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Politics and The Refugee Experience

CHERYL BENARD

Refugees are by definition people who flee from their own state to another because of war, persecution, or personal danger. But this flight, which often makes them stateless – persons without documents, without a government, and without citizenship – moves them into the arena of political entanglements on a scale much larger than those they left behind. The term “refugees” calls up a host of associations regarding conditions we consider universal to this group of displaced people: camps, rations, tents, dependence on the charity of reluctant hosts, and the tedium of waiting for a more permanent solution. Beneath this superficial uniformity, however, the experience of being a refugee is governed by its own “foreign” and “domestic” politics, and we can almost conceive of the different refugee populations as a set of non-nations, governed by internal and external power relationships with their own rules and regularities.

RANKING THE DISPOSSESSED

Estimates regarding the total number of refugees in the world today vary widely; even the lowest figures cited still amount to a very significant number of people dislocated from the normal framework of nation-states. The prospects, living conditions, and forms of social organization of these people are very different from one situation to another, although their formal legal status may be the same and they are officially the charges of the same international agencies.

A first observation that can be made regarding the workings of politics on the conditions of refugee populations is that there is a tacit hierarchy ranking the groups

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and determining how much aid and attention they will receive from the international community. The ranking is determined by several factors.

The Policies of the Host Country

The host country controls all outsiders' access to the refugees and bears a significant portion of the burden of their support. Some countries do not encourage international, national, or private agencies to work with the refugees quartered in their countries. There can be various reasons for this. They may regard the refugees as members of a hostile population and want to keep them under closely restricted surveillance by their own security forces. The refugees may be in a militarily sensitive area, so that an influx of foreigners into the zone is not desirable. The country may deny the refugees official recognition of their status, and therefore also withhold them from the jurisdiction of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). An illustration of all the above motives is the case of Thailand. The Cambodian and Vietnamese refugees are, with the exception of those who have already been accepted for resettlement by third nations, kept in closed camps along the border with Cambodia. The border strip in which these camps are located has been declared not to be part of Thailand in order to make it possible for the Thai government to deny these refugees an official status. Not having legally reached the territory of another state, they are unable to claim asylum; and not being officially acknowledged refugees, the UNHCR has no jurisdiction over them. Their camps are in a highly sensitive region with sporadic fighting, and the area is off bounds to anyone who does not have the permission of Thai military authorities to enter it. Long-standing historic tensions between Thailand, Vietnam, and Cambodia serve to limit any sense of responsibility or empathy the Thais might feel for the misfortunes of the refugees.

The East-West Conflict

Many refugees escape from local, tribal, or regional conflicts only to stumble into the larger battlefield of the East-West conflict, a conflict of which they themselves may previously not even have been aware. This assignment of refugees to one of the sides of the Cold War effectively works to discriminate against populations who themselves have little choice in the affiliation. But the discrimination is selective, tending to benefit those refugees who find themselves assigned to the West. The reason for this is that the Soviet Union does not have a policy of providing emergency relief, disaster relief, or refugee aid to countries within its sphere of influence.

As a result, the refugees from Ethiopia's war with Somalia are among the most undersupplied in terms of goods and services. In 1983, Ethiopian refugees who had lived for an average of five years in camps in Djibouti still did not have any significant infrastructure. A private organization was just beginning to establish

a school, and there was some preliminary construction going on for a clinic. There were only five tents for both camps, and no material for the construction of dwellings had been provided. The refugees lived in stone hovels, the more luxurious ones being fortified against rain by cardboard and plastic strips taken from the containers the rations were delivered in. Third countries were sparsely represented by a German medical team in one camp and a Scandinavian women's weaving project in another. Unlike Thailand, this was not due to any policy of the government of Djibouti, which in fact would have been only too delighted to receive international assistance for these refugees. The camps were open and accessible and any sort of interest was welcomed, though hardly any was forthcoming, since the Ethiopians are considered to belong to the Soviet sphere.

This is also true of the refugees from El Salvador who have fled to Nicaragua. The refugees interviewed by us were primarily old people and women and children who had fled in village units during the course of 1981 and 1982 from the fighting in their area.¹ The majority had first stopped in Honduras, but had been forced by harassment and further fighting to move on to Nicaragua. They expressed appreciation for the courteous reception they had received in Nicaragua. Alone of all the refugee populations surveyed, these refugees were being handled by the same infrastructure available to the local population, with whom few tensions were reported. Children attended the same schools and the refugees were visited by the same mobile health units and were theoretically eligible for the same jobs as Nicaraguan citizens. They were also allowed to cultivate crops on land assigned to them, a privilege often withheld from refugees because it is considered to be a signal that they are here to stay and have a claim on the land. Most host countries assiduously avoid such a signal of permanence. These refugees did not appear to have a very sophisticated grasp of larger political issues or to have selected Nicaragua out of any sense of political affinity. Nevertheless, they are subject to the same ban on western aid that affects the country as a whole. Church organizations are the only ones providing any support to the refugees, and that is very limited in quantity.

In contrast, refugees seen as belonging to the "free world" are in a comparatively more fortunate position. More funds and aid will be forthcoming, and a greater variety of agencies will offer support and services. The Afghan refugees are an illustration. Their presence in Pakistan serves as a reminder of Soviet aggression, so they can be put to political use. There are dozens of voluntary groups and private committees based in Peshawar alone, supplementing the activities of national, church, and international organizations. In some camps, rivalries exist between organizations all seeking to provide similar services for the refugees.

Even where refugees are on the "correct" side of Cold War lines, however, East-West politics can operate to their disadvantage. Like the Afghans, the Vietnamese

¹ This paper is based on research conducted in Pakistan, Nicaragua, Lebanon, Ethiopia, Thailand, and the Sudan between 1982 and 1986 for the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute of Politics, Vienna, Austria.

refugees in Thailand have fled from communism. However, they have fled to the territory of an important regional ally of the United States, Thailand. In their case, western loyalty to an ally takes precedence over the refugee issue, so that western agencies are very circumspect in criticizing the policies of Thai officialdom—including the detention of the refugees in a combat zone and the documented abuse of the refugees by the special military task force that runs the camps.²

Pawns without a board

Refugees can be political symbols because they personify by their mere existence a profound criticism of the state they have fled. Their flight implies that conditions are either unsafe or undesirable—that, in short, their state has failed to provide them with the minimum requirements of life, instead forcing them to leave at high personal risk. There is a material as well as a purely propagandistic side to this, stemming from the recognition that there are instances in which “refugees may be an effective device to use in changing the internal situation in another country.”³

This can work in different ways. Regions can be deliberately depopulated in an effort to deprive an opposition movement of its popular base. This is happening today in parts of Ethiopia, where the government is driving people out of provinces it has not been able to pacify. Alternatively, an exodus can be encouraged by outside forces in order to weaken the established government by draining its manpower, skills, and legitimacy, while at the same time swelling the ranks of its opposition. “In the movement for independence in Africa, those African countries that had achieved independence sought to encourage the independence of the remaining colonial territories by not only accepting political refugees but by giving these refugees all varieties of assistance so that they could evolve as liberation movements infiltrating back into the colonial territories.”⁴

It can also happen that both sides, the government and its opposition, try to manipulate a refugee movement for their own benefit. An illustration is the Afghan case. On the one hand, the government has been accused of deliberately depopulating those provinces that are militarily the most difficult to gain control of. On the other hand, the rebels are thought to encourage the large-scale flight to Pakistan because this is useful as a propaganda device against the Kabul regime and because it increases the base for the opposition movements.

The purely propagandistic role of refugees is best illustrated by the case of eastern Europe. Individual escapees from the German Democratic Republic to West Ger-

² See, for example, the *Country Reports on the World Refugee Situation*, Report to Congress (Washington, D.C.: Department of State, 1983).

³ Thomas Hovet, “Boundary Disputes and Tensions as a Cause of Refugees” in Hugh Brooks and Yasin El-Ayouty, eds., *Refugees South of the Sahara* (Westport, Conn.: Negro University Press, 1975), 25.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

many and larger-scale population movement from the Soviet satellites to the neighboring western countries continue to serve as much-publicized evidence of the repressiveness of their regimes and the undesirability of their social forms. Such institutions as Radio Free Europe, however, have been accused of luring persons who are not personally subject to political persecution and are not suffering real deprivation by offering them a distorted picture of what awaits them in the West. They played such a role in Hungary during the 1950s and have recently been accused of a similar role in Poland.⁵

As far as the treatment of such refugees is concerned, the host country will generally be faced by a dilemma. On the one hand, it wants to contrast favorably with the communist countries these people have left behind and to present life in the West in the best possible light. On the other hand, it does not want to encourage more refugees to come. It also does not want to convey the impression to the international community that it can readily absorb these refugees and support their needs. Instead it wants to stress what a burden they are, so that more support from other western countries will be forthcoming. Refugees are never genuinely welcomed by the population of the host country, which fears them as competitors for jobs, housing, and services; their living conditions must not be too good or this will cause problems domestically vis-à-vis the native population and will attract more refugees and decrease the likelihood of subsidies. On the other hand, one does not wish to appear inhospitable or callous.

In the 1950s Austria, still struggling with its own economic recovery, was not delighted at the influx of Hungarians and resented the fact that the U.S., whose broadcasts to the eastern bloc were seen as having been instrumental in attracting these refugees, did not assume more of the burden of their support. U.S. food donations at that time ranked in sixth place, after the Vatican, Spain, France, West Germany, and Switzerland.⁶ A similar situation occurred with Polish refugees in the early 1980s. To slow what was perceived as a worrisome influx of refugees into Austria, the Poles were declared to be "economic refugees," not political ones, and the border was closed to them. A few days later, embarrassingly for the Austrians, martial law was declared in Poland and they were obliged to rescind the label of "economic refugee." However, Austria bargained with western powers to receive substantially more assistance in exchange for the renewed open-door-to-Polish-refugees policy.

Refugees and Natives—Domestic Consequences of Refugee Presence

In his empirical study of the Muslim-Hindu population exchange in what is now India and Pakistan, Stephen Keller found that a high concentration of refugees in a particular region correlates highly with three effects: subsequent political un-

⁵ Miklos Szabo, *Homeless in the World* (Budapest: Pannonia Press, 1960), 38.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 63.

rest in that region, an increased degree of interpersonal violence, and enhanced political activity.⁷

Under the best of circumstances refugees are a potentially destabilizing factor for the domestic politics of the host country. The local population will be apprehensively and resentfully on the alert for any threat to its own interests. They will envy the attention and begrudge the funds given the refugees, fear their competition in the job market, and resent the resources they consume. Paradoxically, it appears that envy and hostility are greatest not vis-à-vis an entirely foreign group, but vis-à-vis those refugees who have some ethnic or other affinity to the host country—such as Algerian settlers forced to return to France in the 1960s after the war of independence, displaced Germans resettling in West Germany after World War II, Ugandan Asians with British passports admitted to England, and Afghan Pathans moving into ethnically-related areas of Pakistan. The reason may be that these persons are more directly perceived as rivals; they have a legitimate claim and, therefore, present far more of a threat than do total aliens who must be grateful for the charity of the rightful inhabitants.⁸ They feel entitled to what they receive, can demand it much more forcefully because they are familiar with the language and the way the system operates, and they are far more likely to stay. Their knowledge of language and culture also makes them much more likely to seek to competitively enter the labor market.

Given the strength of sentiments against the refugees at the local level, it is not surprising that their admission and their treatment often become issues in domestic politics. The methods by which this conflict is conducted may include heavy reliance on prejudice, rumor, and irrationality. For example, in England opponents of the policy of admitting Ugandan Asians distributed letters purportedly coming from government agencies and ordering the recipient to admit a family of Asians into his home.⁹ At the same time, the apprehensions of the local population, though they may express themselves in extravagant rumor and farfetched fears, nevertheless have a realistic core: jobs, housing, and government subsidies *are* scarce, and the refugees *are* competing for these goods with the local nationals.

However, the refugees may also bring with them some immediate or potential economic benefits. While these will be less evident to the population as a whole, there will be no lack of groups and individuals ready to exploit the available opportunities. This is not a contradiction in terms. It may be true, as some authors have noted, that refugee presence *on the whole* benefits the economic development of the region they are quartered in; however, this benefit will affect the population unevenly and may well operate to the relative disadvantage of the majority of the population. The increased demand for housing, for example, will benefit

⁷ Stephen Keller, *Uprooting and Social Change* (New Delhi: Manohar Book Service, 1975).

⁸ See Derek Humphrey, *Passports and Politics* (London: Penguin, 1974) for the case of the Ugandan Asians; Joseph Schechtman, *The Refugee in the World*, (New York: A.S. Barnes, 1963) for the cases of Algeria and postwar Germany.

⁹ Humphrey, *Passports and Politics*, app.

the real estate market but hurt the economically weaker segments of the native population, whose rents will go up and who will experience greater difficulty in finding affordable housing. Shopkeepers may benefit from the presence of western and international aid organizations, but the inflation of prices for consumer goods and food will hurt the local population. Seen in sum, the local infrastructure may improve, but the native population may still experience relative and even absolute deprivation as a consequence of the schools, clinics, and food distribution programs set up for refugees. This is especially, but not exclusively, true of Third World countries.

Some governments have sought to gain political capital out of this potentially disruptive situation. In Thailand the government exercises pressure on donor states to contribute in a kind of parallel fund-matching program to the so-called "Thai affected villages." In actual fact the situation of the refugees in this region is particularly desperate, and the Thai villages are "affected" in large part due to their own government's policy of keeping the Cambodian refugees confined in a combat zone, where they and the adjacent villages are targets of military attack. The term "Thai-affected villages" implies that the local population is suffering because of the refugee presence, rather than because of larger events of which the refugees, too, are victims.

Pakistan's General Zia ul-Haq was able to dramatically improve both his personal position and the relationship of his country to the Arab states and the U.S. by permitting Afghan refugees and their most important political organizations to settle in Pakistan. As a "front-line state" against Soviet aggression and a host to a very large refugee population, Pakistan has been the recipient of military and economic aid programs it would otherwise most probably not have received. There are also persistent charges that Pakistan takes best choice from any weapons and aid channeled through them to the resistance and the refugees.¹⁰

In the European context, political unrest and increased violence due to refugee presence usually remain within manageable dimensions and do not seriously threaten stability. With the exception of some tragic individual incidents, including a number of murders of Indochinese refugees by right-wing Germans, the German police are able to cope with violence between native Germans and refugees. In the immediate postwar period, the U.S. military government in West Germany reported many instances of violent discord between the native population and the expelled, but the situation was not a serious threat.

In Britain, airport porters refused to carry the luggage of Ugandan Asians, and local neighborhood groups circulated petitions against their admission; there were numerous individual acts of violence. The issue of the admission, status, and treatment of refugees may also become an issue in national politics, usually with the opposition party opposing the allegedly too-generous policies of the ruling government. In the Third World, however, in locations where ethnic rivalries may already be virulent and where the extension of central government control is very

¹⁰ Salman Rushdie, *Shame* (New York: Knopf, 1983), 69, satirized this situation in fictionalized form.

imperfect even under ordinary circumstances, where essential resources are very limited and consensus on the legitimacy of the political system is shaky at best, a large influx of refugees can present a real threat. The political opposition may then add the issue of refugees to its list of grievances, and the position taken may be either for or against the refugees. They may argue that the government is betraying a just cause and sabotaging the political rights of the refugees (as some groups argue on behalf of the Palestinians) or they may say that the government has sold out to the refugees at the expense of the nation itself (as the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) sponsored demonstrations against Afghan refugees in Pakistan have maintained).

This kind of a situation may also place the refugees themselves in significant danger, because if the domestic situation of the political system they have entered is such that a consensus on the legitimacy of the government does not exist, then a consensus on the validity of abstract international agreements and human rights charters will be still more unlikely. Massacres of refugees in Latin America, Africa, and Asia testify to this fact.¹¹

POLITICS IN THE CAMP

The term "refugee politics" can refer to a number of different things. In its most common application it refers to the national and international decision-making process concerning the admission, treatment, and administration of the refugees, and the negotiations determining their ultimate fate. But there are two other levels to which the term would also apply. First, there are those organizations that carry out some political functions vis-à-vis the refugees, providing some of the services of a state and charged with representing the interests and mediating the disputes that arise in regard to the refugees. Second, one can also view the refugee population as a kind of polity, having its own kind of political process.

In all three of these political perspectives, the main characteristic of the refugees remains their dislocation and their marginality. The political institutions that have power over them may not represent their best interests and may in fact be extremely hostile to them; the institutions that have the authority and the will to protect their interests may not have the power to do so; the refugees themselves may have their own political institutions that may have coercive potential and authority, but no power, in those arenas that really matter. Some of the features of the second two forms of refugee politics are described in the following section.

Refugee Institutions

A variety of institutions, many of them dating back to World War II, address themselves to the administration of refugee problems and the representation of refugee

¹¹ See the *Refugee Newsletter* published by the World Council of Churches for regular bulletins on these issues.

interests. They fall into the major categories of international organizations, national organizations, and voluntary agencies (*volags*). The work of these institutions and organizations reflects the paradoxes and ambiguities of the refugees' status. This is true even of the most influential and powerful of these organizations, the UNHCR.¹² The degree of its activities and influence is delineated by the same political constraints that determine the other aspects of the refugees' situation. The funds made available to UNHCR by donor states depend on how useful those states perceive a particular refugee population to be to their ongoing foreign policy. The scope of activities and decisions allowed to representatives of UNHCR depends on the policies of the host government and the pressure other countries can be persuaded to bring to bear on it.

Persons and organizations working with refugees often find themselves operating in the same gray zone of semilegality and marginalism that characterizes refugee life. They may find it necessary to collaborate with official policies they find reprehensible, because their only alternative is to have no access to the refugees at all. They may, in keeping with this, either leak information to the press or help keep abuses secret from outside observers, depending on whether they think publicity would influence or only anger the responsible officials. They may have to use deception, distortions of identity, and illegal backroads through the hostile and ineffective bureaucracy. They may unofficially commission another organization, less bound by official constraints than their own, to perform tasks they cannot do. Some examples of the above are the funneling of supplies to groups not officially entitled to them but performing a necessary service; allowing experts who will be employed by their organizations to enter the country illegally as "tourists," because visas and work permits are not being issued or take too long; appearing sympathetic to representatives and policies of the host government while at the same time denouncing them to others and trying to persuade outside voices to condemn them. They engage in these measures because they may be the only way to fulfill what they consider their moral mandate: to help the refugees survive. It would be interesting to study what effect, if any, this operating in bureaucratic gray zones has on the political identity and attitudes of the employees of refugee organizations. In a sense they form a subcommunity of their own, frequently interacting with one another over a period of many years as they all move from one refugee crisis area to another.

The operation of even the most important of these organizations, the UNHCR, is severely limited by the *de facto* powerlessness of the organization to counteract decisions or violations by the host government. Thus, it acts with more authority than is objectively warranted. For example, the UNHCR may issue the refugees documents giving them official refugee status and theoretically guaranteeing them

¹² On the beginnings of refugee organizations, see *The Refugee in the Postwar World* (Geneva: United Nations, 1951); for an analysis of the structure and operations of the UNHCR, see Louis Holborn, *Refugees, A Problem of Our Time* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1975); for the Honduras incident, see the *New York Times*, 5 September 1985.

certain rights and protections; but the host government can violate these at will. In a recent incident in Honduras, two refugees including an infant were killed in a raid by the army, and ten refugees bearing UNHCR identity cards were taken away for interrogation. In all such cases, the UNHCR can do little more than protest; and in the case of refugees who are not currently in the headlines or who do not have a superpower behind them, this protest will achieve very little.

The political process of the refugees is governed by the exigencies of an ambiguous and often contradictory situation. In the three classic political categories of violence, power, and authority, refugees have their own style of political culture.

Violence

Refugees characteristically are in flight from the violence that threatened them in their home. Arriving at the new destination, they may become victims of the violence of an inhospitable local population; or they may find that they have brought their own war with them. In the refugee camps the splits and factions that were at odds with each other at home may simply reproduce themselves. One form this may take is that of ethnic or tribal strife. In its mildest form it is illustrated by the continuous rivalry in Afghan refugee camps between the dominant Pashtuns and the less powerful ethnic groups such as the Hazaras over such issues as the distribution of goods and services. Each side is always sure it is being shortchanged to the advantage of the other.

The problem will generally be most intense where some of the political structures of the warring parties carry over into the refugee situation. The Palestinians are only the most obvious example among many. The same applies for Thailand, where conflicting Cambodian groupings maintain their headquarters within the camps and prey on each other's civilian populations. It is also true in Pakistan, where different Afghan opposition groups maintain head offices in Peshawar and compete for control of the camps. Here there have been killings of members of rival groups and pressure is put on the refugees to join one or another organization.

Besides this political violence, there generally appears to be a heightened proclivity towards interpersonal violence as well. "Refugees are not only more aggressive than non-refugees," Stephen Keller notes, "but more aggressive than they themselves were before."¹³ Studies of the psychology of refuge life and of the camp situation have produced several hypotheses for explaining this phenomenon.

First, they cite the frustrations of confinement, enforced passivity, and dependence on others for all of life's basic needs. This kind of situation can produce two contradictory responses: the so-called "DP (displaced persons) apathy," a condition of general listlessness and resignation; and random, directionless expressions of violence. Both may be sublimated into physical disturbances, and psychosomatic disorders are extremely frequent among refugees.¹⁴ The violence may

¹³ Keller, *Uprooting and Social Change*, 3.

¹⁴ See H. B. M. Murphy, *Flight and Resettlement*, (Lucerne: UNESCO, 1955).

be directed against the individual himself in the form of sickness or attempted suicide or against other members of his group. It may also lead to a profound condition of alienation described by Bruno Bettelheim and others as “identification with the aggressor.”¹⁵

The second response is a kind of shock reaction to the total disruption of one’s life and the loss of one’s home and property. This seems especially to affect traditional-minded populations who were previously very sedentary and whose code does not value change and flexibility. To such persons the world may truly appear to have lost its moorings, and such concepts as right and wrong, just and unjust may lose their meaning. Such a response may be experienced even by more modern populations. A Dutch medical doctor obliged to flee from the Nazi occupation has described his own experience of departing from the realm of everyday normality and becoming an outlaw:

Everything I did was forbidden. I ate without giving points [ration points]; I travelled by train without special permit; I crossed frontiers without any papers or with forged ones. From being a decent, law-abiding citizen I became a deceiver, an actor and imposter. I did not care anymore for comfort. General hygiene was abolished, food was taken when there was some, or done without.¹⁶

The kinds of crimes and acts of violence most common among refugees follow a pattern explainable by this kind of experience. There are quarrels over the allocation of goods but also over quite trivial matters, escalating into violence in a manner that has been described as infantile.

The classical description of this phenomenon comes, of course, from Bruno Bettelheim, who analyzes the “child-like behavior,” infantile responses, and “regression” of the prisoners into childhood personality structures as he observed and experienced this in the Nazi concentration camps.¹⁷ To Bettelheim, this mass production of child-like behavior was both the deliberate goal of the fascist system, which induced it by coercion and psychological manipulation, and a defense mechanism – although, in Bettelheim’s view, an inadequate and self-destructive one – on the part of the camp inmates, who found some psychological refuge in this attitude. Obviously, the extent to which this response will manifest itself depends on the severity of conditions, and in fact the treatment of refugees varies very substantially. What they have in common, however, is their dependency, their dubious legal status, and the arbitrary nature of the power and the rules they are subjected to. Survival under such conditions does not require the same behavior as at home.

¹⁵ Much of the theoretical and empirical material on the psychology of refugee and camp life stems from the concentration camp studies carried out in the post-World War-II period. But see also P. W. Burvill, “Immigration and Mental Disease” in Juan Mezzich and Carlos Berganza, eds., *Culture and Psychopathology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

¹⁶ S. A. Prins, “The Individual in Flight,” in Murphy, *Flight and Resettlement*, 26.

¹⁷ Bruno Bettelheim, *The Informed Heart* (New York: Free Press, 1960), 13 ff. For a dissenting view, see Terrence Des Pres, *Survivor* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), chap. 6.

Typical “illegal acts” on the part of refugees include misrepresentations of self, of one’s identity, one’s qualifications and political beliefs; these are responses to the sudden and abrupt dislocation of one’s former life, the irrelevance of one’s former self, and the dependence on the wishes of others. For example, the Cambodian or Vietnamese peasant will have to convince the American immigration officer of his devout anticommunist stance. His ability to do so to the interviewer’s satisfaction may depend more on his education and his urban background than on his real sentiments. From this refugees might reasonably conclude that their survival, or at any rate their chance to fulfill their ambitions, depends less on what they are and what they believe than on their ability to meet the alien standards of those who control their destinies. Thus, what we may refer to as “crimes of identity” (lies, exaggeration, misrepresentations of biographical facts) are extremely common and are reported for many different refugee situations. In his article, “The Aftermath of Belsen,” Henri Stern notes that “there were false rabbis, and fictitious doctors were quite numerous”¹⁸ To treat such behavior strictly in psychopathological terms, of course, misses the point; it is also a survival mechanism that will open doors for an individual where the truth would doom him.

In the Afghan refugee camps, increasing the size of one’s family when registering for rations and supplies is reported to be extremely widespread and encouraged by the segregation rules of traditional Pashtun society, which make it impossible for strangers to see, let alone count and register, the women and girls. Among the urbanized middle-class refugees, it is more common to exaggerate one’s education and job skills in the hopes of improving one’s chances to emigrate to the desired country. Since documents can plausibly claim to be (and often really are) lost, incomplete, or inaccessible, the situation encourages such cosmetics. Medical students present themselves as doctors, civilians portray themselves as resistance fighters, etc.

In Thailand, as in many other refugee situations, refugees try to marry local citizens, sometimes paying them for their cooperation, in order to get the legal benefits (residence rights, work permits, etc.) accruing to spouses of citizens. Some Palestinians routinely possess alternate identities, complete with alternate sets of documents giving different places of birth, a different religious affiliation, and a different nationality; they present these as the need arises. Here, as in postwar Europe, there is significant traffic in the documents of deceased persons. The fact that the papers are often purchased from Lebanese officials contributes to the sense of moral and legal dislocation that refugees experience: one is not breaking the law; one is merely surviving within a framework of corruption and anarchy.

Loss of home, property, and country is almost by definition the fate of the refugee. This may help explain the third most common form of crime, crimes of property. Having lost what was rightfully theirs through no fault of their own, refugees may feel themselves entitled to compensations of all sorts. They may also experience a loss of the sense of property altogether. If they could inexplicably from one day

¹⁸ Murphy, *Flight and Resettlement*.

to the next be robbed of what was theirs and had been theirs for generations, then perhaps the rules of right and wrong no longer apply at all. Petty theft is a common problem in the camps. More organized forms of crime or exploitation, of confidence rackets and the like, have been reported in many instances.¹⁹

In Pakistan, there are complaints about poorer refugee groups occupying someone's farmland through squatting and refusing to leave in order to be settled in the designated camp sites. In the urban centers refugees are said to move into houses or apartments and then refuse to pay the rent.²⁰ As the majority of the offenders may be presumed to have lived within the bounds of the law before, their transgressions reflect an attitude that those who experienced injustice and dispossession must be compensated.

Power

The situation of the refugees has been defined as one of powerlessness, and while this is an important observation that serves to explain many features of the refugee mentality, it is not differentiated enough. Refugees are a community and in some senses even a polity. They have power structures of their own, some carried over from before, others newly evolved. Refugees are a marginalized population. They have left their own state and are now residents of a different state, of which they are not citizens. Their status is regulated by international agreements, but there is no way for the international community to enforce these agreements, much less for the individual refugee, who may not even be aware of their existence, to insist on his or her rights. The situation may change from one moment to the next if there is a shift in the way the war in the refugees' country is going, if the government of the host country changes, or even if that government merely decides to change its refugee policy. The refugee may find himself the subject of multiple powerholders who are at odds with one another: the UN agencies and their local representatives, under orders from Geneva; the representatives of the central government of the host country; the representatives of the local or regional administration, which may be pursuing policies significantly at variance to those of the central government; the representatives of political parties or movements of the refugee's own country or political movement.

In the course of a week, Afghan refugees may interact with a dozen emissaries from different centers, all exercising a form of power and authority over them. First, there may be the representative of the Pakistani Refugee Commission, important because he stands for the host country's government; determines where the refugees will be settled; and provides schools, blankets, tents, rations, identity cards, and meals. Then may come someone from the UNHCR, also responsible

¹⁹ Szabo, *Homeless in the World*, 48.

²⁰ For one example, large-scale demonstrations in Pakistan protesting the allegedly favorable treatment accorded Afghan refugees who committed crimes in Pakistan, see the reports in *Oesterreichischer Rundfunk*, 13 February 1984.

for basic resources and services and expected to carry refugee grievances against the Pakistani government to a higher authority. Next may arrive a delegation from one or another Arab or Muslim country or organization, such as the Red Crescent; they have power because they are important sources of money, goods, services, and authority, because they represent Muslim organizations and are influential coreligionists. A group of American congressional delegates may visit and be received as persons endowed with the power to influence the U.S. supply of arms and other support to the Afghan resistance. Then there are the representatives of the various resistance groups, exercising power and authority along a descending scale of magnitude, with the Islamic fundamentalists having the most, the leftist splinter groups the least. They are — to vastly differing degrees — powerful because they have the capacity to use coercion and because they too control significant resources. The Hizbi Islami party under the leadership of Gulbuddin Hekmatiar, for example, has its own police, its own courts and prisons, and it provides education, job training, housing, and subsistence goods for its members and sympathizers. Dissidents are persecuted, criminals tried and convicted, and the infrastructure maintained, all on the alien territory of the state of Pakistan. Such political groups, meeting the criteria for a government except for their lack of sovereignty over territory, may in fact have authority deriving from the very absence of such territory and through their status as resistance movements.

These varied powerholders act differently on the refugees and may at times require contradictory responses. This will particularly be the case where they are in direct competition for control of the refugees or of some aspect of their lives. An example is the socialization process, a crucial aspect of social organization and one that is hotly contested. In some camps, there are parallel sets of school classes — some organized by the local, often religious, leadership; others run by one of the political organizations; another jointly run by the Pakistani Refugee Commission and UNHCR. The Pakistanis, the refugee organizations, and the local camp leadership may all provide teachers, teaching materials, a school location, and supervise the curriculum. In other cases, one school will become the object of contention among the rivals.

In a typical scenario, the Pakistani authorities will erect the school tents donated by the UNHCR; upon the departure of the Pakistani officials, the resistance group Hizbi Islami will unfurl its flag above the building and exchange the Pakistani schoolbooks (especially designed and printed for the refugee children) for their own schoolbooks (which place emphasis on political indoctrination). The teacher, a mullah agreed upon by all of the contending parties, will abandon the curriculum designed by the Pakistani authorities and design his own combination of Koranic instruction and Hizbi Islami material. Some weeks later the Pakistani school inspector will make an unannounced visit, discover not at all to his surprise what has transpired, and oblige the mullah to resume with the official curriculum.²¹ Similar struggles go on over the distribution of rations and goods, with

²¹ Reading primer, (Peshawar: Hizbi Islami, 1982).

all competitors seeking to take credit and receive recognition. The competition is exacerbated by the absence of consensus over political legitimacy. Typically, the refugees in such situations come from a background in which the state did not possess legitimacy (civil war, an occupation army, partition, etc.). If the refugees did not acknowledge the legitimate power of their own government, they are correspondingly unlikely to recognize the power of a foreign government over them, except out of necessity. The host government, often unable to project power even over the outlying portions of its own country, may not be up to the task of controlling the refugees and their political leadership.

Authority

The refugee situation, representing an abrupt severing of the ties of normal life, may also bring about fundamental disruptions of prior authority patterns. This may take one of several forms: old authority structures may be revitalized; existing authority patterns may be reinforced; or established authority may be undermined. All three developments contain potential for significant conflict. The refugee experience may, first of all, deprive portions of the elite of the basis of their position. Large landowners are now without their land and live side-by-side with their former tenants in a tent donated by the Red Cross; village elders may find themselves separated from the rest of the villagers through the exigencies of flight and may end up among strangers to whom their claims of status mean little and to whom they are just other old men. Even where they continue to be recognized, the old elites may try to take preemptive measures against the threatened or anticipated challenge to their positions. They will do this by becoming more conservative. Lapses of behavior and loosening of ritual and respect that might have gone unnoticed in the former context will now be subject to immediate sanctioning. As long as the structure seemed secure, it could tolerate deviations; now, beleaguered, it will be watchful, even oversensitive. In the Afghan camps, for example, rules of sexual segregation are enforced much more rigorously than they would have been in the villages. At home, if young women took an inordinate amount of time to fetch water, then one could be sure that they were merely gossiping at the well, or, at worst, exhibiting themselves in a group to young men circling nearby and within easy supervision of their elders.²² In Pakistan, however, they may be seen by strangers, interact with Pakistanis or westerners, thereby acquiring a bad reputation (which will dishonor their men) or new notions about life (which will threaten male authority). To prevent this, women are confined strictly to the enclosed walls of the family encampment and allowed to go about their tasks only in large and supervised groups. If a young woman is permitted to visit a female doctor at the health clinic, a member of the husband's family (usually the mother-in-law) will accompany her to make sure no undesired information

²² See Inger W. Boesen, "Conflicts of Interest in Pashtun Womens' Lives," unpublished ms., Institute for Ethnology, University of Copenhagen.

is exchanged between the young woman and the medical staff. Therefore, the refugee situation may serve to reactivate or solidify authority structures and social norms that might under ordinary circumstances have undergone a gradual process of attrition; now, they have become self-conscious and defensive, subject no longer to evolutionary undermining.

However, the conservative and defensive response of traditional authority reflects the correct perception that the traditional position has objectively been weakened relative to that of the real or anticipated challenger. Not only have adherents of traditional authority lost some of the material foundations of their position, there may also be a shift in the relative value of some of their other leadership qualifications. In traditional tribal and village society, age, familiarity with religious precepts, kinship to certain important families, etc. may be the most significant personal attributes. In a refugee situation, youth, personal flexibility, and the ability to adapt to a new environment may become traits with a high survival value. Authority patterns (in sociological terms, as contrasted to the political ones discussed above) may be subject to challenge along three main dimensions: class, age, and gender.

Changes in authority patterns along the lines of class are difficult to document for a refugee situation. It seems that they either subsume themselves into the immediate political conflict or take the form of totally different refugee experiences on the basis of class. This may lead to a *de facto* social break-up of what was formerly one stratified population, as each stratum follows a different path. Typically, the younger, educated, urban middle class will emigrate to one of the western countries of asylum (Canada, Australia, the U.S., or a West European country), taking along those of their closest relatives who do not themselves possess the qualities that would make them eligible for emigration to that country.

The rural population, most members of the traditional elite, and the poorer parts of the urban population will remain behind. Those who can afford it may be able to avoid the camp and take up residence in a city or town. These refugees may in time be absorbed into the population of the host country, return home if circumstances permit, or migrate to another country of the region; they may also stay on indefinitely as refugees. The consequences of this splitting of the social strata, of which the depletion of its educated and skilled members is only one small aspect, have not been studied.

Clashes among the refugees on the basis of class differences are rare, partly because of the physical separation. The more prosperous, those with relatives or friends abroad, and those with good connections and access to information will often escape the camp experience altogether. They will be able to afford an apartment or room in town, to leave their country for a desirable permanent location before the exodus has properly begun, to speed up their resettlement through knowledge of the workings of the bureaucracy, through sponsorship, bribes, etc. More common are the conflicts resulting from the other two authority lines, age and gender.

In a refugee context, patriarchal authority may be subject to a barrage of new threats. For village populations flight may mean being located in or near a city, possibly in a country that is socially more progressive than their country of origin.

In addition, the presence of a large number of representatives of the modern West, all eager to introduce clinics, schools, job-training programs, recreational activities, and other such insidious harbingers of new social ideas, present a constant menace to traditional belief systems. Holders of traditional authority will attempt to limit the impact of these influences. They will jealously supervise the curriculum of the schools or sabotage them altogether, suspiciously guard the goings-on in the clinic, and seek to undermine any program they decide is too dangerous. Among Muslims, women and girls will commonly be forbidden to partake of any of these new offerings, often including medical services and education. The reason given will be explicit: this might make them rebellious. At the same time, these services will not be resisted altogether, since they are seductive in their desirability. The holders of traditional authority will simply seek to maintain the upper hand and to control as far as possible the extent and the kind of new influences. They are handicapped in this by the disruption of their former positions.

The survival of the family is no longer in fact being provided by the males for the women and children, or by the adults for the youth. Each family member is receiving provisions in his or her own right from a neutral outside agency. Thus material dependence, the most basic fundament of authority, has been objectively eliminated. The defenders of this authority respond in two ways: by attempting to conceal from their subordinates that such a change has taken place and by increasing the negative sanctions to make up for the loss of positive ones. In the first method, they are aided by the essentially patriarchal workings of international refugee aid. It is still the practice in nearly all refugee situations to dole out the rations to the male head of the family wherever possible and to consider him the representative of his "dependents" in applications for asylum and immigration. In the case of the Ugandan Asians, for example, British authorities distributed immigration vouchers to the male heads of families; these vouchers entitled them to bring along their wives and children. The UNHCR routinely interviews only the man. In numerous cases that came to light by coincidence, the woman did not wish to emigrate or had no idea of her destination.²³ Thus the man can present himself to his wife and children as the source of their sustenance, even where this is no longer objectively true and where the rations are allotted to individuals in their own right. The men may genuinely feel that they are the proper owners of all the rations, regardless of what the benighted westerners who distribute them may believe, and may withhold them or portions of them from the women and children. This is the case in the Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan, where the more desirable food and clothing items are kept by the adult males, even if the donors had clearly intended them to be distributed to women and children.

Where these measures fail or are felt to be insufficient, there is a distinct rise in the exercise of violence and coercion. In the region studied by Keller, child beating was more than twice as frequent among refugees than among nonrefugees.²⁴ This

²³ See Cheryl Benard, "Womens' Anthropology Takes the Chador," *Partisan Review*, May 1986.

²⁴ Keller, *Uprooting and Social Change*, 93.

was not due only to the rise in interpersonal violence that is characteristic of refugee situations, but was part of the redoubled authoritarianism of family heads who felt their position to be threatened. On a questionnaire, refugee men gave highly authoritarian responses on questions dealing with the hypothetical disobedience of sons, recommending very rigorous punishment and in some cases even death. Violence against women generally and wives in particular is another common feature.

Among the Cambodian refugees, incidents of rape against Cambodian and Vietnamese women refugees are very common. On the Samet Platform, an encampment of 250 unprotected Vietnamese in the middle of a Cambodian refugee camp, the refugees would say privately that there was not a young woman among them who had not been raped, either during the flight through Cambodia or in the camp. The refugees modified traditional sex-role norms in order to socially manage this situation; the men pretended not to know that the women had been raped, since acknowledgement of it would have made the young women unmarriageable; and the community in return overlooked the unmanly behavior of the men who failed to defend the women against the attacks of the numerically stronger Cambodians.

Violence against women as a means of upholding gender-based authority patterns is particularly evident in the case of family violence. In the absence of data concerning the frequency of marital violence in the pre-refugee situation (and such data are simply not available), it is necessary to rely on the subjective statements of the refugees and of researchers who have spent time with them in both the pre- and the post-flight situation. In the transit camps in Thailand (set up for those refugees who had already been accepted for resettlement in a third country) incidents of wife-beating were so common that counseling centers and a shelter were under construction.

Among the Afghan refugees, violence against female family members (wives, sisters- or daughters-in-law) is extremely high and is felt by both the Afghan and the foreign assistance workers to be higher than previously. Medical staff see many cases of battered wives, including severe concussions, fractures, etc. The reason cited by male Afghans for their behavior is twofold and clearly supports the hypothesis that authority patterns perceived to be threatened may be preemptively bolstered by violence. Contact with newfangled notions introduced by the foreigners, the first argument goes, threatens to bring about undesirable and disobedient behavior on the part of the women. And secondly, the men argue, while they may have lost a lot they have not yet lost their power over their women, and they intend to keep it. Some will say that they left the country precisely because the Communists were trying to force them to treat their women differently (by introducing schools for girls and legislation improving the status of women) and they do not intend to submit to this without a struggle.

We know from other contexts that men may respond to a loss or expected loss of prestige by increased violence against their wives.²⁵ There appears to be a par-

²⁵ For an analogous study on the results of stress and dislocation in a family power context, see Susanne Steinmetz and Murray Straus, *Violence in the Family* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974).

allel to this in the refugee situation. Men, particularly men whose self-definition contains the qualities of a warlike disposition and gives the honor-shame complex great prominence, may feel humiliated and threatened in their masculine identity by having their country occupied and themselves driven from their homes. Reluctant or unable to fight against the actual enemy, they may compensate by asserting an aggressively domineering patriarchal authority over their own women and children.

As they gain their political footing, the refugees or their leadership may begin to seek a more active part in the national and international politics affecting them. They will become more adept at entering the political process of the host country by forming tactical alliances with opposition parties or by finding ways of exerting pressure on the ruling government in order to forward their own interests. They may also enter the arena of international politics, both regional and global, by seeking affiliations with countries and governments who may support their position. This particular aspect of refugee politics has received analytic attention, particularly in such instances as the Palestinians and other liberation movements.

Finally, it should be noted that the peculiar political position of refugees does not necessarily end with their resettlement. In the host country, refugees tend to be lumped with other marginalized groups in the population. This, however, is not strictly accurate. More than other kinds of immigrants, refugees are not merely a special kind of citizen of the state; they are also members of another polity, even though it may no longer exist except in the minds and consciousness of those who were forced to leave it. In other instances, however, the feeling of citizenship in the former state may be quite vivid, and the refugees may retain a clear sense of dual membership. They may be active in parallel sets of political organizations, with the primacy of old and new citizenship varying in different individuals or even in the same individual at different times. The idea of returning home may be the central political thought, with all other identities subordinate to it. Political activity on behalf of the original home may be either open or clandestine, depending on the state of relations between the state of origin and the host country. The nature of this political consciousness will determine the social behavior of the refugees.

In Austria, for example, the refugees from Indochina do not, as a rule, harbor any thoughts of returning. Their effort to integrate themselves successfully into the community is quite different from that of the Chileans, who firmly intend to return home when politically possible and, therefore, resist the "Austrianization" of their children by trying to keep them out of public schools, not wishing them to learn German, etc. At the same time, the Indochinese refugees, at least of the first generation, have as their social-reference group not Austria and the Austrians, but their fellow Indochinese. This may also be true of many first-generation immigrants, but in the case of refugees the sense of cultural nationhood transcending geographic boundaries has a different connotation. Immigrants may experience such a sense in relation to the "old country," but refugees experience it toward their fellow refugees everywhere. Thus, the Indochinese refugees in western Europe maintain a highly efficient network of communication by which they re-

main informed of the treatment of their countryfellows in other countries, the opportunities another country may offer, the whereabouts of friends and relatives, etc. In this sense their political consciousness corresponds to the definition of a refugee in ancient Greece: more than a stranger, less than a citizen.²⁶

²⁶ Elmer Balogh, *Political Refugees in Ancient Greece* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand Press, 1943), 95.