



**Centre on Migration, Policy and Society**

**Working Paper No. 105  
University of Oxford, 2013**

**Frenzied, Decelerating and  
Suspended: the Temporal  
Uncertainties of Failed Asylum  
Seekers and Immigration Detainees**

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WP-13-105

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**Abstract**

Despite longstanding recognition that variations exist between people's understanding of time, and that time is central to the framing of social life and the management of bureaucratic systems, migration scholars continue to neglect the temporal dimension in their exploration of mobility. This article draws on ethnographic research conducted with undocumented immigrants and immigration detainees in the UK to consider how a recognition of time can provide insights into understanding mobility and experiences of being deportable. It argues that deportable migrants suffer from the instability and precarity created by living with a dual uncertainty of time, one that is simultaneously endless and unpredictable. It distinguishes between frenzied, indefinite and suspended temporal guises, as well as examining two sources of temporal uncertainty.

**Keywords:** immigration detention, asylum, uncertainty, time, temporal

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## **Introduction**

Immigration detainees and failed asylum seekers are subject to various temporal tensions. In part these are associated with cultural diversity, which anthropologists have long demonstrated engender variations in people's experiences and conceptualisations of time (Adam, 1994a; Fabian, 1983; Gell, 1992; Marcus, 1984). To a large extent however, temporal tensions arise from specific characteristics of the asylum and detention systems, including certain administrative procedures, chronic uncertainty and the systemic primacy of 'waiting'. Although time has been examined in relation to space (Lefebvre, 2004; Massey, 1992; 2003), it remains significantly under-theorised in relation to migration and mobility. This point was eloquently made by Saulo Cwerner over a decade ago (Cwerner, 2001) but remains the case today (Anderson, 2007; Griffiths et al., 2013)<sup>1</sup>. This paper seeks to reignite the debate and argue that an appreciation of time offers valuable insights into migration practices.

Drawing on the temporal experiences of undocumented migrants, asylum seekers and immigration detainees, the article will suggest that points of stress accentuate temporal variations and that time is a metaphor by which deportable migrants experience and describe the immigration system. Variations of tempo will be identified, as both a disjuncture existing between people (for example irregular migrants feeling outside the 'normal' time of mainstream society), and as a contradiction within individuals (e.g. detainees contending simultaneously with imminent and absent change). I argue that it is variations in experience of time that separates these precarious migrants from others who physically share the same space, including citizens and detention centre staff.

## **Context: Time and Migration**

Time is a challenging concept to discuss. It is at risk of meaning both too much and too little, and is simultaneously over-analysed and taken for granted (see Adam, 1994b). Various typologies of time have been developed in different disciplines, with (Adam, 1996; Nowotny, 1994) and a great deal has been written on whether time is linear or circular (Chambers, 1994; Zerubavel, 1981), absolute or relative (Gross, 1982), discrete or continuous (Hägerstrand, 1975; Hodges, 2008). Rather than seek definitions, theories or typologies of time however, this article approaches time broadly as a social phenomenon relating to questions of 'when', looking at how time is understood, discussed and negotiated in

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<sup>1</sup> An exception to this is literature on mobilities, which has begun to consider time alongside space (King et al., 2004; Urry, 2001).

practice. I work on the assumption that temporal variations not only differ between groups but that multiple temporal models coexist within societies, not only varying between individuals but also across contexts and life-courses (King et al., 2006).

The article draws on qualitative fieldwork conducted over 18 months in 2008-10 with migrants either living 'freely' in Oxford or detained at Campsfield House, an immigration removal centre (IRC) just outside the city. I spoke to over 300 individuals,<sup>2</sup> all of whom had at some point claimed refugee protection<sup>3</sup> in the UK and were therefore either asylum seekers or refused asylum seekers. The vast majority had been refused and were therefore liable to being deported<sup>4</sup> from the UK. Many of those in Oxford lived in a quasi-legal (or simply illegal) space and about half were in the 'legacy' backlog, an accumulation of several hundred thousand asylum cases that remained unresolved several years after the individual had first claimed asylum.<sup>5</sup> The majority had been effectively forgotten by the authorities, eking out an existence working illegally or relying on friends and charities for subsistence and accommodation.

In contrast, individuals in immigration detention are very much known by the authorities. Immigration detention involves depriving non-citizens of their liberty, holding them in a designated facility in order to realise an immigration-related goal, such as deportation (Silverman and Massa, 2012: 679). The incarceration of migrants has become a key aspect of immigration control in the UK and other countries (Schuster, 2005). Although in theory immigration detention is (usually) employed to facilitate a person's imminent removal from the country, various obstacles can delay or even prevent deportation. It is important to note that unlike most European countries, immigration detainees in the UK can be held indefinitely.<sup>6</sup> Whilst it is an administrative rather than punitive procedure, directly overseen by civil servants not the judiciary, IRCs share many similarities with prisons. As such it can

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<sup>2</sup> I spoke to about 160 asylum seekers in Oxford, from around 30 countries, with particularly high numbers of Iraqis, Afghans and Iranians. They were mostly single men aged between 16 and 30. I also spoke to around 160 immigration detainees at Campsfield. Although all male, they were extremely diverse and came from some 50 countries.

<sup>3</sup> The specific criteria by which individuals are recognised as refugees are established by the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. Under the 1951 Convention, a refugee is someone who: 'owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country'.

<sup>4</sup> Although there are administrative differences between 'deportation' and 'removal', for the purposes of this article I treat them as equivalents.

<sup>5</sup> 'Legacy' cases cover people who claimed asylum before March 2007 and have either never received a decision or to have been refused refugee status but not removed. In 2006 this backlog was estimated by the Home Office to consist of around 400-450,000 individuals (ICAR, 2009: 4).

<sup>6</sup> The UK opted out of Directive 2008/115/EC of the European Parliament and Council, which sets a maximum period of 18-months for the detention of migrants.

be considered part of a broader criminalisation of non-citizens (Banks, 2008; Bosworth and Guild, 2008).

Given the closed nature of IRCs, it was impossible for me to conduct 'normal' participant observation research. Like other anthropologists in this position (e.g. González, 2012), I used a variety of access points, including through volunteering with several asylum and detainee support NGOs as a means of obtaining first-hand experience of engaging with the asylum system and in order to obtain introduction to potential research participants. For two years I was also a paid asylum and immigration caseworker for an MP with an IRC in his constituency. This employment inevitably informs my understanding of the asylum and detention systems, although I do not directly draw on the experience for research material. In addition to talking to failed asylum seekers and immigration detainees, I conducted interviews with various people volunteering or working in the field, including two IRC managers.

All names and identifying information has been changed and great care was taken not to contribute to people's vulnerability or stress. Working with asylum seekers, irregular migrants or immigration detainees is extremely sensitive however, and although I followed guidance for working with refugees (Refugee Studies Centre, 2007), research in this arena inevitably remains beset with ethical and methodological challenges and requires researchers to display continual flexibility and sensitivity in their practices (see Duvell et al., 2010).

Although in many ways little linked my informants, other than all being outside their country of origin and having claimed asylum at some point, everyone spoke of being in a system that was characterised by uncertainty and instability (Griffiths, (forthcoming) 2013b). Whether physically segregated in Campsfield or living in the community, failed asylum seekers have precarious lives on the edge of mainstream society. Fears of dawn raids, detention and deportation contribute to a sense of insecurity, whilst the long legal processes often mean a substantial - but unknown - wait for an outcome. Those living in the community are prohibited from working and generally unable to access financial support, so struggle with poverty, debts and insecure accommodation in addition to stress relating to their precarious immigration status (Crawley et al., 2011; Lewis, 2009).

Immigration detainees often have little information about their situation and can be caught up in 'incidents' such as riots or fights. Although at the time of my research the

average length of stay at Campsfield alone was over a month,<sup>7</sup> some people were detained for much shorter or longer periods – from less than a day to nearly five years. They waited anxiously and apprehensively for removal, but knew that instead they might be suddenly released from detention or transferred to another IRC.

Time is inevitably bound up in the institutional routines and bureaucratic schedules (Edensor, 2006) that make up the immigration system. However, on a subjective level, time is also a salient means by which deportable migrants vocalise and conceptualise aspects of uncertainty connected to their immigration experiences. Despite the great cultural diversity of those involved, there are surprising similarities in how people use time to frame their experiences of the detention and asylum systems. In exploring this further, the article firstly considers different dimensions of temporal speed and then between facets of temporal uncertainty.

## **Tempos**

Given that migration is a phenomenon of both time and space, it is inevitably one relating to velocity. Speed is a contentious aspect of the immigration system. We often see conflicts between individual expectations of speed and the requirements and machinations of the bureaucracies of the immigration and judicial systems. There are also competing claims that the asylum system is both too fast and too slow – that the wheels of the system turn so slowly that people wait years for decisions, generating the massive ‘legacy’ backlog; but also that the asylum decisions are made too quickly, most evident in the asylum ‘fast track’ in which decisions are rushed through in a few days. This section considers this tension in more detail, teasing out a fast, frenzied time rushing out of control, from a long, slow sense of time, one that can decelerate into a suspended, stagnant time.

### ***Frenzied time***

The idea that life is accelerating has been debated in relation to various social phenomena, including capitalism (Tomlinson, 2007), new technologies (Eriksen, 2001; Hassan, 2005), globalisation and modernity (Bindé, 2000; Hassan, 2009; Scheuerman, 2009). In relation to mobility, acceleration is mostly associated with new transport technologies (Cwerner, 2009; Klein, 2004; Lash and Urry, 1994), and arguments that an increase in immigration is leading

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<sup>7</sup> In 2008, detainees were being held at Campsfield for an average of 46 days (HMCIP, 2008: 78). As people could be transferred between IRCs repeatedly, this figure does not reflect the average total length of time people were held in immigration detention.

to unsustainable levels of social change (Connolly, 2009). The policies and bureaucracy of migration undergo near-constant change and governments tend to consider speed a sign of success, including in terms of the rate of asylum decision making (Cwerner, 2004).

In addition to the physicality of mobility and the pace of change of the structures managing it, migrants themselves often speak of experiencing time in which change can happen suddenly and without warning. This is true across migration categories, and includes economic and education migrants, who face a small window of opportunity in which to find a new job or course if dismissed from their existing one before the conditions of their visas are invalidated.

Migrants without regular status however are particularly vulnerable to an unpleasantly quick time. Asylum and immigration decisions can be made very quickly, and those I knew in Oxford feared that a final asylum decision might arrive at any moment, or that they might suddenly be detained when reporting to the authorities, after a random ID check or during a 'dawn raid' at their home. Although most wait long periods as asylum seekers, some individuals (those deemed very unlikely to have successful asylum claims) are 'fast tracked', with asylum decisions made within days. Those refused refugee status have just days to lodge appeals and I have known people making a fresh asylum claim to receive a decision within a single day. Of course, rapid developments need not be negative and many hope that a letter providing refugee status might unexpectedly arrive one morning.

Deportations and removals almost always entail an accelerated sense of time, with a desperate panicked rush of trying to contact solicitors, MPs and friends and family. Individuals normally have just 72 hours' notice of their removal, and sometimes even less. Until the High Court ruled against the practice in 2010, the Home Office could, without any notice at all, remove suicidal and other vulnerable people from the UK, including unaccompanied children bound for another EU country (Webber, 2010). The short timeframes make challenging deportation difficult, especially when the notice period coincides with the weekend or public holidays. My experience of making such challenges as an MP's immigration caseworker was of frenzied drama, working weekends and into the early hours of the morning.

Detainees can also experience fast and unpredictable mobility between IRCs. Individuals are transferred between centres at short notice and without explanation, including sometimes several times within the same day (HMCIP, 2006: 16). A former detainee told me: 'They come two o'clock in the morning. Say "pack your stuff". You don't know where you

are going to, when you ask they say “you’ll find out when you arrive, not before”.’ Such frequent movement of detainees has been described as a way of dehumanising them as transitory and unimportant (Gill, 2009). Even release from immigration detention into the community can happen without warning, in some instances so quickly that the individual has no time to find accommodation.

All of this contributes to a fast, frenetic sense of time in which little can be anticipated and insecurity is rife, a condition Nicholas De Genova describes as ‘deportability’ (2002). People living with the threat of imminent removal describe being unable to plan for more than a few days ahead, a state made worse by the fact that removals are often unsuccessful and individuals can undergo several removal attempts before finally leaving the country, often being taken to the airport or even onto a plane before being returned to immigration detention once again. As one African detainee told me: ‘maybe tomorrow they will take me. You don’t know what tomorrow will hold for you’. An inability to imagine even the near future is profoundly disorientating and disempowering, confining people to living in the present. The system of rush and confusion also hinders others from providing support, from MPs and legal representatives having to make representations under great time pressure, to the difficulties of locating individuals when they are moved rapidly around the detention estate.

### ***Deceleration***

Alongside this frantic sense of time, failed asylum seekers and immigration detainees can also experience very little change, over long periods. In contrast to plethora of literature on the ‘acceleration’ of modern life, much less has been written on slowness, although there is some work on waiting and stillness (Bissell and Fuller, 2011; Corbridge, 2004). To some extent, slowness pervades all mobility, from the ever-lengthening naturalisation process, to the repeated ‘crises’ of long airport queues and the wasting of time through bureaucratic ‘red tape’. Slowness is particularly relevant however to certain forms of migration, including immigration detention.

Although immigration detainees are in the process of being removed from the country, various obstacles can substantially lengthen the process. As noted earlier, there is no time limit for immigration detention in the UK. This means that people can be held indefinitely (for more information see Phelps, 2009). I knew more than 20 men detained for over a year, with one man detained for almost five years (in two separate stints). For example, I



met a west African man who spent 15 months in prison, followed by over 34 months in detention, and a Kurdish man held in immigration detention for 29 months after being involved in a fight. An African failed asylum seeker who could not be removed because his nationality was disputed spoke of his sense of being forgotten in detention when he told me: 'I don't want them to dump me here, this is a *removal* centre! Not a place you can leave someone. It is for removal, for emergency' [his emphasis].

The asylum system itself is often a slow process, one beset with bureaucracy, applications, appeals and judicial hearings. The characterisation of the asylum process as a time of waiting and 'killing time' is not only true in the British context (see Kobelinsky, 2006 for discussion of the French context). Asylum decisions are often slow, taking many years in some cases.<sup>8</sup> Communication with the UK Border Agency (UKBA) can involve waiting months for a response to letters, if a response ever comes. Delays in communicating official decisions to applicants are not uncommon, including instances in which people only find out that they have refugee status months or even years after the decision. An African woman I knew for example found out she had been granted Humanitarian Protection (which is given for five years) six months after the decision was made.

People also wait months for court hearings to be scheduled, for the UKBA to enact judges' decisions, for appointments with embassies, for identity documents to be sent and for decisions to be made. I found that in both my NGO and MP caseworker roles I was continually having to tell people to wait a little longer, or passing on messages from the UKBA that the person needed to be patient and wait whilst the system worked its slow course.

Individuals whose asylum claims had been refused, who were in the legacy backlog or lived 'forgotten' in the community as undocumented migrants, spoke particularly evocatively about a sticky, slow time. Many had spent several years in the system, as was the case for a Kurdish man in the legacy backlog who told me: 'My case, it's been like stuck for six years. Six years! Six years with no answer!' A friend of his, Moussa, was a failed asylum seeker who had been in the UK eight years and spent each day standing on the pavement in east Oxford, simply trying to waste his excessive time. He told me he had nothing to look forward to and was living in parallel universe to the rest of society. He illustrated the stress of this to me by pointing to his receding hairline, saying: 'Look at my hair! No hair over just

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<sup>8</sup> Figures for the length of time people waited for asylum decisions are not available for the period of my fieldwork. In 2010 however, out of the 5,978 cases pending an initial asylum decision, 3,417 had been waiting for more than six months (Home Office, 2012: table as.01). In 2007, the New Asylum Model was introduced for managing asylum claims and the UKBA committed itself to meeting a series of asylum decision targets, culminating in the target of 90% of applications being decided within six months by December 2011. Although the targets were deemed unachievable (Independent Chief Inspector of the UK Border Agency, 2009: 12), and were eventually abandoned, anecdotally, the New Asylum Model does appear to have reduced average waiting times for asylum decisions.

one piece of paper. A piece of paper! Eight year wait too long.' Although many people in the legacy backlog finally received decisions during my fieldwork, the UKBA's target for resolving all cases by the summer of 2011 was not met and at the time of writing in March 2013, some of my acquaintances remain waiting as legacy cases.

In contrast to the rush associated with much of modern life, deportable individuals like Moussa have 'too much' time. Asylum seekers are rarely allowed to work and so have little to do to fill up this empty time. A handful of people I knew were even forbidden by the UKBA from engaging in voluntary work. In addition to the financial impact, this generates an enforced idleness in which people have little to do other than think, which they often considered as contributing to their stress. The chronic waiting of the unemployed has been noted in other contexts, in which people have little to do other than waste time as they wait indefinitely (Jeffrey, 2008; Jeffrey, 2010).

In a world of technology and information, where speed is fetishised, stillness and passivity tend to be considered detrimental (Bissell and Fuller, 2009; Bissell and Fuller, 2011) and waiting with patience is a skill that is often said to be in decline. Being made to wait is inextricably bound up in power relations and social hierarchies and is often associated with bureaucratic domination (Bourdieu, 1997). Whether migrants are forced to wait by smugglers *en route* or by the UKBA in country, the imposition of waiting, always with a glimmer of hope for eventual change, is part of the technique of control that sustains the marginality and compliance of undocumented migrants.

Waiting need not *always* be a negative or empty experience however. Harold Schweizer argues that waiting can be a productive space rather than just dead time (Schweizer, 2008). Giovanni Gasparini distinguishes between three types of waiting: as blockage of action, as an experience filled with substitute meanings, and as a meaningful experience (Gasparini, 1995). Deportable migrants engage in a variety of 'types' of waiting. Those in Oxford tended to hold onto the hope that there was purpose to their waiting, even if the outcomes were unpredictable and distant. The administrative creation of the legacy backlog and the accompanying Case Resolution process helped sustain the hope that waiting might result in a positive outcome. There was an (incorrect) belief by many in Oxford that there was some order to the applications, some paper-based 'queue' at the UKBA to which new arrivals joined the end of. People often expressed resentment when others received decisions 'out of turn' without having to wait long. Linked to this, people often had the sense that there was merit in waiting meekly and that displaying impatience would anger bureaucrats and

result in negative decisions. For example, people often asked me to ring the UKBA on their behalf, only to change their minds at the last minute, afraid that this would invoke retaliatory refusals.

### ***Suspended time***

In contrast to this slow, waiting time, and perhaps indicative of why immigration detention can be so destructive, detainees tend to see no point in their waiting – no sense of productivity, no sense of fairness, no sense of progression. This was an irrational, meaningless and endless time, more a suspension without change, than a queue-like waiting for a goal. Time is often imagined to exist on a trajectory, progressive even if at times chaotic. And yet some deportable migrants experience a suspension, a timeless present whilst the world around them continues forward.

In the past some anthropologists have suggested that there are cultures in which people perceive only of a static, timeless present (for example, Clifford Geertz's work on Bali (Munn, 1992)). I do not wish to suggest that my informants experienced time in a fundamentally different way from myself and I am not suggesting that my informants felt that time had literally stopped. But nonetheless, a non-cumulative stasis can be a powerful - but not exclusive - model by which many people experience and explain time in the asylum system.

There is no maximum length to immigration detention, meaning that it really can be indefinite. Long term detainees frequently speak of their lives as having stopped, with comments such as: 'I've been [in detention] nearly three years. Every day is the same' (an African detainee at Campsfield), or: 'My life, it's no stopped, but something like' (a Moroccan detainee). The experience of slow waiting time has been explored in relation to prisons (Wilson, 2004), including work demonstrating that for prisoners time can become a source of suffering in its own right (Medlicott, 1999).

In addition to sticking, the time of immigration detention does not always appear to be linear. There is significant variability in the lengths of time detainees are detained for before a judge decides they have been detained 'too long' and grants bail (White, 2012: 3). In fact, it is not even the case that if detainees wait long enough their detention will definitely become 'too long'. In a memorable case, a long-term detainee I knew had multiple bail applications refused on various technical grounds, only to have his eighth application refused on the basis that he had by now been detained for so long that he was deemed too likely to abscond for the authorities to risk releasing him. Stasis was also voiced by failed asylum seekers living in Oxford, with comments such as 'I'm stuck! I'm just stuck!' Reza, an Algerian man in Oxford told me

in detail about the many years he waited for a decision to his asylum claim: 'That wasn't any progress in there, just that was passing your life... Four years, going [no]where', going on to say: 'Nothing change for last two year. I just lost my time. And I *know*, if I stay here for next two years again, just doing the same, is nothing is going to happen' [his emphasis].

The disjuncture between their own temporal stasis with the seemingly progressive time of those around them, was often the means by which deportable migrants illustrated feeling 'abnormal'. For example, Moussa, introduced above, discussed his 'excessive' time as marginalising him: 'I keep thinking, thinking, thinking, when, when, when? When I going to get papers? I want to be like you. I want to be normal.' Moussa told me of a period in which he slept on a friend's floor and became a recluse. He only realised how much time had passed when he finally left the house and was shocked to see strong sunlight and that the trees, which he had last seen during wintertime, already had leaves on them.

Although Moussa's days were not differentiated into week days and weekends (my naïve questioning about what he was doing one weekend was met with incomprehension), and his waking hours slipped into semi-nocturnal ones (he slept from 4am until the early afternoon), by standing on the pavement each day, watching people rush by, Moussa was attempting to share the same space as mainstream society, if not their time. Echoing others, Moussa spoke of his unproductive time as a source of shame or oppression, telling me that his life was an endless present and that he was unable to plan or believe in a future.

Like others, Moussa associated his 'stopped' time with a lack of social or personal progress. This was often voiced in terms of being unable to be productive or start a family. The forced idleness of failed asylum seekers, born in large part from prohibitions against employment, is particularly difficult for the younger individuals, with one Afghan man telling me the eight years he waited in Oxford were 'a waste of the best years of my life'. Many deportable individuals feel unable to achieve social goals such as marriage or starting a family. This was highlighted by an African man stuck in lengthy detention who told me: 'I'm 27 right now. I need to carry on with my life. Have a family, have a career. Move on.' He found his stasis particularly painful when he saw other detainees get released from detention and continue with their lives.

Several Kurdish informants told me that because they were not fathers or husbands, they remained boys rather than men, despite the passing of years and their growing age. Their suspension from 'normal' aging and social progression was highlighted when younger brothers in Iraq married out of 'order'. This links to a general infantilisation of detainees and asylum seekers, including by well-meaning NGOs (Griffiths, (forthcoming) 2013a). Those individuals still in contact with families in their country of origin, there was often considerable pressure to abandon the legacy wait in order to return home and 'normal' life developments.

Crossing international borders has been described in relation to the concept of liminality (Donnan and Wilson, 1999; Salter, 2005; Wilson and Donnan, 1998). I would suggest that temporal suspension could also usefully be considered as a limbo – a space between firm legal categories, rights and countries, without access to work, education or marriage. Even an independent monitor of Campsfield described unremovable detainees as being ‘stuck’ to me, saying: ‘They’re in a state of limbo’.

The waiting of asylum seekers has been described as dead time; suspended or alienated time outside individual control (Kobelinsky, 2006). It is this different, pointless time that entrenches alterity, making failed asylum seekers and detainees fundamentally different from the busy people around them. Arnold Van Gennep and Victor Turner described liminality as being between categories (Turner, 1967; van Gennep, 1977), a position in which people are tainted with danger, pollution or illegality (Douglas, 1969). It is also a transformative space and by employing the concept of liminality we can not only examine the stasis of living in a deportable limbo, but the potential of transmutation proffered by this abnormal state.

### **Temporal uncertainties**

The previous section considered three *tempos* pertinent to the lives of deportable migrants. For some people, particularly the most insecure, these different states of time exist simultaneously, producing a sense of time that is particularly uncertain and untrusted. Research on uncertainty often portrays dramatic social and political upheaval, in which lives are made nonsensical as a result of profound change over short time periods. I have argued that the lives of failed asylum seekers and detainees are chaotic due as much to little change, over very long periods of time, as rapid change without warning. Not only do these different temporal experiences exist simultaneously and in tension for individuals, but the lack of predictable time frames or knowable futures produces particular temporal uncertainty, as shall be addressed now.

### ***Temporal ruptures***<sup>9</sup>

Whether held in detention, or living in the community, failed asylum seekers are vulnerable to dramatic and sudden change that brings significant dislocation of temporal (and geographical) expectations. Involuntary mobility, such as deportation, or unwelcome decisions on one’s immigration applications have the potential to dramatically override and

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<sup>9</sup> Thanks to Dr Bridget Anderson and Dr Ali Rogers for conversations that contributed to this section.

alter the temporal patterns and expectations of individuals. For example, refused asylum seekers are vulnerable to 'dawn raids' at their homes, in which they are woken abruptly by a team of immigration officers in the early hours of the morning in order to be detained. Unlike prisoners, immigration detainees do not know which country they will end up in when they leave detention – whether they will be released back to British society or removed from the country.

The 'cruel power' of removal or deportation (c.f. Gibney, 2008) produces a particularly acute temporal rupture, one that dramatically alters the individual's future. Because the future is not just suspended and out of reach, but utterly unknown, it is extremely difficult for people to plan. Detainees tend to be so distraught at the idea of being forcibly deported that they are unable or unwilling to consider contingency plans for that possibility. The 'temporal tear' of removal is especially felt when removals – as often happens – are unsuccessful, be it as a result of last minute political or legal interventions, bureaucratic problems or complaints from other passengers. These lead to multiple removal attempts and require the individual to repeatedly experience the great uncertainty and temporal disruption of deportation, with the associated farewells to the past/present and envisaging of a new, and often unwanted or intensely feared future.

Temporal discontinuity, such as deportation, tends to be experienced as highly distressing and disruptive. However, temporal change is not *necessarily* negative. Indeed, some argue it is integral to lived experience and expectations of the future (Game, 1997). For example, the idea of positive breaks from the past is found in religious narratives of rebirth, or in significant political change. Likewise, sudden changes in a migrant's temporal expectations might result from a successful appeal, rather than arrest or deportation. Migrating itself can be an act of agency actively employed in order break stasis and generate change (see Cole, 2010; Mains, 2007). However, when out of one's control, dramatic reconfigurations of one's immediate and long term future tends to be experienced as profoundly distressing.

### ***The indefinite***

A sense of temporal uncertainty is also associated with the uncertainty of time frames. However difficult it is for people to wait for many years for progress or alternatively to cope with rapid change, it is made much harder when they do not know which will characterise their experiences. An Iraqi man in Oxford waiting in the legacy backlog

illustrated this well when he complained to me: 'I'm sure I can wait, like if they say, for example: "2011, OK, we say no." OK that's fine. I know the day is coming, they going to answer now. But they don't say anything like this, you know. Just waiting. Waiting.' Moussa echoed this man's concern over a lack of temporal limits when he described having to 'wait, maybe two weeks, maybe two years wait. Just wait'.

Although true for all immigration decisions, uncertainty around time frames is particularly meaningful in relation to immigration detention and underlies one of the most significant differences between detention and prison. Both prisoners and detainees are incarcerated against their will, often for significant lengths of time and both experience impacts on their sense of time, such as an extended present and distorted sense of both the past and future (Brown, 1998). However, prison and immigration detention differ profoundly on temporal terms and I would argue that it is this dimension of time that makes immigration detainees less fortunate than even the very longest term prisoners.

Unlike prisoners, immigration detainees do not have the luxury of a sentence. This was explicitly raised by a number of detainees who had also experienced prison, including this Eritrean man: 'They could keep me another 10 months, I don't know. Or they could release me, I don't know... Prison I know what I was doing, you know the release date.'<sup>10</sup> Immigration detainees have no advance warning about how long they will be held. Without a time frame, what might end up as an extremely long wait is experienced as a long series of separate days, each of which could bring profound and unwanted change. So, detainees constantly anticipate imminent removal, transfer or release, even if they end up doing so for months or years. And without a maximum threshold or a date of release, the waiting of immigration detention has no cumulative purpose. There is no goal that one is working towards or end point that the time is ticking down. It is more a sense of having been forgotten until a distant civil servant happens to look at one's file.

Such issues have serious practical implications, not least because high levels of depression and trauma characteristic of asylum seekers have been linked with the indefinite and yet temporary nature of the asylum process (Mansouri and Cauchi, 2007). Without any idea how long they would have to wait, they struggled to imagine a future, plan or invest in themselves. As illustration, a Zimbabwean asylum seeker told me: 'I don't have a future... I don't know what tomorrow holds', and an Iranian man in Oxford said: 'Because nothing is

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<sup>10</sup> Some scholars have also claimed that detention is more harmful than prison because of the perpetual threat of deportation and the uncertainty of being held without a sentence (e.g. Pirouet, 2001: 95).

certain. You don't have any base to build on. You don't know where you going to be next year. Are you going to be here next year or not?' Strikingly, detainees often told me that they were reluctant to join activities at Campsfield or contact support NGOs because they did not know where they would be the following week – a surprising concern for someone in incarceration.

### **Policy implications**

Although the article has focused on negative temporal experiences of the asylum and detention systems, there are instances in which people 'coped' or even managed relatively well. Amongst the asylum seekers and legacy cases in Oxford, some young men carved out a space of suspended reality in which they enjoyed student-like freedoms; waking late, drinking, clubbing and having girlfriends. For these people, in addition to the uncertainty and lack of progress, stasis and suspension was *also* a liberating time outside of familial, religious and social expectations and controls. Unable to plan their futures, some could embrace the present and lived in a limbo that offered opportunities to enjoy freedoms otherwise circumscribed. They were outside the 'normality' of both 'home' and British societies, cocooned in a stasis and without the means to achieve anticipated social goals.

Reza's experience illustrates this well. He described his years waiting as an asylum seeker as a 'jail', but recognised that they were *also* freeing: 'when I live with the people who were in-between, before they get their permission and thing, they do what they like! Because nobody expect anything of them. They are not British, they are not Iranian, they are no belonging to anywhere, any community. They are in-between. They just do what they want.'

This is a complex and contradictory arena. Although on multiple levels excessive and suspended time is intensely harmful, under certain conditions temporal liminality can have the potential to offer freedoms and transformative *rites de passage*. This is only so for people with outside support and who do not fear potential removal, those who have NGOs, diasporas or families to help them and who do not have partners or children relying on them to be successful. NGOs could seek to provide support necessary for individuals to explore these fragile 'positives' of limbo. Perhaps more usefully however, NGOs could encourage and support individuals to take control of their own time, in order to transform it from a space of suspension to one of productivity, in which the waiting for decisions and outcomes is an aspect of their lives rather than the entire framework for them. This would



entail reconceptualising the present as meaningful time in itself, rather than simply a time of stasis or waiting. Ultimately, enormous temporal structure and progression would be provided if policy makers routinely permitted asylum seekers to work.

The picture is far bleaker for immigration detainees. Out of the some 160 detainees I spoke to, I knew just one person that did more than simply survive detention. This man, Tao, recognised that detention offered him one thing that he had not previously had much of and was unlikely to have in abundance again. Immigration detention offered Tao a lot of time. Tao consciously decided to imagine Campsfield as a boarding school and to explicitly utilise the 'gift' of time that he had been given. He used it to give up smoking, to improve his fitness and to informally translate between the officers and other detainees, in order to develop skills that might one day help him find employment. He also invested in social relationships with other detainees and developed contacts that might help him after he was removed. His strategy worked and not only was Tao able to maintain a positive outlook during his – long – detention, but the social network he had established enabled him to find accommodation and eventually a job after he was removed.

Time can be considered a resource, a commodity that one can have too much or too little of. Although many detainees have excessive time, the dual temporal uncertainty and great anxiety most have around removal, mean that few are able to conceptualise time as a resource. Tao was able to because he was in a (relatively) fortunate position as a result of not fighting his deportation and furthermore knowing that disputes between the UKBA and his embassy meant that he was unlikely to be deported quickly or without warning.

Immigration detention is a very difficult arena to work in and detainees tend to be extremely distressed (Bosworth and Kellezi, 2013; Robjant et al., 2009). It is often difficult to know how to help other than listen to individuals, lobby MPs and provide information. Those seeking to support detainees however might also consider helping individuals reappropriate their time. This might involve advising detainees to form routines, in order to provide structure and 'sense' to the days, or encouraging them to develop plans in order to conceptualise and feel some control over the future, even if they only felt able to do so for a matter of a few days ahead.

Ultimately however, transparent and reasonable time frames need to be brought into the asylum and immigration detention systems. For example, the introduction of maximum timeframes for detention, as is the case in most EU countries, and assurances that individuals will never be removed without an appropriately sized period of notice, would go

some way to lessen the dual temporal uncertainty that proves to be quite so harmful. This is a significantly different suggestion than advocating for quicker decision making and deportation processes, so as to avoid long term detention or years spent waiting for asylum decisions. The risk of an emphasis on speed and accompanying targets is that decisions are rushed, skewed or that the more 'difficult', time-consuming asylum decisions are side-lined in favour of those that can be resolved quickly.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the paucity of research in this area, an appreciation of temporality offers insights into various facets of mobility and migration. This article drew on Cwerner's suggestion that time is implicit but paramount to understanding migration, to consider how the temporal dimension provides insight into migrants' own experiences of the immigration system. Whilst trying to avoid exoticising deportable migrants, I have argued that their experiences of time differentiated them from others around them. This was most evident when their temporalities collided with others.

Examples of this include immigration detainees, who felt the pressure of each long hour in detention, speaking of the 'torture' of waiting weeks for correspondence from slow bureaucrats with busy workloads. Or Campsfield officers returning from maternity leave, who were surprised to see familiar faces amongst the supposedly transient population of detainees. Or when those in the legacy wait saw their friends suddenly progress rapidly with their lives once they received leave to remain in the UK and could leave the temporal suspension of the legacy backlog. Reza eloquently highlighted the temporal difference between us when he said 'you know four years for you here, is four years. Four years here for me, is maybe eight years, maybe ten year. Because of different way of thinking, different way of life, different hardship in your life, different problem.'

The article has argued that a prime source of anguish of the asylum and immigration detention systems is not only the absence of a time frame for decision making and detention, but a *dual* temporal uncertainty. People wait for long periods of time, longing for an end to the waiting, but fearful of the change it might bring. This creates an unenviable dilemma in which people both desire and fear time speeding up and slowing down, leading some to back down from pressing for change, afraid of what kind of change intervention might bring. By being detained indefinitely, without knowing how long for and with the continuous possibility of release or removal, detainees worry both that detention will

continue forever and that it will end in deportation without warning the next morning. It is this simultaneous fear of sudden change and never-ending stasis that I mean by a dual uncertainty of time. A profoundly uncertain time, with the threat of sudden, disrupting events extending across long, indefinite stretches of time.

It is the lack of temporal predictability that prevents deportable individuals not only from being able to plan for the future, but from having the 'stability' of knowing that the present will remain uncertain. High levels of depression and trauma amongst asylum seekers have been linked with the indefinite and yet temporary nature of the asylum process (Mansouri and Cauchi, 2007), and psychologists have demonstrated that experiencing time as passing slowly is linked with suffering (Flaherty et al., 2005). In the case of asylum and immigration detention then, the slowness and uncertainty that are a feature of many bureaucracies, are highly exaggerated, becoming a source of anguish and tool of governmentality (c.f. Foucault) in their own right. In other words, temporal uncertainty is in itself a technique of power, one that keeps deportable migrants in a passive state of continual transience and uncertainty.

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