

The Sociology of Involuntary Migration: An Introduction

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Today the millions of people who have been forced into exile or have become displaced within their own countries because of war, intolerance and other man-made causes (such as government-directed development programmes) constitute a problem of new geographical and demographic dimensions. Forced migration is hardly new to human experience, but 'refugees', as we know the problem today, are largely a twentieth-century phenomenon. Some estimate that as many as 140 million people have been forcibly uprooted in this century. These massive involuntary movements, connected with the disintegration of empires and the rise of the state, were, until the 1950s, largely European in origin.

Today the greatest numbers of refugees are found in the poorest countries of the world where most host governments now depend on the international donor community to cope with the enormous economic costs of assisting the uprooted. This economic dependence has created an entire industry of humanitarian organizations which are given responsibility for implementing assistance. It can be argued that to a very large extent this international humanitarian refugee regime is itself responsible for extending and perpetuating the unique status of the refugee. The involvement of international (as well as indigenous) humanitarian agencies creates a macro-setting for involuntary migration different from that faced by other types of migrants. Research on involuntary migration has to take that macro-setting into account, for the actors involved include migrants, their governments and the humanitarian agencies at a minimum, and can often encompass host governments and governments of further asylum.

Despite the numbers of people uprooted in this century, until recently the subject of forced migration has been neglected by academics. Much of the work which has been produced on refugees has been directed by the needs of humanitarian agencies for data which would improve the logistics of assistance programmes. In 1981, lamenting the failure of scholars to focus their expertise on this major social phenomenon, Ron Baker

posed some questions which might explain the reasons for this neglect:

May it be that in many minds (and within established university departments) refugees are seen as immigrants with little distinction drawn between them? Or could it be too difficult an area to research, involving a multidisciplinary approach which academics tend to dislike? Or maybe it has little kudos attached to it and attracts few research grants, hence it is not useful for promotion purposes? Perhaps it is also too painful a subject for social scientists to get close to? One can only speculate the answer (Baker, 1983: vii).

He does not mention the reluctance of scholars to engage with what they regard as ephemeral phenomena. But when ephemeral phenomena continue to occur, overall patterns begin to emerge which are of long-term significance.

Since Baker made his remarks about the lack of scholarly attention to refugee issues, an increasing number of publications on refugee issues written by academics in such fields as international relations, politics and refugee policy have appeared. Too many of these place an uncritical reliance on the statements, position papers and other literature produced by humanitarian agencies, despite the glaring absence of independent field research needed to substantiate them. Such materials then become incorporated into the academic record quoted and requoted, when what is needed is a questioning of the assumptions and articles of faith which dominate the refugee regime against carefully researched evidence. We need good social science research on forced migrants, therefore, to set the record straight. We need it also because of the insight it can give on a whole range of issues associated with social change.

The challenge of understanding forced migration, or any other situation when a population is under extreme stress, is that it requires the application of coherent and integrated research strategies which incorporate the knowledge, methods, theories and concepts of a number of disciplines. That interchange leads to the breaking down of barriers between disciplines. At the same time, the study of human behaviour under conditions of stress promises to contribute to and enrich general theoretical knowledge. It is hoped that one of the results of the publication of this Trend Report will be to stimulate more sociologists to consider how the study of refugee issues will, as Mazur puts it later in this issue, 'benefit sociological analysis by requiring a rethinking of currently used concepts, theories, research methodologies and praxis'.

Admittedly, I have a vested interest in such an appraisal. Since 1982 the Refugee Studies Programme at Oxford University has been promoting *multidisciplinary* academic study, documentation, publication and training in the field of forced migration. In the effort to promote greater academic attention to the study of refugees, it has stressed the need for greater communication between those who are engaged in research in this field. In 1987, the RSP produced the first volume of *The Directory of Current Research on Refugees and Other Forced Migrants*, which included information on studies conducted by 154 researchers and a list of their publications and reports. (The second volume of *The Directory*, which contains information on the work of 239 researchers, is now available from the RSP.) In 1987 the RSP also launched a new project, 'The Refugee Participation Network'. This publication aims to link researchers and practitioners with the object of improving the standards of assistance programmes in the developing world. This year too the Refugee Studies Programme, together with Oxford University Press, began publication of a new multidisciplinary quarterly, *The Journal of Refugee Studies*, which will provide an outlet for publications and a forum for the scholarly development of this field of studies.¹

This issue of *Current Sociology* is a first attempt to present overall trends in the development of sociological studies on the subject of forced migration, and its limitations reflect the embryonic state of the field. The issue should have included surveys of research carried out in all regions of the world. Coverage, however, is incomplete — because of a lack of reports dealing with much unpublished research, research published in languages other than English, and the very large body of classified reports commissioned by humanitarian agencies and governments.² Moreover, it does not include a survey of extant and theoretically relevant literature on the resettlement of those millions of people who have been forcibly uprooted as a result of government-directed development schemes such as dams, transmigration or other directed resettlement programmes. Nevertheless, we are very grateful to the contributors who, despite the serious obstacles they faced in accessing and surveying the literature, accepted the challenge of beginning a debate within sociology on the 'state of the art' of refugee studies.

Research obviously suffers greatly from the difficulties of access to literature, much of which is scattered or unpublished. Although a number of individuals and institutions have acquired important

collections, these are often inaccessible. As funders are traditionally unresponsive to the development requirements of library resources, it is not surprising that there are difficulties in building up collections which will provide researchers with the large amount of unpublished or 'grey' literature that now exists and needs to be examined.

With the establishment of the International Refugee Documentation Network (IRDN), the exchange of information through machine-readable databases should soon be possible. Members of the IRDN are being encouraged to use the same system of indexing and classification of documents and a common thesaurus for mutually employed keywords. This is available from the offices of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). While there is general agreement about the use of the common thesaurus, there is lack of uniformity in the software packages. Some institutions, for example the British Refugee Council and the Refugee Studies Programme in the UK, are using the special software package developed for the International Refugee Documentation Network. Others, for example the Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University and Tomasset University, Thailand, The Refugee Documentation Project, York University, Canada and the Academia Mexicana de Derechos Humanos AC, Mexico City, are using the more sophisticated software CDS/ISIS, a Unesco-produced package which is free to member countries.

In addition to the work reviewed by the contributors to this volume, attention is also drawn to a number of other existing bibliographical sources.³ The studies of the resettlement process in Canada cited in this publication by Gertrud Neuwirth must be supplemented by Dr Doreen Indra's 'A Bibliography of Research on Southeast Asian Refugee Resettlement in Canada' (Chan and Indra, 1987). *A Bibliography of the Hmong (Miao) of Southeast Asia and the Hmong Refugees in the United States* (compiled by Douglas P. Olney), *Bibliography of Cambodia* and *Annotated Bibliography of Refugee Youth* are available from the Southeast Asian Refugee Studies Project, Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, University of Minnesota. The Central America Resource Centre, University of Texas at Austin, has published in *Sourcebook on Central American Refugee Policy: a Bibliography with Subject and Country Index* (compiled by Margo Gutierrez and Milton Jamail, 1985). Since 1982 the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has produced a quarterly, *Refugee*

Abstracts, which is available from their Geneva offices. In addition to this publication, UNHCR has compiled the following specialized bibliographies: *A Selected and Annotated Bibliography on Refugee Women* (1985); *International Bibliography of Refugee Literature*, working edition 1985; and *A Selected and Annotated Bibliography on Refugee Children* (provisional version, 1985). *Refugees*, UNHCR's monthly magazine, also contains book reviews.

In addition to thanking the contributors and the former and current editors of *Current sociology* — Jim Beckford, who invited the RSP to undertake this project, and William Outhwaite, who has patiently seen it through to publication — special appreciation is due to Laila Monahan who, on behalf of the Refugee Studies Programme, was responsible for all the editorial work.

Notes

1. Over the years the Center for Migration Studies, Staten Island, New York, through its *International Migration Review*, has provided researchers with the major academic outlet for publications on refugees. Two special issues on refugees were published in 1981 and 1986. *Disasters*, primarily a quarterly publication, although not entirely directed towards practitioners, has also carried important articles on refugee issues. The RSP at Oxford University holds a collection of some 5000 documents, and the British Refugee Council in London also has a collection. Both are being computerized and are part of the International Refugee Documentation Network.

In addition to a large number of individual researchers in universities scattered around the world, there are other centres which promote the study of refugees and other forced migrants. The Southeast Asian Refugee Studies Project was established by the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs at the University of Minnesota in 1980. Its aims are to encourage, coordinate and support research related to the people from Southeast Asia who have resettled in the USA. For much of its existence it has focused on the Hmong people of Laos, but recently this focus has expanded to include people from Kampuchea. Its collection of documents includes some 2000 references in several languages. The Center also produces the *SARS Newsletter*.

In 1982, the Refugee Documentation Project was established at York University, Toronto, Canada. In addition to its collection of documentation, RDP produces *Refuge*, a quarterly academic publication. At Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada, a Research Resource Division for Refugees has been established as a branch of Ethno-cultural Studies, holds a collection of documents on refugees which has been computerized, and also produces a newsletter. The Department of International Relations, Georgetown University, in cooperation with local academics in Central America and the Caribbean, has completed a major study of voluntary and involuntary migration. The Department of Economics, Free University, Amsterdam has recently conducted a study of the impact of refugees on the host economy in collaboration with the University of Khartoum. The Refugee Policy Group, Washington

DC conducts research for agencies, produces policy-orientated reports, and holds a collection of documents which are available to academics. In 1985, a Refugee Studies Programme was launched at Juba University, the Sudan. A growing number of university departments now offer undergraduate courses in refugee studies. The most established of such courses is taught by Dr Barry Stein for the Department of Social Work, Michigan State University. The Geneva, Switzerland branch of the US-based Webster University offers a certificate in refugee studies.

2. These classified documents include the reports of consultants who have conducted research for international agencies and governments. Such consultancies have become one (very lucrative) way to obtain funding for studies of refugee issues, and there is a growing army of academics who have turned consultancies into an industry. However, the terms of most contracts include the requirement that the researcher sign away his or her independence by promising not to publish — at least not without permission. If research does not find its way into the public domain through publication, not only is there no accountability to peer review, but agencies which contract the research may ignore the results if they wish. When personal economic survival (or the promise of further funding for research) is at stake, consultants tend to avoid producing critical studies, however constructive such results might be to the agency concerned. Among the recommendations and resolutions which were put forward at the RSP's 1987 International Symposium on Afghan refugees, it was resolved that academics should resist entering into such contractual arrangements.

3. Doubtless, this list is itself incomplete. Readers are encouraged to assist the Refugee Studies Programme in its overall objective of compiling a comprehensive annotated bibliography.