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# Imagining asylum, governing asylum seekers: Complexity reduction and policy making in the UK Home Office

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## Abstract

Drawing on elite interviews with UK asylum policymakers, this article entails a detailed elaboration of how policy programmes are produced by particular ways of imagining asylum seeking in an effort to reduce the complexity of the phenomenon and thus devise policy responses to it. The article explores how such processes can lead to the curtailment of the economic rights of asylum seekers with specific reference the UK policy of severely restricting labour market access for asylum seekers. The policy imaginary—the story which is utilized in reducing the complexity of irregular migration in this context—is the idea of the ‘economic pull factor’. That is that disingenuous asylum seekers (economic migrants in disguise) are ‘pulled’ to particular countries by economic opportunities. This construal of what drives irregular migration for asylum is not natural or inevitable, it is the outcome of institutionally embedded ways of viewing the world and Britain’s place within it. This discussion brings insights from critical policy studies to bear on asylum policy making, offering new ways of understanding the practices and processes of policy making in this field.

**Keywords:** asylum, cultural political economy, economic rights, labour market, policy, pull factors

## 1. Introduction

Sixty five years after the signing of the 1951 Geneva Convention on the Status of Refugees, many founding signatories still fail to provide adequate support to people arriving at their borders seeking asylum, many of whom arrive irregularly (i.e. not through authorized channels). State level responses to irregular arrivals seeking asylum in Europe, North America and Australasia particularly have been subject to extensive critique as they appear to penalize asylum seekers for their own displacement and often seek to impede

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people's efforts to find sanctuary and settlement, despite the international legal framework which exists expressly to prevent this from happening (Marfleet 2006; Squire 2009; Kissoon 2010; Allsopp, Sigona and Phillimore 2014). Often, forced migrants—as agency free victims ('genuine refugees')—are juxtaposed against illegal economic migrants who are 'deemed culpable for rendering the task of governing human mobility increasingly difficult' (Scheel and Squire 2014: 188).

Drawing on insights from Cultural Political Economy (CPE) (Jessop 2009, 2013; Sum and Jessop 2013), this article explores how this juxtaposition operates in the UK context, and how this way of imagining irregular migration for asylum—as excessively economic—results in the curtailment of the economic rights of asylum seekers. The starting point is the now well-established observation that patterns and processes of irregular migration are complex, and that complexity exceeds our ability to calculate, manage, govern or guide it—though of course we continue to attempt to do so (Castles 2004). Patterns of irregular migration are complex in that they involve people from a multitude of backgrounds and demographic characteristics moving for a wide range of reasons, from, through, and to a diverse range of contexts. Their journeys are often contingent, changing, and subject to a wide range of intervening factors such as changing immigration laws, border guards, humanitarian interventions, smuggling chains, major life events, and social networks. As such, the totality of irregular migration is ever changing and almost impossible to make sense of in the round. But in order to make sense of it, there are multiple discursive formulations which explain 'forced' and 'voluntary', legal and illegal, migration and organizationally and institutionally fix practices of management and guidance in relation to it. These discursive formulations, here conceptualized as policy imaginaries, are ways of simplifying the complexity of the phenomenon.

Drawing on elite interviews with asylum policymakers, this article entails a detailed elaboration of how policy programmes are produced by particular ways of imagining asylum seeking in an effort to reduce the complexity of the phenomenon and thus devise policy responses to it. The article explores how such processes can lead to the curtailment of the economic rights of asylum seekers with specific reference to the UK policy of severely restricting labour market access for asylum seekers. The policy imaginary—the story which is utilized in reducing the complexity of irregular migration for asylum in this context—is the idea of the 'economic pull factor'. That is, disingenuous asylum seekers (economic migrants in disguise) are 'pulled' to particular countries by economic opportunities. This construal of what drives irregular migration for asylum is not natural or inevitable; it is the outcome of institutionally embedded, morally distancing, ways of viewing the world and Britain's place within it.

Some scholars in migration studies have approached popular discursive representations of migration and migrants as 'narratives', 'knowledge claims', or 'frames', sometimes analysed within the context of particular organizational settings (Boswell et al. 2011). These analyses start from observed narratives—they begin with the discursive—and require additional theoretical insights from other fields (such as organizational sociology) in order to make sense of the discursive within an institutional context. CPE starts from the complexity of real world, and comes to the discursive when identifying the conditions, including institutional cultures, from which particular construals, which seek to simplify that complexity, emerge as hegemonic. CPE, then, focuses specifically upon complexity

reduction as both semiotic and extra semiotic, rather than focusing primarily upon the semiotic (often conceptualized as narratives). In this sense the CPE-inspired analysis developed here adds to and develops existing work within this field (see also [Mayblin 2016a](#)).

After initially exploring the theoretical basis of complexity reduction, drawing on Bob Jessop and Ngai Ling Sum's work in Cultural Political Economy (CPE) in more detail, I then describe the economic pull imaginary and demonstrate its dominance in relation to policies circumscribing the economic rights of asylum seekers. Drawing on research interview data I then explore (a) the pull factor as a hegemonic construal within asylum policy making in the UK, (b) the historically emergent institutional culture and structure which frames the Home Office's response to asylum seekers, and (c) the resulting institutional norms shaping the judgement of what counts as 'evidence' in relation to the pull factor. This discussion brings insights from critical policy studies to bear on asylum policy making, offering new ways of understanding the practices and processes of policy making in this field.

## 2. Irregular migration: Actual and imagined

In the critical realist tradition a distinction is made between actually occurring practices and processes and the interpretation of such phenomena by (in this case) policy actors. Central to this is the focus on how policy actors interpret complex phenomena, having consciously, or unconsciously selected one amongst many possible construals ([Jessop 2009](#); [Sum and Jessop 2013](#)). These interpretations are not only discursive manoeuvres, selected construals can become institutionally embedded and can lead to the development and implementation of policies, to the organization of institutional roles, hierarchies, methods of monitoring, and to the embedding of social relations outside of the policy-making domain. In other words, how and in what form the complexity of irregular migration and asylum seeking is reduced can have significant implications for people's lives, first and foremost in this case, for asylum seekers themselves. In this section I first address the complexity of irregular migration. I then discuss how the imagining of asylum amongst those with policymaking power impacts upon the governance of asylum applicants in the UK, and what the impact of this is on their economic rights. Finally, before moving on to the discussion of the research interviews, I discuss what the implications of this are for the use of evidence in asylum policy making.

### 2.1 The complexity of irregular migration

Irregular migration is a phenomenon that resists generalization. It has been argued that 'migration across national borders [more generally] stands out as perhaps one of the most resistant to scientific analysis' ([Davis 1988](#): 245). Because of this patterns of forced migration, and therefore appropriate policies, can only be properly evaluated in the context of specific migratory situations. Those who end up making an application for asylum in a Western country often, though not always, arrive irregularly—i.e. this is a consequence of the proliferation of technologies of restriction and control which make entering a wealthy host state in order to seek asylum increasingly difficult through unauthorized channels.

Such individuals are sometimes hard to distinguish from other categories of migrant, and indeed policy, legal, and even academic categorizations (e.g. ‘asylum seeker’, ‘refugee’, ‘economic migrant’) themselves can be problematic and do not necessarily mesh with the messy realities of people’s lives (Zetter 2007; Long 2013; Scheel and Squire 2014). Irregular migration, including for asylum, is not therefore a complicated phenomenon, made up of many solvable and knowable parts, it is a complex phenomenon with high degrees of contingency and uncertainty (see Parkhurst 2016 on the complicated/complex distinction).

Those who do eventually become ‘asylum seekers’ come from a wide range of countries, ethnicities, languages, religions, education levels, genders, ages, sexualities, and have variable access to resources. Categorizations facilitate administrative processes but terms such as ‘asylum seeker’ and ‘refugee’ belie the fact that such individuals are not a homogenous group. Indeed, even the generalized demographic make-up of asylum applicants varies significantly between different destination countries, because migration pathways are influenced by historical links, and the presence of settled migrant communities. People are displaced, or choose to migrate (or a combination of the two), for many reasons in many country contexts; and irregular migrants are usually making journeys with imperfect information, changing migration plans on the way, encountering other migrants, humanitarian actors, border guards, media personnel, smugglers, and others who change things for them in various ways (Collyer 2010; Brekke and Brochmann 2014). Changing border and immigration rules and responses introduce further complexity and contingency. Globally, patterns of irregular migration, including migration for asylum, are therefore always changing, meaning that even if we are able to render the complexity comprehensible in a given moment, it is likely to change soon. Indeed, this is why many scholars focus not upon ‘forced’ or ‘irregular’ migration in general, but on particular geographically located individuals, or particular ethnic or national groups in contexts of reception.

Because of this complexity, it is nearly impossible to conclusively identify empirical causality between particular policy interventions in particular countries and the numbers of asylum applications received in that country. Aside from the fact that policy measures tend to be implemented at the same time as a raft of other reforms, which makes it highly challenging to isolate the effect of any one initiative, there are simply too many variables at work in determining such outcomes (Richmond, 1993). And yet, in governing irregular migration in wealthy countries, it is this question more than any other—what makes asylum seekers choose one country over another—that guides asylum policymaking. The aim for policymakers, of course, is not to encourage people to choose one’s country, but to discourage (or prevent) them from doing so. They must therefore simplify this complexity into a narrative that is both comprehensible and, importantly, points to feasible policy solutions. Only physical blocks on arrival (border controls, carrier sanctions), preventing people from exercising their right to apply for asylum if they set foot on the territory of a host country, appear to conclusively reduce numbers (Czaika and De Haas 2013). Policies which look at reducing incentives to move to a particular country (pull factors), such as limiting access to the labour market and reducing welfare support levels have not been proven to have any effect (for a review of this research see Mayblin and James 2016), and yet they continue to be employed. My interest here, then, is not primarily the complexity of irregular migration, though this is important to establish, but the ways in

which policy actors seek to simplify that complexity and in doing so render asylum seeking comprehensible and ultimately governable.

## 2.2 Complexity reduction

Complexity reduction is fundamental to our ability to ‘go on’ in the world; actors and observers attribute meaning to some aspects of the world rather than others ‘because the world cannot be grasped in all its complexity in real time’ (Jessop 2009: 338). In order to describe or interpret phenomena, as well as make decisions, we must therefore focus selectively on some aspects of the world at the same time as excluding others. For describing, interpreting, and governing forced migration, national governments therefore necessarily reduce the complexity of actual events through creating interpretive narratives about what is going on. While ‘the real world pre-exists complexity reduction (and is also transformed in some respects in and through complexity reduction), actors/observers have no direct access to that world apart from the sheer activity of the concrete historical situations into which they are “thrown”’ (Jessop 2009: 338). The ways in which actors or observers identify ‘aspects’ of the world as significant depends on the meaning systems which they have access to and draw upon (Jessop 2009: 338).

One way of conceptualizing these simplified narratives is as policy ‘imaginaries’ (see Jessop 2009, 2013; Sum and Jessop 2013). An imaginary is ‘a semiotic ensemble (without tightly defined boundaries) that frames individual subjects’ lived experience of an inordinately complex world and/or guides collective calculation about that world’. Imaginaries are packages of beliefs, ideas, material circumstances and processes which together form a perspective on a current situation. Though there is a discursive element to this, the argument is not that discourse alone is socially constructive. Rather, in CPE a distinction is made between social construal and social construction (Sum and Jessop 2013). Social construals are how we understand a particular social phenomenon or situation. There is infinite potential variation in this but people *select* and *retain* particular construals which over time form an imaginary (with material consequences and causal powers) which can become hegemonic. Hegemonic construals frame the scope of potential policy options, organize institutional responses to policy issues and then come to have causal powers, thus becoming socially constructive.

Hegemonic imaginaries are selected from a range of possible interpretations, and then retained. They are not simply semiotic; they are also extra-semiotic (material). For example, people avoid (willingly, or through institutional design) having random, unpredictable and chaotic interactions with others and with the material world. This means that possible connections and sequences of action are limited and that social interactions become structured at the same time as particular construals are focused upon. It also means that some interpretations of events, and some social interactions, are avoided. In the field of asylum policymaking, then, the structural aspects of interactions between policymakers are likely to close down opportunities for contestation of dominant imaginaries, such as that which sustains the pull factor thesis, discussed below.

As noted above, why actors select certain construals and how these lead to policy action is dependent on both semiosis (meanings/understandings/discourses) and factors in the material world (structural and material processes and practices). Indeed, semiosis is only

effective when embedded in material practices, which here includes technologies of classification, registration, and calculation, which all discipline social action. Technologies play a central role in the selection and retention of specific imaginaries in that they ‘provide reference points not only in meaning making but also in the coordination of actions within and across specific personal interactions, organizations and networks, and institutional orders’ (Jessop 2009: 339). Technologies include policy decision techniques and policy evaluation. There is a well-established system for managing and disciplining asylum seekers, as well as measuring the asylum system in various ways, such as monitoring the numbers of applications and success/failure rates. These are used to discipline asylum seekers but because they are measurable, they are also used to discipline policy actors within the Home Office, and even the Home Secretary. I will demonstrate below that this wider system is central to the continued legitimacy of the pull factor thesis.

### 2.3 Imagining asylum

How policy actors imagine asylum thus constrains and determines the ways in which they govern asylum seekers through policy mechanisms. Over the past two decades policy-makers in the UK (though also elsewhere) have been very concerned with limiting the number of people who are able to reach their territory—at which point they will have the right to claim asylum and for their application to be properly assessed (Campbell 2016). This concern has tended to override other possible concerns such as preventing displacement from occurring, which is often (though not always) beyond their capability. Mechanisms designed to govern ‘forced’ migration through supporting those who are displaced (the right to asylum and the asylum system which upholds it), are here construed as under threat from disingenuous asylum seekers who are in fact economic migrants. Scheel and Squire (2014: 189) observe this process and suggest that “‘illegality’ has become the interpretive grid for governing migratory movements’ and that ‘forced migrants’ (those who would have a legitimate claim to asylum under international law) are actively produced as ‘illegal migrants’ through media representations and policy measures (see also Squire 2009). The figure of the ‘bogus’ asylum seeker—effectively a clandestine ‘illegal’—as a popular media and political trope peaked in the early 2000s (Gabrielatos and Baker 2008), which is when the focus on economic pull factors emerged.

Central to the drive to decrease the numbers of asylum seekers in the UK, then, is the popular idea that economic migrants are a significant threat to asylum governance systems. If we assume that the asylum system of the UK is under threat from ‘bogus’ applicants, then two logical courses of action present themselves: prevent would-be asylum seekers from arriving in the UK, and dis-incentivize them from choosing the UK as their destination country. Both of these simplistically assume that asylum seekers are ‘pulled’ to the UK by a range of attractive features; features that can be removed with policy measures—such as reducing welfare support and taking away the right to work. Here, asylum has been transformed from primarily a humanitarian phenomenon, in to an economic phenomenon. We can, then, conceptualize this as a ‘pull factor’ imaginary—a simplistic sense-making tool which points to actionable policy solutions oriented to an economic approach. Asylum applicants are construed as ‘illegal’ or ‘bogus’ irregular migrants who have yet to be found out.

Nick Gill's (2016) work on 'moral distancing' within immigration governance systems is informative in thinking through the processes through which this is made possible. Where moral distance is already physically and emotionally established between asylum seekers and policy decision makers, imaginaries are protected and enclosed for policy actors through the everyday workings of the state. This works as much through policy development and evaluation processes as through ministerial decisions. Gill (2016: 6), drawing on Urry (2007) writes 'we might say that moral distancing is an emergent property of a complex system that governs human mobility—a property of the system that is not reducible or traceable to the actions of any individual or parts within it'. The moral scope of individual decision makers is systematically reduced through bureaucracy and through the dispersion of responsibility across a network of actors who (in the case of the Home Office) work at a physical distance from their front-line colleagues, as well as those going through the asylum system.

Some efforts at complexity reduction are more resonant than others, and it is perhaps the long history of ideas of differential humanity and civilizational incommensurability between European and non-European peoples which has in part made this pull factor imaginary, rooted in ideas of disingenuousness and undeservingness, so resonant (Mayblin 2017). Moral distance, in this sense, is not only emergent of bureaucratic organization, but also of much more longstanding ideas of otherness and difference. In this article, it is the institutional organization of the Home Office, the division of immigration policy in to distinct areas of concern which proscribe particular economic rights, and the 'common sense' nature of the push/pull theory of migration, which are of concern; but wider contexts nevertheless require acknowledgment.

The upshot of this dominant, morally distant, policy imaginary for asylum seekers in the UK has been that their economic rights have been steadily eroded. Today, asylum applicants receive welfare payments of £36.95 per week, which represents around a third of the income of the poorest 10 per cent of UK households. Since 2002 the majority of asylum seekers have not been permitted to enter the labour market, or take up any of the 'shortage occupation' jobs which they might legally access if they have been waiting for more than 12 months for a decision on their asylum application (Mayblin 2014, 2016a, 2016b). These restrictions are put in place explicitly in order that irregular migrants are not 'pulled' to the UK by generous welfare benefits or the enticement of labour market access while their asylum application is decided (Mayblin 2016a). One pertinent aspect of this is that though the often uttered claim is that only 'bogus' asylum seekers will be put off while shopping for a migration destination, policies cover all asylum seekers. Here, even having a legitimate claim for asylum (i.e. being able to prove persecution) cannot erase the culpability implicated by the choice to come to the UK. Despite these popular logics, a systematic review of the research evidence on pull factors has failed to find any research evidence that shows that welfare rights and labour market access act as pull factors (Mayblin and James 2016). In the case study below I explore how this policy imaginary is articulated and retained over time through an analysis of asylum policy making in the UK Home Office.

One issue which arises from this discussion is the role of evidence in policy making. This is important because the policy of keeping asylum support payments very low and excluding asylum seekers from the labour market is based on an un-evidenced policy imaginary—the economic pull factor. Justin Parkhurst (2016) explains that 'policymaking typically



involves trade-offs between multiple competing social values, with only a very small proportion of policy decisions simply concerned with technical evidence of the effects of interventions'. Indeed, evidence cannot straightforwardly tell us which is the right choice between different policy options, 'such decisions must be made on the basis of some formal consideration of social values, which modern democratic principles would argue needs to be done' (Parkhurst 2016: 9). Furthermore, different types of 'evidence' serve many purposes within political and policy settings, and research evidence often does not serve a technocratic, policy determining, function (Boswell 2009).

Such practices are important in order to avoid the worst excesses of technocracy but problematic when hegemonic ideas become so entrenched that they become impervious to countervailing evidence or interpretations of phenomena. In the case of asylum, we will see in the case study discussion that there is consensus within the Home Office about preferable policy approaches to asylum (i.e. a restrictive approach to asylum); that this is not open to contestation or deliberation at the policymaking stage and, as such, no serious formal consideration of alternatives takes place. Owing to the consensus on preferable policy options, evidence which challenges these underlying values plays no role in policy making, even where this represents all evidence on a topic. Complexity reduction here therefore leads to the misrepresentation of partisan construals as evidenced 'facts'.

### 3. Asylum policy making in the UK Home Office

#### 3.1 Method

The discussion below draws on 20 one-to-one elite level interviews with UK asylum policymakers. Interviews explored how respondents came to know about the 'asylum space', how they make sense of the complexity of irregular migration for asylum, and what types of information they draw on in these sense-making activities. The policy focus was on the rationale behind placing limitations on labour market access for asylum seekers, which was explored from a range of angles. Interviews were semi-structured and included former Home Secretaries, Immigration Ministers, policy officials involved with asylum policy in the Home Office at various points 2002–16, a member of the Lords with a Home Office role, and special advisors. Interviews were conducted between October 2015 and August 2016 and ranged from 45–120 minutes. Interviews were transcribed and imported in to Nvivo qualitative data analysis software for coding. The coding scheme focused on the Home Office (culture, personnel, policy making processes, and the influence of media, public opinion and law on policy making), charting the range of arguments made in relation to good policy on labour market access for asylum seekers, and evidence or information gathering related themes (systems for gathering information, types of evidence); coding facilitated analysis within the conceptual frame of complexity reduction and policy imaginaries. Many interviewees were concerned to protect their anonymity, as is common with elite interviewees, and for this reason all identifying information has been removed from the discussion below.

This work is part of a broader project on the economic rights of asylum seekers in the UK. The interviews were preceded by a textual analysis of the following sources: newspaper

articles, *Hansard* records of parliamentary debates (including select committees), Home Office and NGO reports, think tank reports, and political speeches covering the period 2002–15. Through this work it had been conclusively established that the idea of the economic pull imaginary absolutely dominated government explanations for taking away the right to work for asylum seekers, over and above any other reason (see [Mayblin 2016a](#) for a full discussion). A systematic review of the research literature had also found that no study over the past 20 years has proven a long term correlation between labour market access and numbers of asylum seekers ([Mayblin and James 2016](#)). These findings in part framed the research interviews.

### 3.2 The pull factor as a hegemonic construal

Interviewees reconfirmed the finding from the textual analysis that the pull factor is a hegemonic construal in asylum policy making. Of all the possible ways of construing practices and processes of asylum migration, this construal was selected, and has come to form a hegemonic imaginary which frames policy making, particularly in relation to determining the economic rights of asylum seekers in the UK. This imaginary emerged as dominant in the early–mid 2000s, within a context where the numbers of applications for asylum had increased significantly. This triggered administrative chaos in the Home Office, which was not equipped to adequately respond to these increased numbers ([Boswell 2009](#)). The response to this essentially administrative challenge was to look for ways of decreasing the number of applications received. Sense-making of this situation seems to have immediately involved assuming that these new, usually non-European, asylum seekers were really economic migrants. Key informants explained:

Why should people not get the message that if the chaos was such that they knew they were going to get the right to work by claiming asylum, why wouldn't you claim asylum, and wait until you had the right to work? And that was really confusing. (Former Home Secretary A)

... the pull factor, what we mean by that is that you are a migrant, frankly an economic migrant; you are not a genuine asylum seeker [...] But when they are doing their calculation they will be told, 'Look go to UK, even if you're bogus, you haven't got a good case to get refugee status, you will still be able to work and it'll take at least six months for them to get rid of you...' [...] Now we want them to go home, if we allow them to work why the hell are they going to go home? Because there is no incentive. They can work there, they have got everything they want, everything [...] Whereas if they can't work [they will think] 'I suppose I'll have to go home.' (Former Home Office spokesperson in the Lords)

I suppose I was of the view then [...] that there was a significant chunk of people seeking asylum who weren't in fact trying to flee from conditions of torture or oppression which existed in those circumstances [...] I always felt there was something in that argument that, if a culture grew up where it was okay to live in the UK and that it was a long time while your case was being heard but you could manage in that period, that wasn't a good culture to build up from the point of view of the UK. Asylum seekers having the right to work in that period was something which built that [...] it was a kind of accepted thing that was, as I say, an inertia of argument,

which I didn't challenge, or, to put it a different way, nobody challenged very directly in a way that I thought about. It was intuitively what people thought. (Former Home Secretary B)

These quotes seem to exactly corroborate [Scheel and Squire's \(2014: 194\)](#) suggestion that the 'bogus asylum seeker' is a figure who is 'imbued with dangerous or excessive agency based on the suspected of "abuse" of the asylum system'. I would add to this assessment that the imagined excess of agency was acted upon with specifically economic interests in mind. Reducing this excessive economic agency is thus the focus of asylum policymakers:

you can only control what you can control [...] So you look at what is within the control. [...] I do believe that there are more asylum seekers who come to the UK whose primary purpose is to live in the UK and work in the UK, than to seek protection from persecution [...] Calais exists because the UK is so attractive. (Civil servant A).

Those who explained that labour market access acts as a pull factor were those in greater positions of authority. They mainly, though not exclusively, included former Home Secretaries, Immigration Ministers, and a Home Office spokesperson in the Lords. Some civil servants saw the lack of evidence for the pull factor but were servants to the views of ministers and therefore not in a position to seriously challenge their agendas. These were all civil servants and special advisors. For example:

I forget the name of the guy that ran the Immigration Bill, but there were people in his team that I remember speaking to about this issue, who were very clear that it [labour market access for asylum seekers] would be a pull factor. And the argument was something that would also be reiterated by Theresa [May]'s team [...] And it's one that, because it makes intuitive sense, it's easy for them to have that position. (Special advisor A)

Another commented that when he looked at the data on asylum applications

The only time you see a sharp drop in numbers is when we imposed juxtaposed control in Sangatte and physically stopped people getting here [...] If the right to work was important we would see some level of change in the shape of the graph, at the point or shortly after, that we've made some difficult decisions and I don't think we do. (Civil servant B).

Here we can see that, having been selected, the retention of the imaginary was facilitated by internal hierarchies within the Home Office which structurally limited contestation of the construal. Home Secretary B reports that he did not see any counter-veiling evidence, while civil servants report knowing about the lack of evidence but knowing that contesting the dominant imaginary would not be well received.

Having been initially selected, which reframed asylum as primarily an economic phenomenon (though of course immigration of any kind from outside of Europe has always been construed in this way, which suggests continuity as well as change), over time the imaginary was retained. This retention was the consequence of path dependent outcomes of institutional design (discussed further below), of the growing influence of the right wing media on Home Office policy in the period in which Theresa May was Home Secretary, and of the extent to which the imaginary had become embedded as 'common sense'.

All civil servant respondents involved with the Home Office during Theresa May's period as Home Secretary pointed to concerns about voter perceptions and (feeding in to this) negative coverage in the right wing newspapers as central to the retention of the imaginary. For example:

they [Theresa May's team] wouldn't ever have agreed to it [reintroducing the right to work], because it would create an opportunity for people in the right wing media to attack Theresa. And her positioning is built on being the sort of answer to UKIP [...] it would have created such a possible risk to them, from the Daily Mail, from Migration Watch, from the supporters on the right of the Tory party. There's just no way that it's the sort of thing that was possible. (Civil servant C).

The idea that labour market access acts as a pull factor for asylum seekers is therefore plausible, common sense, and consistent with the perceived public preference for restrictions on the rights of asylum seekers. It neatly reduces the complexity of irregular migration for asylum in terms which are viewed as consistent with wider discourses on immigration. And yet this is not simply a story of evidence being overridden by racist publics and media sources. There is another layer to understanding the retention of the pull factor thesis and that is the internal culture, and structuring of policy domains within the Home Office, the institution responsible for designing asylum policy.

### 3.3 Institutional culture and structure

The concept of 'institutional culture' has many academic interpretations but all interviewees were invited to share their thoughts on the institutional culture without direction about what that might incorporate. Respondents were relatively consistent in their answers, describing the Home Office as a 'chaotic', 'stressed out', and 'battered organization' lurching from crisis to crisis with low morale and frequent changes of Home Secretary. The arrival of Theresa May as Home Secretary in 2010 and her continuity in post (she was Home Secretary for 6 years) had a stabilizing effect on the institution giving civil servants, they explained in interview, a sense that the crisis years had ended. Her consolidation of power also meant that the sense of the Home Office as a 'fortress' that tightly controlled out-flow of information, including to other government departments, was heightened. Even Downing Street struggled to influence policy decisions or access Home Office data. One official summarized: 'It's kind of a closed and secretive organization . . . focused on driving down migration' (Civil servant E).

The way in which the Home Office has been run, as a ministry in need of 'sorting out', has led, particularly under David Blunkett and Theresa May's stewardships, to a structure at odds with wider trends in the state. Observers have suggested that a shift from government to governance has taken place (Jessop 2002), but this does not appear to have occurred within the Home Office. Here, a top down model where 'state managers are connected to the everyday work of carrying out state projects through a line of communication that relays commands and notices relatively frequently' (Gill 2016: 36) was maintained and reinforced, according to the testimony of my interviewees. Gill (2016) suggests that such a top down approach has much greater potential for moral distance (though he notes that the alternative, disaggregated, system nevertheless fails to deliver moral proximity). He also

notes that ‘the evolution of developed countries’ immigration controls over the past three decades epitomizes the principle of keeping decision makers and subjects apart’ (Gill 2016: 41), physically, but also morally, and nowhere is this more the case than amongst policy makers in the Home Office.

In contrast to the internal organizational change over the period 2002–16 (the move away from chaos and change towards stability), the view within the Home Office of asylum applicants remained consistent, and can plausibly be conceptualized in terms of moral distance. Some characterized this as a culture of suspicion. Others suggested that ‘the Home Office has a role in dehumanising you as an individual’ (Civil servant B), reflecting that front line operational areas of Home Office work (which civil servants are rotated into, to get first-hand experience of the asylum system), in particular change you:

you become that kind of, the prison guard as it were, who’s view on, well they’re [asylum seekers] all liars . . . Those were the sort of Civil Servants that I would meet, who would often be sort of . . . they’re [asylum seekers] all doing it to waste our time and money anyway. And that genuinely is an attitude that no-one’s shy about that actually. It’s not something that we see as an embarrassing thing that you don’t want to admit that you’ve become racist, or you’ve become whatever. It’s probably not racist. But it’s certainly something with a nasty taste to it. (Civil servant B)

One former Home Secretary (A) commented that the culture ‘was very unsympathetic to the position of the people who were asylum seekers’ and another explained:

we are the Home Office and the default setting is there is abuse everywhere. You know, there is abuse under the beds, you check the cupboards when you go home, that is almost a default setting, because we’re the part of Government that has to control and protect. So that’s what you will invariably focus in on. (Civil servant E)

The ‘culture of disbelief’ where asylum seekers are ‘guilty until they’re able to demonstrate that they’re innocent’, as one interviewee (an MP) put it, constitutes the context in which policy officials were, and are, formulating policy options to present to the Home Secretary. This is an institutional context in which people exercising their right to apply for asylum under international law, a considerable number of whom will have been persecuted and forced to flee their home countries, are treated with suspicion and derision, but rarely encountered by policymakers. It is easy to see, then, how such an institutional culture could sustain the pull factor imaginary—an integral part of which is the assumption that if numbers of asylum seekers increase, many must not be ‘genuine’ refugees. This culture was described in similar terms by those who had worked in the Home Office at different points in time from 2002–13, demonstrating that the imaginary has been retained over time.

The institutional culture within the Home Office in part contextualizes the selection and retention of the pull factor imaginary. Viewing asylum seekers as suspect was part, in the early days, of the reframing of asylum seeking as primarily an economic phenomenon. What was needed, if asylum seeking had become excessively economic, was to remove the economic element—remove the pull. Immigration policy was therefore structured in to (a) immigration and (b) asylum, the former linking to mainstream welfare and labour market rights, the latter being entirely removed from those contexts. Asylum support was

moved to a parallel system (and reduced significantly over subsequent years), while labour market access was removed for the vast majority of asylum applicants. This is not simply a discursive issue of how asylum has come to be narrated; it is also about institutional structures which silo different groups of immigrants into systems affording very different economic rights. Once the separation has occurred and the logic established that asylum is about worthiness for sanctuary, not economic need, it becomes very difficult organizationally to contemplate reintegrating them by restoring the right to work for asylum seekers (irrespective of the evidence). This one policy change would undermine the whole structure of UK immigration policy.

This is the institutional context in which the pull factor imaginary, a simplification of the complexity of forced migration, which assumes many asylum seekers are liars hoping to sneak in to the UK, has been retained over time. Indeed, though a number of civil servants explained at interview that they were aware of the lack of evidence for labour market access as a pull factor, the Lords' spokesperson and an immigration minister both described having detailed briefings from civil servants which explicitly stated that the pull factor was real. The policy imaginary is therefore central to how issues are 'read', but also how information and evidence is gathered and evaluated internally. It steers policy making because it frames everything that is discussed on asylum, and the way in which different policy areas are kept organizationally separate, enabling moral distance from the implications of these policies for applicant's lives. In the next section I explore how Home Office officials and ministers dealt with the lack of evidence for the economic pull factor within this context.

### 3.4 Learning about asylum: Dealing with evidence

One of the first questions that interviewees were asked was how much they knew about asylum when they came in to their Home Office role. The answer was always very little. The next question for interviewees was therefore how they went about learning about what they called the 'asylum space'. What sources of information did they draw upon, and how did they access this information? 'Evidence' here was not pre-defined, interviewees were free to bring in any sources that they said informed their knowledge base, and were probed on a wide range of possible sources if not spontaneously mentioned.

The key source of information for all civil servant respondents was Home Office information: operational data, the testimony of usually operational staff, but also policy officials in short handover meetings as roles change and policy briefing documents produced by predecessors. The media and their constituents featured highly for Home Secretaries, Immigration Ministers, and MPs, who then bolstered this with briefings from Home Office officials who some trusted completely and some viewed with suspicion (suspecting they played down the problems and played up their own success in tackling them). Though sample sizes were often used as means of discrediting the wider implications of research findings by all interviewees, politicians particularly focused on non-nationally representative anecdotal and experiential evidence (e.g. constituency meetings) as being highly influential on policy, particularly in David Blunkett's period in the Home Office.

Engaging with NGOs was described as important, but more for feedback on operational issues, than policy directions. NGO reports were never spontaneously mentioned in

relation to information gathering, but when probed officials insisted that they read everything in the area but were often disappointed with the methodological rigour of NGO reports which were usually based on qualitative data with small sample sizes. This is significant in relation to the economic rights of asylum seekers because a large number of consistently critical NGO reports addressing work and welfare rights have been published since 2002. One official explained: 'I would always read all the studies that were sent to me. I think I have to say, I was quite disappointed in the rigour of a lot of the studies that I saw' (Civil servant F). Crucially, such reports would be one of the only points at which this official would encounter the testimony of people going through the asylum system, but such was the moral distance, these testimonies could be dismissed on the basis that they were not 'representative'.

Academic research evidence was never spontaneously mentioned in this context. One official commented 'academics do their own thing and it's almost chance if the government happens to be asking the question at the same time' (Civil servant F). This is despite the fact that 23 peer reviewed studies on pull factors were published between 2002 and 2015 (for a review see [Mayblin and James, 2016](#)). None, of course, found a long term correlation between labour market access and numbers of asylum seekers. This perceived mismatch also played out within the Home Office. In the first term of the New Labour government, when evidence-based policymaking was popular amongst politicians, the Home Office expanded its research expertise beyond crime and into immigration and asylum. The researchers who were brought in to work on this internally were mostly academics and were interested in exploratory research agendas to plug knowledge gaps that were not necessarily aligned with operational priorities. One former Home Office researcher explained

So we'd say, 'We think this is very important.' And they'd say, 'No, no, you don't need to do that, because we've got management data on that.' And we'd say, 'Well, management data isn't the same as research.' And they'd say, 'Yes, but it's much more accurate than research because it's from a larger number, and the people who are doing it understand the system.' And so you, kind of, got a downgrading of the experts, in a way, quite quickly. (Civil servant G)

Contradictory evidence tended to be known and dismissed as bad evidence (usually on the basis that the sample size was too small) or simply not known about. On the former for example, one former official, referring to a report commissioned by the Home Office in 2002, which found that access to the labour market was not a significant pull factor for asylum seekers ([Robinson and Sergott 2002](#), see also [Boswell 2009](#) who also discusses this case), explained:

If the research says the right thing, the sample size is the right size. So if those, you know, X number of people had said what they [the Home Office] were expecting to be said [that work is a pull factor], then there wouldn't have been any issues about it . . . whenever they were asked about it, they'd say, 'Yes, yes, but it was a really small sample.' . . . So they would just play down the significance of the findings, essentially. (Civil servant G)

Being able to define 'evidence' as including certain types of information and not others is a political claim with significant consequences. Interviewees constructed their accounts of what constitutes evidence and data in terms of 'good quality' evidence and 'weak' evidence.

Good evidence was based on large quantitative data sets which mesh with existing institutional categories and policies. Good evidence is therefore sanitized, facilitating the necessary task of distancing policy-makers from moral questions. Weak data was described as qualitative, and with small sample sizes. This usually entailed harrowing testimonies from asylum seekers about their experience of the asylum system, and often challenging the logic of the system. The preference was therefore for Home Office operational data which aligned with existing Home Office priorities and construals of how and why irregular migration for asylum occurs. These technologies of classification and measurement, as well as particular ways of understanding what constitutes good quality evidence, and how (or whether) policy officials access different types of evidence, have therefore enabled moral distancing and supported the retention of the pull factor over time.

The way in which officials gather and evaluate evidence, privileging Home Office operational data and briefings over other sources, either ignoring countervailing evidence or dismissing it as methodologically weak, and all done within an institutional culture of suspicion and hostility towards asylum seekers, aligns with the hypothesis that the pull factor imaginary frames policymaking in relation to asylum policy making. What is particularly interesting in the case of labour market access for asylum seekers is that when presented with the conundrum of the gap between research evidence and Home Office pronouncements that labour market access acts as a pull factor for disingenuous asylum applicants, officials and politicians gave different answers.

Officials explained that they knew there was no evidence to support such an assertion. They explained the conundrum in one of two ways. Most commonly they knew there was insufficient or lacking evidence to support the pull factor thesis, but that was not what the minister (through successive ministers) wanted to hear. This is an example of the institutional operations of public administrators being shaped by the symbolic politics of the electoral cycle (see [Boswell 2015](#)). A small number explained that the complexity of migration patterns means that while there is insufficient data, this also is not an issue upon which conclusive answers could be found (owing to the complexity of irregular migration) and as asylum is a high risk policy area, why risk it? As one official put it: ‘There are already so many fires to fight at the Home Office, why would we light a new one for no reason?’ (Civil servant B).

While officials were aware of the available evidence (both academic publications and NGO reports) and suggested that they would always mention this fact if discussing the policy area, most politicians who were interviewed believed wholeheartedly that labour market access would act as a pull factor, as discussed earlier. The push/pull theory of migration, then, was one with which they were well versed and highly convinced of. When it was explained that I had been unable to find evidence in support of this they either expressed surprise or cognitive dissonance (inconsistency between their beliefs and what they are being told, leading to the dismissal of the new information). On the latter, the common sense appeal of this simplistic construal overrode the evidence. As one former Home Secretary (A), who suggested he was unaware of any countervailing evidence, but who was the only Home Office minister not to express cognitive dissonance, said: ‘Don’t underestimate the power of inertia in argument. Once a doctrine gets established, even if wrong, then changing the doctrine is something that isn’t straightforward to do’. A civil servant suggested



Maybe it's a bit of a vicious circle. Ministers are repeating it because we're saying, 'This is the case.' We keep on saying, 'This is the case', because ministers keep on repeating it. Even so, the government felt quite strongly about this, that it was a pull factor, and there were times where we said, 'The evidence is weak, and, in fact, there's evidence to the contrary.' (Civil servant D)

Even a small shred of evidence in support of labour market access as a pull factor was reported to be sufficient, whereas countervailing evidence 'would have to be damning' (Civil servant F). One civil servant said:

When we were looking at other countries and what their 'permission to work' policy was, it was 'more asylum seekers' [where there is a right to work]. That doesn't necessarily mean that it logically follows that that's a pull factor, but it's something and it's enough to support a notion that I think this government, in particular, felt quite clear about. (Civil servant D)

All of this was enabled by a strong sense amongst officials about the role of the civil servant. Every civil servant interviewee explained that their job was to support the Ministers who are democratically elected and whose role it is to serve the will of the people. This bureaucratic identity within a clear hierarchy, then, enabled civil servants to distance themselves from the moral implications of decisions made by ministers. Even where they disagreed with a course of action, it is not their job to decide on policy. Indeed, the stakes for officials are high. One Special Advisor explained that 'anyone they [Theresa May's Special Advisors] saw, that was incompetent or didn't toe the May line, they got rid of' (Special advisor B). Ministers read huge numbers of policy documents ('submissions') every day and do not want, simply for practical reasons, to explore every research study, briefing, or policy option. Knowing what the Minister wants to hear—and filtering information and options—was therefore described as a hugely important skill for officials, and worked effectively to filter the range of perspectives reaching decision makers.

How, then, did the process of knowing what the minister's priorities were take place? Interviewees described how 'if you need to ask, you aren't doing your job properly' (Civil servant A). They would read the party manifesto, read any statements or questions on immigration and asylum that the minister had previously given in parliament, and pay attention to speeches. There is a general understanding then that irregular migration for asylum is construed as deviant, suspicious and threatening, and therefore that the minister will favour restricting rights for asylum seekers and reducing the number of asylum seekers in the UK and in the asylum system overall. This has been consistent through different governments and the description of the institutional culture described earlier supports this as a logical assumption. Complexity reduction as a determining factor in policy outcomes does not therefore depend on complete consensus on an imaginary because actors are embedded within hierarchical power relations.

Taking into account the description of the organizational culture of the Home Office as being hostile to and suspicious of asylum seekers through successive Home Secretaries, it can only be assumed that little was done at that high level to change the culture or reframe the issue internally or externally. Indeed, such assumptions of undesirability and otherness are consistent with Britain's long term response to immigrants (see [Hampshire 2005](#); [Mayblin 2017](#)). These are the assumptions, then, that filter information making its way

to the Ministers, and explains why politicians in Home Office roles did not know about the lack of evidence on labour market access as a pull factor for asylum seekers.

## 4. Conclusion

This article has argued that in order to make sense of, and indeed critique, the governance of irregular migration for asylum in the UK and other similar policy contexts, it is necessary to first acknowledge that there are two key aspects of such migration. On the one hand there are actually occurring patterns and processes of irregular migration and asylum seeking; on the other hand there are particular construals of it which can be conceptualized as simplified policy imaginaries. These imaginaries come to have causal powers in that they fix practices and processes of migration governance institutionally, support the development of policy, and circumscribe possibilities for contestation of policy choices within policy-making contexts.

CPE allows us to look at how cultures of policymaking, and particularly institutionally, organizationally and materially embedded modes of sense making, occur. More specifically, it allows us to identify how particular construals emerge as hegemonic as part of the existential necessity for complexity reduction. Since migration policy is dominated by simplified understandings of complex phenomena, and those understandings, within policy settings, increasingly focus on the economic aspects of migration (and therefore political-economic policy interventions), CPE has much to offer migration studies. Earlier scholars have conceptualized the discursive aspects of migration policy making in terms of 'narratives' and 'frames'. What distinguishes a CPE analysis is that the starting point is not the already observed narratives. Rather, it is the complexity of the real world and the multiple possible interpretations of that complexity. A CPE analysis then looks to the process by which a particular simplification, or construal, is selected and retained and finally what the implications of that are for relevant actors. While this article is one of the first to start to explore the possibilities of applying CPE to phenomena which are not traditionally thought of as political-economic, there are significant possibilities for migration studies in approaching migration policy from this perspective.

The case study, discussing research interviews with asylum policymakers focusing particularly on labour market access for asylum seekers, demonstrated that there is consensus within the Home Office about the aim and purpose of policies designed to govern asylum (i.e. a restrictive approach to asylum). It showed that this is not open to contestation or deliberation and as such no serious formal consideration of alternative perspectives takes place. Owing to this consensus, evidence which challenges these values plays no role in policy making, even where this represents all evidence on a topic.

Civil servants make sense of this conundrum with reference to democracy. It is the job of the elected ministers to fulfil the will of the people, they explain. In the case of the Home Office this, we might construe, involves pursuing policies which are tough on immigrants of all kinds and will bring immigrant numbers down. There are two ways in which this justification is problematic. First, Home Office ministers and spokespeople have consistently misrepresented the policy context, describing the pull factor as a clear and proven risk of opening up the labour market, which is disingenuous. Presenting MPs and the public

with assumptions dressed up as facts is not the same as fulfilling democratic values. Second, public opinion may give ministers a mandate to find policy measures which decrease the numbers of asylum seekers irrespective of international events, but that is not the same as giving them a mandate to force asylum seekers into poverty under the guise of limiting numbers. This is important, because, as Paul Stratham (2003) has shown, politicians can and do play leading roles in influencing public opinion on asylum. The elegant simplicity of the push/pull theory of migration is seductive, even though it is not necessarily appropriate to apply it to forced migration.

The article has shown how this simplistic imaginary about asylum seeking (what motivates asylum seekers and determines destination choice) is central in shaping understandings of asylum more generally. The result in this case is a highly restrictive regime in relation to the economic rights of those awaiting a decision on their application for asylum. However, more broadly, this way of imagining asylum seeking—detached from factors which do not relate to economic maximization, rational decision making, and choice—can be observed in other areas of migration policy making. In recent years the stratified regime of economic rights for different categories of migrant has become increasingly differentiated in the UK. The thread that links different policy areas is the idea of the economic pull. In the case of asylum seeking, economic rights have not been found to have an effect on destination choice. By identifying this as a key driver for asylum seeking specifically in the UK, policy makers depoliticize sanctuary and the UK's role in sharing the burden of refugees globally. This imaginary, then, is highly politically significant in that it fundamentally changes the terms of the debate on asylum from a humanitarian to an economic issue. Here, making asylum an issue of political economy, rather than moral duty, facilitates the denigration of the UK's commitment to refugee rights.

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