

Shelter provision and state sovereignty in Calais

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Government provision of shelter for Calais' migrant population over the last twenty years has prioritised the assertion of state authority over the alleviation of human suffering. Policies in 2015-16, which involved the destruction of informal shelter and the provision of basic alternative accommodation, continued this trend.

Successive French governments have responded to the large undocumented migrant population in the northern port of Calais by heightening security around the border and by controlling migrants' access to shelter in the immediate vicinity of Calais. There has been a pattern for over twenty years of alternating between providing accommodation and conducting evictions or forced relocations. Reception centres have opened and then shut down and encampments have been allowed to grow and then demolished.

By January 2016, when the French Minister of the Interior ordered the demolition of the informal camp known as 'the Jungle' and the relocation of its residents, the migrant population of the camp comprised an estimated 6,000 people. The Jungle was demolished in two phases over a period of eight months. During the first phase, some of those evicted were relocated to a temporary facility constructed next to the camp from re-purposed shipping containers.¹ Many chose instead to move to the half of the camp which was still standing. In the second phase of demolition, riot police used tear gas, water cannon and rubber bullets to evict everyone, including residents of the container facility.

The provision and destruction of shelter for migrants in Calais has been consistently justified by officials using the language of humanitarianism, citing the poor conditions in which the inhabitants lived. Yet the state's 'humanitarian response' to the conditions in the Jungle in 2016 was to violently evict several thousand people (half of whom saw their homes bulldozed twice), temporarily re-house a minority in shipping containers that did not conform to international humanitarian standards, and ultimately relocate people to asylum accommodation that many chose to leave, preferring to sleep on the streets.

The Jungle camp challenged the sovereignty of the French state. Although the migrant population had received permission to occupy the site in Calais, the autonomous construction of a semi-permanent settlement that by 2016 housed several thousand people defied state authority. Residents of the settlement lived in extreme hardship but they had opportunities to be themselves and perform acts of citizenship which were incompatible with their status as undocumented migrants. It was therefore desirable for the state to demolish the camp and reincorporate its inhabitants

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The 'high street' in the Calais Jungle, April 2016.

into the immigration regime. The decision to dismantle the Jungle and relocate its inhabitants to alternative accommodation in shipping containers and reception centres across France was primarily a political act, not a humanitarian one.

In official camps that provide shelter for displaced people, site arrangements and rules are generally drawn up by the organisation running the camp. In contrast, the French state set the external boundaries of the Jungle settlement – riot police patrolled its perimeter and monitored those entering – but went no further. Inside, residents determined the structure of the camp, building their own houses, initially from plastic sheets, later from longer lasting materials such as wood and corrugated metal. Streets were demarcated and named, and districts were established, generally along national lines. Working with volunteer groups, residents constructed large buildings that provided public facilities such as mosques, churches, children's centres and a youth centre. In the absence of government involvement, humanitarian agencies and voluntary groups performed a range of state-like functions including the provision of medical treatment, childcare,

education, legal advice and the conducting of censuses. The Jungle was the product of Anglo-French border policy but within its boundaries residents enacted their own social order beyond the realm of the French state.

The Jungle offered a space in which residents enacted multiple potential identities irrespective of migration status. There were opportunities for social advancement within the settlement that would not have been possible outside it. The organisation L'Auberge des migrants selected community leaders to assist with the fair distribution of clothes and food. Undocumented entrepreneurs started businesses – grocers sold food purchased in supermarkets in Calais, hawkers traded clothing donated to the camp by the British and French public, and there were a number of restaurants and a nightclub. Residents had opportunities for artistic production, with theatre groups and performing artists travelling from Britain. Volunteers and agency workers lived and worked alongside undocumented migrants to construct shelters and provide services. People made political claims through marches, motorway blockades, occupations, hunger strikes and sewing up their lips. Their actions drew public attention

to the issues facing migrants in Calais, and succeeded in delaying the demolition of the northern half of the settlement by six months.

Reasserting state authority

The shipping container facility constructed alongside the Jungle reasserted the state's authority, restricting the formation of new identities and limiting opportunities for acts of citizenship. Whereas the Jungle was formed incrementally in response to its residents' needs, the container facility was planned and managed by an organisation acting on behalf of the French state according to the principles of cost efficiency and security. Its physical space comprised a grid made up of large containers each housing 12-14 people, whereas camp residents had chosen to live in small, private shelters for individuals or families. The container facility lacked communal spaces for association or performance, public facilities or premises for business. Residents had no opportunity to reconstruct the built environment, which had a permanence that the Jungle lacked. The facility was surrounded by a wire fence patrolled by police dogs, and only residents were able to enter and leave, through turnstiles secured with fingerprint scanners. In contrast, the Jungle settlement had been open to visitors, allowing inhabitants to develop relationships with volunteers, agency workers and activists.

The relocation of Calais' migrants reaffirmed the social and bureaucratic labels from which the informal settlement had sheltered them. Those who moved into the shipping containers became passive recipients of assistance, literally 'contained' in the facility. They were obstructed from creating other identities for themselves by their physical separation from non-residents and by the restrictions on business or community activities. At the same time, the securitised architecture of the facility presented its inhabitants as dangerous.

Shelter provision is political as much as it is humanitarian. In 2016, the dismantling of the Jungle and the forced relocation of its inhabitants were a response to the challenge to state authority posed by the rapidly growing informal settlement. When Eric Besson, French Immigration Minister, ordered the demolition of a migrant settlement in Calais in 2009, he declared that: "On the territory of this nation, the law of the jungle cannot endure." Besson's 'law of the jungle' described chaos and hardship but the Calais Jungle also represented autonomy and the multiplicity of identities. It was these latter characteristics that were incompatible with the French immigration regime.

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1. See image on page 18.

