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New and enduring narratives of vulnerability: Rethinking stories about the figure of the refugee

Abstract

The role of vulnerability in relation to mechanisms of governance and social welfare practices has received growing interest, but how 'vulnerability' is operationalised in asylum policy is less well understood. This paper explores narratives of vulnerability in relation to the figure of the refugee. Taking a narrative approach to stories told about refugees across Europe, it puts forward the argument that access to asylum has gradually moved away from spontaneous asylum seeking to more controlled routes in the UK. This transition has increasingly drawn on the notion of vulnerability to highlight distinctions between people who deserve protection and those who do not. In particular, this paper focuses on the ways in which the UK Syrian Vulnerable Person's Resettlement Programme is underpinned by stories of 'the vulnerable' and exemplifies the latest hierarchy of rights and entitlements to emerge in relation to the figure of the refugee. It also offers insight into some of the ways in which asylum policies create the conditions where vulnerabilities are generated and produced. As such, this paper brings a critical perspective to the state increasingly narrowing the protection space for refugees and redefining 'the vulnerable' as an essential marker of asylum policy.

Keywords

Refugee, vulnerability, (un)deservingness, narrative, United Kingdom, Europe

Introduction

“... [the] focus on those believed to be the so-called most vulnerable reveals that all our models inevitably exclude as they include,” (Anderson, 2013a).

“The Government has stopped accepting disabled child refugees fleeing war in Syria and other countries because it says it cannot cope with their needs” (Independent, February 9 2017).

This article is concerned with new and enduring ‘narratives of vulnerability’ in relation to the figure of the refugee. Our interest arises from concerns about recent asylum policy developments in the UK, in particular those which are underpinned by stories of ‘the vulnerable’ and exemplify the latest hierarchy of rights and entitlements to emerge in relation to the figure of the refugee. We are also motivated to critique dominant narratives of the exclusion and expulsion (Nail 2015) of refugees coming into neoliberal democracies that have risen existentially during the European refugee ‘crisis’. We argue that vulnerability is mediated through dominant narratives, but also narratives of vulnerability are increasingly used to highlight distinctions between refugees who are deemed to deserve protection and those who do not. Further, and somewhat paradoxically, those who are deemed too vulnerable may find themselves undeserving of protection in the brave new world of refugee policy.

While narratives of vulnerability have been gathering political momentum and some critiques of the mechanisms of governance, in relation to concepts of vulnerability, have been elaborated on, the specific issue of how vulnerability is operationalised in asylum policy is less well understood. Taking a narrative approach to the lives of refugees and the stories told about those lives, this paper starts from the assumption that telling stories and making meaning is something we do to construct a sense of our lives for ourselves and for others. Using the concept that storytellers draw on dominant narratives to tell their stories (Squire, Andrews, and Tamboukou 2013; Woodiwiss, Smith, and Lockwood 2017) we respond to the notion that stories do not simply reflect the world but are constructed in socio-politics, cultural contexts, ideology and history (Squire, Andrews, and Tamboukou 2013; Plummer 1995, 2001). Dominant narratives not only shape the stories people tell, they also situate public opinion, sanctioning, constraining or enabling certain stories to be told and heard (Plummer 2001; Smith 2017). Indeed, narratives can simultaneously liberate or limit

our understandings, serving as powerful forms of social control. Therefore, within a narrative paradigm, who is considered to be vulnerable varies over time, between cultures and within cultures, and what is seen as vulnerability in relation to the refugee very much depends on the construction of asylum that is in operation. As Plummer argued in his influential work: “different moments have highlighted different stories” (1995:4) and “as societies’ change, so stories change” (1995:79). Indeed, constructions of vulnerability are moral categories, open to different understandings and changing interpretations, which vary over time and space (Smith 2017; Squire, Andrews, and Tamboukou 2013; Plummer 2001). As such, narratives cannot represent reality in some objective way; rather narratives, and how we use them, construct how we understand and make sense of lived realities.

In order to identify contemporary dominant narratives, that inform and relate to the figure of the refugee, in this paper we explore some of the diverging policy responses to migration across European Union (EU) member states, as well as identify key policy developments in the UK related to ‘vulnerability’ (along with their formal announcements or written ministerial statements in the House of Lords). We also explore some of the media stories in relation to the 2015 European ‘crisis’ about refugees (such as Médecins Sans Frontières 2015), where pertinent images and stories shifted the dominant narrative about the figure of the refugee, many of which were emotionally charged and had a high profile across the major news outlets. These are key sites where we have recognised some of the most overt manifestations of narratives of vulnerability in relation to the figure of the refugee which feed in to public, policy and political agendas.

More broadly, we reviewed the literature related to vulnerability, including a number of international instruments in Europe which pertain to the human rights of refugees, such as the United Nations 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees; the 1950 European Convention of Human Rights; the EU Asylum Procedures Directive (Council Directive 2005/85/EC) and the 67th session of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner for Refugees. A number of parliamentary inquiries, relating to the area of asylum in the UK, were examined, including the 2013 Parliamentary inquiry into asylum support for children and young people. The narratives that created a backdrop to a number of political debates within which the Syrian Vulnerable Person’s Resettlement Programme

(SVPRP) was predicated were explored; this included Theresa May's announcement of the SVPRP in 2014; a number of Home Office statements including from the Secretary of State for the Home Office; written ministerial statements in the House of Lords; the Oral Statement by the Home Secretary on Syrian Refugees (2014) and Commons Briefing Papers (2017). We looked at European campaigns (such as Refugees Welcome), together with the public and political debates that were generated as a result of these pronouncements (see Harding 2015, 2015a; Kingsley 2015; Travis 2013), as well as public statistics that were used to suggest an increase in human mobility and numbers of migrants coming into Europe and the UK, including the International Organisation for Migration (IOM 2016) compilation of available data and the findings of The MEDMIG project (MEDMIG 2018) which was part of the 'Mediterranean Migration Research Programme' (established through the Economic and Social Research Council's 'Urgency Grant', co-funded by the Department for International Development). Like all storytellers, our paper is constructed within and because of particular moments we see as significant in relation to narratives of vulnerability as they inform and relate to the figure of the refugee.

As patterns of migration shift over time, so change the stories we can tell. In 2018, there are few who would argue against the notion that the lived experiences of migration into and across Europe produce inherent vulnerabilities – such as physically perilous journeys at sea, precarious living conditions and complex survival strategies. However, it is also the case that the governing of migration can in turn generate and produce vulnerabilities. Dominant narratives inform and are frequently used to underpin the policies of states. Structured at various stages of the asylum process, immigration policies have stratified individual rights and helped to create the conditions which severely limit the options available to many refugees (Lewis, Dwyer, Hodkinson and Waite 2014). As such, we invoke a dialogical understanding of vulnerability in this paper, which is crucial to reorient attention away from solely individual behaviours and toward social structures, such as the role of immigration policies and interventions, particularly those that produce stories about people who are deemed deserving or undeserving. We call attention to the use of narratives of vulnerability in order to analyse the implications of this framework and we call for reassessment, exploration and a questioning of the narratives told about the

deserving and the undeserving, as they impact on the lives of those seeking asylum or identified as vulnerable.

Drawing from a diverse set of literatures that include refugee and asylum studies, migration management, governance, integration and settlement, and the disciplines of human geography, sociology, social policy and politics, we locate our arguments within broader discussions about human mobility, occasioned by economic crisis and austerity, questioning the exclusion and expulsion of many refugees. In the following section, we provide an overview of dominant narratives of expulsion and exclusion, within current literatures and debates on the figure of the refugee in Europe, in order to provide the context to the analysis of changing asylum policies in the UK. We show how neoliberal regimes of refugee regulation and management have become a defining feature of contemporary European narratives that underpin immigration policies and social order. We then focus on narratives of vulnerability refracted through notions of deservingness and undeservingness, drawing attention to the long history of these debates, as well as the ways they have been constructed in policy and how they play out in people's lives. We go on to explore how the figure of the 'vulnerable Syrian refugee' has emerged in Europe and focus on the UK Government's recent commitment to take a quota of refugees through the SVPRP. We suggest that access to asylum has gradually moved away from spontaneous asylum seeking to more controlled routes, a transition in the UK that has increasingly drawn on the notion of vulnerability to highlight distinctions between people who deserve protection and those who do not. We go on to explore how the UK government has become complicit in the creation of hierarchies of rights and entitlements, which is exemplified through the SVPRP, that in turn make some asylum seekers vulnerable. Finally, we offer some concluding thoughts that consider the consequences of viewing asylum through narratives of vulnerability and the state-driven movement away from spontaneous asylum seeking.

Neoliberal regimes of refugee regulation and management; the vulnerabilising role of hostile states.

For decades, managing migrants coming into neoliberal democracies has been a defining feature of contemporary European narratives, immigration policies and social order. In the 21st century, the stories we can tell about migrants are

increasingly informed by powerful narratives of exclusion and expulsion (Nail 2015). Notably, migration into Europe has become a central issue for EU member states, dominating public, policy and political agendas. The rapid growth of stories about unwanted migrant populations has facilitated continuing, and sometimes deepening, regulation and management of migration. Within this context, 'the refugee' frequently emerges, along with 'other' migrants, as a salient marker of unwanted populations. Of further importance to understanding this context is the rise of managed migration regimes over the past two decades that are increasingly characterised by national security concerns about organised crime, terrorism and unsustainable migratory flows (Walters 2004; Guild 2009). Immigration policies are evolving into more stridently securitised and bio-political forms of 'carceral cosmopolitanism' (Sparke 2006) such that migratory movement and migrants themselves are ever more closely controlled and monitored. For refugees, long synonymised with vagrant, criminal and bogus, there is now a newer storying in which they are at times defiled in media, public and policy debates with the term terrorist. As Nail (2016, 158) points out:

'Every refugee and migrant has now explicitly become a potential terrorist and vice versa. The two figures have been transformed into the other's virtual double. The migrant is a potential terrorist hiding among the crowd of migrants, and the terrorist is a potential migrant ready to move into Europe at any moment'.

The articulation of national borders and nation-building, bound by the different political and legal categorisations of migrants (and non-migrants), is therefore increasingly called into question by the contemporary (im)mobilities of peoples, states and territories.

Refugees coming in to Europe is not a new phenomenon but the issue was highlighted in the recent European refugee 'crisis' which received a great deal of media, public and policy attention in 2015 when the numbers of people attempting to reach and coming in to Europe were reported to have dramatically increased (UNHCR 2016). Multiple conflicts and political unrest across the globe, most notably Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq displaced a large number of people, some of whom crossed the Mediterranean in search of protection and safety (IOM 2016). The number of people migrating into Europe was widely perceived as constituting a crisis (Crawley and Skleparis 2017) and a great number of varying and diametric stories have emerged from EU member states, and from citizenry within them, about the

crisis; all within broader contexts of ongoing struggles due to economic crisis and austerity. These stories have stimulated highly differentiated policies and practices of welcome and exclusion (Lewis and Waite 2018); ranging from the Hungarian prime minister announcing plans to build a fortified fence at their border, to Germany's ostensible policies of welcome (see below) and the spontaneous appearance of a diverse 'volunteer army' at multiple points along the 2,000-mile-long 'refugee trail' across Europe providing shelter, blankets, food and simple kindness (Brocklebank 2016).

Although the relatively sudden and surprising emergence of acts of welcome by citizens across Europe from late 2015 onwards (e.g. the Refugees Welcome movement) indicates renewed practices of sanctuary and hospitality, this was juxtaposed with increasingly different and hostile immigration policies between EU member states. For example, in September 2015 Denmark suspended rail links and closed a motorway between Denmark and Germany, claiming people migrating were refusing to disembark from the trains because they did not want to be registered in Denmark (BBC 2015); Germany introduced temporary border controls with Australia, with the Interior minister Thomas de Maizière suggesting "they [refugees] cannot choose the states where they are seeking protection"(Harding 2015); and the construction of a fence between Serbia and Hungary was completed to strengthen Hungary's borders (Crawley et al. 2018). In contrast, since 2011 Italy had experienced an increase movement of people into Italy (Emergenza Nordafrica) and had rapidly expanded their capacity for sea arrivals, putting in place a number of crucial measures to their reception systems (Crawley et al. 2018; Cooperativa Ruah 2017). By September 2015, Italy was forcefully asserting that there was an unsustainable pressure on their state services due to the disproportionate numbers of new arrivals coming into Italy; the Italian prime minister, Matteo Renzi denounced a lack of European solidarity and called on other European countries to help relocate thousands of refugees across Europe (Reuters 2016). Greece had historically more limited numbers of arrivals by sea and by 2015 failed to provide adequate reception facilities for those coming into the Greek Islands; Médecins Sans Frontières stated: "Given the deep economic crisis that Greece is facing, it cannot be assumed that Greece can cope with this alone" (Médecins Sans Frontières 2015).

Stories of chaotic and overwhelmed services dominated the public and political perception of the European crisis, as well as the lack of capability in dealing with the rapid increase in sea arrivals (Crawley et al. 2018). Countries, such as Serbia and Slovenia, closed their borders to all refugees in November 2015, with the exception of those from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, whilst Hungary was reported to have fired gas canisters and water at refugees who had broken through the fence that separates Hungary and Serbia. Whilst the dominant narrative that Europe's migration crisis was a singular phenomenon of unprecedented sea arrivals, a sense of shared responsibility for responding to and dealing with the increased numbers of people on the move was absent even with an EU proposed solution to relocate tens of thousands of refugees to other member states under a two-year scheme. The cooperation was slow and some countries (UK, Ireland, Denmark, Poland and Czech Republic) refused to sign up to the agreement or recanted on the pledge to deliver. Indeed, diverging policy responses and failure to share responsibility lead to a sense of political crisis in, and of, the EU itself (Crawley et al. 2018).

In the UK context, a broadly defined 'compassion spike' (Lewis and Waite 2018) of citizens donating 'stuff' to refugee camps in mainland Europe from 2015 has not mapped on to any broad anti-xenophobic and pro-migrants' rights mobilisations. The lack of political mobilisation around the issue of migrants' rights was devastatingly evidenced in the UK vote to leave the EU in June 2016. The 'Leave' side of the Brexit referendum campaign brazenly manipulated the threat of refugees massed on EU borders coupled with a generalised fear of immigration by focussing almost exclusively on the issue of free movement within Europe as an anathema (Geddes 2016).

The proposed solutions at the state and supra-state level within Europe have primarily focused on the so called problem of uncontrolled and unregulated movement into Europe. For example, the EU has substantially increased the available resources to carry out operations in the Mediterranean and to establish a new European Border and Coast Guard to reinforce the management and security of the EU's common external borders (European Commission 2016). As a result, the right to seek asylum has been undermined by varying and diametric stories at a EU, nation-state and personal level. At the High Commissioner's opening statement at the 67th session of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's

Programme, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi (2016) stated: “The arrival of large numbers of refugees and migrants has created panic and political instability in the global North, fuelled by irresponsible politicians. Restrictions in the laws governing asylum are being enforced in many countries, even among those with a proud tradition of refugee protection and human rights” (UN High Commissioner for Refugees 2016).

Central to immigration policy developments across Europe and the push to identify those who were seen as attempting to reach Europe without potential claims to international protection, have been stories told about the constantly evolving ‘categorical fetishism of refugees and migrants’ (Crawley and Skleparis 2017). As Goodman, Sirriyeh and McMahon (2017) rightly suggest, the UK media have played a particular role in the evolution of the representation and conceptualisation of the crisis; ‘Initially the media evoked the term “Mediterranean migrant crisis” to present those involved as a problem that needed to be blocked from reaching Europe’s shores. Refugees rapidly became identified with the “Calais migrant crisis”; constructed as a threat to security. Later, stories were framed as “European migrant crisis” whereby ‘migrants’ were constructed as “an ongoing threat to Europe”’ (Goodman, Sirriyeh and McMahon 2017, 105). The categorisation worked to construct those involved in the refugee ‘crisis’ in particular and different ways, many of which stigmatised, vilified and undermined the rights of migrants and refugees in Europe (Zetter 2015). However, the political failure of states to respond collectively, along with the failure of the international community to address the humanitarian needs of those arriving on Europe’s shores, also continues to be part of the narratives that endure within the highly politicised context of refugee regulation and management across Europe. We now move to explore how these narratives are particularly scored by ideas of vulnerability.

Narratives of vulnerability

Increasingly, narratives of vulnerability have informed the response to the European refugee ‘crisis’. Prioritising vulnerable individuals and groups has long been an argument for special protections, resources and interventions (Brown 2017; Dunn, Clare and Holland 2008). A moral obligation of relocating resources and making provision for vulnerable individuals and groups is frequently placed on communities

and advanced economies of the global North whereby 'the vulnerable' become a marker of deservingness by their need (Brown 2014).

Serving to shape policies and interventions in the lives of those identified as vulnerable (Fawcett 2009), narratives of vulnerability have rapidly gained dominance in populist stories and policy development across Europe. In relation to the plight of displaced people and protection agendas, for some this appears a progressive development in equality opportunities. For example, Peroni and Timmer (2013, 1056) suggest "reasoning in terms of vulnerable groups opens a number of possibilities, most notably, the opportunity to move closer to a more robust idea of equality". In this spirit, the potential of vulnerability is a concept that can be utilised to address human rights and social injustices (Turner 2006; Fineman 2008). Indeed, the Strasbourg Court has used the concept of vulnerable groups in society to include specific groups of asylum seekers (see *M.S.S. v Belgium and Greece* [GC], Application No.30696/09). Set against the current backdrop of welfare conditionality, economic crisis and austerity, the elevation of some vulnerable groups can have a powerful effect on those who are considered vulnerable, and also on those who are not.

Although narratives of vulnerability may be useful to certain individuals and groups, the dominant narrative of 'the vulnerable' is potentially detrimental and damaging to those being identified and categorised as vulnerable. These stories often rely on an external evaluation of an individual's behaviour, potentially depriving people of subjectivity and agency. Typically projected on to those deemed in need, the narratives of vulnerability saturate political narratives and many acts of solidarity towards refugees. As such, narratives may allow for 'the vulnerable' to be alternately pitied and some of 'them' 'saved', whilst those refugees who are not deemed vulnerable may be expelled and excluded (Nail 2015).

Narratives of vulnerability are taking on new meanings in the UK in particular, and need reassessment, exploration and questioning as they intervene in the lives of those identified as vulnerable. In the next section, we explore the refraction of deservingness and undeservingness, as it is constructed in the political sphere in and beyond the UK and in relation to narratives of vulnerability.

The refraction of ‘deservingness’ and ‘undeservingness’

Commentators (see Applebaum 2001; Broeders 2007; Brown 2017) have noted that debates on deservingness and undeservingness have a long history, more often than not applied to welfare provision and inextricably linked to markers of difference in the stories of the media, public and politicians. As Watkins-Hayes and Kovalsky (2017: 2) suggest: “the troupe of deservingness [is] one of the most enduring narratives used by government officials, the media, and the larger public to classify poor people and to determine whether they are worthy of assistance”. It is informative to see the narrative of deservingness enduring alongside the reorganisation of welfare states in many post-industrial countries. There have long been multiple initiatives from various authorities seeking to distinguish between different kinds of mobility, but also to intervene in lives to create recognisable and categorisable subjects (Crawley and Skleparis 2017; Sales 2002). The systematic reorganisation and roll-back of public sector provision, in recent decades, has dovetailed with a rhetoric of deservingness and a creeping (re)moralisation of welfare ethics (Monaghan 2012) that has fashioned, yet again, the figures of the deserving and undeserving poor (Archbishop of Canterbury 2011).

Amidst powerful stories of economic crisis and austerity across Europe, the UK policy making arena around welfare is suggested to have followed the aggressive model of free-marketism in the US; with the associated ‘individual responsabilisation’ agenda of neoliberalism (Giddens 1998). Bolstering these narratives is a ‘divisive politics of deservingness and dependency’ (Williams 2015, 204) that links to broader debates on welfare and citizenship (Schierup, Hansen and Castles 2006, Walters 2004a). As Anderson (2013) observes, questions of deservingness and citizenship are bound up in the notion of ‘communities of value’. In such debates, excluded migrants are deemed undeserving because they lack value in some way. In welfare systems, social worth is commonly acknowledged on the basis of recognition of social contribution, or being vulnerable and therefore someone whom society has an ethical obligation to protect. In an era of rising public concern about immigration, connections between public stories that devalue people seeking asylum tend to distinguish between the deserving and undeserving (Sales 2002).

Amid the European refugee ‘crisis’ of 2015, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees and many NGOs operationalised narratives of vulnerability and the

vulnerable refugee became a story that was told and re-told both internationally and nationally by charities and human rights organisations (Fenton, Borton, Collinson and Foley 2016). Whilst both the state and non-state actors operationalised narratives of vulnerability, they sometimes served different purposes. For example, NGO's and practitioners have often utilised the stories of individual refugees to highlight their particular suffering and evoke compassion in the broader public to raise funding and resources (Hannides, Bailey and Kaoukji 2016). Told for a range of complex political and advocacy reasons, the narrative of vulnerability has sometimes been told in an attempt to increase legal protection and human rights for individuals and groups, and to expose undeniable poor treatment and abuse with the aim of improving refugees' lives. In the contemporary construction of such stories, divisions are inevitably created; in this particular time we increasingly witness the divisions between those whose needs are being highlighted in order to ensure they are prioritised (e.g. women, children, disabled, the elderly), and the 'less deserving' (e.g. young single men). The marked emphasis on vulnerability can have a profound effect on the lives of refugees interacting with service providers, and has often led to an expectation that vulnerability should be readable and even 'performed'. For example, research has highlighted the risk posed to young refugees who are compelled to present themselves as vulnerable victims to welfare services or face being refused support and considered 'merely' economic migrants rather than refugees (Bhabha 2001; Maegusuku-Hewett, Dunkerley, Scourfield and Smalley 2007).

Policies on asylum and the legal definition of a 'refugee' originated in a rights-based approach enshrined in the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees to protect those fearing persecution. As the category of who constitutes a 'refugee' is renegotiated and reshaped within the deeply political context of the asylum system and its associated hierarchical system of rights, some people emerge within the definition whilst others are excluded (Crawley and Skleparis 2017). In recent decades there has been a narrowing and qualification of this narrative, with a reassessment of the social worth of people seeking asylum and the ethical responsibilities of 'host' societies. This has been marked by exclusions from full-membership of these societies and the curtailment of rights and welfare support. The former 'morally untouchable' category of 'deserving political refugee' (Cohen 1994,

82) has been (re)storied and fragmented into the sub-categories of ‘genuine’ or ‘real’ refugees who are those deemed to be vulnerable and to have legitimate claims of fleeing persecution versus the ‘bogus asylum seeker’ deemed unbelievable. The Home Office has fueled concerns with campaigns intended to project tough positions on immigration (Jones et al. 2017) and the terms of the political debate have been predicated on the notion that most people seeking asylum threaten the nation’s socio-economic well-being and are therefore undeserving of protection in the UK (Sales 2002).

We now proceed to focus on the constructed figure of the ‘vulnerable Syrian refugee’ which has emerged within the UK context and through the policy intervention known as the Syrian Vulnerable Person Resettlement Programme (SVPRP). We suggest that these narrative and policy developments render the UK government complicit in the creation of hierarchies of rights and entitlements that in turn makes (some) asylum seekers increasingly vulnerable.

The figure of the ‘vulnerable Syrian refugee’

In 2013 and 2014, few European states responded to the UNHCR’s call for an increase in the resettlement of and humanitarian admission for Syrian refugees. Most responses bolstered the containment of refugees in countries neighbouring Syria, with some states investing in the provision of humanitarian aid to the Syrian region. Germany was frequently storied as an exception in Europe; the first country to announce a specific Humanitarian Admission Programme for Syrians, in May 2013 it committed to resettling up to 5,000 Syrian refugees from Syria, Lebanon and Jordan (National Audit Office 2016). In December 2013 and again in July 2014, the German Humanitarian Programme further expanded the resettlement of Syrian refugees including Syrian refugees from Libya (National Audit Office 2016). Suspending the Dublin procedure for Syrians in August 2015, the German government potentially made it easier for Syrians to stay in Germany. The Prime Minister Angela Merkel repeatedly stated that Germany ‘could and would cope’ with the influx of refugees (Harding 2015), whilst calling for a more equal distribution of refugees across EU member states as part of an agreed strategy (Nienaber 2015).

Despite Germany's progress with resettlement, the primary response across Europe was shaped by a powerful narrative of border control (Crawley et al. 2016).

Significant resources were allocated to reinforce Europe's borders; states who initiated programmes of humanitarian admission or expanded family reunification for Syrians set low numbers for entry (Orchard and Miller 2014). However, in a unilateral approach to broader discussions about a potential European wide response, the figure of the vulnerable Syrian refugee was brought into stark relief by the UK government. On 29 January 2014, the former Home Secretary (now Prime Minister) Theresa May announced the 'Syrian Vulnerable Person Resettlement Programme' (SVPRP). The concept that the most vulnerable must be protected featured prominently in the UK Government's rhetoric, aimed at legitimising the introduction of the SVPRP. This was made blatant at the Conservative party conference in October 2015, when May outlined the new asylum strategy. She made a distinction between the provision and entitlements of Syrian refugees, 'deserving' by their vulnerability, and spontaneous asylum seeking. Criticising the current asylum system, which she claimed rewards 'the wealthiest, the luckiest and the strongest' people and denies support to 'the most vulnerable and most in need', a new approach to asylum was outlined:

'to offer asylum and refuge to people in parts of the world affected by conflict and oppression, rather than to those who have made it to Britain [...] to work to reduce the asylum claims made in Britain' (Theresa May, quoted in the Independent 2015).

In the initial stages, the SVPRP provided a route for selected refugees to come to the UK directly from refugee camps in neighbouring Syrian countries, prioritising Syrians from a number of specific categories who were considered the most vulnerable people, such as 'victims of sexual violence and torture', and 'the elderly' and 'the disabled' (Oral Statement by the Home Secretary on Syrian Refugees 2014). The Government announced it expected several hundred refugees to arrive in the UK over three years but did not apply a quota (Commons Briefing Papers 2017). In effect, a two-tier system emerged in the UK, including between Syrian spontaneously seeking asylum and those who were resettled through SVPRP. Syrian nationals (alongside other nationals seeking asylum) who arrived in the UK as asylum seekers continue to be processed through the current asylum system, whilst

a separate route of entry has been created for selected vulnerable Syrian refugees through the SVPRP. Indeed, Syrian nationals were the fourth-largest group of asylum applicants in the year ending September 2015 (House of Commons 2017). Mike Adamson, chief executive of the British Red Cross, was cited in the Guardian (2016) as saying “Syrian nationals who arrive in the UK as asylum seekers are left vulnerable to exploitation [which] seems completely at odds with the spirit behind the government’s commitment to offer a safe home to 20,000 Syrian refugees under its resettlement programme”.

Allied to the desire to exclude and expel those who are undeserving, one of the most powerful ways in which narratives of vulnerability manifest in the SVPRP was as a moral justification for stronger social control mechanisms and for government to make decisions on behalf of those they support and those they do not (Turner 2015). Certainly the SVPRP increased the governance and surveillance of migrants beyond the nation borders of the UK and enhanced mechanisms of social and immigration control. Yet resettlement programmes are not new in the UK and have been implemented periodically in response to specific ‘humanitarian crises’ (for example, post-war Polish resettlement 1947-1950; Ugandan-Asian programme, 1972; Cypriot refugee 1963-63 and 1974-75; Chilean refugees 1974 to 1979; Vietnamese quota refugees 1975-1992; 1992-1996: Humanitarian Evacuation Programme of Kosovar Refugees, 1999). However, the importance placed on ‘the vulnerable’ within the SVPRP reflects an increasing emphasis on “prominent and long-running social policy debates and narratives about [the] ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’” (Brown, Ecclestone and Emmel 2017, 3). The figure of the ‘vulnerable Syrian refugee’ has been framed within a broader narrative of compassion which ostensibly bolsters the UK Government’s moral credibility to pursue specialist treatment for Syrian refugees. Presenting a compassionate stance towards both refugees and the responsibility of states, Theresa May (PM), speaking at the Leaders’ Summit on Refugees on 20th September 2016 stated:

“...we all have a responsibility, both to provide life-saving assistance and enable people to return home one day... we need to ensure that the most vulnerable refugees are supported and, if necessary, resettled where their needs can best be met. The UK has committed to resettling 20,000 of the most vulnerable people, including children affected by the Syria crisis” (Theresa May 2016: our emphasis).

Emphasising the role of the UK towards Syrian refugees and elevating the vulnerabilities of Syrian refugees onto an international platform, the identities of many individuals who seek asylum have been reduced in complexity through the simple act of specifying nationality within refugee policy. Sigona has rightly pointed to the tendency to reduce the plurality of refugee's identities and experiences by privileging "a one-dimensional representation of the refugee which relies heavily on feminized and infantilized images of 'pure' victimhood and vulnerability" (Sigona 2014, 370). Furthermore, whilst immigration legislation in the UK has become increasingly entrenched in relocating vulnerable refugees from other parts of the world, these policy developments have done nothing to address the issues arising with people displaced across Europe. However, on the 2nd of September 2015 the drowned body of a three-year-old boy - Alan Kurdi - was found washed up on the beach at Bodrum, Turkey. Photographs of Alan's body, taken by journalist Nilüfer Demir, rapidly became iconic images. Researchers in Sheffield at the Visual Social Media Lab have discussed how these images changed some of the stories about refugees used on social media. For example, Procter and Yamada-Rice (2015, 59) engage with one specific element of the photographs – Alan's shoes, which they suggest became 'a visual symbol of his helplessness, his need for protection', a story that indicates both vulnerability and innocence. The photographs of Alan emboldened a narrative of compassion in relation to Syrian refugees and children that was not only evoked by law and policy makers in neoliberal democracies, but was also told by pro-asylum organisations and advocates. But stories can be fragile and the narrative of compassion was violently disrupted by the terror attacks in Paris on 13 November 2015, when it was reported that a passport belonging to a Syrian refugee was found at the scene (Kingsley 2015). Undoing much of the narrative of compassion that arose with the image of Alan Kurdi (Vis 2015), the enduring story that 'the refugee' could be a potential terrorist (Nail 2016) served to justify the increasingly restrictive response and the regulatory and governing function deployed in UK immigration policy. Whilst the UK announced it would extend the SVPRP and relocate 20,000 Syrian refugees by 2020, it re-stated the Programme in the face of criticism that the UK Government was doing very little for those people currently displaced across Europe.

The political reasoning behind this limited humanitarian response is clear – the Mayist government suggests that acts of compassion, and intervention for those attempting to enter or already within Europe, act as a pull-factor to encourage would-be entrants to keep coming. These points were solidified in an article written by the former Home Secretary Theresa May (PM) in *The Times* about the Mediterranean sea crossings where she says, “[the UK] cannot do anything which encourages more people to make these perilous journeys” (13 May 2015). Hence any intervention for those at the border of, or within, Europe should be discouraged as the government deems it sends the wrong signal to would-be migrants. Using the UNHCR vulnerability criteria for resettlement, the SVPRP was used to form a dominant narrative that priority would be given to those people that are assessed to be ‘in desperate need of assistance [and] cannot be supported effectively in their region of origin’ (Home Office 2015). As such, the introduction and expansion of the SVPRP reconfigured the concept of ‘the refugee’ through notions of vulnerability and deservingness in distant places.

The story about the figure of the vulnerable Syrian refugee is of deep concern for a number of reasons, no less because it undermines the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which guarantees each and every one of us the right to seek asylum. In signing the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, alongside other European asylum instruments that protect civil, political, economic and social rights, European states explicitly acknowledge the imperative of offering protection to refugees within their nation borders. However, dominant narratives told about refugees combine with immigration stratification to exclude certain refugees from being recognised as refugees. This violates the principles of equality and non-discrimination (including on grounds of nationality) and equal protection of the law¹.

More recently, new stories about the vulnerable are emerging and continually narrow protection for refugees. In February 2017 the Independent reported that the Home Office has been refusing to consider applications from children with disabilities. The United Nations has said the Home Office has requested a temporary limit from people with mobility problems and learning disabilities (Agerholm 2017). These child refugees were considered too vulnerable, and as such undeserving of protection in the asylum policy developments. The process by which narratives are constructed

and the purpose that they serve have consequences for those seeking asylum. In August 2017 the Independent reported only five per cent of refugees resettled through SVPRP have mobility issues, special educational or other disabilities. Yet findings from research with Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon suggests more than 30% have specific needs (Handicap International, HelpAge International Handicap International and HelpAge International 2014, 4). Whilst narratives of vulnerability can bolster those who are seen to be 'most vulnerable' and solidify their deservingness because of vulnerability, they can also be used to construct and sanction an exclusionary narrative of vulnerability that is actively depriving and systematically disempowering many refugees from protection, rights and resources on the basis of vulnerability.

Emerging hierarchies of rights and entitlements

The introduction of SVPRP changed the terms of what is morally 'good' or 'not good' with regard to refugee protection. Helping to create and sustain notions about the deserving and undeserving within refugee communities, the policy increasingly raises the profile of vulnerability as it relates to refugees. The ostensible reasons for this policy change can be seen to lie in the increased numbers of asylum seekers coming into Europe in 2015 and the concept of giving protection and support to those refugees most in need in countries surrounding Syria. However, within the context of this rhetoric and increasingly restrictive immigration rules, the rights of people to seek asylum is undermined.

In the UK, two main asylum routes into the UK have emerged; first, the SVPRP and second, spontaneous asylum seeking in all its diverse forms. These two routes illustrate the latest hierarchy of rights and entitlements for refugees in the UK. For example, refugees coming through the SVPRP were initially given Humanitarian Protection status, with permission to work and access to public funds. They receive a tailored integration package in their initial months and the key documents they need to access services upon arrival. Entitlements under the SVPRP have been further enhanced; on the 22 March 2017, Amber Rudd (Secretary of State for the Home Office) issued a written ministerial statement in the House of Lords (HLWS553²) which changed the legal status for those coming into the UK via the SVPRP. With effect from 1 July 2017, those admitted under SVPRP are given Refugee Status³ and five years' limited leave - those who have already been admitted into the UK

through the Programme before this date are given the opportunity to make a request to change their status to Refugee Status. Humanitarian Protection does not carry the same entitlements as Refugee Status, thereby increasing the rights and entitlements of those who come to the UK through the SVPRP. Rudd suggested that the additional entitlement: 'will help these vulnerable people' (our emphasis). The scope of the SVPRP was amended again; on 3rd July 2017, Rudd presented a further written statement (HCWS23⁴) to the House of Lords which meant the SVPRP now includes '... the most vulnerable refugees in the MENA [Middle East and North Africa] region who have fled the Syrian conflict and cannot safely return to their country of origin, whatever their nationality'. The new nationalities are categorised by concepts of vulnerability and grouped together as 'the vulnerable'.

The SVPRP stands in stark contrast to spontaneous asylum seeking and the latter group enter a far riskier situation within the asylum process. The vast majority of spontaneous asylum seekers are excluded from additional entitlements. For decades, immigration policy and social order have kept the stories of vulnerabilities, violence, global inequalities and injustices largely hidden from European publics. Border controls, directed toward managing refugees coming into neoliberal democracies, have become increasingly punitive. Within this context, those people who cross nation borders face security and management in various forms, including incarceration, dispersal, surveillance and the criminalising of a wider range of activities (Schuster 2005; Waite and Lewis 2017). As a result of successive legislative changes, people seeking asylum in the UK have been separated from mainstream welfare provisions while their asylum claim is being assessed. Provided with extremely limited and highly conditional support, many are excluded from basic standards of living and the lives of those seeking asylum have been widely recognised as 'vulnerable', characterised by, amongst a number of things, poverty, social exclusion and destitution (Gedalof 2007; Allsopp, Sigona and Phillimore 2014). This can be seen as a process of the state 'vulnerabilising' individuals and producing vulnerabilities where they didn't previously exist (Lewis, Dwyer, Hodkinson and Waite 2014).

Some vulnerabilities emanate from aspects of the existing asylum process. For example, the Parliamentary Inquiry (2013) into asylum support for children and young people stated that successive UK governments have failed children by

delivering an asylum support system that keeps children in poverty and denies asylum seeking families the resources they need to meet their needs. Indeed, there is a longstanding and growing body of evidence in the UK about the vulnerabilising effects of multiple and intersecting structural aspects of the asylum system (Waite, Valentine and Lewis 2014). Deepening this are the recent provisions outlined in the Immigration Acts of 2014 and 2016 legislated by the Coalition and Conservative governments that clearly seek to extend the state's deterrence approach by creating a 'hostile environment' (Travis 2013). Refused asylum seekers, as part of the broader irregular migrant population, will in particular feel the sharp end of these policy changes in various realms (Waite 2017). In brief, the Immigration Act 2014 streamlined the removals and appeals system, making it easier and quicker to remove those held to have no right to be in the UK, whilst the Immigration Act 2016. The 2016 Act, therefore, considerably expands the scope of the deportation process, authorising a 'deport first, appeal later' approach that includes all migrants, unless they can show serious harm will be caused to them. As such, those subject to immigration controls can be removed while the outcome of the decision against the appeal to remove them is pending. The new provisions will have a dramatic impact on the lives of those seeking asylum. These include the removal of accommodation and subsistence for many of those refused asylum, and reducing domestic rights and entitlements. Indeed, this too can be understood as the stratification of individual rights which contribute to create conditions where vulnerabilities are produced by the asylum system.

Conclusions

This article has sought to shine a light on the new and enduring narratives of vulnerability in relation to the figure of the refugee. We have built an argument that new narratives map onto insidious divisions between the deserving and the undeserving refugee, and in turn they consolidate and buttress the UK's hierarchy of rights and entitlements according to migrant category. The distinction, division and discrimination between the deserving Syrian refugee and the undeserving asylum seeker has drawn on new stories of the vulnerable and enduring narrations of inherent vulnerabilities. But this is not merely an issue of storytelling; the process by

which narratives are constructed and the purpose that they serve have consequences for those seeking asylum.

By focusing on some of these consequences exemplified by the emergence of the UK's Syrian Vulnerable Person Resettlement Programme, we suggest new and emerging policy interventions reinforce the notion that 'vulnerable' refugees from some countries are deserving beneficiaries of protection whilst others are not. This state-driven movement away from spontaneous asylum seeking, to the creation of controlled routes of entry in to the UK for a specified and limited number of refugees, undermines the rights of people to seek asylum. At the same time as claiming to afford special protection to specific 'vulnerable' groups, narratives of vulnerability have given rise to refutation of protection for many of those who claim to be refugees. The conceptual blurring between exceptional needs and the allocation of resources, alongside the curtailment of the right to seek asylum or to be recognised as a refugee, reflects an insidious shift in refugee regulation and management. As such, we call for reassessment, exploration and a questioning of the narratives told about the deserving and the undeserving, as they impact on the lives of those seeking asylum and/ or identified as vulnerable.

The reification of narratives of vulnerability in the UK is – at its heart – a set of political manoeuvres for the state to differentiate rights and narrow the protection space for refugees. Non-state actors have also evoked narratives of vulnerability which have served to create distinctions between people who deserve protection and those who do not, utilising the stories of individual refugees to evoke compassion in the broader public and to attempt to increase legal protection and human rights with the aim of improving refugees' lives. Despite these efforts, given the overwhelming policy direction of travel in Europe, especially since the European refugee 'crisis' of 2015 onwards with increasing restrictionism and border hardening, narratives of vulnerability are increasingly playing a central role in systematically disentiing many refugees from protection, rights and resources. Indeed, the UK has utilised and perpetuated dominant narratives of the exclusion and expulsion with gusto, and has enforced such policies on most forced migrants by employing narratives of vulnerability as a morally-informed justification device for strong social control mechanisms and governance. This approach functions alongside multiple aspects of

the existing asylum system which generates and produce vulnerabilities where they didn't previously exist.

To be recognised and storied as a refugee now means being identified and categorised as 'vulnerable' because narratives do not simply reflect the world, they simultaneously create and potentially limit it. Bringing a critical perspective to the relationship between narratives of vulnerability and a narrowing of protection for refugees reveals some of the ways in which the state has redefined 'the vulnerable' as an essential marker of asylum policy. The current regime of refugee protection is increasingly unfit for purpose in ways that marginalise the diverse and subjective experiences of persecution and protection. New and enduring narratives of vulnerability have given rise to new dynamics of 'refugeeness' that requires attendant questioning of the systems of vulnerability classifications that we have previously used to understand it. As such there are significant risks with simply working within dominant narratives that exclude and expel refugees; we suggest we should challenge, disrupt and refute the notion that refugees constructed within the narrative of vulnerability are somehow more 'deserving'. It is crucial that we rethink stories about the figure of the refugee because narratives produce borders that are not only physical walls and fences, they are spaces of non-rights, reduced citizenship and degrading and dehumanising stories; they are where the vulnerable have become a marker for the brave new world of refugee policy.

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¹ The principle of non-discrimination (including on grounds of nationality) and equal protection of the law is embodied in Article 3 of the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees.

² "Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme and Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme – Arrangements". Written statement - HLWS553. URL: <https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Lords/2017-03-22/HLWS553/>

³ Those who qualify for refugee status under paragraph 334 of the Immigration Rules should normally be granted limited leave to enter or remain under paragraph 339Q. This will normally include an initial period of 5 years' limited leave and associated benefits. URL

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/597990/Refugee-Leave-v4.pdf

⁴ "Resettlement" Written statement - HCWS23. URL:

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