

Claiming “the common”: the case of lone asylum seekers in the London Borough of Hillingdon

‘The common’ invokes a nostalgic imagination of simple village life to which local people naturally belong (Kuo *et al.* 1998; Kweon, Sullivan and Wiley 1998). The notion of the common fits perfectly with the nationalist thinking in Western countries that people are naturally rooted in native soil (Olwig and Hastrup 1997: 4). Only those with a definite right to live within the vicinity of the common have a natural claim to it.

On the flipside of the common is the enclosure. When perceived outsiders settle in a particular locality, rights to the common are contested and activities of claim and reclaim emerge (Hardin 1968). The notion of the common lends itself to destabilize the “other”, the foreign and to define certain people as marginal. We cannot talk about the common as an unproblematic social entity and say nothing about activities involved in claiming and enclosing it (Harvey 1973).

In this paper the common is used as a metaphor for the activities involved in claiming a sense of place in a particular locality in West London. The paper builds on sixteen months’ ethnographic fieldwork in the London Borough of Hillingdon, examining what happens when a disproportionately large group of lone asylum seeker children claim rights to the council's resources. These children traverse the boundary between the nation-state and an unbounded, translocal and globalized world. When young people seek asylum without parents or family within the Borough's geographical boundary, the local authority – referred to as the “corporate parent” has a duty to look after them. The concept is suggestive of a natural relationship between the nation-state and the foreign children who live within its borders. At the same time, asylum seeker children are seen as an undesirable burden to the British welfare system, a group of people whose claim to ‘urban resources’ (Harvey 2008) is often perceived to be unsolicited and even “bogus”.

During a financial crisis in the local council during the years of 2006 and 2007, these social dynamics crystallized to an unprecedented degree. The corporate parent operated a two-tier funding system, using loopholes in the law to deny lone asylum seekers their full range of rights and services, whilst continuing to provide the full service provision to separated children with British passports (Hamilton and Matthews 2007). Under these conditions, ideals of urban identity, citizenship and belonging became hard for the young refugees to sustain (Harvey 2008: 23).

Although the lone asylum seekers learnt that they held a socially marginal position in the locality, they also discovered that, as children, they could make moral claims to emplacement. They engaged in an on-going “project” of place-making and self-production in order to keep at bay a sense of displacement and instability (Appadurai 199: 180). They became preoccupied with becoming seen as ‘legitimate’ recipients of social benefits by creating personal relations of patronage in bureaucratic organisations. They were set on establishing a future home *in situ* (Denzin 2008) and to enter the “enclosed” common.