

Review of: "Forget the cake: let them work. Conflicting narratives towards work, health and the plight of asylum seekers in the UK"

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This paper addresses the intersection of asylum and work policies in the UK, and is a valuable addition to the growing body of literature focusing on multiply-disenfranchised people with intersecting vulnerabilities that are compounded by their state laws. It explores the ways that asylum policies lock asylum seekers into positions of financial and social disadvantage that undermines their ability to assimilate and participate in their new communities.

Although this paper offers excellent deep-dives in key areas of policy, both in the history of labor policies and expectations and in immigration, it would benefit from several clarifications throughout:

Firstly, it would benefit from a clear identification of who asylum seekers are, and what asylum seeking entails, delineating how it differs from economic migration and refugee resettlement through the UN or other international organization. It would be valuable to, early on, describe what the key, defining aspects or experiences are that allow someone to seek asylum, to set the stage for the later discussion of physical and mental health needs that could impact the desire and ability to work. The author excellently notes parts of the timeline for asylum seekers seeking status, from entry on, but a brief discussion of pre and perimigrational timelines, from events that necessitated asylum seeking, through leaving the country of origin, to entry, would help to contextualizing this end of the journey in years, and locations, to better highlight the financial, legal, and social limbo that asylum seekers find themselves in, and to underscore the concerns for their right, need, or expectations to work.

Second, it could also be valuable to explain the rights of asylum seekers, and the obligations that the UK has to asylums seekers, enshrined in national and international law, since claiming the right to asylum is a key difference in delineating asylum seekers from other migrating people, and sets a particular path for them. This is somewhat addressed on page 4, but an earlier, clearer explanation would help clear up ambiguities and over-generalizations when talking about immigrants in general, versus people who are seeking asylum.

I particularly appreciated the explanation of the dichotomy between “strivers” and “skivers,” although you may want to

define “skiving” for a non-UK audience. As well, there may be more to explore in this section, about who is seen as worthy, and which efforts are legitimized as “good immigrant” and which are vilified as “bad immigrant.” This section could also fit into your section describing economic migrants, and the political narratives (and racial undertones) of conversations about immigration, industriousness, and scapegoating migrating people as lazy. The examples used, about Polish plumbers, or Lithuanian meatpackers, reflects on conversations about economic migrants, rather than asylum seekers, so more apt examples might fit with the larger argument more congruently.

The section on page 4, which deep-dives into hotels and health care is not as clearly connected to the larger argument about work; it could be valuable to revisit the intent with this section, and make sure it is adding to your larger argument about work.

The first paragraph on page 5, which talks about the various skills and professions and “enforced idleness” is very poignant, and starkly illustrates the frustrating situation in which asylum seekers may find themselves. This section could be enlarged upon, with data or statistics about which professions are represented among people seeking asylum, or what skills they offer but are not able to use.

Ultimately, this paper covers a lot of areas with clear eloquence and passion, each salient to the sphere of immigration, but at times not clearly connected together to support where the argument is going – or what the larger argument even is. In particular, the two narratives about work brought up on the 6th page should be mentioned earlier, with the later paragraphs illustrating and enumerating these narratives. Without that, it is unclear whether the argument being made is about a right to work, limitations on work, being forced to work, or the inadequacy of work opportunities. There needs to be a clearer theoretical thread tying all of this together.

Increased citations would be helpful throughout as well, to support the argument and substantiate your points with additional information. While the use of quotes and references to Hemmingway, Sinclair, and Marie Antoinette(?) are amusing, they often distract, rather than clarify the ideas that the author seems to be putting together.