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## Redeeming the human: direct action and human rights at Yarl's Wood

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*Demonstrators at Yarl's Wood, 6 June 2015 (image: flickr/Wasi Daniju)*

In the midst of the Bedfordshire countryside, between acres of carefully tended farmland, built on the good soil of our proud, upstanding, democracy, lies Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre, where asylum seekers are detained indefinitely.

According to its [website](#), Yarl's Wood is a "fully contained residential centre housing adult women and adult family groups awaiting immigration clearance". In reality, it more closely resembles a prison; an ominous complex of buildings surrounded by a fence topped with barbed wire. Allegations of abuse, misconduct and rape have been made repeatedly. Home Secretary Theresa May [has been accused](#) of failing to take such claims seriously.

Yarl's Wood [was opened in 2001](#) by Tony Blair's Labour government to show the general public that Britain was prepared to be tough on asylum seekers. The detainees at Yarl's Wood – around 90 per cent of whom are female – are denied their humanity, and represented as a "threat" or a "drain" by the media and politicians alike. A [recent investigation](#) into conditions at the centre filmed staff referring to detained women as "beasties" and "animals".

Ahead of the general election on 7 May 2015, the manifestos of both Labour and the Conservatives emphasised their intentions to be tough on immigration. Labour [boasted](#) that they would "stop illegal immigration" whilst the Conservatives [assured](#) the public that they would be "cracking down on abuse of the immigration system". The rhetoric employed is worryingly similar; those seeking asylum, alongside others hoping to enter the UK, are not considered to be human. They are reproduced as an illegal threat to security and scapegoated for economic problems across the political spectrum.

Which raises the question: through what avenues can the humanity of those detained be restored? The human rights project usually addresses abuses through a legal framework. This has its value in mounting cases on behalf of individual detainees. However, in a rush to remain objective and persuasive, legal approaches can have a tendency to be distanced from those they strive to empower. Further, an emphasis on the law forecloses other ways of enacting change. Talal Asad [has written](#) that there are many understandings of what constitutes a human. A human rights narrative focused on legal procedures is productive of but one understanding of humanity.

By engaging in direct activism we are perhaps able to redeem a different understanding of what it means to be a human. On 6 June 2015, a demonstration at Yarl's Wood illustrated that passion, empathy and solidarity are tools that also have the potential to enact change. Over five hundred people travelled there for the occasion, carrying banners and makeshift musical instruments. The demonstration was organised through a collaboration between detainees and people on the outside, coordinated by [Women for Refugee Women](#) and [Movement for Justice By Any Means Necessary](#). Among the attendees were women who had been detained at Yarl's Wood and female refugees. Others attended in solidarity, including Shami Chakrabarti from Liberty and comedian Josie Long. The protest was a personal affair; for some it was the first time they had returned to Yarl's Wood since being detained there. Speakers articulated disgust, hope, anger and determination.

We walked the perimeter fence of the detention facility to the singing of the all-women [Lips Choir](#). We reached a section where the barbed wire fence was opposite an accommodation block, enabling us to communicate with the women who were being held inside. They used makeshift banners and clothes to wave at us. We chanted together, showing those inside that they were people, with ideas, hopes and a lot of fight still left, in spite of the prolonged suffering to which they continue to be subjected. Protestors climbed the fence, making attempts to remove it, whilst police observed.

Direct action is a way through which we are reminded of the shared human capacity for hope and pain. Standing alongside those who had been detained at Yarl's Wood, separated by a barbed wire fence from those who are still inside, facilitated the formation of solidarity between different groups of people. It is necessary to re-engage in our shared humanity with one another, as a first step toward fighting systemic injustice. In the short term, treatment of those inside Yarl's Wood [reportedly improves](#) following demonstrations. In the long term, it indicates people will not stop until Yarl's Wood, and other detention centres like it, close for good.

So, what next? The next demonstration at Yarl's Wood is planned for 8 August 2015. [Click here](#) for more information.

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