

## Interview with Jonathan Darling, author of *Systems of Suffering: Dispersal and the Denial of Asylum* (2022)

Jonathan Darling and Sarah M. Hughes

**ABSTRACT:** This conversation between Jonathan Darling and Sarah M. Hughes focuses on Darling's recently published book *Systems of Suffering: Dispersal and the Denial of Asylum* (2022). Based on research conducted over the course of six years, *Systems of Suffering* examines the emergence, development, and implications of the dispersal system in the UK. This market-based system of asylum governance is a process that distributes asylum seekers to predominantly urban areas and, Darling argues, represents a form of "distributed violence that is cumulative and incapacitating, and governs through the exhaustion of its critics and subjects" (p. 3). As the conversation unfolds, Darling talks about the implications of the rapidly shifting legal and policy landscape in the UK for the asylum dispersal and the challenges but, he suggests, political urgency of continuing to research it.

**KEYWORDS:** asylum dispersal system, asylum policies, local government, refugees, slow violence

The following is an interview conducted in January 2024 between Jonathan Darling and Sarah M. Hughes. The interview, the transcript of which has been edited by Olivia Sheringham, focused on Darling's recently published book *Systems of Suffering: Dispersal and the Denial of Asylum* (2022).

In *Systems of Suffering: Dispersal and the Denial of Asylum*, Jonathan Darling explores the emergence, development, and implications of the dispersal system in the UK. This market-based system of asylum governance sees the spatial distribution of asylum seekers to predominantly urban areas and, Darling argues, represents a form of "distributed violence that is cumulative and incapacitating, and governs through the exhaustion of its critics and subjects" (3). The book is based upon six years of research into the UK's dispersal system and Darling places these systems in the context of broader shifts in national and international immigration law, media representation of stigmatized subjects, the retreat of the local state, social housing in Britain, and, perhaps most significantly, the privatization and outsourcing that have come to characterize many aspects of neoliberal governance.

**Sarah M. Hughes:** Thank you so much for talking with me today. I wanted to ask first about what prompted you to write the book, and why you wrote it now?



**Jonathan Darling:** The book comes out of a long-standing interest in the asylum system in the UK more generally, but specifically *dispersal* as a process. I was interested in dispersal because, at the time that I was doing this period of research (2012 to 2018), the majority of academic work had focused on the initial period of dispersal (late 1990s–early 2000s). That work had covered the setup of dispersal, and then in some ways dispersal had fallen off the political radar, and it had fallen out of academic interest. So, I came to the research through a sense that a look at dispersal needed to be updated. Also, the period that I was doing this work coincided with the shift from local government accommodation, a combination between local government and private providers, to a fully outsourced and privatized system, bringing in private security contractors to run housing.

In terms of why write this book *now*, the contracts around asylum accommodation provision changed in 2019 and became 10-year contracts, and for me that was really important as those contracts won't run out until 2029. By that point we will have had kind of a 17-year period of a privatized system, and I think it's important to not forget that alternative systems did exist. They were far from perfect, but I think there's a real risk of a kind of inertia in thinking about asylum accommodation and of the outsourcing of care for vulnerable populations becoming completely normalized and not even up for discussion. So, part of what I wanted to do in the book was to document some of the violence of that system but also to really remind people of the origins of this system and the fact that this hasn't always been the case, and that alternatives do exist.

**Sarah:** Thank you—a focus on privatization comes through strongly in the book, and it seems to me that at the core is an attention to the “asylum seeker market.” Could you talk a little bit more about what you mean by this, and why it was such a significant shift in public and political discourse during your research period?

**Jonathan:** The terminology “asylum seeker market” comes from a representative of the security firm G4S, who in evidence to the Home Affairs Committee in 2013 used this term to describe their entry into the accommodation of asylum seekers across the UK. I was quite struck by this phrase, partly because the accommodation of people in the asylum system is, or should be, the most caring dynamic of an asylum system, if we want to think of it in those terms, in that it's the point at which you are supporting vulnerable people, often at a very basic level, and often at very low standards. But nevertheless, this is where there is a dynamic of care within the system that's set up to be hostile, that's set up to deter people.

I was interested in this language, because it also communicates a bigger shift around asylum as something that can be run and organized by private companies and coordinated rather than a state responsibility. We have to remember here that the market in accommodation is only one tiny part of the markets that are being constructed around asylum. So, in some ways, this language of the market in accommodation was actually quite late, to a set of innovations that companies like G4S, Serco, and Mitie have utilized for the last 15–20 years really, to provide detention centers, deportation contracts and to provide border enforcement all across the world.

**Sarah:** That makes sense, thank you. Now shifting from care to violence, throughout the book, you made the case of dispersal as both a form of distributed violence and, relatedly, as a form of slow violence and draw on [Rob] Nixon's (2011) work here. Your argument is that dispersal is less visible than the often more overt violence of immigration detention and deportation. Why is dispersal a different form of violence, and what makes it slow and distributed?

**Jonathan:** I think dispersal is a different form of violence because the violence of dispersal is less overt and less spectacular. So, if we think about the violence that we often associate with border enforcement and asylum systems, we can think about interjections and pushbacks. We can think about the abuse and harassment of detainees, and the very fact of indefinite detention and the mental health traumas that this produces, all of these things are overtly violent. But being forcibly placed in a part of the country that you have no connection to, in a context in which you are provided with no information and often in very poor housing conditions, while at the same time, going through an asylum system that is taking longer and longer to process people's claims, this in itself has a set of cumulative impacts on people. In the book, I document how people lived through dispersal, and one of the things that came through is this sense of people enduring challenging and violent conditions. Part of that is about the asylum system and the uncertainties of that undoubtedly, but being accommodated in poor living conditions, inadequate or inappropriate accommodation with constant problems to deal with, leaks, broken boilers, infestations of vermin, and at the same time, having accommodation providers not believe you when you complain about those things really comes to matter because it grinds people down, affects people's mental health, and it affects that sense of who they are. So that sense of a slow violence from Nixon (2011), which is about the distribution of violence across longer periods of time, I think we can see that in people's lived experience. And that violence is distributed, because it's not attributable to a single actor; it draws in lots of people who wouldn't necessarily want to be associated with that violence. Here, we can think of the Home Office setting in place policies that create this harm. Similarly, we can think about private contractors having a role, but dispersal also encompasses third sector organizations through forms of co-option, it involves local authorities who have various roles within the system, and it becomes hard for these organizations to disentangle themselves from their complicity in violence.

The last thing I want to say on why I think this slower, less spectacular form of violence matters is because it allows political statements to be made, which demonize those who are suffering that violence. If you're not recognizing that these conditions are harmful, then you don't recognize that complaints are legitimate. One of the things we've seen in the last couple of years is a rise in political rhetoric from the government and from various Home Secretaries saying "asylum seekers should not be complaining about their conditions" or that "conditions are good enough for our citizens," and the basis of that argument, and the sense that people are being ungrateful, is because you're not recognizing the harm that's being done, or perhaps more precisely, you're not recognizing it as a *legitimate* harm.

**Sarah:** I really liked your use of the term "debilitation of the discredited" to highlight some of this slower violence, and so I wondered if you could explain how you use that term in the book?

**Jonathan:** The notion of the discredited comes from [Michel] Feher (2020) and his account of how values are distributed within capitalist societies, in particular neoliberal societies, and how those societies are set up to value and judge certain types of economic competence and certain types of skills over others. He argues that within that context, to not have those forms of skills or not be seen to have the potential of those skills, means that the state no longer wants to invest in you. So the opposite side of investing in the good citizen is discrediting the bad citizen, or the non-citizen. I think in that context, part of what I was trying to argue is that if you marketize asylum, and you make it this site of profit making, the subjects of that system are often not going to be positioned as creditable productive economic subjects. Using Feher's (2020) term, they're going to be discredited. And so part of the way that that violence is operating is to debilitate those people, to grind them down, in the hope that they will leave—we can think here about

both the forced but also the voluntary (and voluntary is a very questionable term here) return of people and their choices to leave the UK. But the state also hopes that such people will just disappear and that as a state you won't have to continue to have a responsibility for them. So that's how I think that the notion of debilitating as grinding away, or trying to remove people's agency, links to the system overall.

**Sarah:** You make the case in the book that the fragmentation and, ultimately, the forced retreat of local authorities and the local state from the dispersal system is of public concern. Why is this?

**Jonathan:** I think the retreat of local government matters for three reasons. The first is because local government previously had a greater degree of oversight over accommodation standards. So if we think about housing legislation, housing regulations, inspections of accommodation, etc., these kinds of things are the areas that local governments used to manage, and still have responsibilities for, but after a decade of austerity, the state has been stripped back such that a lot of that has fallen by the wayside. It matters because this oversight is now lacking.

Secondly, it matters because—perhaps naively—I do believe in democracy as a political project! And I believe that local democracy is something [that] is important, and I think having the ability to engage with a local authority as a forum through which democratic decisions are made is important. Part of what happened with the outsourcing of asylum was the removal of dispersal from local authority oversight, and in doing so, removing it from local authority knowledge as well. There's been a pushback to this since the book was published, but for a period there was a sense of that lack of knowledge and engagement from many local authorities on asylum.

The third reason that the retreat of local government is important is because of recent tensions around the use of hotels to accommodate asylum seekers. We see this more generally around the vitriolic political context of asylum in the UK, which is that local authorities previously had a role in communicating and engaging with their citizenry in a way that the national state does not, and that a private contractor has no particular requirement to do. Previously with dispersal, while imperfect, there were efforts to use local authorities to communicate and engage with citizens. And part of the tensions we now see around hotels is a sense from communities that “we're not told; we're not informed about this.” That vacuum of information has been mobilized and used by far-right groups, and by those who wish to completely scale back any form of support for asylum, and one of the reasons for that vacuum is because local authorities have been shut out.

**Sarah:** In chapter 3 you trace the outsourcing of asylum and the history of dispersal and look at the relationship between private companies responsible for maintaining accommodation and the Home Office and local authorities. You argue that the cost of outsourcing goes “beyond the fiscal” (65). I wonder if you could expand a bit more on what you mean by the cost going beyond the fiscal?

**Jonathan:** Sure, again I'd highlight three things. The first, most obviously, is a massive human cost. Going back to the point earlier about different types of violence, that human cost is in some ways less obvious than the scandalous amount of money we spend on detention, the amount of money we're spending on Rwanda, and the cost in terms of lives lost in the Channel and in the Mediterranean. But that doesn't mean that dispersal does not have a human cost in terms of the number of suicides that we've seen in asylum accommodation that have increased during the period of outsourcing. And a human cost in terms of how this “debilitation of the discredited” is affecting people's mental health, it's affecting their physical health, and it's affecting their sense

of what future they may have were they to receive refugee status in the UK. At the moment, we have a relatively high refugee recognition rate. What that means is that this population are likely to receive refugee status and will have a right to stay in this country and go on to contribute in different ways. And yet we're placing them in a system [that] actively takes away their capacity to do any of those things positively.

There is also a cost to communities beyond those who are in the asylum system, so asking, "what are the fractures of communities that are produced through a lack of engagement, a lack of communication about dispersal, or a lack of addressing the rampant myths on asylum, perpetuated by the government." The relation between the Home Office, between outsourced provision, and the message that sends is that the asylum seeker market is not a state responsibility. And that message is highly divisive.

Finally, I think there is a moral cost. Liza Schuster (2011) makes this point on how societies are judged and how moral decay sets in through the ways in which vulnerable individuals are treated. I think that at best we could think about dispersal and these violences that are slow and distributed as creating a kind of indifference within the wider population, that actually this is something that citizens can afford to ignore. At worst, I think we see that indifference as a form of hostility, that asylum is something that "we" *shouldn't* care about.

**Sarah:** One of the things that I think comes through as a really clear theme in the book is *exhaustion as a form of government*. I think that's one of the main contributions of the book, and it extends beyond the asylum system. Why was it important for you to draw attention to exhaustion, and how did it come up as a theme in your research?

**Jonathan:** So, exhaustion wasn't something that I set out to explore. Initially, it was probably the theme of the book that came through the latest in terms of writing, and that was because it got to a point where I couldn't ignore it. As part of the research, I met various local authorities, organizations, people in the asylum system, people in the Home Office and so on, and I was struck by the constant sense of just how tired everyone was. I think it is important to foreground that exhaustion, and not to underestimate the effects of it because it has material effects for third sector organizations, by removing their capacity to think clearly and strategically about policy change, because they are constantly responding to emergencies.

And obviously, there's the exhaustion of the people in the asylum system that we've talked about in terms of that form of violence. I also think there's a kind of exhaustion in local authorities trying to get a grip on something that they've now been removed from, but who are also now facing pressure from their communities and constituents who expect them to have some kind of engagement with these issues, so there're all these different forms of exhaustion.

The other reason that I think it's important to highlight is because I think there's a tendency to divide off asylum and separate it from wider political and social issues. One of the things I was keen to try and do in the book was to say that dispersal is not this separate system of housing that is unrelated to the wider housing crisis in this country. Instead, we have to think about the connections, because by dividing these systems, what you do is you reinforce a far-right narrative that housing for asylum seekers is better than nothing, and that there's plenty of "British citizens" who also need housing. So rather than seeing that as a point of potential solidarity and a point of shared common questioning about the state's responsibilities to accommodate and support people, you actually use that as a dividing line to say, we need to focus on this group rather than this group.

Part of the point about exhaustion was also that it helps us to understand how the dispersal system is situated in relationship to much wider trends in neoliberal society. For example,

I think we have still not grasped, really, the full effect of austerity on this country in the last decade. The significant effect austerity has had on vast swathes of the state, what the state is able to provide, and what citizens expect from the state. I think that exhaustion comes from being constantly let down in your expectations and recalibrating those expectations to a lower level. That's part of what austerity has done to us as a society.

**Sarah:** Definitely. I also wanted to ask about how, in your wider work, you've often focused on the urban politics of asylum. I'd suggest that the urban is less prominent in *Systems of Suffering*. Could you talk more about that decision?

**Jonathan:** It's interesting that you ask that question, because I've really not reflected on it too much. I started out with the idea that this project was going to be quite urban focused as the book was based on a project called Producing Urban Asylum. As it turned out, the book is urban in the sense that dispersal at that time was a very urban system, with moves to expand dispersal more widely only coming about relatively recently. So the story that I initially thought I was going to tell was how do cities deal with dispersal, how do they deal with questions of asylum support and accommodation in a context of austerity and outsourcing?

Yet in reality, that story became less important as I was confronted with stories of local authority retreat, stories of third sector exhaustion, and the narratives of people who were living through these experiences. I think that there's a story to be told about the city, but for me it felt like there was less political urgency in that issue, and I've done some of that work elsewhere (Darling 2021). So, in that sense, the book was an opportunity to shift focus a little and to be more attentive to the forms of violence, exhaustion, and care that I saw patterning dispersal in different settings.

**Sarah:** This is not a small question, but I wanted to ask about the changes to immigration law and practice that have emerged since you wrote the book. Perhaps most notably we've seen the Illegal Migration Act of 2023, which is ostensibly not about dispersal but will impact the entire asylum system. So, what are the possible implications of this quickly changing legal landscape for the asylum dispersal system?

**Jonathan:** That is an enormous question! I will highlight a couple of things. I sort of hinted at some of the changes in the conclusion to the book and one thing is the continuation of private contracts up to 2029, and the fact that some of the tensions that we're seeing start to come in between local government and contractors. My story is about local government's retreat, and I think we have started to see a resurgence of local government, actually, and a recognition that they can't continue to ignore this issue, and that it's a false economy to think we'll just give this policy arena up to private providers, because the longer-term trajectory of this is that with high recognition rates, people will gain refugee status. Then the local state will have a responsibility, and if the local state hasn't intervened earlier in that process, they have no real engagement and oversight of this.

Other things that have produced tensions have been the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme, the Afghan Resettlement Scheme, and to a lesser extent Homes for Ukraine, in which local government have been given more prominent roles by central government. What that has produced is a recognition that there are alternative models that could be used here. These are not perfect, but they're certainly better than the outsourced privatized model that we currently have in dispersal. They highlight that thinking about alternative ways to do this is not some utopian, radical political project in the way that many members of the Conservative Party

would position it; it is actually a very realistic option that is already happening and being quite effective.

The second thing, of course, is the massive rise and accelerated use of hotels as forms of contingency accommodation. This emerged just before the COVID-19 pandemic and has continued as a result of the collapse of Home Office decision-making. This has produced a lot of media focus and attention around these kinds of issues, which has led government to shift direction away from the forms of community accommodation traditionally seen in dispersal, and into military institutions and barracks, like those at Napier, Manston, Scampton, and Wethersfield. One of the points I make right at the end of the book is that there is a move toward this camp-based model, which we've seen in other European countries. We were starting to see that at the end of the period I was writing, and so I made a plea when concluding the book to say that we really need to resist this move toward camps, because as problematic as community-based dispersal has been, where it works effectively it has been successful. By contrast, we don't see similar examples of segregated and militarized camps being successful.

The third development is that exhaustion has not gone away and has got significantly worse. Part of the reason it's got worse is because it is fostered by a context of political positioning and policymaking that is in complete overdrive over how you deal with what is effectively a broken asylum system that has been broken partly by the state, partly by austerity, and partly by a series of punitive policy decisions by politicians.

**Sarah:** Thank you. This has been brilliant. I've got loads more questions, but I wondered if I could end by asking what's next for you?

**Jonathan:** I've been doing some work on the process of hosting, and in particular, hosting people who are in the asylum system. I think there's been significant attention, quite rightly, on the Homes for Ukraine scheme, but the focus of the work I've been doing is more on hosting schemes for people who are at the end of the asylum system, partly because I want to tell a story about the longer history of hosting in the UK and how it extends back 20–30 years. I'm interested in trying to unpack the intimate politics of those hosting relationships. So, in some ways, I'm shifting scale. *Systems of Suffering* was going from the city and scaling up to a nationwide system. I'm now going the opposite way and thinking about everyday relationships and hospitality.

Then the other thing I'm trying to make sense of, and tentatively write something about, is the last few years of chaos. What does it mean for a government to produce policy that it knows is not effective? And that it has no intention of producing the effects it purports to want to produce. Of course, the challenge there is in trying to nail down a policy and political context that keeps shifting so rapidly but it feels to me politically important to try to do so.

---

■ **SARAH M. HUGHES** is a Political Geographer, working on asylum politics, resistance, citizenship and the politics of epistemology within the academy. Email: sarah.m.hughes@northumbria.ac.uk

---

■ **JONATHAN DARLING** is Professor of Human Geography at Durham University. His research focuses on the spatial politics of asylum, sanctuary and solidarity movements, and the urban dynamics of forced migration. Email: jonathan.m.darling@durham.ac.uk.

## ■ REFERENCES

- Darling, Jonathan. 2021. "Refugee Urbanism: Seeing Asylum 'Like a City.'" *Urban Geography* 42 (7): 894–914.
- Darling, Jonathan. 2022. *Systems of Suffering: Dispersal and the Denial of Asylum*. London: Pluto Press.
- Feher, Michel. 2020. "Disposing of the Discredited: A European Project." In *Mutant Neoliberalism: Market Rule and Political Rupture*, ed. William Callison and Zachery Manfredi, 146–176. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Nixon, Rob. 2011. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Boston: Harvard University Press.
- Schuster, Liza. 2011. "Turning Refugees into 'Illegal Migrants': Afghan Asylum Seekers in Europe." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 34 (8): 1392–1407.