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Full Length Article

“In Wales ... we do things differently”. The politics of asylum dispersal in the UK and emerging national (self-) imaginaries of hospitality in Wales

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ABSTRACT

The 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act marked a watershed moment for the politics of asylum in the UK, setting the discursive groundwork for the now infamous ‘hostile environment’. This article is the first to compare the discursive framings of this formative act by the Home Office and UK government with those of the then newly devolved Welsh political institutions. While exploring the dominant visions of asylum as fear, unease and hostility marking the act, this paper highlights contrasting *national* narratives and imaginaries of welcome and hospitality in Welsh institutions. Drawing on a discourse analysis of archived policy documents, newspapers and interview material, the paper argues that these emerging hospitable imaginaries constituted a form of Welsh national identity formation against a less hospitable ‘Other’ - the UK sovereign state. This article contributes to the critical migration literature by questioning if the notion of hospitality involves more than the ambivalent framing of non-citizens as guests and others, or if instead it is more intended to differentiate from sovereign responses to asylum.

1. Introduction

In the morning of 8th August 2001, a group of asylum seekers being held in a prison in Cardiff, Wales began protesting their detention while their asylum applications were being processed (James, 2001a). At the time, this was one of thirty-three prisons across the UK that was being used to house arriving asylum seekers awaiting the outcome of their applications (James, 2001a) as part of a new dispersal policy that had begun in December 2000 (Carey, 2001). While there had been similar acts of food refusal by imprisoned asylum seekers protesting detention in Liverpool and Rochester in England, the hunger strike in Cardiff attracted a more immediate criticism from local authorities and the newly devolved National Assembly for Wales (NafW). Their detention had, as the *Western Mail* in Cardiff wrote, “angered the assembly” (Mason, 2001, p. 8). The former Welsh Commissioner on the Commission for Racial Equality and member of the Equal Opportunities Wales Advisory Committee stated in an interview that the strike and the responses marked “the beginning of a discourse. That in Wales, in a devolved setting, we would do things differently” (Interview, 11 December 2017). This statement about the hunger strike and the “beginning of a discourse” raises questions about theoretical and political imaginaries of national identity and asylum politics at a new

territorial level.

What would devolved Wales do ‘differently’, and different from whom? In the context of this interview statement on the discursive responses to the hunger strike in Cardiff, the ‘different from’ denotes the detention of asylum seekers in prisons, which had been practiced by the Westminster government and the Home Office since December 2000, and which was representative of an increasingly hostile asylum regime in the UK. Beginning with the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act, the New Labour administration had introduced a range of new punitive and restricting measures on the immigration and asylum system. In this context, the phrase of the ‘abuse of hospitality’ was used so much by the administration that it became one of the emotive phrases commented upon in a report investigating the representation of asylum seekers in the British press (ICAR, 2004).

However, the second element of the statement denotes that in a devolved Welsh setting, things would be done differently from this politics of fear (Huysmans, 2006) and unease (Bigo, 2002). Therefore, this article explores this discursive differentiation of Welsh politics via claims to hospitality towards asylum seekers and refugees by contrast to the UK government and national policies that have become increasingly hostile and regressive since the late 1990s. It draws on detailed empirical material to show how in a devolved setting, contrasting national

Abbreviations: AM, Assembly Member; NafW, National Assembly for Wales; SWEP, South Wales Evening Post; WM, Western Mail.

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narratives of welcome and hospitality travelled alongside those of hostility and the fear of the ‘abuse of hospitality’ used by the UK sovereign state to discursively frame the issue of asylum. The argument developed in this article is that the narratives of a ‘Welsh welcome’ constitutes a form of national identity formation constructing itself against an ‘Other’ (see Barnett, 2005) that is imagined to be less hospitable and more hostile than oneself: the UK sovereign state. Using this discursive differentiation, vis-à-vis narratives of hospitality, devolved nations such as Wales contrast themselves against the sovereign state and its exclusionary politics of asylum.

This argument is of empirical and conceptual importance for the critical literature on migration. In examining the hitherto underexplored specifics of Welsh national imaginaries that emerged through the politics of asylum dispersal in the devolved context of the UK, the article contributes to, and complicates, critical migration scholars’ focus on discourses of hospitality. It does so by diverging from the existing literature which tends to analyse how hospitality and domopolitics situate non-citizens as others (Rosello, 2001; Dikeç, 2002, Walters 2004). Instead, the “Welsh welcome” achieves something different than the hospitable (self-) imaginaries of the sovereign state: it is intended more to differentiate from the UK response.

With this conceptualisation, the article also positions itself within, and contributes to, a burgeoning literature on migration, devolution and tension between different authorities on different scales. In addition to the work on multi-level governance in the EU and the devolution of immigration authority in the US, there has been work on the Scottish context (Bowes et al., 2009; Kymlicka, 2011; Mulvey, 2015, 2018) that addresses issues of migration and asylum policy in a context of a devolved authority in the UK. This work examined efforts to position the Scottish nation in distinction to the Westminster government. However, there has been significantly less engagement with this politics of differentiation around migration and asylum on Wales as another devolved nation in the UK. Therefore, this article compares the discursive framings of the national dispersal policy for asylum seekers, which came into effect with the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act, by the UK and Westminster government and the Home Office with those of the devolved NafW and Welsh Government. This policy is an appropriate case study because the dispersal programme “marked a sea change in British asylum policy as it also marked a turning point for Wales” (Robinson, 2003, p. 189) as for the first-time Wales became official reception area for asylum seekers. For this comparison, this article employs a discourse analysis of governmental framings; with a research aim to compare different national (ised) framings of asylum and considering that discourse analysis has been central for Critical Geopolitics (Agnew, 1994), which analyses the interrelationships between states and how their imaginaries are created and sustained (Mueller, 2010), it made this methodical underpinning an appropriate choice.

To trace the governmental debates around the new dispersal policy in Wales for this discourse analysis, the article draws on archival research into newspaper reports on asylum from the two largest Welsh newspapers with a Wales-wide circulation, the *Western Mail* (WM) in Cardiff and the *South Wales Evening Post* (SWEP) in Swansea from 2000 to 2002, which are stored in the West Glamorgan Archive in Swansea. I searched the archive for material related to the implementation of the UK dispersal policy in Wales specifically, and on the topics of refugees, asylum, immigration and its effects on community in Wales more broadly. I collected one hundred newspaper articles concerned with those broader themes as part of a larger research project (see Bernhardt, 2020). The selected articles for this paper were chosen because they thematised the reaction of the devolved Welsh political institutions to UK policy. They were supplemented by two policy documents: the Home Office document in which the dispersal policy was first announced (1998), and a piece of correspondence from a member of Swansea Council and the Welsh consortium on dispersal (Sugar, 2000). Those were selected because they allowed for a detailed comparison of the

framings of dispersal between national, regional and local government.

With these considerations, this paper proceeds in four main sections. The first section introduces a Derridean understanding of hospitality as a sovereign practice (2000a, 2002) and the concept of domopolitics as the governance of the nation as a ‘home’ (Walters 2004). The second section builds on these concepts to examine the Home Office White Paper *Faster, Fairer, Firmer* (1998) and show how the UK government used the language of hospitality to moralise their securitisation of asylum (Darling, 2013). The third section examines the discursive responses of the devolved Welsh national assembly to this policy. It does so through an analysis of newspaper articles on asylum dispersal published during the implementation of the policy, which thematised the reaction of devolved Welsh political institutions. This section shows how the hospitable framings of the NafW of the dispersal policy contrasted with the framings of the Home Office, and how it facilitated the emerging narratives of a ‘warm Welsh Welcome’ in Welsh newspapers. The fourth section then argues that these national framings of a Welsh Welcome were also used to challenge the UK sovereign state and its exclusionary asylum regime on the expectations of what it means to be a hospitable host (“In Wales ... we do things differently”). It draws on newspaper articles and material from one key informant interview with Reverend Aled Edwards, the former Chair of the Welsh Refugee Council and former Wales’s Commissioner on the Commission for Racial Equality. This one key informant interview was selected out of a larger set of interviews because he was involved with politicians of the NafW at the time of the hunger strike in Cardiff and in responding to the UK government on their detention. This article has begun and will end with an examination of this event, because it was the first time that the newly devolved NafW and the UK government were in an open institutional conflict over the politics of asylum dispersal. In conclusion, the devolved institutional reaction to this hunger strike complicates the critical migration literature on hospitality. This is because the notion of a ‘Welsh welcome’ achieves something other than hospitable imaginaries of the sovereign nation-state, which situates non-citizens as others. Instead, the ‘Welsh welcome’ is intended more to differentiate from the UK sovereign responses to asylum.

2. Hospitality and domopolitics in the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act

There is an inherent inseparability between hospitality and power: there cannot be hospitality without the sovereignty of the person offering the invitation into their home (Kakoliris, 2015). This conception of hospitality provided by Derrida (2000a) understands it as being based on the sovereign possession of the home, the control of the threshold and the decision to include or exclude the arriving guest. For him, this decision shows that there is always already an element of hostility in hospitality (Derrida, 2000b). The conceptual connection between the notion of hospitality and political debates about migration, asylum and post-national citizenship has strongly influenced the critical migration literature (Dikeç, 2002; Rosello, 2001). This literature argues that constructing the offer of hospitality as generosity “reproduces and reinforces uneven relationships of power and rights to belong” (Craggs, 2012, p. 2016).

The literature which highlights the limits of hospitality as a frame and response to the exclusionary politics of asylum (Darling, 2013; Dikeç, 2002) asked how the offer of hospitality entrenches the unequal relations of power and ownership between migrants and the sovereign nation-state. This intersection between ethics, power and space has been conceptualised by Walters as *domopolitics*: the government of the state, and other political spaces, as a home: “... the home as hearth, a refuge or a sanctuary in a heartless world; the home as our place, where we belong naturally, and where, by definition, others do not ...” (2004: 241). Identity is here understood as constructed through “a simultaneous process of identification with and differentiation from selected others”, setting up an excluded element as ‘the Other’ that confirms the identity

of the self (Barnett, 2005, p. 7). Domopolitics is the governance and construction of the nation as a secured and bounded home-space (Walters 2004) that operates through practices and techniques of filtering, classification, and distinction from the 'Other'. Darling (2013: 1786) argues that the domopolitical logics of distinction, associated with the nation-state, often intersect with hospitable narratives and imaginaries, and that this logic of distinction "enacts and moralises domopolitics". The discursive governance of the nation as a home, and the necessary rejection of unwanted strangers is often morally justified by a record of hospitality to a 'worthy' few (Darling 2013: 1796).

These presuppositions and intersections with hospitable narratives are indeed embedded in dominant discourses on the politics of asylum in the UK. Here, Molz and Gibson (2007) has investigated the use and mobilization of the metaphor of hospitality in debates on migration and asylum in Britain, and their effects on imagining British national identities. In her study, the analytical context is the framing of responses to migration under the (New) Labour administration since 1997. This new administration was, on the one hand, constructing a British "multiculturalist nationalism" (Fortier, 2005) around the imagined ideal of a welcoming, hospitable, generous, and tolerant nation (Ahmed, 2004). On the other hand, Sales shows that the national pride in Britain's perceived hospitality is strengthened through the discursive distinction between the 'genuine' refugees and the 'bogus' asylum seekers and economic migrants (2002). In maintaining these binaries between the deserving and undeserving, Britain imagines itself as generous in welcoming *some* people (Ahmed, 2004) but keeping others out. The nation can be imagined as hospitable because it allows 'genuine' refugees to stay, while defining others as not genuine, placing limits on their own hospitality.

While the Westminster government was framing these imaginaries of a multiculturalist nationalism, it was contributing to a substantial moral panic over asylum. Their framing of asylum legislation worked to define the national self-image as hospitable, generous, and tolerant, while at the same time constructing the deserving and undeserving, genuine, and non-genuine other in limiting the condition of Britain's hospitableness (Gibson, 2007: 165). These discussions over migration through the lens of the abuse of hospitality (ICAR, 2004) have since then not only been continuously high on the political agenda and subject of public debates in the UK over the last two decades. They have also influenced the move of successive British governments to 'secure' the borders of the nation and to 'toughen' demands on migrants (Darling, 2011, p. 263) which culminated in the current 'hostile environment' policy. The last two decades of Home Office policy papers represent this attempt to respond to demands to manage and control migration "whilst maintaining the politically salient image of the cohesive and homely nation" (Darling, 2011, p. 263). Critical scholars (Squire, 2009) have noted how it has been particularly from 1999 onwards that the "story of Britain's relation with asylum has been one of increasing restrictions, controls and experimentation with various means of detention, dispersal and, above all, deterrence" (Darling, 2011, p. 264). The Westminster government under New Labour started this process with a range of punitive and restricting measures on the immigration and asylum system, beginning with the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act.

3. Faster, Fairer, Firmer? The politics of dispersal in the devolved UK

The implementation of the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act was preceded by the publication of the Home Office White Paper *Faster, Fairer, Firmer: A Modern Approach to Immigration and Asylum* (1998). This paper emphasises that the goal of the act is to "modernise the whole approach to immigration", and that operations will be more integrated to "maximise efficiency and minimise the scope for abuse" (Darling, 2011). The discursive focus of this paper is placed on targeting the alleged abuses of British hospitality. The intention to "speed the passage of genuine travellers and target resources on potential abuse" is

mentioned twice, and the document states that the policy's goals are to "minimise the incentive to economic migration" through "removing access to social security benefits" (Darling, 2011). This is of importance, as the phrase "the abuse of hospitality" had been increasingly used since New Labour came to power in 1997. In fact, it was used so much that it became one of the 'emotive' phrases commented upon in a report investigating the representation of asylum seekers in the British press (ICAR, 2004). This reiteration of the alleged abuse of hospitality supports Darling's (2013) argument that the domopolitical logic of the British asylum regime is based on the discursive governance of the nation as a home, and that the necessary rejection of unwanted strangers is morally justified by a record of hospitality to a 'worthy' few (Darling, 2011: 1796). This moralises the sovereign decision and the moment of inclusion or exclusion as an imagined responsible enactment of a set of moral obligations to some noncitizens (Darling, 2011).

Practically, the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act introduced a new national dispersal policy for asylum seekers in the UK. This dispersal policy marked a shift from a decentralised system, in which asylum seekers were free to choose where to live, towards a centralised and national support and accommodation system, in which eligibility for welfare provision was linked to the decision to accept dispersed housing on a no-choice basis (Schuster, 2005). A new national agency run by the Home Office, the National Asylum Support Service (NASS), was taking over of the responsibility for supporting asylum seekers. But there was a second important logic apparent in the new legislation on asylum dispersal. This was that thirteen cluster regions were defined to avoid an excessive 'burden' on the south-east of England (Darling, 2011). This is the second domopolitical logic of the British asylum regime—the framing of asylum seekers as a 'burden'. Since its first proposal in the *Faster, Fairer, Firmer* white paper, dispersal has been described as a means to "relieve the burden on provision in London" (1998: Paragraph 8.22). Here, it also reproduces a notion of asylum seekers as a 'burden' that has emerged as one of the dominant discursive framings of asylum dispersal in the UK (Darling, 2016). Therefore, dispersal to different regions, and the responsibility for services, was contracted out to ten consortia, which included two in Wales: one Cardiff consortium and one All-Wales consortium (Robinson, 2003, p. 190). These consortia were declared responsible for hosting and accommodating dispersed asylum seekers from the south-east of England (Robinson, 2003).

This dispersal programme not only "marked a sea change in British asylum policy" but a "turning point for Wales" (Robinson, 2003, p. 189) because for the first-time, Wales became a reception area for asylum seekers. But the implementation of the dispersal system also coincided with the period during which, following the Government of Wales Act 1998, the *devolved* National Assembly for Wales (known since 2020 as Y Senedd) was established. Generally, "devolution" refers to a transfer of powers between different levels of government. This process is also geographical, as the Centre on Constitutional Change describes it as "where some of the power to make laws and decisions has been transferred by a central parliament or government to institutions in one or more territories within the country" (2022). With regards to this spatial and political process of transferring powers, geographers have long examined how processes of devolution effects immigration policies. With regards to immigration authority in the US, Varsanyi (2008: 883) has shown how since the mid-1990s, the 'state' to which noncitizens are vulnerable is no longer only the US government, but also states and cities. Coleman (2009: 907) points to a post-9/11 devolutionary trend in US immigration enforcement becoming more localized, and that devolution therefore "constitutes a significant challenge to who regulates immigration and to what practices security comprises".

This work on potential tensions between authorities and scales *within* the nation-state has since been supplemented by work on multi-level governance in the UK. This is because in the UK, immigration policy is reserved with the Westminster government. However, certain powers which are relevant to the reception of refugees and asylum seekers (health, education, housing etc.) are devolved to Wales, Northern

Ireland, and Scotland. Bowes et al. (2009) highlight that the approach of the Scottish Executive (the Scottish equivalent to the NafW, now called Scottish government) to asylum seekers has been “somewhat different from that of the prevailing UK public discourse [...] whereby asylum seekers in particular are seen as a threat to society” (Bowes et al., 2009: 28). Within this discursive context, Mulvey (2018: 162) examined how different views of social citizenship between UK and Scottish governments have led to different ideas about immigration policy and practice and argued that they are also “indicative of a move away from UK models of immigrant policy”. Focusing on differences in social citizenship *within* a nation-state, he points towards a divergence between the exclusion of asylum seekers and refugees from access to social services in England with their partial inclusion in Scotland. He argues that the Scottish government “always took a symbolically different approach from that of the UK Government with regard to both the general discourse around migration, as well as more specific refugee integration issues” (Mulvey, 2018: 169).

This conceptual focus on differences between nations and localities in the context of devolution has also started to be considered in the literature on asylum dispersal in the UK. While the first engagements examining the politics of dispersal (see Darling, 2011; Darling, 2013; Gill, 2009) have done so mostly in relation to UK asylum policy, more recent accounts have also examined emerging tensions and divergences around asylum between local, regional and national levels. For example, Meer et al. (2021: 1) explored how housing as a core element of migrant reception sheds light not just on recent developments in the governance of displaced migrants, but also on how “local and city level approaches may negotiate, and sometimes diverge from, national level policy and rhetoric”. Looking at the example of Glasgow as the local authority in the UK with the largest annual intake of asylum seekers, but also the only local authority in Scotland participating in the dispersal scheme, the authors highlight the comparison to other cities “immensely more complicated” (Meer et al. 2021: 8) housing landscape relying on divergent formal arrangements between the UK, devolved and local government for its implementation. While their comparative study cautions that the local room for divergence is often limited and partial with regards to asylum accommodation and support, Darling (2022) has most recently shown how local government may support asylum seekers despite more hostile national policies. This work builds on a ‘local turn’ in migration studies, which not only emphasises a growing trend for municipalities to develop their own responses to asylum, but also a landscape in which local government is finding opportunities for “cushioning, bypassing, resisting and counteracting various aspects of exclusionary asylum policies” (Kos et al. 2016, p. 356).

In examining four local authorities and their approaches to asylum dispersal across the UK through the notion of discretion, Darling (2022: 6) highlights an interesting contextual element: forms of tactical influence for local actors over decision-making and evictions were, he argues, far more commonly discussed in Cardiff and Glasgow than in Birmingham and Sunderland. This is explained as resulting partly from the proximity of refugee networks to the devolved authorities in Scotland and Wales, which made a difference to the institutional and political context in the two former cities (Darling, 2022), because Scottish and Welsh authorities have often taken more inclusive stances towards immigration (Mulvey, 2018). In summary, this section has shown that there is indeed an emerging literature addressing these more inclusive stances towards immigration in the devolved context of the UK, with regards to the case of Scotland. However, there has been significantly less engagement with the politics of differentiation around migration and asylum in Wales (see two recent exceptions: Parker, 2021, and Bernhardt, 2022). The following sections address this empirical blind spot with regards to the earlier history of asylum dispersal in Wales.

4. “A warm Welsh welcome”? Devolved responses and national imaginaries of hospitality

The 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act marked the introduction of the dispersal system, of which the local authorities, newspapers and communities in Wales became increasingly aware. Early mentions of the scheme include a SWEF article from the 10th of April 2000 reporting that Swansea Council was preparing to receive up to 1000 asylum seekers, from 5000 people who were supposed to be dispersed across Wales altogether (Greaney, 2000). The first media narrative of migration that emerged in the context of the scheme focused on an emerging conflict between the Home Office and the Welsh local authorities with regards to financial support, funding, and the responsibility for support services for asylum seekers and refugees. In May 2000, the planned arrival of asylum seekers into different Welsh localities, including Neath Port Talbot County Borough, were reported to have been delayed until the late summer because of these tensions over funding (SWEF: 2000).

These organisational conflicts between the Home Office and the local authorities on how the dispersal system should be implemented and financed is also reflected in another archived document. This is a piece of correspondence, sent from the Chief Executive of the City and County of Swansea to the Chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality in London from August 2000 (Sugar, 2000). In it, the Chief Executive of Swansea Council, as part of the Welsh Consortium, outlines her concerns about the implementation of the dispersal scheme and negotiations over costs and funding. She also argues that the planning of the Welsh Consortium could be “put in jeopardy by the Home Office agreeing contracts with private sector providers without proper consultation with either Regional consortia or with local agencies in local areas” (Sugar, 2000). In addition to the lack of consultation, the Council and their partners were concerned over the issue of unit pricing of accommodation and services. This is because for the Welsh Consortium the negotiations appeared to be “almost exclusively price led with a lack of understanding of the difference between providing these particular services in an area as large and diverse as Wales and providing similar services in London and the Southeast” (Sugar, 2000).

In this way, this policy document echoes two main themes that emerged in media accounts of the dispersal scheme. The first is the financial cost of asylum dispersal. Reports continued to be published about the impact this financial wrangling between the UK Government and Welsh local authorities over housing would have on the arrival of asylum seekers in Swansea, Neath, Port Talbot and Carmarthenshire (Bailey, 2001, p. 5). This recurring of similar media narratives resonates with a scholarly analysis by Tammy Speers (2001) of all Welsh local newspaper and their articles on asylum between April and December 2000. She shows that almost half the articles took as their main theme the national or local cost of dispersal (Speers, 2001). Her work found that many of the articles labelled asylum seekers as a ‘burden’, with almost half of the articles thematically emphasising the cost of the dispersal policy and an alleged adverse impact on housing and education (Speers, 2001). This resonates with the earlier examination of the Home Office document and its framing of asylum as a burden on the sovereign nation-state host. It supports Darling’s (2013) argument that claims to welcome are often interwoven with national and sovereign framings of asylum.

However, the implementation of the dispersal system coincided with the period during which constitutional changes (the Government of Wales Act, 1998) began the process of devolution and the creation of the Welsh National Assembly (now known as Y Senedd) in 1999. It initially only had the power to amend secondary legislation (Deacon, 2014, p. 232). However, it was made responsible for running public services like health and education which are relevant to the dispersal of asylum seekers as well as refugee resettlement. Here, the Assembly Member (AM) for the Gower constituency Edwina Hart stated to the assembly that the debate between the All-Wales Local Authority Consortium and NASS concerned the level of funding it was willing to allocate for

accommodation (Bailey, 2001). Edwina Hart stated that the NafW should not be paying for a UK government problem, and that the: “Home Office should be paying the Assembly the additional money needed for health and local government” (Walters, 2001, p. 10). Indeed, Speers also indicates that many articles in Welsh newspapers at the time “carried the message that dispersal was being foisted on Wales to relieve the pressure in the south-east of England” (2001).

This is the second media narrative that recurs: the new dispersal policy framed as a ‘burden’, but in combination with a national politics of differentiation of local Welsh councils and the Welsh assembly from those seen to be imposing it—the Home Office and the UK government. This discursive politics of national differentiation from the sovereign state is in this case inextricably linked with the devolved background of the UK. Devolution for Wales is linked with questions of national identity, where the political process of devolution gives expression to a sense of national sentiment (Mooney & Williams, 2006, p. 609). Discourses of the nation permeate policy making, while national traditions, identities and aspirations are mobilized and constructed to add legitimacy to this nation-building process (Mooney & Williams, 2006). This national sentiment, it will be shown, is also constructed through “a simultaneous process of identification with and differentiation from selected others” (Barnett, 2005, p. 7). The next section therefore examines how narratives of Wales as a welcoming nation were mobilized vis-à-vis the politics of asylum dispersal and a discursive differentiation from the UK sovereign state.

4.1. National narratives of a “warm Welsh Welcome”

After the dispersal policy was announced, Swansea Council’s Chairman of Housing stated in the SWEP that Swansea would give a “warm Welsh welcome to all asylum seekers”, but that the council should still be “compensated by the Home Office” (Greaney, 2000, p. 5). This statement reiterates the theme of the ‘burden’ of the financial costs for asylum dispersal being imposed by an UK government from the outside. But it indicates the emergence of another theme within the local narratives around the dispersal programme: the framing of Swansea and Wales as places imbued with characteristics of welcome and hospitality. With regards to this formulation of a ‘Welsh welcome’, it is also necessary to ask to what extent such claims are about a national or a local framing, as they might not all be *national* in orientation. For example, the notion of welcoming sanctuary cities is often framed as a concern of local communities being opposed to national authorities (see McDaniel, 2018). Considering this is necessary in examining how the claims to a Welsh differentiation might be operating through these scales and patterns as well.

However, what is interesting to note is that the precise formulation of a ‘warm Welsh welcome’ returned numerous times in the analysed newspapers on the dispersal policy, with a specific focus on the *Welshness* of this welcome. In her analysis of newspaper articles between April and December 2000, Speers (2001) found that the Welsh press, in comparison to papers with a UK-wide circulation, gave significant space to those who wanted to welcome asylum seekers – mostly quoting government officials or local councillors. Finney and Robinson (2008: 397) have argued that with the dispersal policy in 1999 the issue of asylum was for the first time, in a period that had seen social and political focus turn on migration, brought to the local level. Building on the work of Aldridge (2003), they illustrate that the central aim of the local press is to “successfully imagine a community so as to give itself commercial viability” (Finney & Robinson, 2008, p. 398). Their comparison of two local papers, from Leeds in England and Cardiff in Wales, shows how they both “draw on particular constructions of their local identity to report dispersal, and shape an image-contrasting images-of community through their reactions to dispersal” (Finney & Robinson, 2008: 407). But in examining why the Cardiff paper has a far more positive stance than the Leeds’s, they argue that it is “worth considering the significance of nationality here” (Finney & Robinson, 2008). Other examples of this

explicit national framing include to ‘Give a warm Welsh welcome’ (*Herald of Wales*, April 13 in Speers, 2001) or the ‘desire to promote understanding of the plight of refugees and asylum seekers and to build on Wales’s tradition as a ‘welcoming nation’ (*South Wales Argus*, November 11 in Speers, 2001). Speers (2001) references Edwina Hart, the Welsh assembly minister with responsibility for asylum seekers and John Griffiths, the AM for Newport East as politicians who attempted to frame the discussion in terms of giving asylum seekers a ‘Welsh welcome’ (Speers, 2001, p. 39). Robinson (2003) summarises Speers’ analysis in stating:

She also praised certain Welsh politicians for adopting and disseminating a more positive attitude towards dispersal than their English counterparts and notes how the press and politicians had made a good deal of the warm Welsh welcome being offered to asylum seekers, and how this formed part of the tradition of Welsh tolerance (Robinson 2003: 191–192).

The statement ends by claiming that this welcome forms part of a ‘tradition’ of Welsh tolerance. A central element that returns in this framing of the ‘warm Welsh welcome’ is that it forms part of a long and continuous history. Speers (2001) references examples from the *Denbighshire Free Press* and the *Evening Leader*, which reiterate that: “There is in Wales a strong tradition of humanitarian action in response to persecution and injustice” (Speers, 2001). Darling (2013: 1789) has argued that discourses of hospitality and asylum in the city have often been framed through the production of a distinct narrative suggesting that urban places possess a ‘proud record’ and ‘long history’ of hospitality. Here, self-imaginaries are constructed through a similar discursive dynamic, referencing a ‘tradition’ of welcoming, but which is constituted through a national frame-foregrounding Welshness. This argument appears several times in the SWEP and resonates with Darling’s (2013) account of place imaginaries. What is also essential to consider in this narrative of a long-standing history of hospitality in Wales is that within those newspaper accounts there is often little mentioning of specific instances that support those claims. The distinction between rhetorical claims of a better treatment of displaced people is not necessarily the same as the implementation of those ideals in practice—these statements can serve as a type of politicisation of social relations rather than an empirical description of how people are treated ‘on the ground’. Considering that it was only with the urban areas of Cardiff, Swansea, Newport, and Wrexham becoming dispersal areas in 2000 and 2001 that a significant number of asylum seekers arrived in Wales (Parker, 2021), this points toward the issue that often these historical narratives are more about a moral place-making (Malpass et al., 2007) rather than supporting refugees and asylum seekers. Therefore, it is also important to avoid essentialising, depoliticising and romanticising home(s) as safe and homogenous places of natural belonging for populations. Such an understanding of the identity of places is what requires them to have boundaries in the first place, and it requires individuals to frame their identity through the negative opposition with ‘the Other’ who is associated with the outside beyond the boundaries (Massey, 1994, p. 169).

However, it is precisely this need to frame a national identity through the negative opposition with ‘the Other’ that brings us to a new and conceptually interesting second element of the ‘warm Welsh welcome’ narrative. In their comparison of local media narratives, Finney and Robinson (2008) urged to consider the significance of nationality. Tracing how a lot of work has shown how Welshness has historically been constructed as an identity under threat, they argue that therefore “in their imaginings, the Welsh are familiar with persecution, are tolerant and are welcoming to foreigners” (Finney and Robinson, 2008: 408). This implicit suggestion of a familiarity with persecution and subsequent tolerance to migrants is a central specificity on what a ‘warm Welsh welcome’ is then meant to entail. For example, Robinson (2003: 191) summarised that Welsh politicians had adopted a more positive attitude to the new dispersal policy, specifically more so “... than their

English counterparts". The emphasis of this framing is here strongly laid on the *more* positive attitude of Welsh politicians compared to their equivalent representatives on a UK level. In this way, these welcoming self-imaginaries of Wales are also constructed through a discursive politics of differentiation from what is imagined to be a less hospitable 'other' - the 'English counterpart'. Giudici (2014: 1412) argues that an inclusive rhetoric has been a feature of Welsh political discourse since the early days of the National Assembly, suggesting that such "post devolution inclusiveness can be seen as a national boundary between Wales and England, the former self proclaiming more 'welcoming' than the latter".

This is of conceptual importance for the critical literature on hospitality and asylum, because it is usually the arriving migrant who is framed as 'the Other' and associated with the outside beyond the national boundary, and against whom a national identity is constructed. This we have seen in the analysis of the domopolitics of the UK asylum regime. Initially, the 'warm Welsh welcome' does not differ too much from sovereign framings of asylum. Through an imagined tradition as a 'welcoming nation' Wales is established as a determined home space with boundaries that make it possible to welcome the arrival from the outside. Here too, the migrant (and guest) is 'the Other' for the purpose of national identity formation as a 'host'. But there is a new element where the "warm Welsh welcome" appears to operate in a different manner from hospitable (self-) imaginaries of the sovereign state. The warm and specifically *Welsh* welcome is also one that is characterised as a 'more' welcoming greeting towards new arrivals than the UK equivalent. The new arrival is thus not the sole 'Other'. The national identity formation of Wales as a potential host to refugees and asylum seekers is also constructed vis-à-vis a discursive politics of differentiation from a sovereign nation-state 'Other' imagined to be less hospitable than oneself. This narrative is interesting for analysing international hospitality, Eurocentrism and its relationship to colonialism (Rosello, 2001). Bulley (2017: 15) argues that "postcolonial territories were formed into states by the welcome forced upon them by strangers". Using the example of the state of Jordan, he shows how the lack of formal sovereignty set it within a postcolonial frame that led to a reversal of the relationship between 'strong' hosts and 'weak' guests (Bulley, 2017: 16), which effected the welcome offered to Syrian refugees after 2011. While this postcolonial context is different from the situation in Wales, both examples highlight that different national narratives can unsettle the power inequalities at the heart of hospitality. Critical scholars such as Rosello (2001) have shown how the metaphor and laws of hospitality always "form a significant part of national identity" (Rosello, 2001: 6). But in Wales, hospitable statements have also been framed in national terms to *differentiate* a devolved nation-state and national identity from the more hostile discursive position of the UK sovereign nation-state, as well as from anti-immigration sentiments and movements in the UK.

Yet, this notion of the 'welcoming nation' comes with its own set of problems. For example, a survey on attitudes towards refugees and asylum seekers in Wales in 1999 found that they were shaped by a 'culture of denial', which assumed that "racism and exclusion were less virulent in Wales than in England, and therefore that refugees did not face any unusual or noteworthy problems living in Wales" (Robinson, 2003, pp. 188–189). However, there were several instances in which the implementation of the dispersal system, the formation of refugee support groups, and the presence and reaction of the BNP¹ and other right-wing groups overlapped in Wales. The presence and electoral success of the BNP was a phenomenon that stretched to different regions in the UK. But, in the specific case of Wales, it constitutes a challenge to the discursive framing of the Welsh nation as a more welcoming place.

¹ The British National Party (BNP) is far-right, nationalist-populist, and neo-fascist political party, with its greatest presence and level of electoral success in the early 2000s and their stance on the politics of asylum thoroughly exclusionary, xenophobic, and racist.

Yet, this political dynamic of comparison was sustained and widespread. In May 2000, so-called 'race-riots' had erupted in Oldham and Burnley in England. Kundnani (2002) and Amin (2003) detailed how long histories of structural inequality, segregation, unemployment and racialized framings of the nation were all elements leading to these riots. Within this complex context, conflicts had also been whipped up by right-wing BNP activists feeding false information about the financial support being received by migrant communities. Here, the SWEP published subsequently an article stating that there was "No reason for riots over race" in Wales (Dicks, 2001). The paper had interviewed the then Welsh race equality chief, who stated that there was no evidence to suggest such a potential social unrest in South-West Wales. He called for political unity and the inclusion of all communities, and stated that:

I believe that the difference in Wales is that there is no underlying resentment between the white population and ethnic minorities. And I believe that is because in England, New Labour has forgotten the poor. But in Wales the main political parties are to the left of their English counterpart's position, and therefore have not forgotten the poor areas (in Dicks, 2001).

The statement emphasises two notions that are associated with this picturing of 'Wales'. There is the imagined absence of racist sentiments, and the imagined differentiation of a Welsh socio-economic framework from neoliberalism, which is associated with New Labour and England. We can observe again politics of differentiation from the British state at a *national* level, with the UK government associated with the national equivalent of England. Furthermore, many mainstream policy actors in Wales continued to represent the influence of fascist groups and parties such as the BNP as exceptions in the Welsh social and political landscape-as perhaps the less hospitable 'other' associated more with the rest of the UK, and England in particular.

For example, after the BNP organised a youth-camp weekend for teenagers in Mid-Wales, the then Welsh First Minister Rhodri Morgan stated in response that: "The fact that the only BNP candidate standing in Wales at the recent General Election got the lowest votes of his party anywhere in Britain was testimony to Welsh good sense" (SWEP: September 2001). One can see a trope of the "Welsh good sense" emerging, which parallels that of the exceptionalism of the "warm Welsh welcome". Here, the "Welsh good sense" combines notions of Welshness with liberal cosmopolitanism, serving to exclude the BNP, their members, their representatives, and their ideology – from the 'imagined national community' (Anderson, 1991). It frames this response also in comparison to a different 'other' – one not within Wales, but outside. The reference to the BNP receiving the lowest vote "anywhere in Britain" structures a comparison of Welsh national identity in opposition to Britain as the more hostile 'Other'.

However, scholars argue that "there is a significant history of racism which does not always sit easily beside the myth of warm, accepting proletarian Wales" (Threadgold et al., 2008: 3). Williams (2015) suggests that with increasing ethnic diversity there have been increasing challenges to the "tolerant nation" thesis, which according to Parker (2018: 113) proposes that "Wales's national character was both egalitarian and welcoming to immigration and positioned Wales as a more accommodating of difference and diversity than other parts of the United Kingdom". Therefore, the last section examines a specific moment that was used in Wales to build claims of a more 'tolerant nation', and how notions of a Welsh exceptionalism were situated in relation to the presence of this differentiating discourse in other parts of the UK- most notably Scotland.

5. "In Wales, we don't do that": a hunger strike and the politics of differentiation

While the regional debate over the BNP in Wales was taking place, the new national dispersal system had started to attract criticism across the UK. The Home Secretary David Blunkett had ordered a report and

review of the dispersal system, which followed the killing of a Kurdish refugee in the Sighthill Estate in Glasgow in August 2001. The focus of the media reporting was first only on the internal operational review, focusing on “how well refugees are integrating into local communities” and suggesting that the government “must now accept the case for secure detention centres for all newly-arrived asylum seekers” (WM: 11 August 2001: 4).

However, as the first asylum seekers arrived in Cardiff in April 2001, the beginning integration of the devolved public services into an emerging hostile asylum regime too was recognised. For example, the SWEP reported that these dispersed migrants’ “treatment in the capital has been controversial because of their detention in the capital’s prison, with trips to hospitals in handcuffs” (Bailey, 2001, p. 5). A group of asylum seekers being held in Cardiff prison began protesting their detention with a hunger strike that lasted one week in August 2001. The protest was a collective endeavour of thirty asylum seekers from Kosovo, Sudan, and Afghanistan, which were housed together in a wing in Cardiff Prison. The strike captured the attention of the Welsh and British press. The *Western Mail* in Cardiff published six articles on the topic during the protest, the *Evening Post* also reported on their plight, and the BBC online section published four articles covering the strike.

The first media engagement with the hunger strike emerged the day after it began, when the WM reported that National Assembly members from different parties had expressed concern on the issue. The leader of the Welsh Conservatives, Nick Bourne AM, called the detention a “clear scandal ... inhumane, degrading and quite frankly disgusting” (WM: 10 August 2001). The Labour AM for Newport East, John Griffiths, and Plaid Cymru argued that the asylum seekers were treated as prisoners. Plaid Cymru is the political party of Welsh nationalism, following a parliamentary and constitutional road to a potential Welsh independence (Butt Philip 1975 in Adamson, 1991). Increasingly, it seemed, the detention of the asylum seekers in Cardiff Prison had, as the WM wrote, “angered the assembly” (Mason, 2001, p. 8). The hunger strike in Cardiff Prison emulated similar protests across the country. One month earlier, detained asylum-seekers in Liverpool Prison refused their food to protest their detention. Similarly, the year before, two asylum-seekers in Rochester Prison in Kent were hospitalised after refusing food for more than thirty days (Carey, 2001). Back in Cardiff, after the remaining thirty asylum-seekers in the prison had lasted one week, they ended their hunger strike the following day. Afterwards, it was announced that the asylum seekers had their appeal turned down and were awaiting deportation (Sherma, 2001). Nevertheless, the hunger strike in Cardiff distinguishes itself from those in Liverpool and Rochester in England. Three months before the hunger strike in Cardiff Prison took place, the SWEP had already reported on the handcuffing and detention of asylum seekers in a hospital in Cardiff during routine screenings. This treatment of asylum-seekers as prisoners and detainees had become public because of accounts made by healthcare staff in the hospital in Cardiff. Indeed, Aled Edwards, the former Chair of the Welsh Refugee Council, member of the Equal Opportunities Wales Advisory Committee and former Wales’s Commissioner on the Commission for Racial Equality, describes here how he became aware of the hunger strike:

It was on the news. And it came from the health providers. And they raised concern. And it was at that time that I think there was a strong sense of civic society saying: In Wales, we don’t deal with this, you know, we don’t do it this way (Interview, 11 December 2017)

The first element is the reiteration that the strike was picked up by the media, specifically the national newspapers in Wales. This was an important element to create a discursive politics of differentiation from such an inhospitable detention associated with the British asylum regime. Moreover, the fact that the healthcare staff in the hospital in Cardiff brought the practices of handcuffing asylum seekers to the attention of the local press is interesting. Indeed, Mynott (1999: 9) had pointed out that with the asylum legislation following the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act, there was a “real danger that local authorities

and their staff may be expected to act much more as immigration officials”. This would also be the case with some public services, such as health which were involved in the provision of support for dispersed asylum seekers. In describing how these emerging activities developed from a “strong sense of a devolved value base”, Aled Edwards elaborated on the political context of those values in response to the hunger strike in Cardiff:

And we used the committee structure of the National Assembly, to call UK officers to account. And I think, that was possibly the first time that this had been done, with any clarity of thought. And, you know, that gave you a sense of, of the beginning of a discourse. That in Wales, in a devolved setting, we would do things differently (Interview, 11 December 2017)

This emphasis on ‘difference’ in a devolved setting is reminiscent of Hill’s examination of the Scottish context, in which there has been a perhaps even more pronounced evocation of the “silent spectre of Anglo-British governance which has curtailed Scottish autonomy in the past and continues to do so through limited devolution” (2016: 201). Indeed, the national hospitality discourse in a devolved setting is also used in ‘othering’ the sovereign nation-state on the expectations of what it entails to ‘be a host’ to refugees and asylum seekers. Devolved Wales enables itself against their own sovereign British nation-state host through re-constructing and challenging expectations of what it means to be a hospitable host to those who are usually framed as the ‘Other’, in this case asylum seekers. Moreover, this beginning of a discourse in national terms was not limited to refugee and asylum-seeker support groups that were part of the third sector and civil society in Wales. It also included individuals in the emerging realm of devolved Welsh politics, who were willing to drive this agenda, as Edwards reiterates. He mentions the Welsh National Assembly Member Edwina Hart, who played an important role in the newspaper narrations of a ‘warm Welsh welcome’, and explains:

So, she developed this narrative, as we all did, that in Wales, we do this. And in Wales, we don’t do that. So, I think the mantra around the kind of prison thing was in Wales, we don’t wish this to happen here (Interview, 11 December 2017)

This notion of “in Wales, we don’t wish this to happen here” corresponds with similar debates in Scotland in 2001, when the Scottish Executive was forced to respond to public concerns over the detention of children and that this “was not, for want of better words, the ‘Scottish way’” (Mooney and Williams 2003: 620). The literature on devolution (Mulvey, 2015) found that UK asylum policy inhibited refugee integration in the Scottish context. Parker (2021: 74) has more recently pointed towards a similar “on-going tension between the Welsh governments stated aim of inclusivity and integration, and the hostile environment approach taken to immigration policy by the Westminster government”. He highlights that the devolved governments are in terms of refugee integration “broadly similar and both have espoused a more inclusive and welcoming discourse to immigration that the UK government” (Parker, 2021: 83).

One can detect a moral politics of differentiation from an inhospitable British other, through the prism of asylum and migration – “we don’t wish this to happen here” (Interview, 11 December 2017), implying ‘unlike in other places’. But what does the statement of “In Wales, we don’t wish this to happen here” do, discursively? One could argue that it promotes the idea that discrimination and detention should not happen but frames this political point through a territorial logic of ‘here’ and ‘there’. This moral differentiation against the sovereign state, as we have seen in the examination of the narratives of a “warm Welsh welcome”, still does not fully escape the logic of us and them inherent to hospitality. But it reveals that these new scalar imaginaries created a discursive differentiation between sovereign and devolved nation-states on the expectations of what it means to be a hospitable ‘host’ to asylum seekers (“In Wales ... we do things differently”). In a devolved

institutional setting, contrasting national narratives of welcome and hospitality travelled alongside dominant narratives of hostility and the fear of the ‘abuse of hospitality’, used by the UK government and the Home Office to discursively frame the issue of asylum. But more importantly, the narratives of a ‘Welsh welcome’ constitute a form of national identity formation constructing itself against an ‘Other’ (Barrett, 2005) that is imagined to be less hospitable and more hostile than oneself: the British sovereign state. Using this discursive politics of differentiation, vis-à-vis narratives of hospitality, devolved nations such as Wales contrast themselves against the British state and its exclusionary politics of asylum.

6. Conclusion

While the critical literatures in political geography have explored hospitality as a means of framing and governing migrants as the ‘Other’ by the sovereign state (see Darling, 2011, 2013), this article has shifted the focus to examine conflicts between devolved and sovereign nation-states regarding the expectations of what it means to be a host to refugees and asylum seekers. While more often migrants are framed as “abusing the hospitality” of the nation, sometimes the sovereign state is also being framed as draconian and not fulfilling its duty of hospitality (Pirouet, 2001). Campaigners for migrant rights have in the past used such discourses of ‘crimes against hospitality’ (Derrida, 2002). This paper found that national imaginaries in a devolved setting used such narratives too: but for an ‘othering’ of the sovereign (host-) state.

The hunger strike by detained asylum seekers in Cardiff at the end of the implementation period of the dispersal policy, and the political reaction by Welsh politicians and newspapers, critically engaged these new imaginaries of hospitality. However, challenging the exclusionary politics of asylum using a national frame has its limits. Whilst it promotes a welcoming narrative, it also reinforces the territorial logic that produces the very idea of some populations as without territory (asylum seekers and refugees). Moreover, it promotes the idea that discrimination and detention should not happen but frames this point through a territorial logic of ‘here’ and ‘there’. We should be wary of the implication that ‘it can happen there, but not here’. This discourse keeps certain narratives of us and them intact. A logical corollary of these welcoming national narratives is that they may also be used as a means of absolving political actors from challenging certain practices beyond the nation’s threshold. In this logic, the ‘national order of things’ (Malkki, 1996) is so pervasive, ordinary and banal (Billig, 1995) that it becomes the language of critique (Closs Stephens, 2013) that is targeting the exclusionary politics of asylum.

Nevertheless, what is most interesting is that this Welsh national narrative can work for progressive ends – such as attempting to take on the British government on asylum. On this issue, Parker (2021: 73) has argued that Wales, whilst “sharing similarities with Scotland, has recently gone further in its commitment to refugees and asylum seekers through its desire to be the first Nation of Sanctuary”. Indeed, the Senedd has most recently used this distinct framing of Wales in rejecting the UK government’s newest “anti-refugee” Nationality and Borders Bill in February 2022, with the Scottish Assembly following shortly after (Lindsay, 2022). However, recent research on this national politics of differentiation (Bernhardt, 2022, p. 236) has pointed out that the extent to which this politics is meant to create some form of separate political autonomy might determine the effectiveness and future radicality of challenging current sovereign asylum regimes. Indeed, Mulvey (2018) related his findings on the inclusive stances towards migration by the Scottish government to the argument of Kymlicka (2011) that there is an explicit multicultural Scottish nation building project taking place, where the “Scottish government has committed itself to including immigrants within its conception of Scottishness” (2011: 294).

Future research on the political movements advocating for national independence in Scotland (Scottish National Party) and Wales (Plaid Cymru) and their stances regarding asylum could therefore unearth

further similarities and differences between territorial settings, and how these scalar settings could support or hinder more solidaristic and supportive asylum policies. Considering the importance which discussions of a ‘local turn’ (Darling, 2022) had in critical migration studies, examining these national narratives in Scotland and Wales further would assist scholars and activists in evaluating their capacity (or non-capacity) to contest, cushion or rework the hostile environment for refugees and asylum seekers in the UK.

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Interview Data

- Interview, 11 December. (2017). Cardiff, with aled Edwards, former Chair of the Welsh refugee council, member of the equal opportunities Wales advisory committee, former Wales’s commissioner on the commission for racial equality, Chair of displaced people in action (DPIA).