Editorial

Asylum, Welfare and Colonialism in Europe: Who Belongs, and Who Deserves?

Olga Jubany [1,*] and Lucy Mayblin [2]

1   Department of Social Anthropology, Universitat de Barcelona, 08001 Barcelona, Spain
2   Department of Sociological Studies, University of Sheffield, Sheffield S10 2TT, UK
*   Correspondence: olga.jubany@ub.edu

1. Introduction

For more than 30 years, public debate concerning migration and asylum in Europe has centred on the question of whether the maintenance of a robust welfare state opposes the reception of international migrants. Asylum protection has been weakened in the name of protecting the welfare state. This supports a narrative of asylum seekers and refugees as illegitimate burdens on European welfare states, legitimating exclusionary policies that restrict their access to social protection structures. Public debates frame asylum seekers and refugees as "abusers" of the welfare state, which is cast as "at risk". Increasingly restrictive immigration policies are necessary, then, to "protect" social services. While empirical research has consistently rejected this as a false dichotomy, academic debates are still too often framed by socially constructed ideas of otherness and belonging, central to populist and nationalist political projects across Europe. In other words, they are established from the position that immigrants of all kinds are indeed outsiders who have not contributed, and then ask whether it is morally appropriate or economically sensible to include them within the community of eligible welfare recipients.

This Special Issue adopts an alternate perspective. Moving beyond current debates, it aims to shift the focus of welfare and asylum research from the ways European states limit asylum seekers and refugees' access to the welfare state, to explore the exclusionary frameworks of states, past and present. It begins from the position that Europe's colonial past continues to shape the construction of categories of inclusion, belonging and deservingness in European welfare states, irrespective of actual histories of colonial membership and economic contribution. While there is a wealth of literature which has explored the role of various colonialisms in shaping the welfare regimes of formerly colonised countries in the postcolonial period there has been much less research that has brought the postcolonial perspective back to the metropole. This has started to change in recent years, with a small but influential number of works starting to make these connections (for example, Bhambra and Holmwood (2018)). In this introduction, we reflect on what this work can tell us about the legacies of European colonialisms in shaping not only European welfare regimes, but more specifically the partial inclusion or even exclusion of people seeking asylum from these welfare regimes.

Welfare is in part based on ideas of belonging through citizenship and paying in to a common pot. Belonging tends to be connected to territorial residence in the nation state, to claims to nationality, and to the expulsion of others who are understood both not to belong and not to have any legitimate claim to the collective pot. Thinking with colonialism disrupts this narrative in Europe since many European nation states today have been part of much larger colonial entities across history, entities from which the metropoles were net beneficiaries. The collective pot, then, was formed from colonial extraction, taxation and exploitation. We might then, understand the legitimate beneficiaries of the welfare state to exceed the territorial boundaries of today's European nation states. But beyond claims to entitlement tied to literal historical connections, we can also recognize that

histories of colonialism established global inequalities—relations under global capitalism of dependency, imperialism and neo-colonialism—which continue to shape today's world. The reality of these forces means that situations of population displacement are not simply endogenous to countries or regions of origin. These connected histories and connected contemporary sociologies, then, mean that efforts to deny access to welfare support systems to forced migrants in Europe can be contested. Finally, we can draw on the insights offered by post- and decolonial scholars to aid our understanding of how human hierarchies are applied to welfare categories with reference to people seeking asylum.

2. Colonial Histories, Welfare Hierarchies and Asylum Categories

The conceptualisation of asylum is central to the justification for maintaining the legal fiction of illegality. This construction of asylum, alongside migration, operates across social, cultural and legal dimensions and plays a critical role in upholding state power. Over the past fifty years, migration has increasingly been framed through the lenses of securitisation and criminalisation. This shift has accentuated the fundamental division between 'us' and 'them' that is constitutive of the nation-state (Anderson 2013). Within this context, asylum has come to symbolise the uncertainties and anxieties confronting the modern European state. Asylum seekers are portrayed as a threat to the nation or a burden to the welfare state against a ghost refugee–victim that only exists as a narrative lifeline, reflecting deeper fears and challenges related to national identity, security, and sovereignty.

The evolution of asylum policies and the exercise of state power are deeply intertwined with processes of "othering" and the construction of narratives that depict migrants as threats (Fassin 2011). These mechanisms have significantly shaped contemporary approaches to migration, which often amplify the perceived social, cultural, economic and security challenges associated with migration flows by popular and political discourse. This has led threat management at national borders to the core of state power, with security measures and border enforcement strategies that become increasingly sophisticated. Threat and exceptionalism narratives serve to push the boundaries of legal constraints, thereby expanding the realm of what is considered permissible under the law, making the most draconian measures commonplace and rendering border enforcement progressively more lethal. Consequently, such approaches have normalised the discourse surrounding migration as a security issue, embedding these debates firmly within the public and political consciousness. This normalisation perpetuates a cycle where migration is continuously framed through the lens of threat and control, influencing both policy decisions and societal attitudes towards migration and asylum.

The underlying premise of this threat narrative is the fictitious notion of European states as homogeneous white nations. Within this framework, migrants are framed as a cultural, moral and economic challenge to the essence of the white nation, which is presented as a uniform unit with a defined character. This framing is unfailingly grounded in nationalist discourse, which emphasises perceived threats to the 'unity' of the nation. It is further supported by hierarchical categorisations rooted in colonial constructions of the 'other', where gendered and radicalised classifications intertwine with the threat–vulnerability continuum (Mayblin 2017). Such rhetoric perpetuates the idea that the presence of migrants undermines the cultural cohesion and societal stability of the nation, simultaneously reinforcing European states as custodians of rights and the moral order, further entrenching exclusionary attitudes and policies behind a humanitarian discourse.

Thus, the imperative to exclude the 'other' has emerged as a central political message, supported by an increasingly unwelcoming climate towards those that are framed as "non-belonging". This development is not a novel phenomenon but rather a resurgence of historical patterns in a new guise, characterised by a contemporary language that significantly influences asylum constructions and policies. This shift underscores the persistent and evolving nature of xenophobic discourses, revealing deeply ingrained colonial legacies that continue to shape modern state practices and societal attitudes towards migration.

The significance of narratives that deconstruct asylum as a right, while simultaneously reconstructing it as a threat, is crucial for understanding how asylum seekers and refugees are construed as burdens by European welfare states (Sales 2002). These narratives do not only shape political discourse and policy but also play a fundamental role in defining institutional attitudes and decision-making processes on the ground. Ethnographic research has revealed that the construction of asylum is perpetuated at the institutional level daily through the work of frontline agents (Jubany 2017). State agents are influenced by pervasive meta-narratives of hierarchisation of the 'other', reproducing these constructions through their work culture and day-to-day decisions.

Significantly, while the impact of policy on implementation is clear, the impact of these meta-narratives on policy enactment is frequently underestimated. This oversight persists despite evidence that the knowledge production on asylum is more closely aligned with racialised and gendered discourses than with the formal outputs or objectives of policy. The interplay between these discourses and institutional practices, as the papers in this Special Issue demonstrate, underscores the need to critically examine how deep-seated cultural and societal biases inform and shape asylum policies and practices. Making sense of these mechanisms is essential for unveiling the underlying assumptions that contribute to framing asylum seekers as threats or victims, rather than from a perspective of rights.

3. The Geographies of Colonialism and the Politics of Welfare Entitlement

Post- and decolonial theory and research has transformed how we think about the emergence of nation states, the geographies of belonging and exclusion that were afforded by colonial and imperial states, and how these histories have shaped the present moment. Empires were expansive transnational entities which networked together distant territories—economically, politically, linguistically and culturally. Several European countries, such as France, Spain or the UK, were, for most of their history, part of transnational empires. This then changed in the middle of the twentieth century, as colonial states started to shrink back to nation states through decolonization. As Steinmetz (2014, 78/9) points out:

> *The last third of the twentieth century saw a kind of conceptual transubstantiation in the social sciences whereby polities that historically had been called empires were recategorized as states. This happened as the great colonial empires were disappearing and nation-states were becoming the default unit of organization for the international system [...] States figure as the historical origins and end points of empires, with nation-states acquiring and losing empires or empires devolving into mere states.*

While the social sciences have been accused of paying too little attention to these histories, recognising them can help us to make better sense of the present. In short, the argument made by post- and decolonial scholars is that we cannot understand the history of these now diminished nation states without some reference to the larger colonial geographies that shaped and were shaped by them (Bhambra 2016). For example, looking at France from a postcolonial perspective means recognising the shifting territorial geography of France over time—expanding and contracting as the Empire waxed and waned. We cannot properly understand France today without recognising this shifting territorial history.

Understandings of welfare states specifically are often dependent on understandings of the contemporary territorially bounded nation state. But, as noted above, many states have had a shifting territorial composition, and many states in Europe have historically been the metropoles of large empires. Their emergence as wealthy global powers has been intimately tied to colonialism. Through resource extraction, colonial taxation and labour exploitation, they later came to have the resources to develop welfare states. These welfare states tended to emerge in the fall-out from decolonization and as such it was the much smaller polity of the metropolitan nation state that benefitted from new welfare entitlements. Gurminder K. Bhambra (2022) is a key scholar in leading this discussion. She has written extensively about how the creation of the British welfare state was shaped by colonial gains, particularly from India. She explains that in 1884:

£203 million at the disposal of the British state for general government £89 million came from the UK, £74 million from India, and £40 million from territories and colonies in the rest of empire. Over half the money at the disposal of the government at Westminster came from the labor, resources, and taxes of those within empire and beyond the national state. The taxes and resources of colonized subjects were taken into account when making calculations about the feasibility of national welfare provision in the metropole (i.e., in terms of calculating the size of the national fund) without ever taking them—colonized subjects—into account as the recipients of the distribution of that fund; not even in the most extreme cases of famine and starvation. (p. 11)

What Bhambra shows is that Britain drew large amounts of money from its colonies, and later used money from across the empire to invest in creating a welfare state within the metropolitan space only. She argues that the relatively unacknowledged extraction from former colonies should lead us both to conduct further research exploring the larger non-national polities which have shaped national welfare systems and to reparative actions to rectify historical injustice.

When people arrive in Europe from elsewhere today, then, there is a tendency to view these people as very much not deserving of participation and benefit from European welfare states. The boundary of deservingness ends at the edge of the nation state through citizenship. Bhambra's intervention interrupts the idea of the nation as the imagined contributor to a collective reserve fund, which is then distributed within the community. If we start to trouble this kind of binary inside/outside thinking, this view is challenged. We might then ask, how can inclusion within welfare regimes be reimagined to account for colonial histories? This includes recognizing the kinds of literal histories of interconnection that Bhambra writes about. But it might also include recognising global patterns of inequality which have been shaped by histories of colonialism, and which mean that some countries are in long-term relations of economic dependency which disadvantage them at the global level.

E. Tendayi Achiume (2019) challenges the legal right of 'First World' states to exclude 'Third World' citizens by, like Bhambra, centring colonial histories and their legacies into the present. Achiume observes that the European empires were built upon white economic migration. The mobility of 'First World' citizens was prioritised, while the autonomous economic migration of 'Third World' citizens of empire was curtailed. But as economic migrants moved out of Europe, resources flowed in the opposite direction, bringing prosperity to the metropolitan centres. The hostile response of 'First World' states to 'Third World' migrants is possible because nation states have the right to exclude outsiders as a matter of sovereign self-determination. Non-nationals are 'definitionally political strangers with no cognizable claims to shaping the trajectory of the respective nation-state, and certainly no say as to the terms of their admission and inclusion within that body' (p. 8). Achiume asks us to rethink this logic. She suggests that histories of colonialism represent an 'invitation to interdependence', and having built deep global interconnection, metropolitan postcolonial states cannot ethically now disavow that interdependency (see also Amighetti and Nuti (2016)).

Decolonisation was, for many, a project of seeking equality, in part through decolonised states gaining political control, but also control of their economies. But Achiume argues that rather than gaining full economic and political sovereignty, decolonisation involved a shift from colonial empire to neo-colonial empire. The failures of formal decolonization therefore maintain the political association between 'Third' and 'First World' persons 'in a de facto political community of de facto co-sovereigns mutually instrumental to the prosperity of neo-colonial empire' (p. 44). Peoples around the world (across the First/Third world divide) remain politically and economically interconnected, but people in the 'Third World' remain largely subordinated in this relationship. Achiume refers to this set of relations as 'neo-colonial empire'. Her argument is that 'Third World' peoples are co-sovereign members of neo-colonial empire' and are therefore 'entitled to a say in the vehicles of effective collective self-determination within this empire' (p. 12). It is in this situation

of co-sovereignty that Achiume argues 'Third World' persons should have access to the shared goods, including territorial access and welfare states, of 'First World' states. This of course extraterritorialises the demos beyond nation state borders, moving its boundaries to neocolonial interconnection.

4. Exploring the Crossroads of Asylum, Welfare and Colonialism

Aiming at unsettling the citizen/non-citizen divide, the works in this Special Issue dig into the construction of belonging and welfare entitlement. Collyer and Shahani examine the UK–Rwanda partnership, revealing how current offshoring practices of refugees can be traced back to well-established practices of colonial governance in the British Empire. Collyer and Shahani draw parallels in the rationale and language between the current Rwanda policy and its key antecedents in policies of forced (im)mobility during colonial rule, showing how these are normalised in British governance. Humphries explores current 'sanctuary cities' as a challenge to the transfer of control over mobility from municipalities to the sovereign by English colonial governance. Yet, Humphries reveals that rationalizations based on 'deservingness' continue to permeate these initiatives, as they fail to acknowledge the continuity of the colonial legacy as current practices in the role of cities as an apparatus of the nation-state migration governance. Castellanos analyses the historical cartographies of power inequality imbricated within migratory movements, showing how racism continues the key groundwork of the citizen/non-citizen divide. In this line, Perocco and Della Puppa provide an empirical work analysing the discursive characteristics of welfare racism in public discourse in Italy today, and its prevalent role in informing policy.

Focusing on the construction of refugee policy, implementation and their consequences, Jacobsen looks at the extractive practices of labour within the asylum system, by exploring the relationship of Syrians with the Danish welfare state and its 'integration' program. This illustrates how refugees are construed as welfare recipients and are disempowered in the process. In a similar vein, Borelli, Poy and Rué propose the concept of 'ghost bureaucracy' to examine the state's strategic shifts between appearance and disappearance, showcasing how the state selectively advances, or withdraws, to control and manage mobility. Their comparative ethnographic analysis applies this novel concept to examine the active role of bureaucracy within the asylum system in reinforcing a dichotomy between 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' recipients of welfare. Walsh and Ferazzoli meanwhile focus on self-disciplining practices in the process of claiming asylum, illustrating how "externally controlled practices of dispersal and *waiting*" become forms of violence and, consequently, result in behaviour modifications among those waiting for asylum decisions in the UK in ways that facilitate the state's ability to govern populations within the asylum system. Finally, Freedman, Sahraoui and Tyszler provide an in-depth ethnographic approach to the gendered and racialised violence exercised by the French asylum system arguing that the legal and material precariousness of women face in the asylum system are directly connected to exclusion of refugees from the citizenry.

5. Conclusions

The postcolonial nation-state perpetuates inequalities in access to welfare resources, privileging certain groups based on notions of belonging which depend on colonial amnesia. This represents asylum seekers and refugees as a burden for European welfare states, and even as illegitimately profiting from it. An analysis which looks at this issue in the context of histories of colonialism unsettles these categories, revealing how welfare states in Europe have developed thanks to the benefits of colonialism. It challenges the right of past colonial empires to exclude outsiders in the name of sovereignty, after having already set the structures for global inequalities and interdependency. Bridging the gap to the colonial past of current phenomena and relations also draws attention to how it continues to shape welfare policies and practices today. Looking at the continuities between colonial structures and current bureaucratic configurations within the welfare state, this Special Issue dives

deeply into how racialised discourses and discriminatory practices continue to underpin how welfare is currently construed in Europe.

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