

**Curating the Diffused Site of the Political:
Refugee Economies and the Public Sphere**

Brandon LaBelle, *The Other Citizen*

*The border is on me.
It tracks me, profiles and files me.
I run to it. It pushes back.
It won't leave me alone.
It keeps track.
It digitizes me.
The biometry that I carry unknowingly.
I am newly measured.*

*My pigment like a map of pixels.
Bit by bit.
Increments of intrusion, extraction.
The border is in the satellites, the airports, the mobile phone.
It monitors my calls.
It turns me into data.
Data is my name and data is my game.
Data that I hold in my palm, turn into stones to throw.
Across ponds in deep forests, and further; across streets full of
torn paper
and silence.*

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Public Sphere

- Within an expanded field of art and curating discussions around the notion of the public sphere have been largely dominated by the idea of an 'Agonistic Pluralism' developed by the Belgian political theorist Chantal Mouffe which she pitted as 'politically realist' alternative to Jurgen Habermas' 'Deliberative Democracy' model of a public sphere.
- **Political Realism:** "It is only when division and antagonism are recognized as being ineradicable that it is possible to think in a properly political way." (Mouffe) i.e. antagonism is what is distinctive about politics.
- Agonism sees conflict as the chief ingredient and guarantor of pluralist democracy as well as what constitutes its specificity. Instead of arguing for a rational consensus, it argues for a 'conflictual consensus' that avoids falling into pure antagonism by reinventing conflict as a struggle between adversaries rather than a struggle between enemies.
- Alex Thomson has noted how agonism "replaces the idea of a public good with 'politics' itself as an abstract value deprived of any content, except for the pragmatic virtues of pluralism and tolerance." Thus: Agonism only lets "articulate a distinctive political virtue in terms of the value of political conflict itself."

Public Sphere

- What is important to consider here is how these two assumed opposite understandings of a public sphere (Agonistic Pluralism and Deliberative Democracy) are both anchored to what is essentially the same space, a parliament. A general public sphere for Mouffe is “where conflicting points of view are confronted without any possibility of a final reconciliation.” These points of view are also hegemonic projects, or latent hegemonies, since for Mouffe public space can only be conceived as a perpetual battleground.
- Unmistakably this is parliament as an endless battlefield, and this calls into question art’s love affair with the agonistic model, since what adopting it as an institutional template leads to is a corresponding one-to-one relationship in which the art institution is conceptualized as a permanent battleground. Simply put, agonistic art institutions—whether in theory or in practice —reproduce the limitations of parliamentarianism and retain the concrete space of liberal democratic parliament as a kind of imprint or inner image wherever they go and whatever they do

Left-Wing Populism and the Image of the People and Franchising Democracy

Mouffe advocates a Left-Wing Populism that would establish an 'agonistic pluralism', she sees this Left-Wing Populism as the only way to combat current Right-Wing Populisms that she understands as being a response to the waning and crisis of neoliberalism. The anthropologist and sociologist Didier Fassin recently stated that:

"I do not think that present right-wing populism is a response to a crisis of neoliberalism, first because it is not a response, and second because there is no such crisis. On the contrary, right-wing populism is often a Trojan horse for neoliberalism. Examples abound, but one should suffice. The coming to power of Donald Trump is an electoral victory for populism but a political victory for neoliberalism."

DIDIER FASSIN text

Challenges

These notions of public sphere, seem increasingly out of touch fundamental changes in political communication with the public. These changes cause disruption to public spheres, they are highlighted by communication theorists W. Lance Bennett and Barbara Pfetsch:

“First, the proliferation of social and digital media has increased the dispersion and cacophony of public voices. Second, this fragmentation of publics has led to an “inability to communicate across differences” These challenges to the ideal of shared communication are magnified by declining confidence in institutions such as parties, press, and legislatures, which served as authoritative information hubs in idealized modern democracies. [...] Third... the systematic construction of parallel online political realities that enable citizens to live within “filter bubbles” co-produced by social networks, platform algorithms, and affordances. The resulting weakening of traditional bases for validating information has further opened societies to bots, trolls, hacking, and disinformation from outside sources.”

Challenges

Angela Dimitrakaki

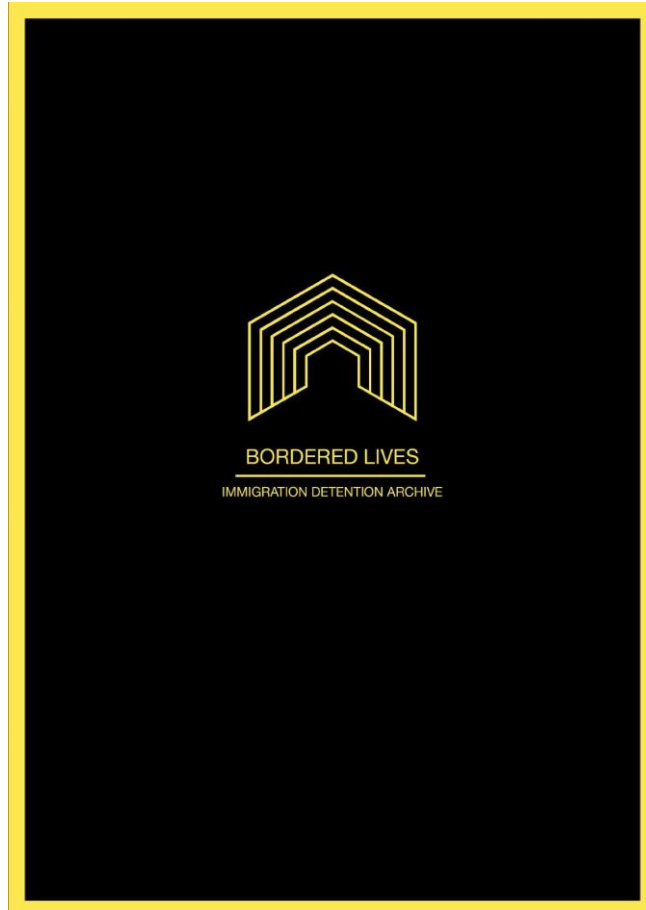
“... the consensus on what democracy means at present: a **“democracy of equivalence”**, an electoral accounting potentially at least legitimising the power of *any* majority over *any* minority. It is this equivalence that we witness as “the free, public expression of opinion”, registered in Artur Zmijewski’s *Democracies* (2009) where micro-collectivities advocate their possibly antithetical politics. This is then registered and signified as an unsolvable problem, a necessary shortcoming of the condition of democracy as practised in civil society.”

The Diffused Site of the Public Sphere

- Economic Realism rather than Political Realism
- Inspired by Feminist-Marxist theorists Maya Gonzalez and Jeanne Neton I suggest that despite its pluralist intentions, such versions of the public sphere imply an abstract community of equal citizens who are only 'formally equal' but effectively remain systemically and infrastructurally disadvantaged and unequal. Importantly, the point here is not to seek an alternative to radical democratic projects – such as Chantal Mouffe's agonistic democracy – but to acknowledge their shortcomings with regards to various constituencies, groups and desires; constituencies already part of the post-migratory story.
- The public sphere is in the concrete and embodied struggles with the political economy of borders, detention camps and centres, the Calais jungle, phones etc. that give voice “an indigenous knowledge of the unwanted, the unchosen, and the held together,”. This is what I call 'refugee economies' they are economies in which 'the floating subjects' of the world live out the public sphere.

Imran Perretta, 15 Days, 2018





Mary Bosworth Director of the Centre for Criminology and Director of Border Criminologies, an interdisciplinary research group focusing on the intersections between criminal justice and border control collaborated with Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll artist and Prof. of Global Art Birmingham Uni.



Detention Centre Compact

This compact is not legally binding. This is a voluntary agreement which you are encouraged to sign. If you do not wish to sign it will not affect your rights and responsibilities or the way you are treated in the detention centre or have an effect on any application or appeal that you may have made about your stay in the United Kingdom.

WELCOME TO [REDACTED] IMMIGRATION REMOVAL CENTRE

Dear Resident,

We understand that arriving at [REDACTED] can be a stressful and anxious experience but we hope that by reading this booklet some of those fears may vanish and that your stay here will be pleasant.

This booklet contains all the information that you will need to know about [REDACTED] what you can expect from us, and what we expect from you during your stay here.

Firstly we would like to answer the two most popular questions that residents ask when they arrive here:

What is [REDACTED]?

[REDACTED] Immigration Removal Centre and is run by [REDACTED] on behalf of the Borders and Immigration Agency (BIA). The Centre houses up to 405 residents at any one time, all of which have different backgrounds, religious beliefs and cultures but each and every one is treated with dignity and respect by the staff that work here.

Why am I here/how long will I be here?

BIA will have explained to you the reasons why you have been brought here. If this has not been explained, then you can request to see a member of the BIA team, who will discuss your case with you.

Please note that [REDACTED] Staff do NOT know your personal circumstances and are not allowed to get involved in your case, therefore they cannot answer these questions so please do not ask them to.



HOUSE RULES

Here at [REDACTED] we have rules which MUST be adhered to. These rules are not only for your benefit, but for the benefit of all other residents who stay here, and staff that work here.

We expect you to:

- Treat staff, Residents and all other people visiting the Centre with respect whatever their race, religious beliefs, sexuality or social circumstances.
- Never to bully, threaten or intimidate other Residents and/or Staff
- Not to display material that would be offensive to other Residents, Staff or Visitors to the Centre.
- Refrain from the use of alcohol or the use of any controlled drugs.
- Cooperate fully in the Centre's activity and avoid bad behaviour.
- Treat the Centre properly with care and to keep your room clean and tidy.
- Have respect for, and never interfere with, other people's property.
- Maintain an acceptable level of personal hygiene.
- Keep within the rules, whether local or national, which apply to you.
- Respect the trust placed in you and your Visitors in the visits hall.
- Keep noise to acceptable levels at all times.
- Express your views, requests/complaints in a reasonable and constructive manner.
- Comply with the Centre's smoking policy

To co-operate fully with the detention centre staff, immigration service, and others assisting in the operation of the centre in the performance of their duties. To abide by the centre's local rules and routines for the smooth and safe running of the centre.

Never to use alcohol or drugs within the centre unless authorized for medical or religious purposes.

To submit to a medical examination if it is believed that you may be suffering from a specified disease that could affect your own health or that of others.

Never to send a communication whose contents may endanger the security of the detention centre or the safety of others or are otherwise of a criminal nature.

Never to ask any officer to take part in any business or to bring in or take out any article on your behalf.

To express your views, requests and complaints in a reasonable and constructive manner.

WE AGREE TO THE TERMS AND CONDITIONS OF THIS COMPACT

_____ Officers signature

_____ Print name

_____ Residents signature

_____ Print name

Date :-

**Boardroom
Campsfield House
Immigration Removal Center**

