SPACES OF RACIALIZATION: IRELAND’S DIRECT PROVISION ASYLUM CENTRES AS SITES OF RACIALIZED STATE VIOLENCE

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Abstract: Since November 1999, people arriving in Ireland to seek asylum have been dispersed throughout the country and confined in Direct Provision (DP) accommodation centres. Though initially meant for a six-month stay, by May 2020 7,700 people were living in 85 DP and emergency accommodation centres, many of them for up to nine years. The centres are operated by for-profit private companies who have been paid 1.6 billion euros since 2000, and are mostly sited in remote locations outside cities, on the periphery of society. The confinement of asylum seekers has been disavowed by state and society and continues the disavowal by Irish state and society of the coercive confinement of unwed mothers and poor children in church-run institutions, where women and children were confined and enslaved until late in the twentieth century.

This article is based on interviews with and publicly available testimonies of asylum seekers in Direct Provision and on public and social media statements by the Movement of Asylum Seekers in Ireland (MASI). It theorizes the DP centres as racialized zones of non-being (Fanon 1967: 8) and the DP regime as racialized state violence. The segregation and racialization of asylum seekers in Direct Provision were poignantly demonstrated by asylum seekers’ inability to observe social distancing in overcrowded DP centres during the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic, leading to a considerable number of them being infected.

Keywords: asylum seekers; Direct Provision; Ireland; MASI

Introduction

A resident at Newbridge Eyre Powel Direct Provision centre (one of the poorly run centres in the country, run by a dictator of a manager) got a letter that he was being transferred to the Great Western Direct Provision centre in Galway. When he challenged this sudden transfer, the Gardai (Irish police) were called and he was threatened with being charged with trespassing. Of course out of fear, he left Newbridge to go to Galway.

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When he reached the Great Western centre in Galway, he produced a letter from the International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS) that he had been transferred there. The receptionist said, “Where is the isolation clearance letter?” By now it was evening time. The asylum seeker said this was the only letter the manager from his old centre gave him, signed by an IPAS official. Now for those who don’t know, the IPAS is the government’s International Protection Accommodation Service that deals with the accommodation side of Direct Provision, [which] used to be the Reception and Integration Agency (RIA) before.

The receptionist said the gent must go away, that he was trespassing and that he would call the Gardai. Indeed the Gardai were called and threatened to charge him with trespassing and forced the guy to go, saying they didn’t care where he goes. The gent had not been to Galway before, didn’t know anyone to call there, it was freezing cold outside, his world was just crumbling in front of his very eyes. . . I spoke to him just now. . . he has nowhere to go as he is not accepted anywhere. 

(Lucky Khambule, coordinator, Movement of Asylum Seekers in Ireland [MASI], Facebook post, 20 February 2021)

In November 1999, following the dispersal of asylum seekers in Britain, the government of Ireland \(^1\) decided to disperse people arriving in Ireland to seek asylum to accommodation centres sited in disused hotels, guest houses, holiday camps, hostels and caravan parks throughout the country, two weeks after presenting their asylum applications. Between 2007 and 2018 160 centres have opened and closed (Nedeljković 2018). The term used by the Department of Equality and Law Reform (now the Department of Justice and Equality) for this system of accommodating asylum seekers was “Direct Provision,” because it provides applicants for international protection with bed and board plus a small weekly “residual income maintenance payment to cover personal requisites” of €38.80 per adult and €29.80 per child (raised in 2017 from €9.60 per child, and €19.10 per adult, and raised again in March 2019 from €21.60 for both adults and children) (Pollak 2019) and some additional benefits such as a clothing allowance and a medical card, though no welfare allowances. Asylum applicants are arbitrarily assigned to a Direct Provision centre and, as the opening quote demonstrates, are often arbitrarily transferred from one centre to another.

Before the introduction of the Direct Provision (DP) regime, asylum applicants had lived in private rental accommodation in urban centres, mostly Dublin, supported by a governmental rent allowance/rent supplement. Between 2000 and 2019 DP centres have accommodated 64,594 people (Pollack and Hilliard 2019). According to an Asylum Information Database (AIDA) report,\(^2\) in 2020 6,937
people were living in 44 DP centres, and a further 2,059 people were living in 36 emergency accommodation centres—a total of 8,996.3

The DP centres are operated by for-profit private companies whom the government has paid €1.6 billion since 2000, enabling them to extract significant economic profit from racialized asylum seekers, as Bhatia and Canning (2020) argue in relation to the asylum accommodation system in Britain. A breakdown of annual spending shows that DP costs have increased significantly since 2019. The increased costs largely stem from the need to provide emergency hotel and bed and breakfast accommodation at €100 per bed per day (as opposed to €35 per bed per day in DP centres) because existing DP centres are at capacity, following a rise in asylum applications in 2019. In 2020 alone, emergency accommodation cost €45m (Fagan 2021). This for-profit DP regime arguably constitutes Ireland’s “asylum industrial complex” (Lentin and Nedeljković 2021: 107–126). Beside the buildings needed to house asylum seekers and the companies providing services necessary to run them, many local and international suppliers partake in the profit-making process. These include electricity, heating, communications, sewage and refuse collection companies, food and drink suppliers, hygiene and cleaning products providers, health and transport service providers—all raking in profits from the miserable existence of asylum seekers forced to reside in Direct Provision (Lentin and Nedeljković 2021: 115–116).

More than a hundred academic, media and NGO reports on the DP regime have been published since its inception (e.g. Doras 2019; FLAC 2003, 2009; Loyal and Quilley 2018; Lentin and Nedeljković 2021; Thornton 2014, 2015, 2019). They have criticized the appalling living conditions and the lack of transparency of the DP system, its detrimental impact on residents, and the centres’ unsuitability for long-term accommodation. According to sociologist Steven Loyal (2003: 79) asylum seekers in Direct Provision are “marginalized, excluded, poor, and . . . lack freedom”; and according to the Free Legal Advice Centre (FLAC 2009, the system does not comply with the rights enshrined in international human rights law. The 2019 UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) report stated that Direct Provision does not protect the rights of international protection applicants and recommended its complete phasing out.4

While still residing in a DP centre, MASI spokesperson Bulelani Mfaco wrote in The Guardian about the humiliations involved:

My time in direct provision has taken away all the simple pleasures of life—even just the ability to taste one’s own cooking. I am forced to get naked in front of strangers after a shower while I dress, and I have been subjected to homophobic abuse—the very reason I left my country. The social exclusion, being deprived of privacy, the inability to have social and sexual relations due to being stuck in
dormitory accommodation for years with no end in sight, is infantilising, degrading and cruel.

(Mfaco 2021)

Asylum seekers’ testimonies speak of overcrowded accommodation where single people must share rooms with several total strangers whose languages they do not speak, and where families must share single rooms to the detriment of parents and children alike. The centres’ remote locations make it difficult for residents to travel, congregate and organize. The inadequate and often past its sell-by-date food is served at set times, with no food available outside mealtimes, often leaving residents, particularly young children, hungry. The testimonies speak of dismal, badly maintained and often unclean physical facilities; there are insufficient amenities for children, and limited spaces for the residents to congregate; residents are often not permitted to receive visitors, and staff are uncaring at best and abusive at worst. Former asylum seeker Vukašin Nedeljković (Lentin and Nedeljković 2021) tells of gates and fences surrounding many DP centres, some of which have security cabins and all of which have CCTV cameras that are constantly observed by security guards, keeping residents under surveillance. Residents have to sign in on a daily basis and must inform centre managers and the IPAS if they are absent from the centre for more than 72 hours, and some centres have a 10pm curfew.5 Furthermore, asylum seekers in Ireland were only granted the right to work in June 2018, as the result of a long struggle by asylum seekers and their supporters (and a successful Supreme Court challenge),6 and in accordance with the European Communities (Reception Conditions) Regulations 2018.7 Mental health is a serious problem in Direct Provision where the state tacitly grants centre owners, management and staff what Bhatia (2020) calls “permission to be cruel” through bureaucratic practices that create and exacerbate psychological distress for already traumatized refugees who often experience new mental health problems or exacerbated pre-existing problems as a result of living in DP centres. According to Loyal and Quilley (2018: 116), as many as 90 per cent of asylum seekers suffer from depression and are also five times more likely than Irish citizens to be diagnosed with a psychiatric illness, with many having suicidal tendencies.

Given the dismal conditions and lack of empathy by the state’s immigration bureaucrats, centre owners, managements and staff, it is not surprising that Direct Provision kills. Between 2002 and 2014 at least 72 people seeking asylum (16 of whom were under the age of five) died (or took their own lives) in the DP system under state care. Since 2019 the Department of Justice and Equality has refused to release figures of asylum seekers dying in DP centres, so no up-to-date figures were available at the time of writing (Grayson 2017; Thomas 2019). However, in 2021, in
response to public outcry, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, now in charge of the centres, announced deaths in DP would be formally recorded and released for the first time (Thomas 2021).

Lentin and Nedeljković (2021) propose that the hiding from public view of Ireland’s past coercive confinement of thousands of unwed mothers and deprived children in church-run Mother and Baby Homes, Magdalene laundries and industrial schools, some in remote locations, some in the middle of towns and cities, until late in the twentieth century (O’Sullivan and O’Donnell 2012), represented a disavowal of something that Irish people were aware of but “managed not to know.” Far from accidental, the disavowal and erasure of these institutions of coercive confinement were engineered by the Irish state that continues to hide confined asylum seekers in DP centres from public view by coercing them to live in remote, privately run DP sites. Linking Ireland’s violent past coercive confinement regime with the violent confinement of asylum seekers in the twenty-first century, Clair Wills (2021) argues that, like refugees, unwed Irish mothers and their children were violently forced from their own communities and were, in effect, rendered stateless by the Irish state and its agents—a clear case of racialized state violence, as this article argues.

DP centres have been theorized by Loyal (2011) as Goffman’s “total institutions” (Goffman 1991), and by Lentin and Moreo (2014) as sites of deportability (cf. De Genova 2002). DP centres are maintained as sites of deportability not only through physical isolation but they are continually re-enacted in “bureaucratic intrusions, impediments and indignities which regulate all aspects of asylum seekers’ lives including food, use of electric appliances, receiving visits etc.” (Loyal 2011: 81). In DP centres the “punitive ramifications” of deportability “insinuate the inequalities and excesses of state power and sovereignty into the everyday production of social space and the disciplining of mundane relations” (Peutz and De Genova 2010: 2). Frequent pre-dawn raids by Gardaí (Irish police officers) and the spectacle of deportation enforcement are technologies of violent state control that sustain asylum seekers’ continual vulnerability to deportation.

This article is based on interviews with asylum seekers and former asylum seekers carried out by me and by Vukašin Nedeljković, on publicly available social media testimonies by asylum seekers, and on statements by the Movement of Asylum Seekers in Ireland (MASI). The interviews Nedeljković and I conducted with current and former asylum seekers, and the materials we collected for our book (Lentin and Nedeljković 2021), some of which are quoted in this article, aim to use the voices of asylum seekers as primary data. This is based on the requests by MASI, whose members insist on the voices of asylum seekers being used by researchers without over interpretation (see, e.g., Cresswell 2005 on the centrality of psychiatric survivors’ testimonies to research). The materials used for this article have been shared with
former asylum seekers and with key MASI members and are the result of my ongoing involvement with asylum seekers groups since the mid-1990s and particularly with MASI and its ongoing campaign to end Direct Provision.

This article theorizes the DP centres as zones of nonbeing (Fanon 1967: 8) that are above all spaces of violence and racialization (Calmore 1993; Grosfoguel 2016; Lipsitz 2007). The article employs the term “coercive confinement” used by O’Sullivan and O’Donnell (2012) in relation to women and children coercively confined in church institutions. This term is more appropriate than terms such as “incarceration,” as asylum seekers in Ireland are not forced to accept the government’s offer of accommodation in Direct Provision and are free to leave the centres—in other words, the DP system is not a detention regime.

Surprisingly, with a few exceptions (Lentin and McVeigh 2006; Luibhéid 2013; Lentin and Nedeljković 2021), the DP regime has not been theorized in terms of race and racialized state violence. However, the segregation and racialization of asylum seekers in Direct Provision, which this article argues constitute racialized state violence, were poignantly illustrated by the inability of asylum seekers to observe social distancing in over-crowded DP centres during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, leading to a considerable number of them being infected, as noted in the conclusion to this article.

**Direct Provision Centres as Racialized Zones of Nonbeing**

We are human beings, like everyone, like all of you. All we ask is that we be treated as such. The very fact that people have to ask the Government to treat them humanely should shame all of you . . . People cannot be treated as less than others, indeed, less than human, merely because of their citizenship status or nationality . . . Human rights are not preserved only for Irish or other EU people living in Ireland . . . and an asylum seeker child does not have to be Irish for the best interests of the child to prevail . . . There are children in Direct Provision forced to grow up in state-sponsored poverty, many of them are too ashamed to tell their friends in school where they live . . . The warehousing of people in Direct Provision centres throughout the country amounts to effective incarceration. As an asylum seeker I am divorced from the social, political and economic life in the country.

(Bulelani Mfaco during MASI’s appearance before the Oireachtas [Parliamentary] Justice Committee, 29 May 2019)

The extra-legal DP system was introduced on the basis of a ministerial circular rather than legislation, thereby allowing it to bypass the Equal Status Acts (2000–2015) that prohibit discrimination in the provision of goods, services, accommodation and
education, but that did not apply to immigration and asylum matters (Thornton 2014: 22). DP centres must therefore be understood not merely as being located by the sovereign state outside and above the law, they must also be theorized as “zones of non-being,” a term employed by Frantz Fanon (1967: 8) to think of black people “marked by the dehumanizing bridge between individual and structure posed by antiblack racism” (Gordon 2005: 3).

Though not all black or brown, asylum seekers are racialized by the Irish state precisely by being segregated and coercively confined in remote DP centres on the periphery of society, where they are subject to the state’s bureaucratic permission to be cruel (Bhatia 2020). Racialization needs unpacking beyond biology or culture and beyond individual or structural racism that is often considered a matter of morality, “decoupled from the colonially of race” (Lentin, A. 2021). Prison abolition theorist and activist Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2002: 261) defines racism as not resting on phenotype or culture, but as “the state-sanctioned and/or extra-legal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerabilities to premature death.” Decolonization theorist Ramon Grosfoguel (2016: 10) positions racism as a global phenomenon that differentiates people along the line of the human. He argues that as a global hierarchy of superiority and inferiority, racism differentiates between people classified above the line of the human and thus recognized as human beings with access to all rights, and people classified below the line of the human and thus considered non-human and devoid of any such rights.

Race scholar Alana Lentin (2020: 5) conceptualizes race as “a technology for the management of human difference, the main goal of which is the production, reproduction and maintenance of white supremacy”—whiteness here encompassing the profits of citizenship and Europeanness rather than the privilege of skin colour. And race scholar Alexander Weheliye (2014: 4) proposes the term “racializing assemblages” that “construct race not as a biological or cultural classification but as a set of socio-political processes that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite humans and non-humans.” These definitions leave little doubt that assigning people applying for international protection the category “asylum seekers,” dehumanizing them and segregating them in remote DP sites of carceral deportability define them at best as “not-quite human.” All this leads me to understanding the DP regime as a system of racialization, well beyond phenotypical or cultural categorizations, and DP centres as Fanonian zones of nonbeing where, according to Lewis Gordon (2005: 3), negatively racialized people “find themselves . . . not structurally regarded as human beings.”

Elaborating further, Grosfoguel (2016: 11) writes that racialization occurs through the marking of bodies as superior or inferior: “The important point here is that those subjects located above the line of the human, as superior, live in what Afro-Caribbean philosophers following Fanon’s work called the ‘zone of being,’
while subjects that live on the inferior side of the demarcating line live in the ‘zone of non-being.’” According to this interpretation, asylum seekers in Direct Provision—subject to a set of state regulations, isolation and segregation—live on the inferior side of the racialized demarcation line.

Taking on board Weheliye’s conceptualization of race as separating people according to their human, not-quite-human and non-human status, and Bulelani Mfaco’s quote above, we must concur with Gordon’s interpretation of Fanon’s writing that black (and other negatively racialized) people’s attempt at living “simply as a human being,” or at normality, which is interpreted by Fanon as “whiteness” or as “Irishness” in this particular location, soon becomes a “tale of how exercising this option leads to failure.”

This sense of failure, of being racialized and not being allowed common humanity was poignantly expressed in what former asylum seeker and activist Evgeny Shtorn said in our interview with him (2 August 2019) about being marked out as an “asylum seeker other” in Moate, a small Irish town, where the DP centre he lived in was located:

I went to that village walking, and I arrived at the bar. And when I entered the bar, the guy looked at me and said, “Ah, you are the new people, no?” . . . Wasn’t anything bad, but I was immediately identified . . . “the new people” as they said. Well he invited me for a whisky, he was quite okay. But the very fact that you are so visible, even when you are out of the Centre also makes me feel like this Panopticon extended out there, the very space of the Centre. You are in the Centre wherever you go, everyone knows . . . Moate is very small. Everyone knows who you are. No one is confused because . . . I don’t know, maybe if you were white, I don’t know . . . But people of colour, we all are immediately identified, immediately . . .

Evgeny Shtorn’s testimony speaks of everyday racialization, which emanates from the institutional, systemic racism involved in accommodating asylum seekers in remote DP centres. The coercive confinement of asylum seekers is an act of racialization that arguably constitutes racialized state violence, the main concern of which is achieving the state’s policy aims, which in this instant means exerting control over immigration and asylum.

**Direct Provision Centres as Spaces of Racialization**

Evgeny Shtorn’s testimony also makes abundantly clear that zones of nonbeing are not just physical spaces. Therefore, in theorizing DP centres as racialized spaces, I do not merely relate to the materiality of the confinement spaces that are DP centres, but to the Irish regime of race that has constructed the DP system as a
network of remote centres, segregated from Irish society and disavowed by Irish state and society.

It is worth remembering that the very act of migration, and more specifically of migrating to seek political asylum, is itself racialized. The French sociologist Etienne Balibar (1991: 218) proposes that migrants are quintessentially a racialized group and that the racialization of immigrants and immigration entails blaming immigrants for the crisis of the state’s services, from the economy to housing and from health to education, a crisis that, in differentiating the population between “citizens” and “migrants,” is essentially racial.

In Ireland, since the current wave of in-migration began in the 1990s, migrants and asylum seekers have been blamed for the country’s housing shortages, for overcrowded schools and hospitals, and for welfare fraud, all of which preceded their arrival. According to MASI spokesperson Bulelani Mfaco (2020), citing legal scholar Liam Thornton (2019), the reason given by the state for the establishment of the DP regime was preventing asylum seekers from abusing Ireland’s allegedly “generous” welfare system. Establishing the DP regime aimed to dispel the perception that the social welfare system was a “pull factor” attracting asylum seekers to Ireland. Thus it is hardly surprising that the racialization of asylum seekers also means the racialization of the spaces designated to coercively confine people who arrive to seek international protection.

The racialization of space has been theorized in several ways. One way is the analysis of the racialization of landscape and urban spaces. In “The Racialization of Space and the Spatialization of Race,” George Lipsitz (2007) argues that the US national spatial imaginary is racially marked, and that the racial demography of the places where people live, work, play, shop and travel decides their exclusion and inclusion, and determines their entitlements to own homes and access essential services such as education, unpolluted air, water, food and land. Likewise, John Calmore (1993: 1233) argues that racial (spatial) segregation debases those who are its victims, those who victimize, and those who are mere accessories. Another way of theorizing the racialization of space, with specific reference to Israel’s land-grabbing occupation practices and demographic classifications, is Yinon Cohen and Neve Gordon’s (2018) argument that Israel’s bio-spatial strategies, separating between (occupying) Israeli Jews and (occupied) Palestinian Arabs, and using statistics to racially categorize the Palestinians, construct space itself as a racialized category.

Theorizing the racialization of space itself is pertinent to what I argue is the racialization of the DP spaces themselves. While not an occupied population, nor an imprisoned population or a population living and working in racialized residential landscapes, asylum seekers in Ireland are coercively confined in DP centres that become racialized spaces of nonbeing through policies of mistrust and dispersal,
making them functions of state racism that at the same time work to spread societal “xeno-racism” wherever asylum seekers are dispersed to (Webber 2012: 94).

According to Grosfoguel (2016: 12), while zones of nonbeing are not only specific places, living in a zone of nonbeing must be interpreted as living in a space of racialization:

Given that in the zone of nonbeing subjects are racialized as inferior, they live racial oppression instead of racial privilege ... In the zone of nonbeing, the multiple oppressions are \textit{aggravated} by racial oppression. The zone of being and zone of nonbeing are not a specific geographical place, but rather a position within racial structures of domination that operate at a global scale between centers and peripheries, but that are also manifested at a national and local scale against diverse groups considered as racially “inferior.”

In addition to not being recognized as fully human in zones of nonbeing, there is also the violence involved in coercing asylum seekers to reside in DP centres, a decision over which they have no control. Sara Salem (n.d.) adds violence to Fanon’s description of zones of nonbeing and to his argument that racism is a structure of power and domination along the lines of the human:

People in the zone of nonbeing are not recognized as full humans. While there are people who are oppressed within the zone of being (women, queers, etc.), it is important to realize that they have racial privilege that the people in the zone of nonbeing do not have. The way the system regulates conflicts in the different zones is important. In the zone of being, conflicts are regulated, and are peaceful with exceptional moments of violence. In the zone of nonbeing, the system manages conflicts through violence, appropriation and dispossession. Thus the norm is violence with exceptional moments of peace. People in this zone are oppressed along class, gender, sexuality, \text{AND} race.

In the racialized spaces that are Ireland’s DP centres, the state uses asylum accommodation as an instrument of state control, primarily, but not exclusively, as a prelude to deportation. According to Alice Szczepanikova’s study of asylum accommodation centres in the Czech Republic (2013), the only reason for incarcerating asylum seekers in accommodation centres is the state’s need to control migration: “By actively promoting the image of accommodation centres as benign places, the state controls the dominant representation of refugee reception. In everyday practices in the centres, control and assistance are closely intertwined and produce an oppressive environment that engenders asylum seekers’ dependency.”
Szczepanikova’s analysis resonates with the ambivalent position of asylum seekers in Ireland. Though they are not forced to reside in DP centres, as repeatedly stressed by government ministers, asylum seekers not taking up the offer of DP accommodation are deprived of the right to bed and board, and do not receive any state benefits, including medical cards and weekly allowances, which is why most accept the state’s offer. Theorizing the racialization of space in general and with particular reference to DP centres makes sense when considering that for many asylum seekers living in Direct Provision is akin to what Lauren Berlant (2007: 754–764) terms “slow death.” Slow death, which I propose can be understood as a racialized condition, refers to the physical wearing out of a population and the deterioration of people in that population that is a defining condition of their experience and historical existence, and a mass physical attenuation under global or national regimes of capitalist structural subordination and governmentality. Capitalism, according to Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2015), is always racial and is always involved in prisons and other systems of incarceration and coercive confinement, which, she reminds us, “rose in tandem with the transformation in the role of money in everyday life.”

Following prison abolitionists such as Wilson Gilmore and Angela Davis (2005), who speaks of the “prison industrial complex” which benefits not only prison operators but also a whole economy of service providers and employers, I suggest that the fact that Ireland’s DP centres are owned and run by for-profit private operators who make huge profits on the back of asylum seekers, means that the system also benefits the state both financially and politically. The latter via persuading the public that it is doing the right thing about addressing what has been often called the “refugee crisis,” while also not unleashing asylum seekers onto the already over-burdened Irish housing market.

I propose that confining asylum seekers in for-profit DP centres, where overcrowding serves centre owners’ profit margins rather than the residents’ human needs, falls within the conditions of such capitalist structural subordination. Slow death, Berlant writes, prospers not in traumatic events such as military encounters or genocide, but rather “in temporal environments whose qualities and whose contours in time and space are often identified with the presentness of ordinariness itself” (Berlant 2007: 759). And it is the very ordinariness of being confined in Direct Provision while awaiting decision on their asylum applications that is repeatedly expressed in testimonies by asylum seekers in Ireland such as the following one by Jawad, an Afghan asylum seeker (interviewed on 6 August 2019 by Vukašin Nedeljković, published in Lentin and Nedeljković 2021: 99):

They talk about the Direct Provision centres like here in the jail, you know, and you cannot do anything, you cannot go anywhere . . . It’s very difficult and your
friends cannot come, not allowed to come. And it’s very, you’re feeling not well, your mind is not relaxed, and you’re thinking why I am in jail, that’s it . . . We are three people in one room . . . just white guys . . . And if you have any problem and you complain, nobody cares about you . . . Like if you don’t have ID, you cannot go to the toilet. Because I once went in the bar and I tried to go to the toilet in the bar and they asked me “Can I have your ID please?” And I say “Sorry” and he says “Sorry, you can’t.” And that’s why.

Berlant stresses that slow death is not about an orientation towards the death drive but rather about the maintenance of the living, “a condition of being worn out by the activity of reproducing life” (Berlant 2007: 759). However, when testifying to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Justice and Equality on Direct Provision and the International Protection Application Process, Bulelani Mfaco spoke not merely about the ordinariness of not being accorded full humanity by the DP regime, but also about actual death:

People cannot be treated as less than human, merely because of their citizenship status or nationality . . . Human rights are not preserved only for Irish or other EU people living in Ireland . . . That’s why a lot of people commit suicide in the DP centres. Some attempt to commit suicide because they fear they might be deported, especially when you are getting the letter from the Department of Justice saying that your application has been rejected. A lot of people are taking sleeping pills and they struggle to sleep for fear that their next letter in the post will be a deportation letter . . .

In Lieu of a Conclusion: Direct Provision as Racialized State Violence

In April 2020, a month after the pandemic broke out, there was an outbreak of Covid-19 in the Skellig Star Hotel Direct Provision centre in Cahersiveen, County Kerry, where more than one hundred asylum seekers had been transferred to from Dublin, at least two of whom having died in hospital. After local people protested, the centre management decided to lock in the residents in order to prevent infection, and residents remained locked in for almost two months with nowhere to cook, and they had to beg staff for the most basic necessities (Lucey 2020). The Skellig DP centre residents were not persuaded by the government’s reassurances that it was taking sufficient precautions, and in July 2020 they embarked on a hunger strike in protest against not being allowed to leave the centre. One of the strikers, Azwae Fuard, said to the Irish Times: “Think of the pressures on our mind, locked in a small room. One by one getting Covid. We suffered for four
months in the same building.” Moreover, residents, many of whom were victims of trauma, torture and rape, also faced water rationing and were served inadequate food, Fuard said (Hutton 2020).

By October 2020 313 cases of Covid-19 were reported in DP centres, representing 4 per cent of all residents, compared to a rate of 1.3 per cent for the rest of the population at the same time. According to a report by the Office of the Ombudsman for Children, Life in Lockdown,13 the boredom, loneliness and frustration felt by children everywhere in Ireland during the pandemic and associated lockdowns was magnified for children in DP centres (Baker 2020). Reacting to the conditions of asylum seekers in Direct Provision during the pandemic, MASI focused on the unavailability of single rooms for people to isolate in, and on the practice of relocating residents to centres with no isolation possibilities, noting that “many asylum seekers share bedrooms, toilets, showers, kitchens and dining areas with strangers. Keeping two metres away from the next person becomes impossible in this setting.”14

In March 2021, in the midst of uncertainties regarding the vaccination project, there was a social media rumour that all the residents of Ireland’s largest DP centre in Mosney, County Meath, where in June 2020 an undisclosed number of people had tested positive for Coronavirus (Malekmian 2020), were to be vaccinated. The rumour proved to be fake news circulated by extreme right-wing sources that also expressed the racist view that “Irish people are second class citizens in our own country” (The Journal 2021). In fact, according to MASI, only asylum seekers who worked as frontline health workers, were elderly or medically vulnerable were vaccinated (The Journal 2021).

The problem of refugees and asylum seekers contracting Covid-19 was not unique to Ireland and asylum seekers and migrants throughout Europe were disproportionately affected by the pandemic. Overcrowded reception and accommodation centres with no possibility of practising physical distancing or following hygiene measures was one of the main concerns the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) identified in its May 2020 migration quarterly bulletin. At the same time, the FRA pointed out that closed borders made it more difficult for refugees to reach safety in the EU and this left people stranded at sea, while suspended asylum procedures during the pandemic left many in limbo.15

The Covid-19 crisis highlighted many issues where deprivation, inequality and racialization differentiate between population groups along the lines of the human, as argued, inter alia, by Weheliye (2014). In conclusion I propose that the conditions of asylum seekers in Ireland’s DP centres during the Covid-19 pandemic—despite the Irish government’s welcome but much criticized 2021 White Paper committing to end Direct Provision by 2024, a process not began at the time of writing this article16—confirm my argument that DP centres are racialized zones of nonbeing where residents are not recognized by the Irish state as fully human. Furthermore, allowing the pandemic to disproportionately affect asylum seekers
in Direct Provision illustrates that the Irish government was in fact operating racialized state violence against asylum seekers, compounding the violence involved in coercively confining a disparate group of vulnerable people legally seeking international protection in the state.

Locking up asylum seekers in DP centres during the Covid-19 pandemic without providing them with isolation facilities and overlooking their health and safety needs constitutes racialized state violence. Furthermore, treating asylum seekers differentially to other population groups in the Republic of Ireland—not only during the Covid pandemic—constitutes institutional and systemic racism.

More generally, as argued by Neve Gordon and Penny Green (2020), by granting the police powers during the Covid-19 pandemic to fine and detain people who infringed government regulations regarding mask wearing and social distancing, states unleashed structural violence that is embedded in social institutions and tends to harm people by preventing them from meeting their basic needs. Structural violence often leads to fatalities, while disproportionally affecting vulnerable racialized populations. Gordon and Green define these actions as

a form of violence that involves human rights violations perpetrated by states to advance organisational goals. They don’t see this criminality because structural violence tends to precipitate social death, which is gradual, and therefore fails to generate the kind of visceral shock we are currently experiencing as the pandemic spreads across the globe.

The condition of asylum seekers in Ireland’s DP regime during the Covid-19 pandemic, including locking up some asylum seekers inside DP centres, confirms the argument that the differential treatment of asylum seekers by the Irish state constitutes racialized state violence. A poignant illustration of this was provided by an Irish Refugee Council (IRC) report about the experiences of asylum seekers during the pandemic. The report found that over half the respondents felt unsafe due to the number of people they were forced to share accommodation with, and to their type of accommodation. Some respondents indicated that asylum seekers’ experiences of Direct Provision during the Covid-19 crisis were akin to “slow death,” that “domain of living on, in which everyday activity; memory, needs, and desires; diverse temporalities and horizons of the taken-for-granted are brought into proximity” (Berlant 2007: 759). Yet beyond slow death, asylum seekers quoted in the IRC report also expressed a very real fear of actual death as the following quote from some of the people interviewed by the Irish Refugee Council illustrates:

“This place is packed, people are coming in every day and they bring them here and put us at risk of Corona,” a respondent noted. “I feel like our wellbeing is not
important to them. We share the same canteen, a lot of people share bathrooms and toilets. The truth of the matter is we are at risk of dying more than anyone else.” “We are powerless,” stated another. “Just sitting ducks waiting to die.”

(The Hotpress Newsdesk 2020)

Notes

1. The term “Ireland” as used in this article refers to the Republic of Ireland, although “Ireland” consists of two states: the Republic of Ireland and the Northern Ireland statelet (McVeigh 2006; McVeigh and Rolston 2021).
3. In 2020 51.5 per cent of the applicants were men, 30 per cent were women and 19 per cent were children; in 2021 the top five countries of origin were Nigeria, Georgia, Somalia, Afghanistan and South Africa (see: http://ipo.gov.ie/en/IPO/IPO%20Stats%20Sep%202021%20FINAL.pdf/Files/IPO%20Stats%20Sep%202021%20FINAL.pdf (accessed 18 November 2021).

References


