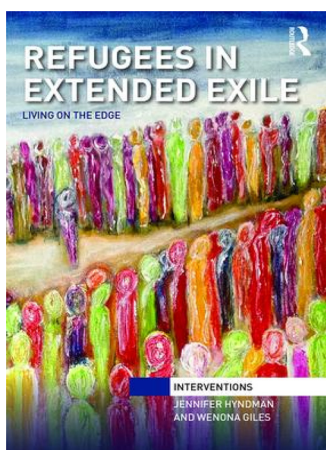


BOOK REVIEW



Refugees in Extended Exile: Living on the Edge

Jennifer Hyndman and Wenona Giles*

Book review by Catherine-Lune Grayson, PhD, Policy Advisor for the International Committee of the Red Cross and author of *Children of the Camp: The Lives of Somali Youth Raised in Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya* (Berghahn, New York and Oxford, 2017).

⋮ ⋮ ⋮ ⋮ ⋮ ⋮

Statistics show that long-term displacement is the new normal.¹ In the absence of solutions to their exile, people remain trapped in permanent temporariness for years – or decades in the case of Somalians, Afghans or Palestinians. The traditional “durable solutions” bringing exile to an end are elusive: only a few hundred thousand refugees return home every year, few States hosting refugees in the global South are willing to allow them to settle permanently in their country, and less than 1% of the refugee population are being offered resettlement in a third country.

In *Refugees in Extended Exile: Living on the Edge*, Jennifer Hyndman and Wenona Giles analyze the global politics that lead to protracted displacement and argue that the normality of extended exile is not coincidental, but results from containment policies that have made the international refugee regime and its “durable solutions” increasingly irrelevant. States generally agree that refugees deserve protection – albeit minimalist protection that ensures their bare survival, but not a dignified living – but they also believe that such minimalist protection should be provided in regions of origin, rather than in the global North. The will to keep refugees in the global South has translated into the implementation of measures to prevent people from crossing borders and claiming asylum, or, when

* Published by Routledge, London and New York, 2016.

they do manage to cross borders, to keep them in camps in marginal regions.² Such exclusionary policies and practices have been legitimized by being presented as critical to national security. Refugees who have been forced to move because of threats to their own security have themselves been cast as a security threat that must be contained. Such depiction is contingent on the othering of people trapped in extended exile. Refugees are hardly seen as fellow humans. They have been turned into (potentially threatening) beneficiaries rather than political and right-bearing subjects, an observation that resonates strongly with Hannah Arendt's poignant writings on the exclusion of refugees from the human race, their reduction to bare life and their ensuing marginalization from the political sphere.³ Throughout their book, Hyndman and Giles show that such politics of exclusion must be deciphered in light of broader political and historical dynamics and the constellations of power in which they are embedded – with the end of the Cold War, refugees have lost their “geopolitical valence”⁴ and have therefore stopped being of great interest to major powers. The global war on terror has turned them into a potential threat, justifying their exclusion. This is a thread that already runs through Hyndman's earlier work.⁵

In examining the connection between long-term displacement and the containment of populations in remote areas of the global South, and the will of countries of the global North to keep populations deemed undesirable away from their borders, Hyndman and Giles powerfully complement critical writings on the politics of displacement. Hyndman herself has convincingly studied the geopolitics of displacement and humanitarianism in her seminal book *Managing Displacement: Refugees and the Politics of Humanitarianism*,⁶ in which she notably explores how the international refugee regime has evolved from protecting the right to seek asylum to a focus on the right to stay home. The politics of asylum have also been considered by authors such as Hannah Arendt,⁷ Peter Nyers,⁸ Michel

1 Between 2010 and 2016, the proportion of refugees under the mandate of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) who have been in exile in a given country for five years or more has varied between 41% and 68% (see UNHCR's annual *Global Trends* reports for 2010 to 2016). Variations in proportion are mostly related to new displacement and not to vast numbers of refugees having found a lasting solution to their exile.

2 Hyndman and Mountz have coined the potent term “neo-refoulement” to describe the bundle of geographical tactics that prevent would-be asylum-seekers from reaching the territory of a signatory to the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, 189 UNTS 137, 28 July 1951 (entered into force 22 April 1954); and the Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees, 606 UNTS 267, 31 January 1967 (entered into force 4 October 1967). See Jennifer Hyndman and Alison Mountz, “Another Brick in the Wall? Neo-refoulement and Asylum in Europe and Australia”, *Government Opposition*, Vol. 43, No. 2, 2008.

3 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Meridian Books, Cleveland, OH, 1968 (first published 1951).

4 *Refugees in Extended Exile*, p. 9.

5 See Jennifer Hyndman, *Managing Displacement: Refugees and the Politics of Humanitarianism*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN, 2000; Jennifer Hyndman, “The Geopolitics of Migration and Mobility”, *Geopolitics*, Vol. 17, No. 2, 2012.

6 J. Hyndman, *Managing Displacement*, above note 5.

7 H. Arendt, above note 3.

8 Peter Nyers, *Rethinking Refugees: Beyond States of Emergency*, Routledge, New York, 2006.

Agier⁹ and Liisa Malkki.¹⁰ Hyndman and Giles' book takes stock of this scholarship, and reads like a compelling conversation with several of these authors on the need to question the salient language of "protracted refugee situations" and "durable solutions" that has delivered limited results, and to rethink the refugee regime in "ways that might allow us to imagine different futures, politics and policies".¹¹ The authors, a geographer and an anthropologist, draw on research across disciplines and significantly build on their own work and research conducted mostly between 2006 and 2010 with Somalian and Afghan refugees in Kenya, Iran and Canada, as well as key informants in humanitarian organizations in Europe and North America, to attempt to better grasp the effect of global politics on the intimate life and ontological (in)security of refugees. In doing so, they reflect on the question of security from the perspective of States, but also, and most importantly, from that of people. Although these two perspectives are enmeshed, refugees' perception of (in)security has often been neglected in discussions related to security and displacement and migration, as this question tends to be addressed through the narrow prism of national security.

Hyndman and Giles flesh out their argument in five insightful chapters that intend to make refugees themselves visible, bringing texture and nuances to their lived experience, and analyzing the political, historical and geographic factors that have confined them to remote areas. They navigate between several sites of prolonged displacement and large- and small-scale perspectives, a trajectory that takes the reader from sites of protracted displacement in Iran and Kenya (Chapter 3), to the politics of management of refugees in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and South Africa (Chapter 4), to sites of resettlement in Canada (Chapter 5), in light of tensions between refugee protection and securitization, externalization and the exclusion of asylum-seekers (Chapter 2). Hyndman and Giles' premise is not new, but their will to stimulate new thinking leads them to challenge the established order and language in a thoughtful way. Their people-centric considerations on security, their recognition of people's agency and their critical reflection on resettlement are especially stimulating.

In discussing the tension between securitization and refugee protection, the authors contrast and connect the existential insecurity of the global North in the face of terrorism or migration with refugees' profound legal, material, intimate and quotidian insecurity in sites of protracted displacement. They productively rework the concept of "ontological security", coined by Giddens in 1991, to illustrate that the absence of a legal status, belonging, livelihoods and perspectives for the future characterizing extended exile produce "an acute sense of not knowing what comes next"¹² that shapes people's lives and behaviours. They observe that this ontological insecurity is closely related to the depiction of

9 Michael Agier, *Gérer les indésirables: Des camps de réfugiés au gouvernement humanitaire*, Flammarion, Paris, 2008.

10 Liisa H. Malkki, "Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization", *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 11, No. 3, 1996.

11 *Refugees in Extended Exile*, p. 7.

12 *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

refugees as vectors of insecurity – because refugees are perceived as an existential threat by the global North, they are trapped in a permanent temporariness that produces ontological insecurity.

Throughout their book, the authors aim at avoiding broad generalizations. To do so, they introduce nuances in the experience and modes and means of survival of people facing “indefinite stasis”¹³ and in the politics of managing people, as the conditions and quality of asylum vary greatly through time and from one place to another – that is, between countries, but also between camps and cities, and rural and urban areas – and from one person to another. In stepping away again from a State-centric lens, they point out that refugees’ experience is not only shaped by the response of the host State – cities and communities are also central to the provision of hospitality and security and contribute to people’s sense of ontological (in)security. Although it seems obvious that the nature of people’s experience is strongly influenced by their individuality and the context, scholarship on forced displacement – just as scholarship on humanitarian action – has often been criticized for focusing on States and institutions and for disregarding people’s agency and reducing them to a mass of anonymous victims.

The authors’ critical observations on resettlement and exclusionary politics through a discussion of people’s experience of resettlement in Canada, one of the world’s main refugee resettlement countries, are very interesting given the limited critical scholarship on this question. Hyndman and Giles challenge the rescue narrative in showing that people are not necessarily “saved” by resettlement and that the politics of resettlement are not strictly guided by non-political benevolence. In fact, resettlement programmes for refugees selected abroad have allowed the Canadian government to justify more exclusionary measures towards asylum-seekers trying to reach the country by their own means. It is commonly implied that such asylum-seekers are undeserving or somehow breaking the law, unlike those who compliantly wait for a hypothetical resettlement in their region of origin. There as well, the authors show how the politics of resettlement and asylum cannot be read in isolation and are the manifestation of transnational politics and networks. In considering people’s perspective on resettlement, they question the fact that resettlement represents the end of the story, as the language of solutions seems to suggest. They wonder to what extent resettled refugees really experience life as full rights-bearing Canadians. Despite being citizens, many feel socially and professionally marginalized and are ambivalent about their situation. Yet, becoming citizens does reopen pathways for legal mobility, work and education.

In questioning the language of durable solutions itself, in drawing connections between the normality of extended exile and the political will of the global North to contain refugee populations, the authors of *Refugees in Extended Exile* search for new ways of approaching exile and addressing the deleterious effects of protracted displacement. To some extent, their irritation transpires in

13 See Melanie B. E. Griffiths, “Out of Time: The Temporal Uncertainties of Refused Asylum Seekers and Immigration Detainees”, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 2, 2014.

their dissection of the geopolitics of exile as they show that containment – rather than holistic protection – remains core to the management of refugees. Their reflection is engaging and challenging, although their expressed will to imagine different futures, politics and policies pits itself against the fact that States’ security focus has commonly supplanted their commitment to protecting refugees. They call for a bridging of the distance between “us” and “them”, and indeed, a recognition of our shared humanity seems essential to countering the narrative that depicts asylum-seekers as a threat and justifies their exclusion. They also stress that solutions to long-term displacement must involve the restoration of rights, as displaced people require membership in a State for protection. Humanitarian assistance alone does very little to address the long-term insecurity and protection of persons; hence, it might not be the foreseen “durable solutions” that focus on the restoration of rights that need to change, but the politics surrounding them that have made them unreachable for the vast majority of refugees.

Refugees in Extended Exile should be read not only by scholars, but also by humanitarian and government workers who play a key role in the management of refugee populations. Years ago, Hyndman’s writings allowed me to finally grasp my own discomfort in the face of refugee camps of a quasi-permanent nature. They shed light on the connection between such sites and global containment policies, and on the instrumental role played by humanitarian organizations in keeping certain populations at bay. Hyndman and Giles’ book must be read for the very same reasons – it is illuminating and shows how people’s trajectories are shaped by wider social, political, economic and historical dynamics.

