

## Just somewhere to lay my head: Seminarium Migracyjne

'Just somewhere to lay my head': Destitution, disbelief and coercive control in the UK's asylum system

Zapraszamy na **XXIV Seminarium Migracyjne** (w j. angielskim) Pracowni Antropologii Migracji IEiAK UW. Tym razem naszym gościem będzie **dr William Wheeler** (University of Manchester).



Przydatne informacje **Link do strony wydarzenia:** [zoom](#) [1]

**Data rozpoczęcia:** 20-05-2021

**Godzina:** 17:00

Asylum seekers in the UK are forbidden to work or access benefits. However, while they are waiting for a decision on their claim, support is extended in the form of approximately £35 per week and housing provided by a subcontractor on a 'no-choice basis', usually in depressed post-industrial areas where housing is cheap. The British asylum system, like many of its European counterparts, is known among scholars and activists for its 'culture of disbelief', which leads many to be wrongly refused asylum. If the refusal is upheld by the courts, asylum seekers become destitute – not entitled to work, with no access to welfare benefits or Home Office support. The only ways to escape destitution are to provide evidence of a medical condition so severe that it would be impossible to return to the country of origin, or, more commonly, to submit a fresh claim for asylum. At this point people become eligible for 'section 4 support' – housing and financial support, now on a pre-payment card. But applying for section 4 is not straightforward. As the culture of disbelief among decision-makers extends to asylum support applications, asylum seekers are required to document their destitution in exhaustive detail. This paper, based on 18 months' ethnography in third-sector organisations working with asylum seekers, explores how lives are shaped by extended cycles of refusals, destitution, fresh claims and asylum support. I suggest that, in their encounters with Home Office bureaucracy and its subcontractors, people seeking asylum are subjected to patterns of coercive control – control of their finances, of their movements and, in the final analysis, of their capacity for being.

Bio:

**William Wheeler** is a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow in Social Anthropology, University of Manchester. His

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research looks at the lives of those living at the sharp end of the current hostile politics surrounding asylum and migration in the UK. Through long-term ethnographic fieldwork in Manchester, he has explored how people seeking asylum encounter the opaque bureaucratic structures of the Home Office and its subcontractors in the private and third sectors. His chapter '[Conversion through destitution: Religion, law and doubt in the UK asylum system](#)' [2] was recently published open-access by Bloomsbury in *Refugees and Religion: Ethnographic Studies of Global Trajectories*, B. Meyer and P. van der Veer (eds).

He has previously worked in the Aral Sea region of Kazakhstan, exploring the intersections between large-scale environmental change and Soviet and post-Soviet political economy. *Environment and post-Soviet transformation in Kazakhstan's Aral Sea region: Sea changes* will be published in autumn 2021 by UCL Press.

Polecana literatura:

- Sarah Willen, 'Plotting a moral trajectory, sans papiers: Outlaw motherhood as inhabitable space of welcome', *Ethos* 42 (1), 2014, <https://doi.org/10.1111/etho.12040> [3]. An outstanding ethnography of the phenomenology of migrant illegality, which I find useful for thinking about how categories like 'failed asylum seeker' shape people's lifeworlds.
- [Nick Gill and Anthony Good \(eds\), \*Asylum Determination in Europe: Ethnographic Perspectives\* \(Palgrave, 2019\)](#) [4], available open access. Ethnographic studies of asylum decision-making procedures in various European countries, including two chapters on the UK. See also my [review of the book](#) [5] in the *Journal of Legal Anthropology*.

**Source URL:** <https://etnologia.uw.edu.pl/aktualnosci/just-somewhere-lay-my-head-seminarium-migracyjne>

### Odnosi?niki

[1] <https://us04web.zoom.us/j/74812260453?pwd=cINzTmtQbHB3MXdGSXVMaVo0OVA1dz09>

[2] <https://www.bloomsburycollections.com/book/refugees-and-religion-ethnographic-studies-of-global-trajectories/ch13-conversion-through-destitution>

[3] <https://doi.org/10.1111/etho.12040>

[4] <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-319-94749-5>

[5] <https://www.berghahnjournals.com/view/journals/jla/3/2/jla030211.xml>