize that seeking stability within conditions of flux is not simply a political product of sovereign, or governmental authority. A range of urban actors seek stability too. In the case of Anna, alongside her demands for dignity, safety and basic information on her situation, there is a desire for stillness and stability in the turbulent conditions of being made mobile by dispersal. Anna invested considerable amounts of her labor and sense of self into creating some stability for herself and her family, speaking to the risks that arise through urban dynamics of instability and aleatory authority. As Dunn and Cons (2014) note, whilst the complexity of overlapping forms of governance may offer openings for evasion and unintended sites of resistance, such effects are rarely without cost. Dispersal thus highlights how the hopeful politics that Magnusson (2011) attaches to the city as a space of transformation, is challenged by the disruptive nature of that transformation at the level of citizens and non-citizens who experience the politics of the state as intentionally disruptive and discomforting (Darling, 2011). This calls for a nuanced approach to seeing like a city, which is not content to rely on the potentials of urban multiplicity and uncertainty to unproblematically undermine the exclusions of state sovereignty and bordering. Rather, in considering dispersal, the need to retain a concern with how the capacity to navigate tensions of uncertainty and stability is unevenly distributed is one means of developing an account of refugee urbanism that eschews urban romanticism or exceptionalism.

In developing such an account, and despite its challenges, seeing like a city does present a number of opportunities. First, methodologically, a seeing like a city approach entails a concern for staying with multiplicity and focusing attention on the temporary stabilization of orders. In the context of urban asylum, this means examining not just the disciplinary mechanisms and technologies that shape and condition how asylum seekers encounter cities, but also the spatial and social practices through which urban experience is constituted. Addressing multiplicity through such practices demands renewed attention to the materials and infrastructures that shape how refugees and asylum seekers experience cities, from governmental materials of categorization (Darling, 2014), through infrastructures of accommodation and urban services (Amin & Thrift, 2017), to material and infrastructural failures that express relations of power and position within the city, such as the collapsed ceiling and its aftermath for Anna (Lancione & McFarlane, 2016). It also demands greater critical engagement with how urban worlds are learned and adapted to as complex compositions of authority, autonomy, presence, and aversion. The multiplicity that seeing like a city foregrounds is an ontology of uncertainty and, as such, requires attention to how uncertainty is lived with and adapted to as a mode of cohabiting in the midst of urban “throwtogetherness” (Massey, 2005).

Secondly, seeing like a city may offer a way of approaching political questions, and not just a way of understanding the urban. This is important as it shifts the kind of political claims and demands that are made – from either abandoning the state altogether as a political formation or to radically altering its constitution through political revolution, to an account of situated practices and counter-conducts that emerge *within* existing fields of government. As the forms of dissent that emerged in Glasgow illustrate, these practices are often unpredictable effects of generative forms of power and claims to authority. Such an approach is evident in Larner’s (2014, p. 197) discussion of whether the mechanisms of creative appropriation often used by the state and other dominant actors to side-line and incorporate dissent, might also be employed by those seeking to challenge such dominance, thereby asking if it is possible to “imagine new ‘arts of government’ that might take advantage of (instead of simply denouncing or resisting) recent transformations in the spatial organisation of government” (ibid). Refugee urbanism may offer one perspective from which to start imagining these possibilities in the context of urban asylum.

Note

1. For example, coverage in a range of newspapers drew attention to Glasgow as a city at the forefront of negotiating the UK’s asylum system. These included headlines of “Being a ‘failed asylum seeker’ leads directly to homelessness on the streets of Glasgow” (Clark, *The New Statesman*, 2018), “Confusion over ‘eviction’ of Glasgow’s asylum seekers” (Goodwin, *The Herald*, 2018), and ‘Calls to halt plans to change locks on homes of 300 Glasgow asylum seekers as city could plunge into “humanitarian crisis”’ (Paterson, *The Scottish Sun*, 2018).

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