

# Jailbirds

Jukka Relander

**What do asylum-seekers and migratory birds have in common? A great deal, in fact. Both hail from exotic lands, and neither is permanently rooted in any specific place. Asylum-seekers and migratory birds live in between two countries.**

But they differ, too. A bird wants to fly, but an asylum-seeker wants to lay down roots. What is more, an asylum-seeker whose identity or travel route is unverified or who faces expulsion can be locked up indefinitely in a prison-like detention unit. The bird at least gets a cosy birdhouse high up in a birch tree in someone's backyard, some so lavish they look like miniature villas. In other respects, too, the bird is better off than the asylum-seeker: It can come and go as it pleases, its home is spring-cleaned every autumn, and a plush nest awaits its return every spring. The asylum-seeker is meanwhile locked up in an institution resembling a concentration camp, cut off from the outside world by barbed wire fencing and prison bars. An immigrant detention centre is like a prison, only real prison inmates are luckier: at least they know how long their sentence will be. An asylum-seeker can only wait and wait.

Otto Karvonen equalizes the status of birds and asylum-seekers by building miniature avian detention centres. His Alien Palace Birdhouses are copies of real-life immigrant detention centres from around Europe, complete with concrete walls, barred windows and sullen façades. His reproduction of the Dordrecht detention centre in the Netherlands is even encased in a wire cage, just like the original, whilst the avian version of Finland's Metsälä detention unit is a 'snug' combination of red brick and chromed bars. The barbed wire might be missing, but the likeness is otherwise uncanny. It would seem inhumane to force a bird to live in a barred, concrete mini-colossus. But for some reason it seems perfectly normal to offer a barred, concrete hulk as suitable accommodation for an asylum-seeker.

Karvonen's birdhouses open up surprising, unexpected perspectives on current social issues: What does migration in essence imply, how do we respond to foreigners, and what are our feelings about a hot political topic of the past two decades, international mobility? They pose the question: Why are things as they are, and couldn't we see the whole issue from a fundamentally different viewpoint? Mobility is, after all, a cornerstone of modern-day western civilization. Money travels, goods travel, people travel. "All that is solid melts into air," said Marx of our capitalist economic system. Yet whilst the very mechanisms of our society rely on free movement, the power elites of the West simultaneously attempt to restrict it. Money is free to travel where it will, but the free movement of people and goods depends on its origin. If the 'Made in' label bears the name of a developing country, then free movement is instantly circumscribed. Cocoa imported from Ghana is blocked by high customs duties, and a refugee fleeing a nation in ruin is greeted by the border guard's stern caveat: "Not here".

### **The Wild West and the Welfare State**

Western countries fall into two categories: those that allow free movement but fail to guarantee their citizens a minimum livelihood, and those that limit

incomers to assure their own citizens affordable public services and social security. Let's call these two models the Wild West and the Welfare State.

Back in the 19th century, the Wild West was in many respects a free territory where anyone could vanish without a known identity. The state intervened only if someone caused trouble. Its denizens remained nameless and numberless unless they registered to vote – or had a brush with the law, in which case society made its presence felt in the form of punishments, prison bars and forced labour. To this day, the US and the UK still apply the Wild West model to some extent, albeit that neither is quite as 'wild' as the untamed prairie. Except perhaps in their foreign policy.

The logic of the Welfare State is altogether different. It gives more, and it takes more. It is based on the state assuming control of every aspect of its citizens' lives. Birth, health, nutrition, height, weight, material welfare and death all come under its protective – and controlling – wing. It imposes an all-encompassing system of control, yet at the same time it guarantees a safe, predictable life for its citizens through the fair redistribution of resources. Under the State's controlling wing, we can live free of concern for our basic security, yet at the same time we are the system's prisoners: we live in a gilded cage of good intentions.

The Wild West model is based on the ideal of complete liberty – up to the point of downright indifference. That's not to imply that social norms are absent in the US – to the contrary, but the State asks for very little: everyone is free to be what they want, as long as they look after themselves. The high number of prison inmates is the price paid for liberty. The faction of the community that threatens the liberty of others is segregated from the rest. There are migratory birds and there are jailbirds – and there are more of the latter in the US than anywhere else in the world.

The jailbirds of the Welfare State are not physically confined. We move about freely, we eat and drink what we want, we work at least ostensibly of our free will, and we arrange our lives and homes as we like them to be. But the controlling eye is ever-present, for it is within us. In our society, control is based not on discipline, but norms. Society's message is: "Everything we do, we do in your best interests, dear citizen. If it's not working out for you, then it's your lifestyle at fault." The same form of control is exercised also by the multinational corporations that commodify health, beauty, nutrition and fitness: first they commodify the norm in order to then sell us the means, methods and merchandise to pursue that norm, which will forever hover just out of our reach.

This machinery of control is the dark side of both the Welfare State and consumerist society. Though constructed 'for our own good', its controlling presence categorizes everyone into groups: the healthy and the sick, the social and the unsocial, the productive and the unproductive, the thin and the fat, the virtuous and the corrupt. It registers our cultural background, native language, skin colour and physical deviations and ranks them as socially desirable, undesirable or harmless. We then eye up our peers and benchmark our social 'market value' against that of Others.

From the Welfare State's perspective, asylum-seekers and paperless migrants are lumped together as an undifferentiated mass – they have not yet been pigeon-holed and statistically conferred the status of individuals. In a certain



Alphen a/d Rijn Detention Centre  
The Netherlands

absurd way, the detention centre is a dominion of freedom: if the norms that shape our daily lives are instruments of power, then existing outside the world of social control, social security codes and the finger that waves disapprovingly every time you light a cigarette means that you are free to be exactly who you are. Also in this limited reverse respect, the analogy between asylum-seekers and migratory birds rings true. And perhaps the unbearable freedom of the paperless – freedom from classification, norms and a designated identity – is the fundamental reason we regard them as menacing and dangerous.

### **The mirror of Otherness**

The detention centre is a space that exists outside the domain of social order, yet it exists in a state of hermetic segregation within that very same order. People who spend days, weeks or even months incarcerated in the waiting room of the Welfare State regard themselves neither as part of an undifferentiated mass – albeit that's how they are treated – or as 'free' for that matter either. They exist in a ground-zero state between a past that had a definite shape and a particular identity and a nebulous, as-yet shapeless future. These in-betweeners behind barbed wire fences become the blank slate upon which we project all the complicated emotions and fears we feel towards all things foreign. We can project anything without encountering any resistance, for we know nothing about who or what they really are. The truth can only come forth when our fantasy confronts friction. But an incarcerated anonymous alien reaffirms our fantasy without the least bit of friction whatsoever.

An immigrant in a detention centre is not in an utterly hopeless state of affairs, however. The German philosopher Hannah Arendt once said that a person in a truly hopeless state is someone who would actually benefit from being imprisoned. A detention centre provides people fleeing starvation, war and dictatorship with clean, dry clothing and three square meals a day complete with regular portions of healthy rye bread. A North Mexican fleeing the drug wars might never have realized they have 'rights' until they are read them by the US border patrol. A person fleeing the chaos of a collapsing nation has no 'human rights' until his or her name is penned by an official at the refugee detention centre.

Although we would like to believe that human rights are universal and inalienable, in reality we have no rights until a national government guarantees them. Human rights represent an ideal, with civil rights as their most tangible manifestation. In other words, if your nationality provides no guarantee of any rights, your options are limited – and this is the plight of the blameless jailbirds packed in our overcrowded detention centres.

There is one last hope: refugee status. But getting it takes perseverance, the host country's good favour, and good luck – especially in Finland, where refugee quotas lag far behind the European average. Gaining refugee status in Finland involves passing a rigorous screening process. The battery of questions fired by the Finnish authorities conforms to international standards, but a Parliament-ratified quota of only a handful of refugees ensures that not even the most heartrending tale of woe will make the cut if the numbers are already full. We, however, never hear the stories behind the numbers. Search the internet, but you won't find any asylum-seekers telling their story, at least not in Finnish.



Dordrecht Detention Centre  
The Netherlands

If a conservative politician proposes strict 'quality standards' for the people migrating to our country, it makes big headlines, but we are still no wiser about the real people waiting for asylum. Their stories are not part of the picture. If they were to speak, it would shatter the mirror of Otherness.

### **Lives waiting to be classified**

There are certain refugees whose stories we know. The Americans love sharing tales of Afghans saved from the Taliban, who are regarded as a direct threat particularly to women. In its war against the Taliban, the West can easily identify with the female victims of chauvinist terrorists, but it's a notch harder for a Muslim male fleeing a western-minded dictator to make his voice heard, if not outright impossible.

The hotly contested question pertaining to the Somalian refugees that have been coming to Finland since the early '90s is whether they come here to mooch off our social services or to steal our jobs. Most debaters say both – apparently overlooking that one option logically excludes the other. Whether newly arrived or already settled in our country, immigrants are viewed exclusively in terms of what they represent to us, not how they view or feel about their own situation. The debate focuses solely on whether the refugee is a threat, a cost overhead or a potential taxpayer, depending largely on what the speaker regards as the bigger problem: the shortage of jobs or labour. But there is one point on which they unanimously agree: the nameless, unknown, excluded person is, beyond doubt, a threat.

Foreigners integrated within Finnish society are perhaps viewed in slightly less black-and-white terms (such as the Somalis, for example), but their original function as a mirror for our fears still holds. 'Sharped-eyed' anti-immigration propagandists tirelessly inundate the internet with diatribe attesting to the truth that lurks behind every seemingly unique individual: in the end, every foreigner is nothing but a foreigner. Even the liberal press is blind to the fact that the Somali community is highly heterogeneous. The first groups to arrive in Finland were students formerly based in Moscow, whereas the later arrivals are mostly farmers and other ordinary folk. The spectrum is wide: some of the early arrivals were academically qualified, while many of the later arrivals could barely read when they came to our country. But in our collective imagination, they are all part of the same immigrant soup, even the young adults who have lived in Finland their whole lives.

In a similar way, the media lumps together all migrants from Africa, regardless of their language, cultural background and religion, notwithstanding that there are radical differences between the countries they come from and the conditions in each region. Many argue that we should only accept Christians since they would supposedly adapt better to our society – though the very same commentators claim that our society has become too secular and we no longer live by the Christian values that we expect our future migrants to embrace.

The controlling hand is ever-vigilant. Our detention centres are packed to the gills with lives waiting to be classified. In the end, some will be ushered into our society; others will be shown the exit door. The ones permitted entry are duly registered: their native language, religion and children are neatly noted and categorized. They are given a name, a number and a little nook in a hulking block of concrete flats somewhere on the outskirts of town. Their children are designated



Schiphol Detention Centre  
The Netherlands

a day care centre and school, the adults are informed where they must register as unemployed job seekers. And so their situation improves. They are gradually moulded into individuals.

### **Small cracks in reality**

Otto Karvonen challenges, stirs and teases our preconceptions. For his *Here Will Open* series of installations, he placed innocent-looking placards in the shop windows of vacant stores, variably announcing the forthcoming opening of a “Christian-Hindu day-care centre” or “the multicultural patriotic guild of Turku”. He introduces subtle dislocations in our reality, which passers-by might not even notice at first until we stop and think “Hey, something doesn’t quite add up here”. And it surely doesn’t add up. But where’s the problem: Is it the artist selling Finnish traditional Islamic bread at the market, or is it our status quo? We have a tendency to pretend that norm-breaking cracks in the system are invisible. Or, more precisely: some refuse to believe they even exist, while others imagine that the cracks can be prevented by simply ignoring them.

Slavoj Žižek divides people into three groups: liberals, fundamentalists and authentic fundamentalists. His classification is based on our responses to these ‘cracks in the system’. Fundamentalists reject everything that is foreign: foreigners are foreigners and they’d best stay elsewhere. Liberals are happy to accept foreigners, yet at the same time they believe that all foreigners are exactly the same as we are. Liberals and fundamentalists take an identical attitude to difference: they deny and reject it. Authentic fundamentalists by contrast believe that foreigners are indeed totally different, yet they are curious to find out what they’re really like on their own terms. This is how down-to-earth rural folk once saw the world. Perhaps Karvonen is urging us to adopt the same attitude.

Foreigners are here to stay, because the world is a changed place. Back in the Wild West, towns and cavalry forts were islets of order amid the freedom of the prairie. In our society, the set-up is the reverse. There is order everywhere, except in forgotten pockets where we stash away the pariahs of the nation-state system, the stateless, the paperless, the social security code-less, the jailbirds of our controlling regime. Their plight is similar to that of the wild flora and fauna in our national parks, which have been designated a sequestered patch of land in which to ‘be free’.

Foreigners and nature both exist as an undifferentiated, shapeless, nameless mass. Karvonen turns the tables on and opens our eyes to seeing the world aright. He urges us to see foreigners as part of ‘us’ rather than ‘them’. Perhaps the condition of foreignness is identical to the part of ourselves that we keep hidden deep within. This is why Karvonen’s message is universal: the same gesture works in both Turku and New Zealand, because each of us is ultimately a foreigner to someone, and also foreign to ourselves.

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