

Comment Piece

COVID-19 and the (Extra)ordinariness of Crisis: Lessons from Homeless Migrants

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The 16th of March 2020 signalled an abrupt rupture in the rhythms of ordinary life. In the months that have passed since the UK first went into lockdown individuals, families and communities across the country have struggled to remake life in the impasse, navigating the discomfiting and unfamiliar feeling of life being suddenly suspended, unpredictable, and precarious. COVID-19 has imbued everyday life with the visceral experience of crisis, a heightened sense of risk to life itself which the seams of the normal cannot hold. It is precisely this 'unusual' sense of precarity and of unpredictability, and its juxtaposition to the security and knowability of the ordinary, that renders COVID-19 a crisis event. Put simply, the crisis lies in the *extraordinariness* of it all.

Yet, scholars working across feminist theory, queer theory and necropolitics (Berlant, 2011; Butler, 2006; Mayblin et al., 2019; Mbembe, 2019; Puar, 2017) have increasingly problematised understandings of crises as staccato, temporary, abnormal and spectacular moments of disjuncture from the everyday. Such work has shifted focus away from privileged experiences of time and of ab/normality, showing how thinking from the positions of marginalised individuals and communities underscores that the everyday itself can be a site of crisis – of perpetual *crisis as normal* (Berlant, 2011). For migrants experiencing homelessness in the UK, I argue, life is always already lived as precarious, unpredictable and suspended. Indeed, in the context of a UK immigration apparatus that is increasingly hostile towards them (JCWI, 2020a; Richmond-Bishop & Bailey, 2020), everyday life for homeless migrants *is always already a threat to life itself*. How, then, might our conceptualisations of COVID-19 as a crisis work to illuminate these realities, both intellectually and politically?

THE HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT & UN/BEARABLE LIFE

Current data as to the number of migrants experiencing homelessness in the UK is both incomplete and unreliable. In part, this is a consequence of the inability of many homeless migrants to access statutory support.¹ In 2012, then Home Secretary Theresa May announced the UK (Conservative)² government's plan to solve the

¹ Whilst the scope of this paper is limited, it is crucial to note that the category of 'homeless migrants' cannot sufficiently bear the multiple experiences of migrancy and homelessness in the UK. Here, a brief introduction to the state's 'Hostile Environment' policies and their impact on non-EEA and EEA migrants provides an initial, if incomplete, in-road into understanding the scale of the crisis already shaping homeless migrant lives at the point of the pandemic.

² It is important to note that whilst this was the first systematic implementation of a 'Hostile Environment' strategy, the concept had already been introduced in May 2007 by then New Labour Immigration Minister Liam Byrne (Travis, 2007).

'problem' of immigration by explicitly encouraging the unbearability of life in the UK for migrants; stating: 'The aim is to create, here in Britain, a really hostile environment for illegal immigrants' (JCWI, 2020a). Whilst the state claimed to be targeting 'illegal' immigrants, the Hostile Environment's reach has stretched far beyond that scope, with subsequent government policies broadening each year the number of migrants ineligible for statutory support. Today, all migrants from non-EEA countries who have not secured Indefinite Right to Remain in the UK are subject to what is known as a No Recourse to Public Funds, or NRPF, condition (Migration Observatory, 2020). The NRPF condition effectively forecloses access to welfare support, including Universal Credit (under which housing and jobseekers' benefits are now managed), and even admission to refuges for women fleeing abuse (JCWI, 2020b). For EEA migrants, the politics of in/eligibility is more complex, but from December 2013 the state has implemented various measures with the explicit goal of restricting EEA access to the welfare state (DWP, 2016). For example, whilst EEA migrants in employment are technically able to access the benefits system, the requirement to pass a 'Habitual Residence Test' and to provide proof of tax and National Insurance contributions (note that migrants are more likely to be coerced into uncontracted and exploitative forms of labour) forms an immense barrier that has been amplified further by the recent shift to Universal Credit (Boobis et al., 2019). After Brexit, these barriers are set to increase, leaving many more individuals subject to NRPF conditions.

Tellingly, 67% of the UK homelessness/immigration organisations surveyed by *Crisis* stated that migrant homelessness had risen between 2018 and 2019 (Boobis et al., 2019: 7). Research in London showed that in 2019 around *half* of the capital city's population of rough sleepers were non-UK nationals (ibid.: 21). That non-UK nationals make up around *one tenth* of the British population throws into stark relief the particular vulnerability of migrants to homelessness in contemporary Britain. In cutting off migrants from the support systems they need to survive, the state necessarily produces a racialised politics of precarity, which exposes migrants to harm in ways disproportionate to those constructed as 'natives'. Yet, homelessness also makes resolving one's immigration status – that is organising documentation, keeping track of appointments, and seeking necessary legal advice – extremely difficult (ibid.: 17). Indeed, homelessness organisations across the UK are increasingly challenged by the lack of options available to them in supporting migrants out of homelessness, just as the number of migrants approaching their services increases year-on-year (ibid.: 38). Finally, that Home Office decision-making processes are often excruciatingly long – taking years rather than months (ibid.: 42) – exacerbates the normalisation of crisis in the lives of homeless migrants.

Hostile Environment policies have and continue to mark migrant populations for harm, exposing increasing numbers of migrants to long term homelessness and destitution. In denying access to multiple forms of support, these policies directly target the viability of life in the UK, with the aim of discouraging settled and thriving futures for migrants. Indeed, in May 2020 the High Court found the rigidity of NRPF to be in contravention of Article 3 of the Human Rights Act, namely the prohibition of inhuman or degrading treatment (Shelter Blog, 2020; see also EHRC, 2018). The 'everyday', then, becomes a site of power through which the state manages 'difference', leaving particular individuals vulnerable to crisis in ways that exhaust their capacities to remake life – or even, to *bear* life, in Britain. It is this exhaustion that renders the Hostile Environment a mechanism for 'slow death' – a concept that Lauren Berlant offers for interrogating how the condition of being 'worn out by the activity of life-building' (2011: 44) functions to mark non-normative populations for death through the more subtle and insidious modes of violence which have categorised neoliberal modernity. Indeed, these connections between immigration policy, migrant precarity and population management have been made even more explicit in the government's recent announcement that rough sleeping may soon be considered *grounds for deportation* for some migrants (Grierson, 2020).

FAST DEATH/SLOW DEATH: COVID-19 & THE HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT

So what is at stake for homeless migrants in constructions of 'crisis' as extra/ordinary? In March 2020, at the beginning of 'lockdown', the British government announced the *Everyone In* scheme, which has housed around 29,000 rough sleepers³ in emergency accommodation with the expressed aim of 'protecting some of the most vulnerable people in society from COVID-19' (Gov.uk, 2020). Yet, what this rhetoric of 'protecting' homeless individuals' obscures are the very policies that made those individuals' lives so precarious in the first place, particularly rough sleepers who are also migrants. Letting this go uninterrogated risks our own complicity in the normalisation of suffering prior to COVID-19, and also leaves unquestioned what might happen to marginalised communities 'after' the pandemic has ended. Indeed, thinking of crisis as a complex continuum of experience that 'unfolds' through the ordinary (Berlant, 2011: 10) destabilises the very utility of 'pre', 'during' and 'post' crisis as a temporal taxonomy.

³ This figure also includes some individuals who were being sheltered on a night-by-night basis in hostels, church halls and other venues where isolation was not possible.

Whilst *Everyone In* may be protecting homeless migrants from the immediate death threat of COVID-19 – and in temporarily suspending eligibility criteria for statutory support might even constitute a moment of relief from the ‘crisis ordinary’ (Berlant, 2011: 9) I have described thus far - the extraordinariness of the scheme maintains the status quo that permits the everyday to be a site of slow death, maintained and experienced through the racialised management of access to statutory support, and invisibilised through its very normalisation. Clearly, academic engagement with ‘crisis’ will continue to proliferate as a result of COVID-19, but neglecting to think critically about the assumptions upon which our common-sense (privileged) understandings of crisis rest risks inadvertently obscuring – or even underwriting - state infra/structures of violence. Instead, thinking COVID-19 from the seldom thought positions of those most marginalised in our communities will illuminate the ways that the pandemic crisis is not a break in the normal but rather, as Berlant suggests, ‘an amplification of something [already] in the works’ (ibid.: 10). This is crucial for assuring that our intellectual work remains politically vigilant. More specifically, for homeless migrants this will ensure that combatting the fatal force of COVID-19 does not leave unquestioned the slower risks to life itself that so many face in these hostile times.

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