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Refugees and 'Other Forced Migrants'

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REFUGEES AND ‘OTHER FORCED MIGRANTS’¹

David Turton

INTRODUCTION

One of the inspirations for this Workshop was the recently established ‘Higher Education Link’, sponsored by the British Council and funded by the Department for International Development (DFID), between Addis Ababa University (Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Department of Politics and International Relations and the Faculty of Law) and the University of Oxford (Refugee Studies Centre). The principal aim of the link is to foster collaboration in research and teaching between the linked departments in the field of forced migration and to encourage dialogue between academics and policy makers. We hope that, in due course, the Link may lead to the establishment of a Centre for the Study of Forced Migration in the Horn of Africa at Addis Ababa University. In this paper I want to discuss a general problem that arises whenever one attempts to formalise and institutionalise a relatively new field of academic enquiry, such as forced migration, with the aim of having an impact on policy: namely, how to define the subject matter of the field.

It might seem that the answer to this question is obvious: if we want our research to influence policy, then we had better define its subject matter in terms of categories and concepts which are employed by policy makers. This is the approach which was adopted by refugee studies, when it emerged as a field of academic enquiry in the early 1980s. It’s concern to be ‘relevant’ (and, it must be admitted, its need for funding) led it to adopt policy related categories and concerns in defining its subject matter and setting its research priorities. The trouble with this approach is that the categories and concepts employed by policy makers may not be helpful – indeed they are likely to be downright unhelpful - when

¹ This paper was given at a Workshop on ‘Settlement and Resettlement in Ethiopia’, organised by the UN Emergency Unit for Ethiopia and the Ethiopian Society of Sociologists, Social Workers and Anthropologists, and held in Addis Ababa between 28 and 30 January, 2003. It is based on an earlier paper prepared for the RSC’s Summer School module on ‘development-induced displacement’. A longer version *‘Refugees, forced resettlers and ‘other forced migrants’: towards a unitary study of forced migration’* is available through the New Issues in Refugee Research series from UNHCR’s Evaluations and Policy Analysis Unit, Paper No. 94.

it comes to the pursuit of scientific understanding. This, after all, is not their main purpose. And yet we must assume that the better the science, the more likely it is to have a beneficial impact on policy. I shall argue in this paper that the scientific study of forced migration is, paradoxically, less likely to be ‘relevant’ to policy and practice, the more slavishly it follows policy related categories in defining its subject matter.

The particular question I shall ask, in order to pursue this argument, is this: why do academics who write about refugees, even when they are happy to describe them as a ‘sub-category of forced migrants’ (Martin, 2000, p. 3), show so little interest in the substantial literature which now exists on the most numerous² and most ‘forced’ of all forced migrants, those displaced by development projects? I shall refer to this category of forced migrants as ‘forced resettlers’ and the process which displaces them as ‘forced resettlement’. I am therefore focusing on people who have not only been forced to move because of a development project but who have also been allocated a specific area in which to resettle and been provided with at least a minimum of resources and services in order to re-establish themselves. Another term used to refer to forced resettlement is ‘development-induced displacement and resettlement’ (DIDR). Those who are forced to move by development projects have also been called ‘oustees’, ‘development-induced displaced persons’ (DIDPs), ‘project affected persons’ (PAPs), ‘development refugees’ and ‘resettlement refugees’. I prefer ‘forced resettlers’ because this term can also be used of those who are resettled by government sponsored programmes which use resettlement as a technique of rural development and political control (as they were used in Tanzania, Ethiopia and South Africa in the recent past). It also avoids both the term ‘refugee’, which has a specific definition in international law, and such acronyms as ‘PAPs’ and ‘DIDPs’ which have an objectifying, depersonalising and, ultimately, dehumanising effect.

According to Michael Cernea, formerly Senior Adviser on Social Policy at the World Bank, and main architect of the Bank’s policy on involuntary resettlement, the disinterest in

² Based on a study of projects involving involuntary resettlement which were assisted by the World Bank between 1986-1993, it has been estimated that about ten million people per year were displaced during the 1990s as a result of dam construction, urban clearance and road-building alone. (Cernea, 1996, p.300). More recently, Cernea has estimated that ‘During the last two decades of the previous century, the magnitude of forced population displacements caused by development programmes was some 200 million people globally...’(2000, p. 11)

forced resettlers shown by those who write about refugees is matched by an equal disinterest in refugees amongst those who write about forced resettlers.

...the literature on 'refugees' coexists side by side with a literature on 'oustees' or on 'development caused involuntary displacement'. There is little communication and mutual enrichment between them. Concepts and propositions are not inter-linked, and empirical findings are rarely compared and integrated. For instance, most of the writings on refugees omit oustee groups from the typology of displaced populations. In turn, research on oustees forgoes the opportunity of doing comparative analysis by studying refugees. As a result, the chance for more in depth treatment is being missed. (1996, p. 294)

The lack of interest in development-induced displacement amongst the refugee studies community (which is what concerns me here) is all the more noticeable because of the growing use within this community of the term 'forced migration' to describe the scope of its interests and activities. Consider, for example, the Refugee Studies Centre, in Oxford, with its Summer School and its Masters Degree, both in 'Forced Migration', and its periodical publication, *Forced Migration Review*, which developed from the earlier publication, *Refugee Participation Network Newsletter*. Consider also the professional association of the refugee studies community, which has given itself the name 'International Association for the Study of Forced Migration'. And consider the recently established research and teaching programmes at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg and at the American University in Cairo, which have called themselves 'Forced Migration Studies' and 'Refugee and Forced Migration Studies' respectively. And consider, finally, three recent publications by leading scholars of, respectively, international relations, law and international migration: Gill Loescher (2000), Anne Bayefski and Joan Fitzpatrick (eds.) (2000), and Susan Martin (2000). Each of these publications can be seen as falling squarely within the field of refugee studies but each uses the term 'forced migration' or 'forced displacement' to describe its subject matter.

In short, there has been a growing tendency, over the past few years, in both academic and policy circles, for refugees to be mentioned in the same breath as 'other forced migrants', almost as though these were interchangeable categories, a tendency much lamented by refugee studies 'fundamentalists' or 'conservatives' (Adelman, 2001, pp. 9-10). In the next section I shall ask who these 'other forced migrants' are, and why they do not include forced resettlers. I shall then discuss some of the empirical and conceptual

similarities between people who are categorised as ‘refugees’ and those who are categorised as ‘forced resettlers’. Finally, I shall suggest that the main obstacle to what Cernea calls the ‘bridging of the research divide’ (1996) between these different populations of forced migrants is the over-reliance of refugee studies scholars on *ad hoc* distinctions which have important political and policy implications but which result in categories which are ill-suited both to comparison, and to the observation, description and analysis of empirical data.

‘OTHER FORCED MIGRANTS’

So who are these ‘other forced migrants’? They are, of course, ‘internally displaced persons’, usually referred to as ‘IDPs’. These are people who, because of the circumstances causing them to move (in practice military conflict and violence), would have been considered worthy of international protection, under existing interpretations of international law and of the mandate of the UNHCR, if their move had taken them across an international border.³ This is made abundantly clear by the three publications by Loescher, Bayefsky and Fitzpatrick and Martin, mentioned earlier.

Loescher’s call for a ‘comprehensive approach’ to forced migration focuses exclusively on refugees, whom he describes as ‘people who have fled from and are unable to return to their own country because of persecution and violence’, and the internally displaced, whom he describes as people who have been uprooted because of persecution and violence but who remain in their own countries’ (2000, p. 190). He mentions ‘people who have been uprooted by development projects’, but only to point out that they are amongst the ‘millions’ of forced migrants ‘who are outside UNHCR concern’ (p. 191). He includes a section on ‘the growing problem of internal displacement’, in which he notes that ‘A new comprehensive international regime for forced migrants will necessarily have to place internally displaced persons [as defined above] at the centre of its concern’ (p. 210). And he calls attention to the need to strengthen the international human rights regime, so that the international community can better ‘monitor developments in human rights issues and intercede on behalf of forced migrants’ (p. 210). It is here that one might reasonably have expected some reference to be made to the rights of forcibly resettled people, but it is clear that Loescher’s sights remain firmly fixed on those who have been forced to move by

conflict. The lack of any reference to human rights issues affecting forced resettlers is even more glaringly apparent in the book edited by Bayefski and Fitzpatrick, the entire purpose of which is to discuss the human rights of forcibly displaced populations. The book does include, however, a chapter on the internally displaced (to which I shall return). Finally, Martin defines forced migrants, ‘For the purpose of this paper’, in the same way as Loescher, namely as ‘persons who flee or are obliged to leave their homes or places of habitual residence because of events threatening their lives or safety’ (p. 3). Also like Loescher, she makes only passing reference to forced resettlers, although she does note that they could become of concern to the international community if their governments were unable or unwilling to provide them with protection and assistance (p. 6).

The interest of refugee studies scholars in the internally displaced has been fuelled, if not inspired, by the growing concern of the international community with the ‘IDP problem’, a concern that is motivated not only by humanitarian considerations but also by the political objective of preventing and ‘containing’ refugee flows. Be that as it may, and the ‘real world’ being what it is, it cannot be denied that there are strong practical reasons for maintaining a clear distinction between refugees and the internally displaced on the one hand, and forced resettlers on the other. The key point here is that both refugees and the internally displaced are unable or unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of their governments, while forced resettlers have been deliberately moved by their own governments in the name of ‘eminent domain’ law, which allows private property to be expropriated for the sake of a wider public good. Forced resettlers, therefore, expect to be compensated for the land and property they have lost and it remains the responsibility of the government that moved them to provide them with protection and assistance.

Development-induced displaced persons (DIDPs) generally remain in their country of origin and their legal protection should theoretically be guaranteed by the government. In terms of the international state system, the government is responsible for ensuring that the rights of people under its jurisdiction are respected....the complexities of DIDR [development-induced displacement and resettlement] result specifically because the government that is responsible for the displacement is also responsible for ensuring the protection of DIDPs. (Barutciski, 2000, p. 2)

³ I shall refer to them as ‘the internally displaced’ and use the acronym ‘IDP’ only in inverted commas.

There are also strong practical grounds for maintaining a clear distinction between refugees and the internally displaced, because of the different statuses of these two categories of forced migrants in international law. Refugee protection, for which there exists a strong body of legally binding norms and principles, ‘is essentially about promoting asylum in foreign countries’, while the protection of the internally displaced, for which there are no legally binding norms and principles, ‘is basically about humanitarian intervention in troubled countries’ (Barutciski, loc. cit.). There is, of course, much debate about how to address the needs of the internally displaced, given that there is no single international organisation with a mandate to protect and assist them. But what is generally agreed is that it is important not to risk ‘diluting’ the protection currently afforded to refugees under international law by extending the term (as would be perfectly meaningful in everyday speech) to other forced migrants who do not qualify for the same level of protection – to speak, for example, of ‘internal’ and ‘external’ refugees.

REFUGEES AND FORCED RESETTLERS: TRACING THE CONNECTIONS

But, just because there are practical advantages in distinguishing sub-classes within a class of empirically related phenomena, does this mean that academic research dealing with the subclasses so distinguished should proceed as though on parallel tracks? One person who definitely thinks not is Michael Cernea (1996, p. 294). He first argued in favour of more integration of the literature on forced resettlers and ‘internal refugees’ in an article published in the *Journal of Refugee Studies* in 1990 (‘Internal refugee flows and development-induced population displacement’) and he was still arguing the case ten years later in *Risks and Reconstruction: Experiences of Resettlers and Refugees* (Cernea and McDowell, (eds.) 2000). In this book he repeats the summary he gave in his 1996 chapter of the benefits to be gained from ‘bridging the research divide’:

This potential for gain is fourfold. *Empirically*, the two bodies of research could enrich each other by comparing their factual findings. *Theoretically*, they could broaden their conceptualisations by exploring links and similarities between their sets of variables. *Methodologically*, they could sharpen their inquiry by borrowing and exchanging research techniques. And *politically*, they could influence the public arena more strongly by mutually reinforcing their policy advocacy and operational recommendations. (Cernea, 2000, p. 17, emphasis in the original)

The reasoning is persuasive but, judging by the way the term ‘forced migration’ continues to be used by the refugee studies community, it has fallen largely on deaf ears. Before returning to my opening question, and asking why this should be so, it is worth mentioning briefly some points of similarity and difference between those forced migrants who fall within the category of ‘refugees’ and those who fall within the category of ‘forced resettlers’. I shall approach this question, first, by focussing on the *experiences* of forced migrants and on the challenges they face in re-establishing themselves in a new place. Here I shall rely mainly on Cernea himself, and on an unpublished essay by Elizabeth Colson, ‘Coping in Adversity’ (1991), which is a rare example of an attempt to achieve precisely the kind of ‘bridging’ between two bodies of ‘research literature’ that Cernea has been calling for. Second, I shall move from the empirical to the conceptual level and suggest that the figure of the refugee and the figure of the forced resettler can both be seen as revealing underlying contradictions in the ideology of the nation-state as the dominant political organising principle of the modern world.

The definitions and labels used to separate subsets of forced migrants are based on the causes of flight, or the ‘imputed motives’ (Colson, 1991, p. 6) of those who flee, and on the prevailing norms and principles of international law. They are not based on the experiences of forced migrants after they have left home. Both Colson and Cernea emphasise the ‘commonalities of experience...among the uprooted, however they are set in motion’ (Colson, 1991, p. 1). Colson focuses on the psychological stress caused by the experience of being forcibly displaced. She notes that, while all migrants are liable to increased levels of stress, this is compounded for *forced* migrants by bereavement at the loss of their homes and anger and resentment towards the agents and institutions which forced them to move. This is likely to lead, for both refugees and forced resettlers, to a loss of trust in society generally and to the expression of opposition and antagonism towards the administrative authorities, and towards the staff of humanitarian organisations, who continue to have power over their lives. For refugees, this is seen most obviously in a critical and resentful attitude towards camp personnel, as reported, for example, in Harrell-Bond’s account of Ugandan refugees in Sudanese camps (1986) and in Malkki’s account of Hutu refugees in Mishamo refugee settlement in Tanzania, who regularly described themselves as the ‘slaves’ of the Tanzanian authorities (1995a, p. 120).

Unlike most refugees, forced resettlers (I refer here specifically to those displaced by infrastructural projects) have no choice about leaving their homes and cannot entertain the slightest hope of returning to them. Also unlike refugees, of course, it is theoretically possible for their move to be planned well in advance. The authorities can therefore take steps to ensure that the disruptive impact of the move is minimised and that the standard of living of the resettlers is improved, or at least maintained. In practice, however, this hardly ever happens: those displaced by development projects are not only (like refugees), typically, amongst the poorest and politically most marginal members of a society but they are also likely to become even more impoverished as a result of the move. Forced resettlers, therefore, may end up ‘as alienated from their governments as the refugees who have fled their countries’ (Colson, 19991, p. 15). Based initially on her study of the forced displacement of the Gwembe Tonga, of Zambia, by the Kariba Dam in 1957-58, Colson has attempted, in conjunction with Thayer Scudder, to demarcate phases in the *process* of forced displacement, which will also be found to apply to refugee populations. First there is a stage of denial (‘this cannot happen to us’), when ‘the possibility of removal is too stressful to acknowledge’ (Scudder and Colson, 1982, p. 271). After the move has taken place, there is likely to be a phase during which people will cling to old certainties and take no risks, even if this prevents them from taking advantage of new economic opportunities.

Following removal, the majority of relocatees, including refugees, can be expected to follow a conservative strategy. They cope with the stress of removal by clinging to the familiar and changing no more than is necessary. (Scudder and Colson, 1982, 272)

Here we may see a clear illustration of the difference which force, or the relative lack of choice in deciding whether, when and where to move, makes to the behaviour of migrants. The greater the area of choice available to them, even though they may be escaping from difficult or even life-threatening, circumstances, the more likely they are to show high levels of innovation and adaptation in taking advantage of the opportunities offered by their new environment (Turton, 1996).

The fact that forced resettlement, unlike the flight of refugees, can be planned in advance, and the fact that it is an inescapable consequence of economic development, has provided both the motive and the opportunity for social scientists to study its long term consequences. This research, much of it carried out by social anthropologists, has produced a

huge amount of detailed information that has been used in efforts to promote improvements in the design and implementation of resettlement projects. Cernea, who has been at the forefront of these efforts, has presented what he calls an ‘impoverishment, risks and reconstruction model’ of forced resettlement, which is intended to act as a guide to the actions needed if the potentially impoverishing effects of forced resettlement are to be avoided or minimised. Two of these effects are particularly relevant to the comparison of forced resettlers with refugees: landlessness and loss of ‘social capital’.⁴ According to Cernea, empirical evidence shows that loss of land ‘is the principal form of decapitalisation and pauperisation’ of forced resettlers (2000, p. 23) and that ‘Settling displaced people back on cultivable land...is the heart of the matter in reconstructing livelihoods’ (p. 35). Loss of *social* capital refers to the disruption and disintegration of the informal social support networks which are vital to economic survival in communities where individuals and households are vulnerable to short term and unpredictable fluctuations in income. Both of these potentially impoverishing effects of forced migration clearly apply to those forced to move by conflict, whether across international borders or not, at least as much as they do to those forced to move by development projects.

On an empirical level, then, it is clear that refugees and forced resettlers ‘confront strikingly similar social and economic problems’ (Cernea, 2000, p. 17). But it is also possible to trace a connection between them at the conceptual level, by considering their relationship to the nation-state, or to what Malkki (1992) has called ‘the national order of things’.⁵ The refugee, as a person who is unable or unwilling to obtain the protection of his or her own government, makes visible a contradiction between citizenship, as the universal source of all individual rights, and nationhood as an identity ascribed at birth and entailing a sentimental attachment to a specific community and territory.

.....the twentieth century became the century of refugees, not because it was extraordinary in forcing people to flee, but because of the division of the globe into nation-states in which states were assigned the role of protectors of rights, but also that of exclusive protectors of their own citizens. When the globe was totally divided into states, those fleeing persecution in one state had nowhere to go but to another state, and required the permission of the other state to enter it. (Adelman, 1999, p. 9)

⁴ The others are ‘joblessness’, ‘homelessness’, ‘marginalisation’, ‘food insecurity’, ‘increased morbidity’ and ‘loss of access to common property resources’. (Cernea, 2000, p. 20)

⁵ The argument that follows is set out at greater length in Turton (2002).

The figure of the refugee exposes a contradiction in the idea of the nation-state, as both a culturally homogeneous political community and as the universal principle of political organisation. The refugee is 'out of place' in a conceptual as well as an empirical sense. He or she is an anomaly produced by the universalisation of the nation-state as a principle of political organisation.

The forced resettler, as a person displaced 'in the national interest' to make way for a development project, makes visible a contradiction between the nation-state as, on the one hand, the ultimate source of legitimate political control and the principal agent of development in a given territory and, on the other, a community of equal citizens. The main objective of a project involving forced resettlement is, of course, to benefit a much wider population than that of the displaced themselves. And the key characteristic of this wider population is that it shares with the displaced population membership of the same nation-state. Co-membership of the nation-state, therefore, makes legally and morally legitimate a situation in which, as Cernea has put it, 'some people enjoy the gains of development, while others bear its pains' (2000, p. 12). But who are these 'others' who are also fellow-citizens? In what sense are they 'other'? Is it just that they are 'not us' or is it, more fundamentally, that they are 'not *like* us', that they have a different and systematically inferior, relationship to the sources of state power?

The empirical evidence suggests the latter answer is correct. In case after case of forced resettlement, we see the state exercising its right to expropriate private property for public use against a relatively impoverished and powerless group of its own citizens, with typically disastrous consequences for their economic, physical, psychological and social well-being.⁶ In many cases, the displaced people are members of an indigenous minority who are forced out of their home territory or part of it. They are economically and politically marginal to the nation-state within which they were incorporated in the process of nation-building and their forced displacement can be seen as a continuation of that same process. Writing about the contribution of forced resettlers to the 'greater common good' in India,

⁶ In a recent paper, Chris de Wet (2001) has considered why this should be so and whether such results are avoidable. He argues that 'the resettlement components of development projects display a very high failure rate....because of the inherent complexity of what is involved when we try to combine moving people with improving their conditions' (p.4642)

Arundhati Roy notes that well over half those due to be displaced by the Sardar Sarovar Dam on the Narmada River belong to ethnic minorities which make up only 8 per cent of the Indian population as a whole. She comments:

This opens up a whole new dimension to the story. The ethnic 'otherness' of their victims takes some of the pressure off the Nation Builders. It's like having an expense account. Someone else pays the bills. People from another country. Another world. India's poorest people are subsidising the lifestyles of her richest....(1999, pp. 18-19)

In other words, forced resettlement is a 'price worth paying' for the good of the nation, provided somebody else pays it, where 'somebody else' refers to fellow citizens whose relationship to the state is different from, and inferior to, our own. It follows that, when affected populations form themselves into campaigning organisations to resist resettlement, they are challenging not just a particular project, or the development policy of a particular state, but the idea that underpins the state's claim to sovereign power over its territory: that it is a 'nation'-state, a national community of equal citizens. They are challenging, in other words, the legitimacy of state power. On this basis, the forced resettler has an equal claim, along with the refugee, to being considered the 'Achilles heel' of the nation-state system (Adelman, 1999, p. 93). Both categories of forced migrants expose underlying contradictions in the ideology of the nation-state.

There is no doubt that the empirical and conceptual connections that can be traced between refugees and forced resettlers support Cernea's call for more interchange of ideas and findings between researchers focusing on these two categories of forced migrants. Although Cernea himself considers that trends in this direction are 'getting stronger and gaining ground' (2000, p. 17), he does not give the evidence to support this claim and one can therefore be forgiven for remaining sceptical about it. But, in any event, his basic contention - that communication and cross-reference between these two bodies of literature has been notable by its absence - remains valid and, in the light of the above discussion, requires explanation.

AN EXPLANATION

The main benefit Cernea sees coming from the bridging of this divide is intellectual – it will improve the quality of research, theoretically and methodologically, in both areas⁷. But, as the above quotation illustrates, he also hopes that this will, in turn, help policy makers to recognise, and then prevent or minimise, the risks of impoverishment that are faced by both categories of forced migrants. Paradoxically, however, there are good reasons to believe that it is precisely the close relationship between the academic field of refugee studies and the world of policy and practice that has worked *against* the interchange of ideas and findings between these two areas of research. According to Cernea, ‘The key policy objective in resettlement is restoring the income-generating capacity of resettlers’ (1996, p. 314), while refugee protection, in the words of Barutciski, quoted earlier, ‘is essentially about promoting asylum in foreign countries’ (2000, p. 2).

While conceptual models that emphasise the reconstruction of livelihoods are appropriate for DIDR situations which may or may not involve abuse on the part of local authorities, they are not necessarily appropriate for refugee emergencies that are by definition situations in which the victims’ human rights are violated.....it would be overly ambitious to believe or insist that emergency refugee assistance is intended to restore the livelihoods of victims of persecution or conflict to levels before their flight’ (Barutciski, 2000, p. 2)

There was a time, of course, when such an objective was not seen as ‘overly ambitious’ but as part of a desirable progression from ‘relief to development’. That was during what has been called the ‘asylum phase’ (Crisp, 2000) in the history of the post-war international refugee regime (from the 1960s to the 1980s), when the integration of refugees in the country of first asylum (usually in the developing world) was seen, along with voluntary repatriation, as the most viable and feasible ‘durable solution’. Thus, during the 1960s and 70s agricultural settlement schemes for refugees were set up with the help of the UNHCR in several African countries, the aim being to help refugees re-establish themselves in a new country and to become self-sufficient.

Between 1961 and 1978, approximately 60 rural settlements have been installed, most of them in Burundi, Uganda and Tanzania.....In the 1990s, nearly a quarter of all refugees in sub-Saharan Africa were estimated to be living in 140 organized settlements, most in the eastern and southern

⁷ Personal communication, 23/9/03.

regions.....Planned land resettlements have long been considered the best means for promoting refugee self-sufficiency and local integration. (Lassailly-Jacob, 2000, p. 112)

It is here, in the planning of agricultural settlement schemes for refugees, that research on forced resettlement has, potentially, the greatest practical relevance to refugee policy. (Kibreab, 2000, pp. 324-331). But this policy has significantly changed since the 1980s, to one which focuses on prevention and containment in countries and regions of origin, and on early repatriation, rather than on the reconstruction of refugee livelihoods in countries of asylum.

The days are past when many rural refugees could be assisted toward achieving self-sufficiency in exile. Going into exile now means hiding among locals or surviving in transit camps, where the living conditions are so poor that few wish to stay on. (Lassailly-Jacob, 2000, p. 123)

There is consequently little incentive for policy-oriented research in refugee studies to concern itself with the findings of the equally policy-oriented research on forced resettlers.

But there is another, more fundamental, way in which ‘the dominance of policy concerns in refugee studies’ (Black, 2001, p. 67) can be seen as working against the integration of research findings on different populations of forced migrants. I am referring here to the *intellectual* dependence of refugee studies on categories and labels which are the product of political and policy concerns rather than of scientific ones. The scientific point of distinguishing subsets within a class of related phenomena is to encourage and facilitate comparison between those subsets, in order to throw light on the wider class, and to aid (in the sense of make more acute) the observation, description and analysis of empirical data. These objectives are interdependent, since there must be a constant readiness to revise and sharpen abstract categories in the light of empirical observation. The trouble with the categories used within refugee studies is that, being dictated by political and policy concerns rather than scientific ones, they actually discourage comparison within the broader category of forced migration and are not amenable to revision in the light of empirical evidence.

Consider the term ‘refugee’ itself. This, of course, is a legal category, based on the 1951 *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees*, which was itself heavily based on the ‘strategic political objectives’ of the Western powers at that particular historical moment.

(Hathaway, 1991, quoted in Chimni, 2000, p. 14). Hathaway distinguishes ‘five essential elements’ in the Convention definition, of which the first is ‘alienage’: the claimant for refugee status must be outside his or her country of origin. But, as Hathaway points out, the exclusion of ‘internal refugees’ from the Convention definition was not ‘so much a matter of conceptual principle, as it was a reflection of the limited reach of international law’ (1991, quoted in Chimni, p. 401). He quotes Shacknove’s argument that ‘alienage is an unnecessary condition for establishing refugee status. It...is a subject of a broader category: the physical access of the international community to the uprooted person’ (Shacknove, 1985, p. 277) and concludes that

....the physical presence of the unprotected person outside her country of origin is not a constitutive element of her refugeehood, but is rather a practical condition precedent to placing her within the effective scope of international protection’ (Hathaway, 1991, loc. cit.)

The key criterion, then, that distinguishes refugees, as the term is used in the language of refugee studies, from ‘other forced migrants’ is not based on ‘conceptual principle’ and is not a ‘constitutive element’ of refugeehood. It follows that the term does not distinguish a ‘subset’ of forced migrants that can be meaningfully compared to other subsets. As Malkki has put it, the term is not ‘a label for a special, generalisable “kind” or “type” of person or situation’ but ‘a descriptive rubric that includes within it a world of socio-economic statuses, personal histories, and psychological or spiritual situations.’ (1995b, p. 496)

The ‘IDP’ category is even more hazy and imprecise. The internally displaced are defined, in the ‘Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement’ of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), as

persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalised violence, violations of human rights or natural disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognised State border’ (quoted in Chimni, 2000, p. 242).

The ‘essential’ purpose of the definition is to ‘help identify persons who should be of concern to the international community because they are basically in refugee-like situations

within their own countries’ (Cohen, 1996, quoted by Chimni, 2000, p. 407). The inclusion of people who have fled their homes because of ‘natural disasters’ (itself a highly ambiguous and imprecise concept) is intended to cater for cases where governments ‘respond to such disasters by discriminating against or neglecting certain groups on political or ethnic grounds or by violating their human rights in other ways’ (Cohen, 2000, p. 82).

A first point to make here is that, on these grounds, it would be logical and understandable to prefer the term ‘internal refugees’ to ‘internally displaced persons’. This would both recognise the ‘refugee-like’ situation of the people being referred to and make clear the distinction between them and forced resettlers, who are also displaced within their own countries but who are not in a ‘refugee-like’ situation. As noted earlier, however, the logic which dictates the use of ‘IDP’ rather than ‘internal refugee’ is a practical, not a conceptual one: it has to do with a concern not to undermine the protection available to refugees under the 1951 Convention, which makes ‘alienage’ an ‘essential element’ (Hathaway, 1991, quoted in Chimni, 2000, p. 15) of the legal definition of a refugee. Secondly, the form of words used to justify the inclusion of those displaced by ‘natural disasters’ could easily be used to extend the definition to many if not most of today’s forced resettlers, even though they are not mentioned in the formal definition. Indeed, principle 6.2(c) states that all human beings have a right to be protected from ‘arbitrary displacement’, including cases of ‘large scale development projects, which are not justified by compelling and overriding public interests’ (quoted in Chimni, 2000, p. 427.) But this ignores the main issue in forced resettlement, which is not simply that people should be protected from ‘arbitrary displacement’ but that, however compelling the public interest reasons for displacing them, there remains an obligation on governments to protect their political, social and economic rights (Pettersson, 2002). In principle, then, the definition is extendable to a huge variety of different situations, groups and individuals and is too vague (note such qualifiers as ‘in particular’, ‘essentially’ and ‘basically’) and inclusive to serve as a meaningful analytical category for comparative purposes.

For the same reason, the categories ‘refugee’ and ‘IDP’ are also unhelpful when it comes to the observation, description and analysis of empirical data – of the world as it actually is. It happens that the Head of UNHCR’s Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit, Jeff Crisp, recently lamented the fact that the staff of the organisation ‘seem to know less and less about the people and communities we work with’ (2001, p. 9). He gives a number of *ad hoc*

explanations for this - security problems, which keep UNHCR staff away from rural areas where refugees are mainly found, increased paperwork which ties staff to their computers and rapid staff turnover 'in remote locations'. He also complains that researchers in refugee studies are spending too much time in libraries and not enough in the field. By way of illustration, he mentions having met several postgraduate students in the recent past who wanted to write dissertations about the international community's responsibilities towards the internally displaced, but none who wanted to investigate the situation of the internally displaced 'on the ground' (loc.cit.). This call for more in-depth empirical research in refugee studies is greatly to be welcomed. It also goes to the heart of the matter I have been discussing in this paper, because it puts the focus on the *experiences* of refugees and 'other forced migrants', rather than on the causes of their flight or their status in international law. But the argument I have presented here suggests that the explanation for this lack of knowledge of the everyday lives and preoccupations of refugees 'and other forced migrants', goes deeper than mere lack of time and/or interest amongst UNHCR staff and academics respectively.

Empirical research, as opposed to mere random observation, cannot proceed except in the light of general propositions which, among other things, identify the phenomena to be investigated and group them into meaningful general categories. These categories must, in turn, be open to refinement and revision in the light of particular observation. This condition cannot be met, however, by categories which are designed to meet the needs of practical politics and humanitarian assistance rather than of scientific enquiry. The category distinctions which I have discussed in this paper are rightly and tenaciously upheld by academics, policy makers and activists alike, on the grounds that they are vital, given the current 'reach' of international law, for the protection and assistance of refugees. The trouble is, they would not stand up to the close scrutiny which would inevitably result from the kind of field-based, empirical research that Crisp is calling for (Allen and Turton, 1996, pp. 5-9). If taken seriously, therefore, such research could lead to a wholesale questioning of the unexamined assumptions upon which the current international regime of refugee protection and humanitarian assistance – and possibly much else - is based.

CONCLUSION

I take it for granted that it is through the questioning of taken-for-granted assumptions that academic research can make its most valuable contribution to the general improvement of the human condition. But of course, when knowledge has potentially radical and disturbing consequences for established thought and practice, ignorance may be considered bliss. This presents a fourfold challenge to all those involved in the study of forced migration and in the design and implementation of policies intended to improve the situation of forced migrants. First, we need to adopt a unitary and inclusive approach to the definition of the field. Second, we need to encourage research which is aimed at understanding the situation of forced migrants at the local level, irrespective of the causes of their flight. Third, we need to recognise that such research will, inevitably and rightly, call into question the adequacy and usefulness of existing generalisations, assumptions and categories. And fourthly, we need to recognise that it is by the questioning of taken for granted assumptions and categories that academic research can have its most beneficial impact on policy and practice. In the words of Louis Pasteur, a scientist whose practical contribution to the general improvement of human welfare it is difficult to exaggerate, we need to recognise that ‘Il n’existe pas de sciences appliquées mais seulement des applications de la science’ (‘There is no such thing as applied science, but only the application of science’.) (1872:42).

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