

Tracing Imaginations of the State: The Spatial Consequences of Different State  
Concepts among Asylum Activist Organisations

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## **Abstract**

*The paper examines the spatial consequences for activism of viewing the state through either a statist or post-structural lens. It is argued that understanding the state in different ways produces very different spatial strategies among activists. Drawing upon detailed case studies of two asylum seeking activist organisations in the UK, the connections between imaginations of the state, spatial strategies towards institutionalised authority, and the pros and cons of these strategies for activism itself are examined. Through these cases, the paper emphasises the importance of everyday theories about the state not only for understanding what the state is, but also for understanding how relationships with the state are formed and points towards the constructive power of imaginations of the state in their own right.*

Keywords: State theory; activism; asylum seekers; refugees

## **Introduction**

A tension exists at the heart of state theory between imaginations of the state as a coherent entity that exists relatively independently of social influences and the contingent, contradictory and peopled nature of the state that emphasises its social character. This tension has structured debate for over a quarter of a century: does the state constitute a distinct sphere that has properties that are unique and different from other areas of society? Political economists (Gramsci, 1978; Poulantzas, 1978), anthropologists of the state (Gupta, 1995), geographers (Jones, 2007; Mountz, 2004; Painter, 2006) sociologists (Giddens, 1979; Rose and Miller, 1992) and historians (Foucault, 1991) have all grappled with this question. At stake is a fundamental disagreement about what the state is, which can be expected to profoundly influence the ways we understand its effects as well as the ways that non-state actors seek to interact with it.

Most recently, this tension has been expressed in the distinction between statist and post-structural state theories that take the division between state and society to be, respectively, extant and questionable (see Painter, 2005). In support of the relative separation of state from society (the statist position – see Jessop, 2001), we are able to

cite the organisational differences between the two spheres, the differences in competences and the different pressures – market, media, and electorate – that operate over the two domains. In support of the socially imbued nature of the state, however, a range of both established and emerging schools of thought have underscored the inter-penetration of state and social spheres and brought into question the continuing usefulness of defining the two separately. Feminist research, for example, has underscored the peopled nature of the state, situating social influences right at the heart of state institutions (Allen, 1990). Anthropological research on the state emphasises the way it is experienced in routine, on-the-ground situations (Sharma and Gupta, 2006). It has drawn attention to the conflicts between state practices underscoring how unlikely it is that all the multitudinous activities and institutions that make up and produce the state in mundane, everyday settings pull in a complementary direction (Ferguson and Gupta, 2002; Painter, 2006). These approaches have also emphasised the contingency of state structures upon state practices that confirm and re-produce structural effects (Mountz, 2003), echoing earlier, very different, critical realist and structuration theory analyses which underscore the emergent, socially contingent nature of states (Giddens, 1979). Other social theorists have emphasised the reputational effects of the state as a symbolic force in society, requiring no physical or institutional presence to exert a social effect (Bourdieu, 1994). Rather, the idea or symbol of the state has been identified as an increasingly potent social force, extending into more and more areas of the life world (Abrams, 1988; Mitchell, 1999). Key here is the way in which the state works through the ideologies, beliefs, fears and allegiances of social actors, dispensing with any *a priori* distinction between state and social domains.

These two viewpoints – the statist position that maintains a distinction between state and society and the post-structuralist attempt to undermine this distinction – have given rise to a useful and productive antagonism that pervades contemporary state theoretical thinking. While these theoretical debates have played out in academic circles, however, this article takes a different perspective on the nature of the state. The concern here is not over the precise nature of the relationship between state and society. The article is concerned, instead, with the *consequences of viewing the state in a particular way*. Specifically, two inter-related implications of the debate between statist and post-structural approaches to the state have so far not been given sufficient

attention: the spatial consequences of viewing the state one way or another and the consequences of different conceptions of the state for activism and groups that seek radical social change.

This line of research may be at least as important as high, abstract state theory. State theoretical deliberations do not occur in an academic vacuum, without having an impact upon the wider social environment. It is in this sense that Bourdieu (1994) points towards the influence theoretical social scientists can have in making the state that they describe and imagine, by proscribing relationships to it that draw its boundaries and call forth its effects. ‘Most writings devoted to the state’, Bourdieu (1994, p55) argues ‘partake, more or less efficaciously and directly, of the state’s *construction...*’ (emphasis in the original). It should therefore come as no surprise that it is possible to classify some activist activities, which share various critical relationships with the state, according to the way that the state is understood among their participants. The spatial and activist consequences of these everyday, operationalised, caricatured understandings of the state, corresponding to the theoretical debates with which academics are familiar, form the subject of this article.

The article draws upon a set of 37 interviews conducted between 2005 and 2007 with asylum seekers, asylum sector employees and asylum activists, contrasting the approaches of two very different activist organisations. The first, which we shall call ‘Asylum Action’ is a pro-asylum pressure group and support group operating in the South of England. Their view of the state is consistent with a statist position, producing specific spatial and activist consequences. Viewing the state as a coherent and exploitative entity, and therefore taking an exterior, oppositional position in relation to the state, produces various different forms of radical dissent that are expressed through distinct spatial relationships with institutionalised authority. Their suspicion of the state and state-influences allows for a sustained ideological critique that prompts public debate and acts as a counter-weight to the technicalisation and mundanity of mainstream politics. In this sense Asylum Action seek to create a real critical dialogue through antagonism and conflict (see Rancière, 2009, on the necessity of conflict to politics). Asylum Action’s distance from the state does introduce, nevertheless, a number of opportunity costs for activism.

South London Citizens (SLC) have employed a more proximate strategy towards the state and its personnel. Their imagination of the state emphasises its peopled character, and they view themselves not as agents of opposition, but as agents of information provision and facilitators of dialogue and co-operation across the public-activist divide. Their view is consistent with a post-structural imagination of the state, and produces a more interactive, physically and socially more inter-connected state-activist geography. This strategy produces its own successes in terms of working closely with state personnel and even ‘persuading’ state personnel to see things differently from within their own organisations and departments. This proximity and frequency of interaction with figures in authority, however, can also produce difficulties that can undermine the ability to critically resist exploitative and subjugating state policies and practices.

The paper sets out, first, the theoretical currents that have given rise to the dualism between statism and post-structuralism that presently characterises state theory. Second, the case of Asylum Action’s activities in England is considered and their successes as well as some of the challenges they face are examined. Third, the experiences of SLC are considered through the production of their report into the conditions at Lunar House, the country’s foremost asylum screening centre (Back *et al*, 2005), and again the pros and cons of their imagination of the state from the perspective of effecting change, and the spatial strategy it produces, are considered in distinction to those of Asylum Action. In the fourth section, these empirical cases are used to build an idealised schema of the relationship between imaginations of the state, spatial strategies of activism, and the advantages and challenges of these spatial strategies for activists of various hues.

### **Dualism in State Theory**

The clean separation between state and society is a common and widespread assumption. As Pierson (2004) outlines in his review of the various theoretical positions on the state, the history of state theory itself can be characterised by differences in the hypothesised relationship between state and society, reflecting throughout the assumed distinction between them. Pierson reviews the post war debates between theories that suggest that states tend to determine societies and

theories that suggest that societies tend to determine states, traversing neo-liberalism, structural Marxism, elitism and pluralism and demonstrating, through this *tour de force*, the striking pervasion of questions and hypothesised relationships that take for granted the distinction between state and social domains.

This distinction has been referred to as the separate spheres assumption (Peck, 2004). This assumption imagines a relatively autonomous sphere of the state that ‘intervenes in’, ‘regulates’ or ‘affects’ another autonomous sphere labelled ‘society’ (Painter 2006). The so-called separate spheres assumption has been roundly critiqued by a range of social scientists from a wide variety of backgrounds, who insist, firstly, upon the pervasion of social effects throughout the state and, secondly, upon the pervasion of state effects throughout society (Abrams 1988; Gupta 1995; Heyman 1995; Mitchell 1999; Mountz 2003; Peck 2004; Poulantzas 1978; Rose and Miller 1992). In the first case, Mitchell (1991) reviews attempts by statist scholars to ‘bring the state back in’ during the 1980s. He shows how their increasingly tight definitions of ‘the state’, culminating in the exclusion of all but the Presidency and the Department of State in the US case (Krasner 1978), were nevertheless unable to expel the pervasive influence of social effects (Nordlinger 1988; Skocpol 1985). The statist literature was accused of tautology because it defined the state *ex ante* and then traced observable social trends back to those institutions labelled ‘the state’ (Jessop 2001). In this vein, Mitchell writes that statism ‘... simply begins with the intentions of the state, thereby attributing an apparent separateness and autonomy that subsequently go unquestioned’ (1991 p84). Abrams concludes that ‘We have come to take the state for granted ... while remaining spectacularly unclear as to what the state is’ (Abrams 1988 p59).

In the second case, a number of authors have also questioned the separate spheres assumption by pointing to the degree to which state effects penetrate the social sphere. From political economy, Bourdieu (1994) builds upon the work of Gramsci (1978) to identify the symbolic currency of the state. The state, Bourdieu suggests, holds a monopoly over the symbolic resources that allow institutions to command the ideological allegiance of factions and classes. From economic sociology, Abrams (1988) identifies the effect of the ‘idea of the state’ in a seminal paper. He argues that the idea of the state is at least as important as the state itself in propagating social

conduct that is concordant with the presence of the state. It is, he suggests, *belief* in the state and its coherence that allows it to have such widespread social effects. Building upon this theme, Painter (2006) has suggested that the idea of the state is becoming increasingly socially influential, through a process that he calls ‘statization’ – a term borrowed from political economy that refers to the promulgation of the idea of the state through society. These schools of thought underscore the state’s ability to engender effects from a distance without actually being capable of exerting the influence it suggests it commands. In the cases both of the political economy of consent and the political sociology of ideational state effects, the common theme is the ability of the state to pervade the psycho-social spaces of the citizenry in ways that produce uniformity and assent even as the state itself as a unifying structure is patently unable to impose its will or even, at times, insufficiently coherent to produce a discernable position or set of aspirations. The ability of the state to mobilise social forces despite its own flaws, weaknesses, contradictions and inadequacies is one of the abiding insights of post-structuralist state theories.

There are, then, a number of difficulties with the separate spheres assumption that is typical of statist work. Nevertheless, there are an equal number of difficulties with abandoning it. There is, very clearly, something distinct about the way in which the state functions, discernible not necessarily through the people who are ‘in charge’, not necessarily through the policies or overt politics of the state, but through the structurally inscribed competencies and capacities of states, that tend to promote social relationships of various types as a result of providing specific, subjective fora within which social factions interact, social disputes are resolved, democratic accountability is exercised and political power is exerted. This ability of states to steer social interactions in various directions (often, in the long run, to the detriment of subaltern classes) has given rise to theories of the state that emphasise the state as a specific social relation, exerting power through the forms of social relationships that are conducted in state contexts (Jessop, 1990; Jessop, 2008). This has, in turn, produced a compromise among state theorists, many of whom have begun to work with a dual theory of the state in some form or other precisely due to the twin disadvantages of overlooking either the structural or post-structural properties of contemporary states. Such a dual approach has been expressed by a range of different authors. As Abrams writes,

There is a state-system ... a palpable nexus of practice and institutional structure centred in government and more or less extensive, unified and dominant in any given society. And its sources, structure and variations can be examined in fairly straight-forward empirical ways. There is, too, a state-idea, projected, purveyed and variously believed in in different societies and at different times. And its modes, effects and variations are also susceptible to research.

Abrams, 1988 p58

Similarly, Mitchell (2000) discusses the 'relative autonomy' of state institutions while Painter (2006 p34) writes that 'states are constituted of spatialized social practices which are to a greater or lesser extent institutionalized (in a 'state apparatus')'. Jones (2007) concurs, commenting that,

On the basis of both Weberian and neo-Marxist state theory, states should be viewed as entities that are partially autonomous from, at the same time being partially embedded within, the broader society. While the state apparatus and its specific organizations are useful analytical categories, it should be emphasized that they do not possess desires, properties or agency in and of themselves. Both are the product of decisions and priorities of state personnel and are formed through a combination of programmed state forms and more informal rules of practice adhered to, or challenged by, state personnel. Following this, it is important to think about the state in the plural rather than the singular.

Jones, 2007, p45

The ideational or symbolic aspect of the state is therefore to be understood as a complementary aspect to its institutional forms.

What does this emerging consensus about the dual nature of the state mean for activists who express their imaginations of the state through their spatial strategies towards the institutions of the state and the people who populate them? While numerous authors have reflected upon the spatial reorganisation of the state from one

perspective or another (see, prominently, Brenner *et al*, 2003; Brenner, 2004; Sparke, 2005), a direct comparison of the difference that the two perspectives make to activists and their spatial relationships to institutionalised centres of power has not been made. While the debate about which of the two positions is the more accurate may very well ebb and flow for some considerable time, less attention has been given to the consequences of adopting one or other of the two approaches for the efficacy of state-directed activity such as asylum seeker activism. Moreover, while academics may be at liberty to advance an indeterminate position regarding the nature of the state at a theoretical level, there are at least two factors that can deny activists the luxury of a dual position on the state. First, they often do not have the opportunity, or necessarily the disposition, to debate the nature of the state extensively. This tends to give rise to attitudes towards the state that are less theoretically nuanced but more practical in orientation. Second, activist groups often require a consistent position regarding the state. State institutions are invariably key institutions that figure routinely in their everyday activities, either because activists work with the state, (possibly for the state), because they work in opposition to the state, or because the state regulates their activities, for example through the prohibition of registered charities engaging in ‘political’ work. As a result, activism is influenced by a distinct view of the state that is consistent with the objectives of the specific activist groups involved. Their imagination of the state may very well interact with their attitude towards pursuing different types of legal status and charitable status, their attitudes towards financial support from the government, their relationships with police and other state institutions as well as their membership and information policies.

This paper therefore seeks to provide a new perspective upon the on-going tension between statist and post-structural state theories, by developing a consequentialist state theoretical perspective that highlights the implications of viewing the state from either a statist or a post-structural position for activists in the field. Of course, their imaginations of the state may not be voiced in academics’ terms, but it is certainly possible to distinguish between activists who tend to view the state as a coherent, bureaucratic structure and those activists who take a view of the state as more approachable, contestable and responsive. In the following two sections the pros and cons of taking a perspective on the state that corresponds to these two elements of the emerging duality in state theory are assessed.

## **Resisting the State: Asylum Action's Campaign**

Thirty-seven asylum seekers (3), activists (20) and government employees (14) were interviewed between 2005 and 2007. Access to activists was secured through a mixture of cold calling, personal contacts and on the basis of participation in their activities. Activists would generally be happier than government employees to be interviewed in their homes or in public places: government employees would tend to prefer to be interviewed in their places of work. There were also opportunities to interview activists impromptu at a range of events, which formed the focus of activists' efforts, from demonstrations to public consultation meetings. In contrast, state actors tended to both pursue and emphasise the smooth running, non-event-based character of their working environments, therefore generating fewer opportunities to interview people without prior arrangement. The characteristics of individual contributors cited in this paper are given, subject to anonymity, in Appendix One.

Asylum Action is a political pressure group that conducts high profile, strategic, media-intensive campaigns to prevent asylum seeker deportations and to raise the profile of asylum seekers in the South of England, often through campaigning around individual asylum cases. It has been running for over eight years and is often the first port of call for asylum seekers who lack large nationality concentrations. Asylum Action has carried out a number of very high profile political activities in support of asylum seekers, focussing upon the stories of individual asylum seekers. Their success has been measurable by the fact that they have altered the law on a number of occasions, secured the release of a number of detained and scheduled-to-be-deported asylum seekers and won legal cases on their behalf. They have exceptionally good contacts with asylum seeker communities who are routinely removed from the UK, enjoy very well developed links to both local and national press and possess the experience and human capital to be able to sustain a political campaign.

Source 1: We have been very successful, run three campaigns two full blown ones and a smaller one that was based around children and families. All three cases were won.

NG: What role do you think your campaigning had in bringing these three successes about?

Source 1: They all said that without us it wouldn't have been successful.

Asylum Action are unlike many advocacy organisations that, through their links with established refugee communities, tend to have contact with asylum seekers who are more likely themselves to be granted refugee status. In contrast, Asylum Action often seem to be the first point of call for marginalised, precarious asylum seekers. While there are limits to the effectiveness of using the press to influence asylum cases (asylum tribunals have reacted poorly to press coverage in the past and delivered unfavourable verdicts) Asylum Action have been instrumental in raising awareness of asylum seekers throughout the South and are well known nationally among activist communities.

The state is understood in relatively negative terms among the campaigners and activists that make up Asylum Action's membership, which is understandable when faced with the human suffering that many of the asylum seekers they are in contact with have endured. For example, on discussing the fact that some Polish migrants had taken up spaces for asylum seekers at English language classes provided in their local area, one activist commented

Source 2: You get such an example of the state using racism to divide people. It's all divide and rule and the state plays the game amazingly well. If they can set one community against another then so much the better.

Another Asylum Action member had clearly lost confidence in the legal system of determining asylum seeker claims. She outlined her attitude towards figures of legal authority.

Source 4: I am telling you - don't believe the judge, because the judges, immigration judges I mean, they are working with the government, the Home Office is against asylum seekers...

A third interviewee working with Asylum Action commented upon the widespread public association between asylum seekers and illegal employment:

Source 3: That's state racism. The state uses the economy in a way to force us to have an underclass of workers!

It is through viewpoints such as these that the state is imagined as an actor that has a relatively coherent, calculated position on asylum seekers. Among radical activists working on behalf of asylum seekers in the UK, the predominant feeling is that politicians and other state personnel are generally anti-immigration.

Source 1: They just want to make life as unpleasant and as foul as they possibly can. No question in my mind about this. There is a particularly sort of vindictive side to state policy. I mean I really thought they couldn't go lower than Michael Howard [*a former British Home Secretary*], but boy did we get lower than Michael Howard. I mean they revel in actually talking about asylum seekers as if they are all a bunch of crooks.

NG: How calculative do you think this is?

Source 1: Oh, it's completely calculative.

It is not the objective here to discuss the accuracy of this view of the state. Suffice it to say that this negative view is consistent with a statist position that sees the state as a coherent entity that is separate from, and acting over, the social domain in calculated ways. Rather, this article is concerned to understand what the consequences of this view are among asylum seeker activist groups in terms of their resulting spatial strategies towards the state and the advantages and disadvantages that these strategies offer.

In the case of Asylum Action, their spatial strategies towards institutionalised positions of state authority are oppositional, reflecting their view that the state comprises a coherent and concerted anti-immigrant institution. During the period of this research, Asylum Action would therefore occupy activist spaces such as marches and parades, vigils in support of asylum seekers and public demonstrations in order to

raise awareness of asylum seekers' situations. Describing the breadth of their activities, one organiser listed the following:

Source 2: We have often been outside the office in [*nearby town*]. When [*name*] got arrested we went and campaigned, we held up our banners and everything, we walked down through the town. We have been with several asylum seekers to sign on<sup>1</sup>. We were going in [*to the police station*] and protesting and then they were finding it difficult to register asylum seekers so they moved the signing on to [*a different police station*] where they have cells. We've put on a play - that's a strategic work defending asylum seekers - we were asked to put it on at [*local museum*]. We often put in resolutions to get money at union annual conferences: we have resolutions on anti-racism and defending asylum seekers at a number of unions. We do a lot of speaking - if we get any requests we go out. And we respond to arrests a lot of the time. When [*name*] was arrested lots of us were so upset because she was a sixth former and had been taken during her A-levels and put into prison in [*a police station*]. So immediately I got about 15 of us, went outside with the megaphone - in fact we've got a video...

The range of activities these activists undertake is striking, as well as the degree of personal commitment to defending asylum seekers that Asylum Action members exhibit. The spaces that Asylum Action tend to occupy include the spaces outside government buildings, public platforms at which campaigners can voice their concerns, and trade union networks through which a broad base of support for asylum seekers can be constructed. This has produced important successes not just in individual cases, but, through these, in raising the profile of asylum seeking communities in the South more broadly.

This said, there are opportunity costs of operating in the sort of oppositional activist spaces that Asylum Action tend to prefer. In the locality in which Asylum Action operate, for example, the police force carefully fosters relationships with the asylum seeking community in the region. One officer outlined the ways in which he would assist the asylum seekers he came into contact with to complete their legal cases for support, explain the legal process and facilitate communication between asylum seekers and local support groups, including lawyers who were still prepared to take on state-financed legal case work, all of which was work he was neither obliged nor

expected to perform. What is more, this interviewee claimed that a pro-asylum outlook was not unique to own approach: a number of officers apparently shared close personal relationships with asylum seekers in the local area, not only visiting them during the course of their patrols but also meeting them socially on a regular basis.

This close proximity to the asylum community produced a high degree of loyalty towards its more vulnerable members. When officers were party to information that might aid the deportation of failed asylum seekers, for instance, this information was not automatically passed on to deportation task forces.

NG: Have you ever taken on an informative role for the immigration service?

Source 8: I'm not the immigration service. I'll speak to the immigration service, I mean I'm quite frank with the immigration service about what I do. But I wouldn't promote anybody being arrested, I wouldn't facilitate the arrest of somebody unless it was something serious, I mean if they were a suspect in an investigation. When I speak to them I don't say 'did you know so and so is now living here?'.

There was also a willingness to put the needs of the asylum seeking communities under police jurisdiction before the political pressure to meet deportation targets.

Source 8: If immigration suddenly decided they were going to go on a swoop and arrest a lot of [*national group*] I'll ring up [*name*] and say 'you should be aware of this', not because I'm tipping him off, em, but because it will have a significant impact within that community.

Despite the commitment of this police officer to the asylum seekers under his jurisdiction, however, he had experienced sustained exclusion from groups that support asylum seekers in the city. He had this to say about Asylum Action and their support for destitute asylum seekers in the region:

Source 8: ... some of them have a fair bit of distrust about police because they don't understand where we're coming from. I mean I can't say it surprises me. They think you're the police and you just want to arrest asylum seekers.

NG: Do you think that attitude is going to be helpful for them in pursuing the rights of asylum seekers?

Source 8: No, not at all. I don't really get the opportunity to go out and find out what they're doing because they've got their conceptions, preconceptions about what we're about.

NG: Would you be open to, I don't know, somebody getting in touch with you from there and saying how can we work together?

Source 8: Well yeah. I can't actively, politically take part in demonstrations

NG: Is that because of the fact that you're a police officer?

Source 8: Yeah yeah. But having said that, I'd be quite happy to speak to someone and say look, are you aware that this has happened [*elsewhere in the country*]? And the same should apply here. That sort of information stops here because I don't know where it should go. Perhaps if I had a contact there, I could ring up and say perhaps you could do something with it. But in their wildest dreams they couldn't imagine police officers would be that way inclined. It's a bit of a shame really, it evokes enormous emotion, I've got different information sources obviously that may be of use to them.

The frustration of this interviewee results from his exclusion from activist networks, precisely because he is imagined as part of the state and therefore distrusted. The opportunity costs of his exclusion, in terms of the information foregone by the activist organisations that might otherwise have developed communication with him, is also alluded to.

Also in England's South, notions of the state precluded co-operation between Asylum Action and powerful individuals, employed by the government, who had become alarmed at the way in which asylum seekers were selected for housing inspections. One interviewee worked for NASS, a government agency responsible, among other things, for checking that asylum seekers who were housed in government funded property were not also in employment<sup>ii</sup>. NASS was, however, also responsible for making sure that asylum seekers had adequate housing, meaning that they would inspect properties to make sure that they met minimum building requirements. NASS therefore had a responsibility *both* for the welfare of detainees and for the detection of fraudulent claims. The interviewee at NASS was alarmed that the inspections that were ostensibly for welfare purposes were actually being used to detect fraudulent asylum claims. This meant that, rather than mothers with large families receiving welfare visits, for example, single male asylum seekers were visited more frequently

because they were more likely to (be able to) work illegally. This meant that the more vulnerable asylum seeker families generally did not receive visitors, while men experienced a degree of gender-biased targeting. The interviewee at NASS carried out these visits at the discretion of his regional manager and indicated by meeting with me that he was willing to divulge his concerns. When asked, however, about whether or not he would approach Asylum Action about this practice he responded as follows:

Source 9: Someone like [*Asylum Action*], they are excellent, they campaign for the rights of asylum seekers, they really have done a lot of work, in schools and on TV. But when they go and debate ... they just argue and don't listen. I mean some people will just fight, fight a cause for the sake of fighting and I certainly wouldn't talk to them because, because of my position, I think they'd sooner fight me than listen to me.

In the cases both of the pro-asylum police officer and the NASS employee with concerns about NASS' practices, then, the way Asylum Action's members imagine the state makes it difficult for links to be forged with potentially sympathetic government employees.

### **Recasting the State: South London Citizens' Lunar House Campaign**

Whilst Asylum Action seeks primarily to resist state practices, other activist groups seek to work with state actors in the (re-)negotiation of their attitudes and treatments of asylum seekers. The second focus of this research is a charity called South London Citizens (SLC) that, during the mid 2000s, had become concerned about the experiences of asylum claimants at Lunar House in Croydon, London, the UK's most notorious asylum reception unit (see Gill, 2009). Lunar House is the first port of call for many asylum seekers claiming asylum in the UK. If claims are not made at ports, and less than half of all asylum claims to the UK are made upon arrival, then they are made at one of the two 'Asylum Processing Units' in Croydon and Liverpool. Lunar House in Croydon is the largest of these, employing around two thousand IND employees in 2005, with another four thousand working nearby (Back et al. 2005).

South London Citizens is an eclectic charity that undertakes ‘broad-based activism’ meaning that a range of diverse organisations who have common concerns about particular issues in particular places mobilise without acting in isolation. London Citizens, their parent body, has been active in pursuit of a ‘Living Wage’ for migrants in London (Jamoul and Wills, 2008). The fee-paying membership of SLC consists of schools, churches, mosques, synagogues, unions, hospitals and university departments. At Lunar House, the charity focused upon creating a record of the mis-management of the Lunar House complex and the effects of this mis-management upon the asylum seekers who frequent the building. Drawing upon over 300 survey responses from both the staff and users of Lunar House, as well as around 30 written statements, the team compiled a report that examined the treatment of asylum claimants within Lunar House that was published and circulated among senior Immigration and Nationality Directorate<sup>iii</sup> staff (Back et al. 2005).

During the compilation of this report SLC worked closely with the management team at Lunar House, drawing upon their expertise and exploiting the social capital the management team commanded within their own institution, in stark contrast to the strategy employed by Asylum Action. Although the management team were initially sceptical about the intentions of SLC, the charity combined media coverage, the threat of media coverage and frequent meetings with management to allow them to forge a working relationship with key government officials who then helped them to produce their report. The emphasis throughout this process was upon finding common ground between state and non-state actors reflecting an imagination of the state that downplays its separation from social actors. As one senior immigration official commented, underscoring the degree to which SLC had managed to frame their activities in terms that state actors found appealing:

Source 10: The reason why we [*The IND*] wanted to cooperate with them is that their objective was exactly the same as our objective, you know, let’s make this better, we want to improve customer service, we want to make things good for staff.

This proximity between SLC’s activists and the IND management team results from a very different view of the state to that shared by members of Asylum Action. One

SLC member outlined their philosophy in comparison to some more confrontational organisations that he had dealt with in the past:

Source 6: [*Some organisations*] are aggressive by nature. They are about class warfare. They're about standing up for their members against 'them'. You know it's an 'us' and 'them' situation. You're in a war, you're in a battle, you don't take any hostages, they'll get you if you don't get them sort of attitude. The churches, the mosques, the schools, the community groups [*that make up SLC*] are about a very different philosophy. They're about building bridges, about actually building reconciliation, that's at the very core of what they're about. They bring diversity together, they make diversity work.

Whether or not this interviewee's interpretations of the potential of churches, mosques, schools and community groups to 'make diversity work' are accurate, he gives a clear indication of the co-operative attitude that SLC espouses. The group believes that communication across divergent interest groups, including the state, is essential to effect change. One interviewee, again distinguishing the work of SLC from more confrontational approaches, stated her view of the potential of negotiation in activism:

Source 12: You need to actually enter into the real world and work with these people. You don't just stand on the edge with a banner, you get round a table. You know, hyper political posturing isn't necessarily politics, and I think The Left has definitely played itself out with hyper political posturing.

A view of the state as negotiable produces a range of spatial relationships with state actors that, together, represent a more proximate geography to institutionalised authority. In the early stages of the SLC relationship with the IND, for example, the latter were confident enough to give the activists a guided tour of the entire Lunar House complex, much to the surprise of SLC's activists given the strict control measures that are usually enforced at the site. Later on, this attitude re-emerged in the co-operation of the Lunar House team through email correspondence, letters and the attendance of meetings. Admittedly, at times relationships would break down, most frequently because the IND senior management group were worried about media scrutiny and criticism. At these times SLC had to apply pressure, in the form of public

shows of support for asylum seekers, in order to get the management team back on board (Gill, 2009). In general, however, a degree of mutual co-operation and respect emerged. As one indication of the closeness with which the two parties eventually worked together, the SLC team were invited to form a steering group, within the administrative structure of the IND itself, in order to oversee the changes that they recommended in their report and to use substantial levels of the IND's own financial resources to meet their objectives. Commenting upon this achievement, one SLC organiser stated that:

Source 11: The IND has agreed to use South London Citizens as its scrutiny group. We have met up with them twice now and we will be meeting up again on the 25th of this month. [*A senior IND manager*] has now given us a lengthy response to our 28 recommendations and how we will move forward. Not bad for a grass-roots organization of churches, mosques, schools and trade unions which is only just over a year old. Real democracy in action!

This sort of co-operation would have been difficult to forge with Asylum Action's activists, whose distrust of state institutions and history of disruptive protests at police stations would have prohibited such an arrangement, and yet it is clearly a source of pride among SLC's activists. This illustrates the difference that different views of the state can make to the objectives, values and spatial strategies towards the state of activist organisations.

The advantages of this proximity are clearly evident in the success of the SLC's efforts to overturn some of the dehumanising practices at Lunar House. The policing of asylum seekers during the queuing process, for example, has been reviewed as a result of the SLC's report (Back *et al*, 2005) and the large, intrusive barriers along the route have been removed. SLC also convinced the IND to allow mobile phone use in some areas of the Lunar House complex, to introduce a customer service booth and to re-organise the interview rooms to ensure greater privacy.

There are, however, also a number of difficulties associated with imagining the state as a porous and peopled institution. Primary among these disadvantages is the risk of co-optation. The tendency for state objectives, categorisations and approaches to be

taken up by third sector institutions that work closely with states has been recognised in Wolch's (1990) work concerning the 'shadow state' which warns of the risk that voluntary and charitable organisations end up doing the work of the state itself if they are not vigilant about defining and pursuing their core objectives when co-operating with state actors and institutions. From the perspective of the management team at Lunar House there were clear benefits available through working with SLC.

Source 10: We had the same objectives so we thought well we're very happy to cooperate with them, we'll share with them what we've done and you know get their advice and you know support in some ways. And information - because some people would tell them stuff that they wouldn't necessarily feel that comfortable telling us.

From the perspective of activists, even though there had been a number of tangible successes that had arisen as a result of their campaign work at Lunar House, there was still a sense of discomfort at the way in which senior IND officials had been so accommodating – sometimes unerringly so – of the activist work that had been pursued. One SLC member expressed this discomfort in terms of a sort of linguistic colonisation that had occurred, whereby activists' language and concepts had been taken up by state actors, which had the effect of de-politicising this language.

Source 7: You know the structures of government themselves seem on the one hand so hard and clear cut and on the other hand that hardness seems to evaporate when you touch it, its almost as if the language of the government and to some degree of the Home Office itself and the immigration service has absorbed so much of the language of its opposition that its hard, in some ways you feel almost lost for words because it feels like the government have taken all those words which you are using to try and open up things or to argue about injustices or to argue about hypocrisy in the system and you hear the same words coming out of the mouths of senior civil servants and senior politicians. Because the words that you thought you were using, that were your tools, your resources, in a political struggle have somehow been taken by the other side and are coming out of the mouths of the people who you think of not necessarily as your opponents but as people who have interests that seem very different.

Other difficulties arose through the fact that the SLC charity had chosen to work with one particular administrative unit, the IND's senior management team, within a larger state apparatus. By focusing upon a particular administrative level, the constraints that its staff are under in terms of the limitations imposed upon them through job specifications and financial constraints are also implicitly taken on by the activists working closely with them. A number of the more far-reaching recommendations of the SLC team, such as the wholesale relocation of the asylum screening unit at Croydon to a purpose built centre, were consequently dismissed due to the budgetary constraints that the management team itself was under. The danger, then, is that technocratic limitations upon the possibility of change appear binding, precisely because of the proximity between activists and IND officials who are themselves institutionally constrained. As in the case of Asylum Action's work therefore, a particular vision of the state – this time as permeable, peopled and malleable – gives rise to distinct advantages and disadvantages from the perspective of activists seeking radical change.

### **Theorising the Spatial Consequences of Activist Imaginations of the State**

What emerges from these two cases is the evident importance of different imaginations of the state for the way that activism is conducted and the consequent advantages and challenges that activists experience. Drawing on the cases discussed, it is possible to suggest a generalised schema of these issues based upon the pros and cons associated with different imaginations of the state from the perspective of activist organisations.

INSERT TABLE ONE HERE

The table traces the association between a particular imagination of the state (in the Left-most column) and the advantages and disadvantages that such an imagination might present to activists on the ground (in the Right-most columns). In the second row, a statist view of the state is associated with a practical approach to state-activist relationships that views the state in distinct institutional terms and can lead to spatial strategies that aim to resist the state, causing activists to occupy oppositional, confrontational spaces around and outside the state apparatus. In the third row, a post-

structural emphasis upon the malleable, contestable and peopled nature of the state can be associated with the sort of proximate spatial strategies that SLC have pursued. These produce geographies of activism that are more integrated with state processes, practices and practitioners and that seek, through these strategies, to recast the state and its activities.

It may be argued that there are a range of perspectives on the state that activist organisations espouse, either implicitly or explicitly, that are not represented in this scheme. These may vary according to the political party that has power either locally or nationally, according to the social positions of the members of activist organisations themselves or according to the histories of interaction with state institutions and actors that activist organisations have experienced. What is more, within activist organisations there may also be differences of opinion that reflect more or less sympathetic and pro-active imaginations of the state, varying across members, according to specific government departments, or across different projects conducted by the same activist organisation. Indeed, there were examples of viewpoints expressed within both Asylum Action and SLC that ran counter to the prevailing position of both groups. Such variations make generalisations at the level of activist organisations as a whole more difficult. It may therefore be useful to regard the scheme presented in Table One as an idealised abstraction rather than an exact description of the consequences of activists' state imaginations. The cases of Asylum Action and SLC nevertheless usefully illustrate the consequences of polemic positions on the state, even allowing for the fact that most activist organisations, including Asylum Action and SLC, will usually imagine the state in terms that are somewhere between these idealised opposites.

Notwithstanding these caveats the schema conveys, first, the centrality of space to state-activist relationships and, second, the fact that theoretical imaginations of states have important material consequences for activism. Space fulfils the dual function of both expressing and producing the imaginations of activists regarding the state. In terms of expressing their conceptions of states, asylum activist organisations translate their imaginations of the state into the spatial strategies they employ towards state officials, for example in terms of distancing in the case of imaginations of the state

that are suspicious, distrustful or critical, and proximity in the case of imaginations of the state that emphasise the state's peopled and socially malleable character. In terms of producing the state, these spatial patterns in state-activist organisations can act to bring about the very sorts of state practices that they anticipate, because state actors will respond to distant and proximate spatial activist relationships very differently. State institutions that are distrusted, separated and avoided may become alienated and distrustful themselves and conduct themselves in ways that appear to confirm the need for this sort of treatment. Alternatively, state institutions and actors that are included by activist organisations may respond positively to this sort of interaction and be more forthcoming in forging mutually shared objectives and facilitating activist activities, thereby confirming the preconceptions of more co-operative imaginations of the state. There is, then, a self-fulfilling property to activists' imaginations of the state that operates through the spatial manifestation of these imaginations.

Another feature of this schema is the relationship between abstract theorisations of the state and some of the practical consequences of viewing states in particular ways. Activism provides a clear example of the ways in which abstractions concerning the state can produce consequences that are practical and hold important implications for the form, content and outcomes of activist endeavours. This underscores the importance of a relatively neglected area of state-centred research: mapping and configuring the geographies of understandings of the state themselves, regardless of their *a priori* accuracy or inaccuracy. A sustained, theoretically informed effort to assess the nature, determinants, histories and geographies of attitudes towards, and conceptualisations of, the state is presently lacking from mainstream state theory which continues to deal predominantly with ontological questions surrounding the state's status, rather than with questions about the consequences of viewing the state in particular ways. This is regrettable precisely because, as Table One demonstrates, it is possible to trace imaginations of the state from ideational, immaterial spaces to dispositions among activists that exert their own social effects and constitute the basis of state-society relationships, of which state-activist relationships are a primary example. These observations illustrate the potential of a strand of pragmatic state theorising that examines state theories from a consequentialist viewpoint, promising to move beyond the contemporary dualism that characterises state theory.

## **Conclusion**

This research has highlighted the consequences for activism of viewing the state in terms that are equivalent to a statist or post-structural position. One finding of the research is that there are important consequences for activists of imagining the state in different ways, because activist organisations will tend to organise their relationships with the state according to the conceptions they favour. Another finding is that this organisation is inherently spatial: activists express their conceptions of states through strategies of distancing and proximity in terms of the frequency of interaction with state officials, the spaces that activists occupy and the levels of co-operation that they are willing to entertain. A third finding is that this expression can become a force that shapes state-activist relationships in its own right, tending to produce relationships that confirm and bolster the original suppositions. By treating state institutions in different ways, different responses can be called forth and it is in this sense that we can identify the productive character of state concepts and ideas (Abrams, 1988). All of these observations indicate, moreover, that the debate between statist and post-structural understandings of the state is far from purely an academic pursuit, and in fact has a series of important consequences for the likely success of different activist projects. This points towards the potential of analyses that have as their object not 'the state' but notions of the state, in an attempt to analyse in a systematic way the effects of competing notions in an array of social situations.

The research also underscores, finally, the diversity of activist activities that can be helpful to asylum seekers in the UK. Both SLC and Asylum Action can point towards a series of successes that have improved asylum seekers' situations in the UK and yet they have employed strikingly different approaches to effecting change. It is encouraging, therefore, that there is room for a range of different approaches to activism, and to the state, in the activist field. What these diverse approaches illustrate is that there is room for a degree of specialisation and division of labour across different activist organisations working in similar fields. Rather than seeing these approaches as incommensurate, this research points towards the potential for concomitant activist projects of a variety of hues. To the extent that there was incomprehension, and even a degree of disdain, regarding alternative approaches to the state among both organisations studied, it is appropriate to call for recognition of

the value of different spatial strategies to the state and, more generally, a greater appreciation of difference across the activist field.

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### **Appendix One**

Source 1	Asylum Action organiser, British, 40s.
Source 2	Asylum Action organiser, British, 40s.
Source 3	Refused asylum seeker associated with Asylum Action.
Source 4	Asylum Action member and activist, non-British, 50s.
Source 5	SLC organiser and activist, non-British, 20s.
Source 6	SLC organiser, British, 50s.
Source 7	SLC activist, British, 40s.
Source 8	Police officer, British, employed over five years.
Source 9	NASS employee, British, employed over five years.
Source 10	Senior IND manager.
Source 11	Activist working with SLC.
Source 12	Activist working with SLC.

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<sup>i</sup> Asylum seekers are required to visit local police stations at regular intervals as they await a decision on their claims.

<sup>ii</sup> The National Asylum Support Service (NASS) was responsible for the welfare of asylum seekers as their claims were being processed. It was created in 2001 but was heavily criticised for its lack of front office functions (NACAB, 2002a; 2002b) and at the time of writing was undergoing major reform, including a name-change.

<sup>iii</sup> The Immigration and Nationality Directorate was renamed the 'Border and Immigration Agency' in 2007 and was subsumed into 'The Border Agency' in 2008.