



Anthropology and the Study of Refugees

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Source: *Anthropology Today*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (Aug., 1992), pp. 6-10

Published by: [Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2783530>

Accessed: 30/09/2010 14:15

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subjects and in those days probably not identifying themselves primarily as Turks) used to seek temporary work in Russia. The city of Batumi was one of their most favoured destinations. The details differed, but then as today the main factor promoting cross-border movement was severe economic hardship.

Hann, C.M. 1990. *Tea and the Domestication of the Turkish State* (SOAS Occasional Papers in Modern Turkish Studies No. 1. Huntingdon: Eothen P.).

Meeker, Michael E. 1971. 'The Black Sea Turks: Some aspects of their ethnic and cultural background', *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 2, 4, pp.318-45.

obviously attractive to the visitors; above all, in their view their property is safer in Turkey than in almost any part of the ex-USSR. More speculatively, it is possible that some other features of this region command respect, even though they are an inconvenience to traders – for example, almost complete observance by adults of the Ramazan fast. On the other hand, some visitors may notice, for example, in Turkey's secular rituals and the ubiquitous cult of Atatürk, hints of what has been so dramatically swept away in their own countries.

Images and myths form a rich and ever-changing backcloth to these marketplace exchanges. The myth of the wealthy socialist superpower has been exposed, while myths concerning blonde women live on for the time being. On both sides one may expect more realistic pictures to emerge, with poverty, corruption and civil conflict among the most frequently recurring themes. In this way a border that was sealed for two generations has been truly opened. Alongside the highlighting of cultural differences, new affinities are starting to emerge, and it is possible that some old ones will be renewed. Already some people we know are expanding a cross-border relationship from its original economic base into a more meaningful friendship, with

regular visiting on both sides. The full implications of all these increased contacts, particularly in view of ethnic complexities on both sides of the border, are too complex to analyze in a short article.

As a postscript, we must acknowledge that these market developments have affected our main research plans and altered the way we are perceived in the region. In 1983 and 1988 we were not ourselves mistaken for *Rus*, as we frequently are this year, and not without some discomfort. Nor do we recall having in earlier years to fend off quite so many questions about our own material circumstances, about who is paying us to live in Turkey, and how much money can various types of worker expect to receive in England today (after stoppages). We too have been caught up willy nilly in this ever-increasing dissemination of the language of the market. As it happens, economic themes figure prominently on our research agenda here. We hope to complete a study of the small business sector, to complement earlier rural work. Like other anthropologists elsewhere we had expected to make many useful contacts in the course of satisfying routine wants by patronizing local establishments. But we too are finding the lure of the *Rus pazari* impossible to resist. □

Anthropology and the study of refugees

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Both authors wish to express their appreciation to Professor Rene Hirschon, University of the Aegean and the Department of Anthropology, Oxford Polytechnic, for her comments on an earlier draft and also to Laura Hammond, Research Student, Department of Anthropology, University of Wisconsin, Madison, who helped the authors when she was visiting the RSP in January.

Throughout this century, scholars scattered around the world and from a wide range of disciplines have engaged in refugee-related research, with publications relating to legal issues dominating the field. Of all the disciplines involved in the study of human behaviour, we contend that anthropology has the most to contribute to the study of refugees. The relation runs in the other direction as well; anthropology can also gain by recognizing refugees as falling within its disciplinary concerns.

During the 1980s the study of forced migration has gained greater recognition as a legitimate academic field for research and instruction. A significant number of new publications have appeared, including the multidisciplinary *Journal of Refugee Studies* and the *Journal of International Refugee Law* – the latter sponsored by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). A few university-based research centres specifically devoted to this field have been established.¹ However, when the Association of Social Anthropologists and the *Journal of Refugee Studies* co-sponsored a prize essay in this field, none could be offered the first year and, in the second, there were still insufficient contributions to justify its continuation. More generally too, although forced displacement, uprootings and other refugee-related phenomena – including the events which give rise to them – are a standard feature of human social experience, relatively little attention has been paid to it by the academic establishment. In 1982, at a conference on the psychological problems faced by refugees, Ron Baker, a professor of social work, criticized academia in

general for its neglect of the subject:

It has been estimated that up to 140 million people have been forcibly uprooted in this century alone! In view of this it is remarkable that social scientists have generally neglected refugee studies and research. Further, no 'Department for Refugee Studies' exists in any university or other higher education institution. It is pertinent to ask why...? May it be that in many minds...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 ...not useful for promotion purposes? Perhaps it is also too painful a subject for social scientists to get close to? (1983)

Three related issues may be singled out. The first is the conceptual confusion surrounding our perceptions of displacement, and the lack of rigorous classification for the different conditions, causes and patterns of refugee movements in time and space. The second is the limitations of our institutional arrangements, the 'culture' of academia, which does not get beyond rendering lip service to the need for an inter- or multi-disciplinary understanding of human society. The third is the need for reconsideration of the very expertise and subject-matter which are regarded as defining anthropology.

Who are refugees?

The history of refugees in this century began with the replacement of the old multi-ethnic European empires by the new world order of sovereign nation states. Hundreds of thousands of people were forced to flee their homes because they did not 'belong', they did not fit the nationalist principle of 'one state, one culture'

(Gellner 1983) and thus could not be accommodated within European national state borders. Unlike such movements in the previous century which, in proportional terms, were much larger (Wigren 1990), in this century there have been far fewer places for these 'extra' or surplus people to go.

Responding to the need for a coordinated international response, the League of Nations, and later the United Nations (Skran 1988) labelled them 'refugees' (Zetter 1991), and introduced humanitarian law intended to ensure the protection of their rights. Refugees became the focus for the development of a vast and complex network of institutionalized assistance composed of host governments, UNHCR and other UN organizations, and also non-governmental organizations (NGOs) which were assigned or assumed responsibility to deal with their material needs.

Two major premises underlie the functioning and determine the objectives of this humanitarian 'regime'. The first is that refugees are a transitory phenomena of crisis and disorder, and thus only temporarily relevant. The second, human nature is best served in a sedentary setting.

Although there have been millions of refugees at any given period during most of this century, refugee protection remains conceived as temporary, somewhat akin to a natural disaster. ...Originally the term of office of the High Commissioner was limited to only three years, beginning in 1951, and it has been renewed for five year periods since (Dunbar-Ortiz and Harrell-Bond 1987).

Although its mandate requires UNHCR to seek 'permanent' solutions to the predicament of the refugee, it was established during the onset of the Cold War, at a time when most refugees were eastern Europeans escaping 'communism' and viewed as votes for liberal democracy. This perception facilitated their settlement in the West. With increasing numbers of refugees of non-European origin, UNHCR began to speak of 'durable' solutions, promoting voluntary repatriation as the most desirable solution, followed by integration in the country of first asylum, with resettlement and naturalization in a third (usually western) country being the least desirable 'solution', open normally only to a selected few.

Given the unwillingness or inability of the poorest states which currently host the majority of refugees (95%) to offer permanent resettlement, and the impotence of the international political system to resolve the situations which have caused their uprootedness, refugees have been re-defined as cases for more or less permanent international welfare. What is clearly left open are questions of appropriateness of policies and the effectiveness of assistance programmes, arenas in which anthropology and anthropologists are urgently needed to 'interfere'.

In anthropological terms, refugees are people who have undergone a violent 'rite' of separation and unless or until they are 'incorporated' as citizens into their host state (or returned to their state of origin) find themselves in 'transition', or in a state of 'liminality'. This 'betwixt and between' (Turner 1969) status may not only be legal and psychological, but social and economic as well. Moreover, encoded in the label 'refugee' are the images of dependency, helplessness and misery, e.g. 'The presence of floating groups of oppressed and miserable persons presents the international community today with one of its greatest challenges' (Lillich 1984). 'As Zia Rizvi noted: "Once an individual, a human being becomes a refugee, it is as though he has become a member of another race, some subhuman group"' (Dunbar-Ortiz and Harrell-Bond

1987).

What can anthropology do for refugees?

Most refugee predicaments involve cultures in violent collision. To survive, refugees must adapt to radically new social and material conditions. Documenting and interpreting the variety and diversity of human cultural phenomena is the work of anthropology. Indeed it was in the course of intensive empirical documentation of other cultures that anthropology acquired scientific status and legitimized its method of investigation as a hallmark among the other social sciences: long-term and intimate ethnographic fieldwork.

The existence of a large refugee population usually activates the machinery of humanitarian assistance. Anthropologists' insights into power, and their expertise on structure of authority, place them in an advantageous position to contribute to the formation of policy (James 1991; Harrell-Bond, Voutira and Leopold 1992). For example, policy-makers tend to assume that movement within a region requires less 'cultural' adjustment since people are living with 'kith and kin' on the other side of artificial colonial-imposed boundaries. Though shared language and history may alleviate the trauma of uprooting, they do not eliminate the challenges of exile. Research has demonstrated that crossing a state border sharply affects power relations between members of the same ethnic group, and that to resist being forced into camps requires that people employ a myriad of strategies which include the re-definition of kinship and social obligations (eg Harrell-Bond 1986; Harrell-Bond and Wilson 1991).

Policy-makers also assume that adaptation to industrialized society is more difficult for refugees from the developing world. Those accepted are usually the most highly educated. However, the mental health record of 'elite' refugees selected for resettlement in the West (e.g. Boavida 1991; Frederico 1991), and the reported educational success of the first-generation children of Hmong, a pre-literate Laos society now living in the US, shake such assumptions.

The social meanings of the legal concepts of asylum and refugee as defined in international conventions, and the consequences of differing norms for the treatment of 'strangers', are another area to which anthropologists have a major contribution to make. When the 1951 UN Convention was written, only 35 states participated; most of the colonial empires were still in place, the eastern bloc had their own views of what caused refugees, and the atmosphere of the Cold War was the backdrop to UN deliberations (Weis n.d.). Consequently, as with a great deal of human rights law, many of the new states in the developing world view the Convention definition of refugee rights as impositions of western values. But the response to migration – even forced migration – is hardly a new phenomenon. Both Islam and Judaism – no doubt most other great religions of the world – include the requirement to offer asylum as a religious tenet. Indeed, the practice of granting asylum in Islam is far more liberal than that defined by the UN Convention (Elmadmad 1991). Moreover, all societies studied by anthropologists have had their own methods of incorporating strangers, otherwise even anthropologists would not have been received. Although van Gennep (1909) began his study of rites of passage by describing such ceremonial processes, there are few anthropological sources other than Shack and Skinner's study, *Strangers in African Societies* (1979) to which comparative legal scholarship can resort. As Khadija Elmadmad, currently studying

the concept of asylum in Islam and African customary law, puts it:

This book is of very great interest for my study. ...But there is little [other] literature on the question. Reading this book helped me in understanding the real meaning of aliens and citizens status through the concept of strangers in African societies, that refugees are a special type of aliens, but some people who are considered as strangers are not and are easily assimilated to citizenship. During my field trip in the Sudan, I discovered that [the attitudes of locals] vary between friendliness, indifference, fear and antagonism, just as it is developed in their book which refers to strangers. These attitudes have a great impact on shaping the law on refugees and migration and on the government's policy....(Pers. comm.)

Focusing on intervention, a number of anthropologists (e.g. Harrell-Bond 1986; Waldron 1987), have shown the ethos of humanitarian work to be one in which the victims are too often treated as villains, with the helpers assuming the role of figures of authority. Humanitarian organizations tend also to treat their beneficiaries as an undifferentiated mass. Assistance is often 'packaged' and delivered without due consideration of the distinctive values, norms and social organization of the afflicted population. As Sidney Waldron (1988) points out, an urgent need exists for anthropologists to act as *cultural brokers* to communicate the perspectives of refugees (see also Harrell-Bond 1986).

Two remarkable examples coming from recent refugee research demonstrate the relevance of anthropology to understanding human behaviour, and contributing to the alleviation of suffering under extreme conditions of survival. Working as a psychologist, Gadi Ben-Ezer's (1990) work amongst Ethiopian Jews in Israel applies an 'anthropological' approach. Observing serious problems which arose between the refugees and the 'absorption authorities', he found the explanation in the clash of social norms: for example, what for Ethiopians constituted appropriate behaviour between themselves and persons whom they perceived as having higher status (1985). When children who had stopped eating were referred to him, he was able to identify their 'abnormal' behaviour (eating disorders/eating arrests), caused by their experiences of uprooting and the tensions experienced in the process of adapting. He learned that the Ethiopian identified the abdomen as a 'container' of emotions. When it became 'too full' of only troubles and sorrows, the children were unable to eat (1990).

Another anthropologist (Conquergood 1988), in exchange for research access, accepted the invitation to direct an environmental health education programme in a refugee camp. Construing refugee camps as 'liminal zones', he identifies 'the playful creativity of performance' as the means through which refugees are able 'to play with new identities, new strategies for adaptation and survival'. They 'invent a new "camp culture" that is part affirmation of the past and part adaptive response to the exigencies of the present'. In his work as a practitioner, Conquergood used popular theatre as a method for communicating health messages. In 1991, although he may himself have been forgotten, the invented character of 'Mother Clean' was still performing her 'hygienic work' in camps in Thailand.

Unfortunately, such examples are few within our profession, which leads us back to Baker's efforts to explain why refugee studies have been neglected. For anthropologists there are specific reasons. Our theoretical biases partly account for such neglect. Elizabeth Colson (1989) notes that in the past, we have 'downplayed the violence, cruelty and unhappiness existing in

the areas where we worked. One reason may have been the belief that such actions were momentary departures from cultural norms that generated long term harmony, but whatever the reason, by doing so, we falsified the record.'

What can anthropology do for policy-makers?

On the basis of his research and long experience as an official in the government's Commission for Refugees in the Sudan, Ahmed Karadawi has observed that a major goal of refugee policy has been to use international assistance handed out in camps as a method of creating dependency and de-politicizing the refugees (1983:540). Concerning the origins of the institution of the refugee camp, Malkki (1990) notes, it was during the last years of the Second World War when they 'emerged as the principal technique or instrument for ordering, administering, and controlling refugees'.

While the experience of uprooting seriously undermines the historical continuity and identity of a population, in her ethnography of the refugee camp situation in Tanzania, Liisa Malkki (1990) found conditions were favourable to the formation of a particular type of historical and political consciousness. Thus, far from contributing towards the intended policy goal of de-politicization and control, the context of camp life provides people with the opportunity to engage in the creative activity of interpreting their flight and articulating and constructing a collective narrative concerning common past:

The mythico-historical discursive practice in which the refugees are so impassionedly involved, politicizes their past in Burundi and their present in the refugee camp. ...The mythico-history serves as a political ideology for the present, while the lived-in present provokes the past into narration, transforming it in the process.

In contrast, the refugees who were living in an urban setting, scattered amongst their hosts, show no such signs of Hutu identity. The most common method of survival in this context involved intermarriage with the hosts. Malkki's findings appear corroborated by the 1990 invasion of Rwanda by refugees from Uganda. The invasion was mounted from camps which had been in existence since 1959.

The relevance of such findings from research for policy-makers may be further reinforced by noting that in a state of siege, imposed by military coups and dictatorial governments, one of the first actions taken is the abolition of the right of assembly. The logic of this principle seems to be ironically contradicted by the institution of the refugee camp which precisely establishes the conditions of continuous assembly and potentially political fermentation.

Another anthropologist, Ann Belinda Steen (1992), conducted research on the impact of policy on Tamil refugees in the UK and Denmark. The Danish government funds a highly elaborate programme for refugees which begins with eighteen months of training in language and 'culture'. There is provision for up to a total of five years of training intended to help refugees become acculturated and integrated into the Danish labour force. Nevertheless, she found that unemployment among the Tamils remains very high and Tamils are being socialized to behave, as their social workers appreciatively describe them, 'like children'. In Britain such elaborate provisions do not exist. Most Tamil asylum seekers are only accorded the status of 'exceptional leave to remain' rather than full refugee status. This entails that they are only eligible for the minimal social welfare benefits. Under these conditions, the Tamils in Britain, as her study shows, behave very dif-

ferently in relation to the labour market. Many she interviewed were holding three jobs at the same time and they are described as 'Thatcher boys'.

The dangers of any oversimplified interpretation of such findings cannot be underestimated given the complexity and variety of factors which are involved in the processes of social, cultural, psychological adaptation and economic integration. Another study of Tamil refugees in London included a General Health Questionnaire, a tool commonly used to detect psychological illness in community-based research. It was found that 'Around half of the sample had levels of depression and anxiety...' which, had they been under the care of a general practitioner (any refugees in London have difficulty getting on a doctor's list), would probably have led to their being referred for 'specialist psychiatric treatment' (Pelosi and Harrell-Bond 1991).

What refugees can do for anthropology

One of the gains for anthropology in studying refugees is that it offers the chance to record the processes of social change, not merely as a process of transition within a cultural enclave, but in the dramatic context of uprootedness where a people's quest for survival becomes a model of social change. People who have been forcibly uprooted have to adapt to their new social, economic and physical environments. This process challenges the utility of beliefs, values, technology, statuses, exchange systems, and all other aspects of society in which anthropology has a vested interest. The long-term process of cultural adaptation in a group of displaced people who retained the identity of being 'refugees' for decades is documented in Hirschon's monograph, *Heirs of the Greek Catastrophe* (1989). As Greeks from Asia Minor, they viewed themselves as distinct from and culturally superior to the Greek population they found in mainland Greece. Despite their suffering and extreme poverty on arrival, they maintained their identity, 'refugee', to signify their perception of themselves as having a privileged relation with respect to the Byzantine heritage of modern Greece. It is noteworthy that Hirschon as well as Anita Spring (1982), and Art Hansen (1982) who studied Angolan refugees on the Zambian/Angolan border, all doing their fieldwork in the early 1970s, studied refugees 'by accident'. None of them had gone to the field with that explicit intention.²

Reyes Schramm (1986;1989), an ethnomusicologist, has focused on the role of musical tradition in order to address the thorny theoretical issue in anthropology of the relationship between the past and the present, tradition and innovation. Concerned with an analysis of the Vietnamese refugee experience, first in the camps and then in the process of resettling in the United States, she has demonstrated how these refugees present anthropologists with a situation

...where tradition and innovation not only co-exist but co-occur, where these not only contrast with but complement each other in contexts marked by great disruption, the Vietnamese refugee case provides an exemplary opportunity for gaining fresh insights into the relation of tradition to innovation and of form to content (1986).

In New Jersey, this activity of innovation – the celebration of the Vietnamese New Year (tet) – is shown to have significant relevance in helping the community to ignore 'regional, class, and other difference and begin the task of community building' in the new environment. In this context, the threat of polarization generated by the dichotomy between 'communists' and 'non-communists' is submerged as the community celebrates the old Vietnamese symbols in a different

setting (1989).

A similar argument concerning the future of an anthropology that would be able to accommodate in its core concerns for the varieties of human suffering was recently put forward by John Davis in his Elizabeth Colson Lecture, 'The Anthropology of Suffering' (1992). Davis's main aim was to suggest an integration of two kinds of anthropology: the anthropology of 'maintenance', that is the 'comfortable' anthropology which studies social structure and documents social organization, and the anthropology of 'repair', concerned with issues of policy and intervention. To bridge the gap between the two kinds of anthropology requires the recognition that the causes of human suffering are essential features of all societies, rather than being unique to any particular case, or pathological per se.

The salutary results of such a strategic move could be imagined by considering similar conceptual shifts in other scientific fields. A relevant example comes from medicine and the work of the French Professor Claude Bernard (1865; 1877; [English] 1927), which established the methodology of preventive medicine. Bernard's revolution was primarily conceptual and involved a redefinition of the concept of disease. Prior to his work, disease was defined as a state that leads to, or is closer to death, thus it was the opposite of health and essentially distinct from it. Bernard argued that the healthy and the pathological are not radically different: in the case of disease one of the normal functions of the organism has been impaired and what appears as a pathological state is in fact the organism's attempt to compensate for the impaired function. The elimination of the ontological boundary between the 'healthy' and the 'diseased' resulted in the erasure of the methodological boundary between pathology and physiology and opened the way for a unified field of investigation of the normal functioning of the organism and the re-examination of known diseases (Voutira 1982).³

A similar shift in anthropology could prove catalytic: it would eliminate the distinctions between theoretical and applied anthropology, predicated on historically entrenched disciplinary prejudices, particularly about the kind of anthropology that studies social change. As Lucy Mair publicly revealed, Malinowski sent her to study social change because 'he said, that I did not know enough anthropology for fieldwork of the standard type' (Mair 1969:8).

If wars, violence, and famines are indeed normal features of the cultures which anthropologists study, as Davis's unified picture of anthropology suggests, then so are the refugees' modes of survival and cultural bereavements (Baskauskas 1991), and all else that gets 'lost' or changed or transformed in the process.

Coming to terms with such a realization does, of course, undermine a familiar and cherished assumption in social science that reinforces the implicit ranking contained in Malinowski's statements to Lucy Mair. This is the distinction between what is *politically relevant*, which demands practical involvement and engagement, and what is *scientifically interesting*, which only requires theoretical reflection, sober inspection and detachment. Removing this distinction, though a challenge, is not in itself sufficient. One would also have to locate refugee phenomena within the mainstream of anthropological concerns. Besides the moral justification, there are legitimate demographic grounds for doing so. In today's world where about 18 million refugees exist and more than twice this number are internally displaced, the challenge to the scope of

1. The earliest such centre of research and documentation was established at the University of Minnesota in 1980, and anthropologists were involved. The centres in Canada are headed by a sociologist, Professor Gerturd Neuwirth, at Carleton University and a philosopher, Professor Howard Adelman, at York University. More recently members of the American Anthropological Association have established two sub-groups to address refugees and related issues: The Committee on Refugee Issues and the Task Force on Involuntary resettlement.
2. Perhaps it was precisely because they were anthropologists that this 'invisible' category of humanity became visible. It is interesting to note how easy it is for researchers to fail to notice that among the people they are studying are refugees. During Sekou Toure's rule of Guinea, hundreds of thousands of Fula refugees resided in Sierra Leone. Because the government refused international assistance, these people were not defined as refugees and were allowed free movement within the country. Although entire sections of the study, *Community Leadership and the Transformation of Freetown* (Harrell-Bond et al.) were devoted to the Fula, none of the authors ever conceived of them as refugees.
3. A similar case may be made for Freud's elimination of the

boundary between the normal and the pathological, which allowed him to use slips of the tongue, *lapsuses*, and dreams to reach conclusions about the normal.

- anthropological studies as well as to its skills and imagination is all the more pressing. On the other hand, anthropology's coming to terms with the reality of pain and human suffering contained in the refugee experience may turn out to be the the refugees' own gift: it may lead to a more vital and enriched kind of scientific writing and understanding. □
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