

# Complexity reduction and policy consensus: Asylum seekers, the right to work, and the ‘pull factor’ thesis in the UK context

The British Journal of Politics and  
International Relations  
1–17

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DOI: 10.1177/1369148116656986

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## Abstract

Since the early 2000s, asylum policy in Western states has become increasingly dominated by the concept of the ‘pull factor’—the idea that the economic rights afforded to asylum seekers can act as a migratory pull, and will have a bearing on the numbers of asylum applications received. The pull factor thesis has been widely discredited by researchers but remains powerful among policymakers. Through an analysis of the pull factor in the UK context, and drawing on insights from Cultural Political Economy, this article argues that the hegemony of the pull factor thesis is best understood as a ‘policy imaginary’ which has become sedimented through both discursive and extra-discursive practices and processes. The article offers a means of understanding how a common sense assumption—which is challenged by a large body of evidence—has come to dominate policymaking in a key area of concern for politicians and policymakers.

## Keywords

asylum seekers, Cultural Political Economy, policy imaginaries, pull factor

## Introduction

Since the early 2000s, asylum policy in Western states has become increasingly dominated by the concept of the ‘pull factor’. That is, the idea that the policy context on asylum in a particular country can act as a migratory pull, and will therefore have a bearing on the numbers of applications for asylum received. The economic rights of asylum seekers have been a particular focus of attention, as the assumption that many asylum seekers are not ‘genuine’ refugees (who migrated primarily as a consequence of persecution) but are instead economic migrants (who migrated primarily in search of employment) has become increasingly popular. Such ‘bogus’ applicants are thought to be using the asylum

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system as a means of gaining entry to destination countries, or to access welfare or employment upon arrival. Under this rationale, policies which significantly restrict the economic rights of asylum seekers should take away the pull and decrease the numbers of applications made. In this sense, asylum has been re-narrated as an economic phenomenon, rather than a primarily political and humanitarian phenomenon. This article focuses specifically on the right to work, or labour market access, as a pull factor.

There have been numerous studies over the past 20 years which have sought to investigate the pull factor, and ultimately to find evidence for or against its existence. These studies, discussed further in the next section, have not found there to be a strong link between the economic rights of asylum seekers in host countries and destination choice (see, for example, Day and White, 2002; Hatton, 2004, 2009; Keogh, 2013; Neumayer, 2005; Robinson and Sergott, 2002; Toshkov, 2014; Valenta et al., 2015). Rather, it is other factors such as histories of colonial relations between countries of origin and reception that are found to have the strongest influence on destination choice. In light of this strong body of countervailing evidence, how can we then make sense of the continued resonance of the idea of labour market access as a pull factor? Addressing this question is the primary concern of this article. Rather than attempting simply to refute the policy rationale, the article offers a means of understanding how a common sense assumption—which is challenged by a large body of evidence—has come to dominate policymaking in a key area of concern for politicians and policymakers.

Because simplified interpretations of complex phenomena are communicated by politicians as stories, researchers have tended to approach them in terms of the conceptual frameworks of narratives (Boswell et al., 2011; Roe, 1994) and frames (Bleich, 2002; Van Hulst and Yanow, 2016). This has particularly been the case in studies of the politics of immigration. Both of these types of approach observe that policy problems do not necessarily emerge from rigorous analyses of real-world phenomena, but are the product of ideational resources, ideologies, knowledge systems and political agendas. Boswell et al. (2011) develop this by focussing on policy narratives as entailing particular *knowledge claims* which are grounded in cognitive processes: the need to know causal criteria, the need for coherence, and consistency with available information. This is plausible but the concentration on discourses draws attention to just one potential analytical focus. The institutional and material contexts from which discourses emerge are thus left unexplored and consequently such approaches do not facilitate an understanding of how hegemonic narratives come to have causal powers when actors use them as a basis for action.

The concept of policy ‘imaginaries’, part of the approach to Cultural Political Economy (CPE) developed by Ngai-Ling Sum and Bob Jessop (Jessop, 2009; Sum and Jessop, 2013), offers a deeper analysis of such phenomena and is a more adequate alternative to narrative based approaches. CPE incorporates the cultural turn (a concern with semiosis or meaning making) into the analysis of the interaction between economic and political phenomena, and their embedding in broader sets of social relations. It involves a synthesis of critical semiotic analysis and critical political economy and in doing so situates discourses in relation to extra-discursive (material, institutional, technological) factors. While policy narratives are important, then, in order to understand their significance we need to dig deeper into the contexts from which they emerge. Starting from the sense-making stories that policymakers tell themselves and others in interpreting phenomena, narratives are then nested within a broader framework. The semiotic aspects of meaning making (narratives) are therefore important, but so too are the broader material aspects such as institutional arrangements, technologies, and international political contexts.

In short, CPE offers a means of understanding how what politicians *say* fits into the cultural–political–economic *contexts* in which they work.

## Method

The article utilises a case study example: British policy on asylum seekers' rights to enter the labour market. This case demonstrates the extent to which simplified interpretations of complex phenomena can become sedimented with problematic ends, as well as the ways in which these interpretations emerge from broader semiotic and extra-semiotic practices and processes. The article sits within a broader project on asylum seekers economic rights in the United Kingdom which is investigating (1) the political imaginaries of asylum which make the policy of severely restricting asylum seeker's economic rights possible, (2) the economics of the policy (state and non-state economic impacts), and (3) the implications of the policy for asylum seekers throughout their migration journey. The research presented here is based upon textual analysis in the first phase of the project. This involved creating a database of texts of all of the records of the debates in the Houses of Commons and Lords which covered the issue of asylum seekers and the right to work; records of parliamentary committee meetings and reports where the issue arose (e.g. the Home Affairs Select Committee); newspaper articles from all major UK national newspapers; political speeches made by party leaders and cabinet ministers; think tank reports; European Union (EU) Commission and Parliament reports; third sector reports; and campaigning materials produced in the period.

In total, 449 texts covering the period 2002–2015 were gathered and imported into NVivo qualitative data analysis software. The texts were then coded to identify the full range of arguments made—for and against—giving asylum seekers the right to work. When coded, this provided a database through which I was able to identify the range of arguments made, by who, and in what contexts, for the period since what was effectively a work ban came in. Through this process it was found that those arguing for the right to work to be re-extended were from a diverse range of contexts and political persuasions, that they made their arguments in a wide range of contexts, and that the arguments themselves were wide ranging. All of these efforts at contestation have had no discernible effect on the policy, making the arguments made *against* the right to work especially interesting. These arguments were made by a very narrow range of actors, in a narrow range of contexts, and drew overwhelmingly on one argument: the pull factor.

The approach taken in this article is distinctive in two ways. First, CPE has not been employed as an analytical framework in the study of the politics of, and policymaking on, asylum, making this a novel intervention in that field. Second, while there has been growing interest in CPE in recent years, emerging work in the field is dominated by a focus on the governance of the economic sphere (e.g. the financial crisis, labour migration). Yet many of the core concepts of the CPE promoted by Sum and Jessop, and notably that of policy imaginaries, have implications beyond these existing applications (as noted in Sum and Jessop, 2013). By looking at the case of asylum policy, then, we see that the logics of these explicitly economic spheres can be observed in other policy areas which have traditionally been seen as external to capitalist policy imperatives. As asylum has been re-narrated as an economic, rather than a political and humanitarian phenomenon, CPE also offers an entry point in to making sense of this. The next section looks first at the policy agenda pursued in service of this simplified understanding of the context to the asylum system in the United Kingdom, and then briefly traces the deployment of the pull factor as a policy justification over time.

**Table 1.** Timeline of policy changes.

Year	Rule change
2002	Right to work taken away—unexpected announcement by Immigration Minister
2005	The United Kingdom opts <i>in</i> to EU Reception Conditions Directive (RCD). Must give asylum seekers the right to work if they have been waiting 12 months or more for a decision on their claim
2008	The United Kingdom opts <i>out</i> of Recast RCD which suggests member states grant access to the labour market after 6 months of waiting for a decision on their claim
2010	Legal case (ZO (Somalia) (2010) UKSC 36). UK government must extend the right to work to failed asylum seekers who cannot be returned to country of origin in line with asylum seeker policy under the RCD
2010	Home Office announce new rule: asylum seekers (and failed asylum seekers who cannot be returned) who have waited 12 months for a decision on their claim can only apply for jobs on the shortage occupation list

### The pull factor in the UK context

Asylum seekers can apply for the right to work if they have been waiting 12 months or more for a decision on their application for asylum and the delay is not deemed to be their fault. If granted the right to work, they are then limited to jobs on the shortage occupation list. This list includes specialist highly skilled jobs such as ‘classically trained ballerina of international standard’, and so in effect presents a total barrier to legal employment for the vast majority of asylum seekers (Bales, 2013; UK Border Agency (UKBA), 2013; Mayblin, 2014).

Before 2002, it was possible for asylum seekers to apply for the right to work if they had been residing in the United Kingdom and awaiting a decision on their claim for 6 months or more. In July 2002, Beverly Hughes MP (Minister for Citizenship, Immigration and Counterterrorism) announced in the House of Commons that asylum seekers would no longer be able to apply for the right to work. However, in 2005 the UK government opted in to a European Union Directive on asylum reception conditions (2005/85/EC) which meant that they were forced to re-extend the right to work. Reluctantly, the UK government allowed asylum seekers to apply for the right to work 12 months following their initial application for asylum, and only if the delay was not seen to be their fault. They opted out of the Recast EU Reception Conditions Directive proposed in 2008 as it suggested giving the right to work after 6 months. Further restrictions were introduced in 2010, when it was announced that if granted the right to work, asylum seekers would be restricted to jobs on a government shortage occupations list. The introduction of the shortage occupation list rule is linked to a legal case (ZO (Somalia) (2010) UKSC 36) which opened up the right to work to failed asylum seekers, demonstrating the restrictive tendencies of policymakers in this area. A timeline of key legislative changes is provided in Table 1.

Because asylum seekers are potentially left destitute without access to employment, under the European Convention on Human Rights the UK government makes itself liable for the living costs of such individuals. Therefore, asylum seekers receive £36.95 per week for food, clothes and other essentials, and are accommodated on a no choice basis in private housing in a range of cities across the United Kingdom (‘dispersal’). The welfare payment is around 50% of job seekers allowance, which is itself set just above the poverty line (so as to disincentivise unemployment), and as such asylum seekers are effectively

forced into a situation of poverty and (often long term) unemployment (Bales, 2013, 2015). While this policy is clearly undesirable from the point of view of many asylum seekers (Doyle, 2009), it nevertheless costs the state a not insignificant amount of money. A freedom of information request submitted as part of the wider project in which this research sits revealed that 2014–2015 asylum support cost over £206 million and an additional £27.5 million if support for refused asylum seekers was included.<sup>1</sup> Such an administrative burden, on a purely financial basis, does not seem consistent with the government officially pursuing an economic agenda popularly termed ‘austerity’. Furthermore, successive UK governments have gone to great effort to reduce unemployment, reduce welfare dependency, and admonish British citizens who fail to embody the ‘worker citizen’ model (Anderson, 2013).

By far, the most common reason given for limiting the right to work for asylum seekers is that such a policy would act as a ‘pull factor’ for economic migrants to come to the United Kingdom and claim asylum in order to access the labour market (see, for example, HC Deb, 23 July 2002: c1041W; HL Deb, 17 March 2014: c32). It is said that the United Kingdom would, if this policy was pursued, receive a high, and increasing, number of applications for asylum, and that this would slow down the system of assessing applications as caseworkers would be overburdened with unfounded applications. Of the 93 texts in the dataset that contained arguments *against* extending the right to work, 83 contained this argument. Below are seven examples of this argument being made in different fora. It is worth providing a number of examples to demonstrate the continuity and consistency of the argument across genres and over time. First, an extract from a speech by minister in the Labour government Beverley Hughes in the House of Commons on the day that the policy change was announced in 2002:

I am determined to make it clear that there is a distinct separation between asylum processes and labour migration channels. It is essential that we have a robust asylum process that works effectively and swiftly in the interests of refugees, and also is not open to abuse by those who would seek to come here to work [...] Those who are granted refugee status can work immediately, and we welcome the enormous contribution that the skills and knowledge of refugees can make to our society and to our economy. However, our asylum system exists to help those fleeing persecution—those who want to come here to work must do so through the various economic routes available rather than abuse the asylum system. (Beverley Hughes, HC Deb, 23 July 2002: c1041W)

In 2005, the right wing think tank The Centre for Policy Studies published a report which praised the policy change, taking up the same argument:

Until recently, even undetected illegal immigrants had a strong incentive to claim asylum since, once they lodged a claim, they gained access to the benefit system, qualified for the right to work after six months and had immunity from removal while their claims and appeals were being assessed. These incentives have at last been curtailed. The recent reduction in asylum claims may simply mean that fewer illegal immigrants are now bothering to claim asylum. (Lilley, 2005: 4)

Among many articles dealing with the topic in the Daily Mail newspaper, in 2006 the newspaper quoted the anti-immigration Migrationwatch-UK campaign group as follows:

Sir Andrew Green, chairman of Migrationwatch UK, said: ‘Many of those who turn out to be false claimants work to send money back to relatives so allowing people to work will act as a

double incentive for those least likely to be genuine asylum seekers'. (*Daily Mail*, 19 October 2006)

The government's response to the Joint Committee on Human Rights report on the treatment of asylum seekers (which argued for the right to work to be reintroduced) in 2007 continued to make the argument:

The Government is committed to ensuring that there is a distinct separation between asylum processes and labour migration processes. It is essential to maintain a robust asylum process that works effectively and swiftly in the interests of refugees and is not open to abuse by those who come here to work. (Government response to Joint Committee on Human Rights, 2007, HL Paper 134 HC 790: 14)

In a Home Office Impact Assessment of the policy in 2010, the same argument was made:

The Government believes it is important to maintain a distinction between economic migration and asylum. Allowing asylum seekers and failed asylum seekers permission to work is likely to encourage asylum applications and further submissions from those without a well-founded fear of persecution. This is why asylum seekers are not generally allowed to work [...] Giving permission to work to asylum seekers and failed asylum seekers (with further asylum based submissions outstanding) at an earlier stage in the process would be likely to encourage abuse of the asylum system by economic migrants. (Home Office Impact Assessment, 2010)

This was echoed by a Home Office spokesman quoted in the *Daily Telegraph* in 2013:

A Home Office spokesman said: 'Opening up the labour market sends out the wrong message to potential asylum seekers, encouraging spurious claims and clogging up the system'. (*Daily Telegraph*, 11 June 2013)

In the final example below, Conservative Peer Lord Attlee speaks in the House of Lords in 2014, again making the same argument using the same language, 12 years after Beverley Hughes' original announcement:

The purpose of the current policy is to deter economic migration, because people would be able to come here, claim asylum and after a while be able to work. With this policy, we can deter economic migration through the asylum route and therefore properly determine genuine cases. (HL Deb, 17 March 2014: c32)

These examples demonstrate the consistency over time and across genres of the argument. It is important to point out, however, that the majority of documents in the dataset where this argument appeared are political fora—the House of Commons, the House of Lords and various parliamentary committees. Where this argument appears in the media it is in the form of a quote from a Home Office spokesperson, a government minister, or an explanation for why the policy exists which paraphrases these sources (e.g. 'the government ended the work concession because ...'). What this means is that a small number of actors, all associated with the Home Office or UKBA, espoused this argument; actors who were in positions of policymaking power.

## Economic rights as a pull factor?

In response to the growing salience of the economic pull factor as a policy rationale, there have been numerous studies which have sought to investigate the extent to which this assumption underpinning policy is correct. In this section, I use this research to demonstrate the extent to which the pull factor entails simplifications of very complex phenomena to the extent that the policy of limiting asylum seekers' access to the labour market seems almost entirely unfounded.

The pull factor thesis presents a 'common sense' understanding of motivations rooted in rational choice theory. That is, the idea that asylum seekers have a comprehensive knowledge of the rights that they will have in different countries and then make a rational choice on the basis of potential for economic gain. Yet research over the past 20 years has consistently found no significant link between economic rights and asylum destination country (Brekke and Aarset, 2009; Castles and Loughna, 2003; Crawley, 2010; Day and White, 2002; Gilbert and Koser, 2006; Hatton, 2004, 2009; Holzer et al., 2000; Keogh, 2013; Middleton, 2005; Neumayer, 2005; Robinson and Sergott, 2002; Sitaropoulos, 2000; Thielemann, 2003; Toshkov, 2014; Valenta, 2014; Valenta and Thorshaug, 2012, 2013; Valenta et al., 2015). The removal of the right to work had no impact on the volume of asylum applications in Zetter et al.'s (2003) review of asylum policies across Europe 1990–2000, and the employment pull factor is further challenged by findings that asylum applications do not decrease when unemployment in host countries increases (Holzer et al., 2000; Neumayer, 2005). Asylum seekers have been found to have very little knowledge of their ultimate destination country before arriving, and limited ability to choose where they go (e.g. Barsky, 1994; Brink and Pasariboe, 1993; Crawley, 2010; Gilbert and Koser, 2006; Havinga and Böcker, 1999; Robinson and Sergott, 2002). Havinga and Böcker (1999: 53) found, like many others (Collyer, 2003; Gilbert and Koser, 2006; Robinson and Sergott, 2002; Toshkov, 2014; Valenta, 2014; Valenta and Thorshaug, 2012, 2013; Valenta et al., 2015), that 'the asylum policy and reception of asylum-seekers in the country of destination does not appear to be a dominant factor in explaining the patterns of destination for asylum-seekers'.

Research participants in every study undertaken over the past 20 years have been found to have very little knowledge of the United Kingdom or the UK asylum system before they came to the country, and most assumed they would be able to work, only finding out that this was not permitted once they arrived (e.g. Crawley, 2010; Gilbert and Koser, 2006). For example, the findings of Robinson and Sergott's (2002) study for the Home Office, which was published in the same month as Beverly Hughes announced that the work concession would be taken away:

There was very little evidence that the sample respondents had a detailed knowledge of: UK immigration or asylum procedures; entitlements to benefits in the UK; or the availability of work in the UK. There was even less evidence that the respondents had a comparative knowledge of how these phenomena varied between different European countries. (Robinson and Sergott, 2002: viii)

In short, it is not possible to speak of one single 'pull factor' as the key to understanding forced migration flows and there is insufficient evidence to support the theory that access to the labour market acts as a pull factor for asylum seekers.

The pull factor assumption is an imaginary based upon this set of simplifications rooted in ‘common sense’ assumptions. While it is coherent on its own terms, it is based upon an exercise in complexity reduction which creates an understanding of the policy context which bears little relation to the messy, and extremely complex, phenomenon of forced migration. There is, furthermore, not one example in the database of texts, discussed below, of ministers or spokespeople representing the Home Office referring to evidence to support the pull factor thesis.

Underpinning the pull factor is a further set of simplifications relating to the motivations of asylum seekers, and the context in which they flee their home countries and make an application for asylum in the United Kingdom, which are relevant here. The first point to note is that it is well established among migration scholars that a complex relationship exists between forced and voluntary migration. Indeed, the Global Commission on International Migration argued in 2005 that ‘notions of “forced” and “voluntary” migration should be conceptualised as occurring on a continuum rather than as dichotomous categories’ (Middleton, 2005: 2). Within this context, many asylum seekers assume that when they reach a place of safety they will be able to continue with their lives, which is likely to include working. For example, Havinga and Böcker (1999) found that economic opportunities are important for single males, though cautioned that ‘this does not imply that these groups are not real refugees or that they did not flee their country out of fear of severe persecution’. In short, economic aspirations and experiences of persecution are intertwined and are not mutually exclusive.

Why might an asylum seeker wish to work? First, research has shown that very few asylum seekers have any experience of a welfare state such as exists in the United Kingdom and imagine that they will be able, if not expected, to work and support themselves upon arrival (Crawley, 2010; Robinson and Sergott, 2002). Second, work is linked to improved self-esteem, improved mental health, and helps to maintain skills that asylum seekers have from their home countries (a high proportion of asylum seekers are highly educated—see Doyle, 2009). Third, asylum support rates are very low, which forces asylum seekers to live in situations of poverty, to which working may be a preferable alternative (Bales, 2013, 2015). In short, it is not possible to make a clear distinction between asylum seekers and economic migrants on the basis of their work related aspirations. This is because many asylum seekers will aspire to work at the same time as having experienced persecution which led them to flee their home country, even though the search for work was not the primary motivation for migrating in the first place. This does not make their application for asylum illegitimate.

Relatedly, within the pull factor imaginary asylum applicants tend to be understood to be either genuine refugees fleeing persecution (and therefore interested in sanctuary rather than work) or ‘bogus’ applicants who are in fact economic migrants. It is, however, a simplification to represent asylum applicants as either successful, and therefore genuine, or unsuccessful and therefore disingenuous. Many applications are initially rejected (therefore at that point designated as unfounded) and then granted at appeal, thus moving from the unfounded pile to the genuine pile overnight. Even that is a simplification as it may take months or years for the appeal to go through, during which time the applicant’s status as either genuine or otherwise is unclear. Furthermore, since 1996 nine new pieces of primary legislation have been passed which have sought to make it more difficult for asylum applications to be successful. This has included restricting the definition of persecution, introducing safe country lists, and restricting asylum seeker’s access to legal aid, advice, and appeal rights (Mayblin, forthcoming). What this means is that an applicant

who applied for asylum in 2002 and was granted refugee status might today be found to be ‘bogus’. The applicant need not change, but the parameters of the definition of persecution, and the legal and political context mean that the application would be rejected. The binary genuine/bogus assumes that asylum applicants know and understand this changing legal context, know exactly what ‘counts’ as persecution at that moment in time, and are therefore in a position to know whether their application is legitimate or otherwise. If the life experience of the individual, which they may believe to be one in which they were persecuted, does not fit within the parameters of the current definition used by the UK government, it is assumed that persecution did not occur. In short, the genuine/bogus binary is a gross simplification of a very complex set of legal, political, and individual circumstances and processes.

If an application is rejected it is assumed, within this simplified understanding of the issue, that the applicant was disingenuous in making their application and since they did not suffer from persecution they can and should return to their home countries. In reality, it is often very difficult to return failed asylum seekers to their countries of origin for a variety of reasons (Crawley et al., 2011). These include the presence of war, a lack of working airports in home countries, the denial of home governments that the would-be deportee is a citizen of their country, an inability to obtain travel documents from countries of origin, and the Home Office stating that it would not be safe for them to return. Again, the image of the bogus asylum seeker as an economic migrant who chose to migrate for work, and to make an application for asylum in the United Kingdom as a logical means by which that plan might be actuated, is a gross simplification of the circumstances of many asylum applicants.

In summary, the evidence suggests that economic rights do not act as a pull factor for asylum seekers, and that the binary understandings of forced and voluntary migration, and genuine and ‘bogus’ asylum applicants which underpin it are misguided. The pull factor is one explanation for a set of very complex processes and practices which is based on a highly simplified understanding of those processes and practices. The next section makes sense of the emergence and continued resonance of the pull factor using the concept of the ‘policy imaginary’.

## **The pull factor as an imaginary**

### **1. Complexity Reduction in CPE**

Before embarking upon an analysis of the pull factor as a policy imaginary it is necessary first to introduce the concept in relation to the concern with complexity reduction within CPE. Complexity reduction is fundamental to our ability to ‘go on’ in the world; actors and observers attribute meaning to some aspects of the world rather than others ‘because the world cannot be grasped in all its complexity in real time’ (Jessop, 2009: 338). In order to describe or interpret phenomena, as well as make decisions, we must therefore focus selectively on some aspects of the world at the same time as excluding others. Jessop suggests that while

the real world pre-exists complexity reduction (and is also transformed in some respects in and through complexity reduction), actors/observers have no direct access to that world apart from the sheer activity of the concrete historical situations into which they are ‘thrown’. (Jessop, 2009: 338)

The ways in which actors or observers identify ‘aspects’ of the world as significant depends on the meaning systems which they have access to and draw upon (Jessop, 2009: 338). In researching processes of complexity reduction, identifying these meaning systems is therefore important. The pull factor thesis is, I argue, a specific example of complexity reduction in the field of asylum policymaking.

A key concept in researching complexity reduction within CPE is ‘imaginaries’ (see Jessop, 2009, 2013; Sum and Jessop, 2013). An imaginary is ‘a semiotic ensemble (without tightly defined boundaries) that frames individual subjects’ lived experience of an inordinately complex world and/or guides collective calculation about that world’. In other words, it is a way of understanding the world—a meaning system—as deployed in policy contexts. Imaginaries are packages of beliefs, ideas, material circumstances and processes which together form a perspective on a current situation. In moving beyond ideas, then, the concept also moves beyond a narrow focus on narratives. Imaginaries draw upon discourses around the past, the present and the future. Jessop (2013: 235) writes,

there are many such imaginaries and they are involved in complex and tangled relations at different sites and scales of action ... Without them, individuals cannot ‘go on’ in the world and collective actors (such as organizations) could not relate to their environments, make decisions, or pursue more or less coherent strategies.

The ‘imaginaries’ concept enables researchers to link the ways that policymakers envisage future, or current, outcomes, and consequently favour particular policy approaches. However, Sum and Jessop (2013) also see a need for clear distinction between social construal and social construction. Social construals are how we understand a particular social phenomenon or situation. There is infinite potential variation in this, but people select and retain particular construals which over time form an imaginary (with material consequences and causal powers) which becomes hegemonic. The pull factor thesis, then, is a specific example of a social construal which has been retained over time. Imaginaries, and their translation into institutions and social practices are, however, contingent. CPE analysis includes the role of extra-semiotic (material) as well as semiotic factors in ‘the contingent emergence (variation), subsequent privileging (selection), and ongoing realisation (retention) of specific discursive and material practices’ (Jessop, 2009: 340). Variation, selection and retention of imaginaries is a process which occurs through the ‘dialectic of path-dependency and path-shaping that emerges from the contingent co-evolution of semiotic and extra semiotic processes’ (Jessop, 2009). This process makes some efforts at complexity reduction more resonant than others.

Complexity reduction has both semiotic and structural aspects, so a further aspect of complexity reduction is the way in which people avoid having random, unpredictable and chaotic interactions with others and with the material world. This means that possible connections and sequences of action are limited and that social interactions become structured at the same time as particular meanings are focussed on. But it also means that other meanings are excluded, as are other social constellations. What is important in the field of asylum policymaking, then, are the structural aspects of interactions between policymakers, which close down opportunities for contestation of the pull factor thesis.

Why actors select certain construals and how these lead to social construction is dependent on both semiosis (meanings/understandings/discourses) and factors in the material world (structural and material processes and practices). In CPE, semiosis is only viewed as effective when embedded in material practices, which includes technologies of

classification, registration and calculation, which discipline social action. Technologies play a central role in the selection and retention of specific imaginaries in that they ‘provide reference points not only in meaning making but also in the coordination of actions within and across specific personal interactions, organisations and networks, and institutional orders’ (Jessop, 2009: 339). Technologies include policy decision techniques and policy evaluation. There is a well-established system for managing and disciplining asylum seekers, as well as measuring the asylum system in various ways, such as monitoring the numbers of applications and success/failure rates. This system is central to the continued legitimacy of the pull factor thesis, which I discuss further in the next section.

## 2. The pull factor as an imaginary

Politics is about practical argumentation (Fairclough, 2016). Civil servants and politicians are concerned with taking practical action to address a problem that they perceive to exist. However, often politicians are in fact involved in, or committed to, more theoretical arguments at the same time as arguing for policy actions. These might be about potential futures or potential policy outcomes. In this case, the aim of the policy is purportedly to solve a *practical* policy problem around false asylum applications being made (i.e. it is framed as such) when in fact the problem—migrants being ‘pulled’ by the economic rights available in a given country—is theoretical. It is theoretical because the claim is not backed up by empirical evidence. The process by which an imaginary comes to be framed as a practical policy problem that is best solved by curtailing asylum seekers’ rights to work is the focus of this section.

As stated earlier, there are three distinct moments in the life of the imaginary. The moment of variation (emergence), that of selection, and then a longer phase of retention. The first two represent moments when a particular construal emerged from a range of possible explanations as the most salient understanding of the policy context, and its selection privileged a particular understanding of the ‘problem’ which suggested a constrained set of solutions. How, and why, the imaginary has been retained is then a separate, but linked, issue. Both discourses and material practices, as well as structural factors were involved in the contingent emergence, selection and retention of the imaginary. The analysis of the policy imaginary identified through coding the database of texts is therefore structured around these moments of variation, selection and retention. But because CPE calls for an analysis which reaches beyond the discursive, the analysis also looks at extra-discursive (material, institutional, technological) factors in enabling the selection and retention of the imaginary.

### *Variation and selection*

First, let us look at the moment when the pull factor imaginary was selected from a variety of possible construals of the phenomenon of asylum migration. At that time, around 2001/2002, asylum applications in Western states had reached a peak within the context of the post war period (discounting displacements caused by the Second World War itself). While the increase in applications for asylum was a consequence of world events, including the Iraq war and military intervention in Afghanistan, which the UK government was involved in, there was a general perception among politicians, the media and the general public that the system was out of control (Squire, 2009). Under-resourced to respond to an increase in applications, the government department responsible for

assessing them in the United Kingdom was unable to cope and waiting times for a decision on an asylum claim increased. This situation became known as ‘the backlog’, and the perception that the system was out of control, and that numbers of asylum seekers were unprecedented and unmanageable was articulated as the swamping of the country by hordes of migrants (Gabrielatos and Baker, 2008). Those migrants were themselves increasingly described as ‘bogus’ as it was assumed that such a high number of people could not have been genuinely persecuted.

It was at this moment that the pull factor imaginary was selected from among the variety of analyses on offer. If many asylum applicants were not ‘genuine refugees’ then they must be coming to the United Kingdom for other reasons. As rational utility maximising actors, they must be coming to work. This conceptualisation of the problem entailed a number of simplifications which reduced the complexity of the issue to a series of easily understood ‘common sense’ interpretations. Across the texts within the dataset, the asylum system was thus represented around 2002 as a machine: either one which works well so long as it is protected from abuse (as argued by the ministers responsible for the system), or inefficient, slow, chaotic and therefore subject to abuse (as argued by their detractors). Where it is efficient it is so efficient that giving asylum seekers the right to work is unnecessary. In order to maintain this efficiency, it is necessary to introduce limitations on labour market access to curtail current widespread abuse and therefore presumably increase efficiency even further. Either way, ‘the system’ is an entity that is under constant threat of abuse, and therefore requires protection.

Throughout the 2002–2015 period covered in the dataset, asylum applicants are therefore overwhelmingly represented as abusers of the asylum system. However, conceding that there are indeed ‘genuine’ refugees in the world, asylum seekers are represented in two ways: as either genuine refugees who have been persecuted and only want or need protection (not employment); or as economic migrants who are posing as refugees in order to obtain the legal right to work in the United Kingdom. As ‘abusers’ are the policy problem for which solutions are sought (as opposed to the existence of refugees, and therefore contexts of persecution in countries of origin targeted), this is the primary representation of asylum applicants (e.g. Select Committee on Home Affairs Minutes of Evidence, 11 September 2003, HC 1088-i). Within this representation of the situation, it is very difficult to tell who is genuine and who is ‘bogus’ without going through the asylum process. Therefore, much work would be saved if the number of economic migrants applying for asylum could be reduced. This makes disincentivising asylum applications (among those looking for work, who are not refugees) appear to be a logical solution.

Imaginarities are most effective when embedded in material practices such as technologies of classification, registration and calculation which discipline social action. As stated earlier, technologies play a central role in selection and retention of imaginaries because they provide reference points for meaning making and co-ordinate actions within organisations and institutions (Jessop, 2009). Thus, the existence of a system for counting, registering and assessing asylum applications itself defined the presence of increasing numbers of asylum seekers in the late 1990s and early 2000s as a problem. If only a problem for administrators, these asylum seekers were nevertheless a problem. We therefore find in the 2002–2015 period a sustained interest in numbers—of applications, of recognition rates, of deportations—as both a measure for policy success, even where the policy focuses on extremely complex phenomena, and is intended to tackle non-quantifiable factors such as ‘motivations’.

Importantly, there were both discursive factors at play in the selection of the pull factor imaginary, and extra-discursive factors. These extra-discursive factors included the existence of multiple large scale refugee producing situations, the expansion of mass international air travel, and an under resourced processing system. In this sense, the imaginary identified within the database of texts emerged in response to a set of real-world phenomena, and yet the interpretation of the implications, and policy responses to those phenomena, was based on one, simplified, discursive framing of it—the pull factor thesis. The undesirability of this contemporary cohort of asylum seekers is likely deeply rooted in ideas of civilizational incommensurability and differential humanity which are legacies of colonialism, though official discourses are of course carefully deracialized (Mayblin, in press).

The structural context for the selection of the imaginary in the United Kingdom is also important. Within the imaginary, migrants are *either* asylum applicants (who have no interest in working) or economic migrants (whose focus is working). The two categories are mutually exclusive and consequently work becomes something only of interest and/or relevance to economic migrants. The extent to which this separation has been operationalised is related to the institutional organisation of migration management within the UK. Asylum seekers are legally distinct from all other categories of migrant, and there are limits (in relation to the 1951 Geneva Convention on the Status of Refugees) to the control that states have over them. Once in the United Kingdom, they must be permitted to make an application for asylum and that application must be properly assessed. The control of other groups of migrants is up to the discretion of nation states, and those who enter the United Kingdom without the permission of the state can legally be deported without having to go through any additional process. Despite being legally distinct, institutional responsibility for policymaking on all forms of migration is held within one government department, the Home Office. There is therefore a need to create a clear and coherent migration policy regime across all types of migration and within the context of widespread hostility to migration and a perception that it is out of control, as described above. The distinction between economic migration and asylum seeking (and thus their associated economic rights, including labour market access) is therefore in part a function of the institutional and legal context in which policy is made, and it logically leads to the instituting of rules which separate the economic rights of asylum seekers from other migrants. This institutional context in part explains the selection of the imaginary.

While asylum seeking and working are not mutually exclusive or even contradictory activities, their separation in policy terms from 2002 onwards led inter alia to a distinction between those who wish to work and those who wish to claim asylum. This gave institutional support to judgements about the morality of asylum applicants: a refugee would not seek to work; if they did, they would clearly not be genuine. Applicants were/are either making a legitimate claim or cheating the system, genuine or bogus. They were/are either permitted to stay or not; if not, they should/will leave. The system is under attack from bogus applicants and should be defended.

### **Retention**

How, then, was it that the imaginary was retained, even when there was no evidence to support it, and a large body of evidence, described earlier in the article, challenging the simplifications that it was based upon? First, because the simplified understanding of the issue, the policy imaginary, continued to be espoused. Second, because the institutional

framework from which it emerged, which promoted a distinct separation between working and asylum, remained. Third, because the continued use of technologies to measure asylum applications showed that applications were decreasing. While there were a variety of reasons for the decrease, not least the introduction of policies which aimed to prevent asylum seekers arriving in the United Kingdom, such as carrier sanctions, the policy was not shown to have failed. A more complex reading of government data suggests that, since the proportion of successful applications did not reach high levels (as it would if bogus applicants were discouraged from applying), strictly limiting labour market access was not having the desired effect. Nevertheless, the simplified understanding of the issue continued to be espoused; it was politically salient, and easy to understand. Finally, those affected were not a part of the electorate, decreasing the incentive to expand their rights.

Retention is similar to sedimentation—‘all forms of routinisation that lead, *inter alia*, to forgetting the contested origins of discourses, practices, processes, and structures. This gives them the form of objective facts of life, especially in the social world’ (Sum and Jessop, 2013: 163). The denial of most asylum seekers’ access to the labour market has, then, become sedimented. Between 2008 and 2010, there was a large scale third sector and trade union campaign to extend the rights of asylum seekers to work. Consequently, public discussion of the issue increased and there was accordingly a spike in the number of texts in the database around this period. By this time, though the pull factor still had not been proven, it had taken on the status of ‘known fact’. That is, Home Office spokespeople and government ministers repeated in interviews, in statements, in parliamentary debates, the fact that the right to work acts as a pull factor for would-be asylum seekers, which is the sole reason required to limit it. While various actors and organisations sought to politicise and re-politicise the issue (Mayblin, 2016), countering with other knowledge claims, none have yet been successful. None have yet successfully dismantled the logic of the pull factor imaginary.

## **Conclusion**

Policymaking necessitates complexity reduction in the interest of undertaking practical interventions in the social world. While this is an essential part of governance, complexity reduction can, in some circumstances, lead to deeply flawed policy rationales being adopted and acted upon. Complexity reduction, then, is key to understanding how it is that policymakers might pursue policy programmes which directly contradict the available evidence on a particular issue. One approach to making sense of these irrationalities in the policymaking process is to label simplifications ‘stories’ or ‘narratives’ (Boswell et al., 2011; Roe, 1994), and this has been the most common approach taken in studies of the politics of immigration. However, in focusing primarily on the discursive, these approaches cannot fully take account of the wider structures which make the adoption of a narrative so widespread that it becomes hegemonic and thus comes to exert causal powers. A more satisfactory approach is to understand the narrative as part of a policy imaginary which is emergent of semiotic and extra-semiotic phenomena, as advocated by cultural political economists.

Asylum policy provides a model example of misguided complexity reduction. This article has looked at the policy area of asylum seekers and the right to work, which is dominated by the pull factor imaginary. Not only is there no evidence to support the pull

factor thesis, there is also a large body of evidence which refutes it, some produced by the government department responsible for this policy area, the Home Office. The article has presented analysis of a database of 449 texts which cover the issue of asylum seekers and the right to work in public and political fora 2002–2015. This analysis identified the dominance of the pull factor thesis among policymakers and yet a review of existing research reveals that this thesis is unevidenced. In explaining the sedimentation of this problematic imaginary, I turned to CPE, a synthesis of critical semiotic analysis and critical political economy which situates discourses in relation to extra-discursive (material, institutional, technological) factors.

Both the dominance and the inaccuracy of the pull factor thesis is widely acknowledged among scholars who research asylum and yet none have yet presented a systematic analysis which seeks to explain this contradiction. This article fills this gap in the literature and in that sense it speaks to asylum and refugee studies scholars. However, more broadly, this policy area is ideal for exploring the utility of the CPE framework developed by Sum and Jessop in making sense of the troubled relationship between policymaking on complex phenomena, sedimented ideas, and evidence. What it offers is a means to understand the significance of simplified stories and the contexts from which they emerge. It is a way of nesting narratives within a broader framework which can account for not only the semiotic aspects of meaning making (narratives) but also broader material aspects such as institutional arrangements, technologies, and international political contexts. In short, a means of understanding how what politicians *say* fits into the cultural–political–economic *contexts* in which they work.

## Funding

The author(s) received funding from the ESRC for the research in this article: Grant number ES/L011468/1.

## Note

1. Freedom of Information (FOI) Ref. 38465, available at: [https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/asylum\\_support\\_costs\\_published\\_b?nocache=incoming-780299#incoming-780299](https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/asylum_support_costs_published_b?nocache=incoming-780299#incoming-780299) (accessed 3 May 2016).

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