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Making and Unmaking Refugees: Geopolitics of Social Ordering and Struggle within the Global Refugee Regime

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Wars and conflicts around the world take the lives of millions and leave millions more displaced both physically and emotionally. With an unprecedented number of displaced peoples worldwide, the plight of refugees, stateless, and internally-displaced people remains a crucial global issue. The current COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent growth of restrictions and barriers to mobility and resettlement have further exacerbated the challenges faced by displaced persons.

Recent and emerging geographic scholarship has paid considerable attention to the interlocking themes of mobility, borders, immigration and displacement as critical to understanding the current global refugee crisis. *Geopolitics*, in particular, has featured several themed issues and sections that attend to the various ways borders and bordering practices shape and inform migration, mobility and displacement. In 1998, then-editor David Newman organised a special issue on *Boundaries and Territories and Postmodernity*. This plenary special issue focused on the ‘new world order’ and the extent to which borders have become increasingly permeable in the post-Westphalian geopolitical context. The special issue also called for continued engagement with the subject of changing territorial orderings (Newman 1998).

Over the last two decades, *Geopolitics* has sustained the conversation through special issues and sections on themes related to borders, mobility and migration (Varsanyi and Nevins 2007; Hyndman 2012; Dell’Agnese and Szary 2015; Mainwaring and Brigden 2016; Beurskens and Miggelbrink 2017; Makarychev 2018; Meier 2018). However, while some special issues/sections have examined refugees within the context of broader discussions of migration and mobility, there have been no themed issues solely devoted to the geopolitics of refugee categorisations and various forms of violence experienced by globally-displaced persons within the global refugee regime.

This themed special section brings the intersection of embodied experiences and social ordering produced by the global refugee regime to the forefront

through a collection of original articles that engage both theoretical and empirical examinations of the global crisis. Examining the geopolitics of “*making and unmaking refugees*” provides us with an analytical lens to better problematise the ambiguous, bureaucratically-ominous, and often politically-charged categorisation of persons who are displaced (see for instance Jones 2016) as ‘refugees.’ As such, this collection endeavours to draw attention to the slipperiness of such categorisation and how it haphazardly designates, hierarchises, legitimatises and delegitimizes those who are displaced because of forces beyond their control. We recognise that while the refugee classification affords safety and security to some, the same classification leads to the exclusion and deprivation of basic rights to millions of others.

Who is a refugee? And who decides whether one is a refugee or not? What is behind the label, and what implications does the label carry for those it designates and those it does not?

Etymologically, the term ‘refugee’ comes from the French word *réfugié*, meaning ‘to seek refuge.’ It was first used to describe French Huguenots who fled France to escape religious persecution following the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685.¹ The internationally-accepted legal definition of ‘refugee’ was adopted by the 1951 Refugee Convention to provide protections to those fleeing persecution. But the scope of the original Convention was limited geographically to Europe, a region that was still reeling from the violence of World War II. Temporally, it was also limited to those events occurring before January 1, 1951 (UN General Assembly 1967). These restrictions were later removed by the 1967 Protocol to cover refugees universally in a period in which decolonisation efforts and Cold-War conflicts uprooted people from their homelands across the world.

A refugee is legally defined today as someone who is ‘unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion’ (Ibid). As this definition emphasises political and other forms of persecution as the conditions that compel individuals to flee their home countries, it excludes millions of individuals who are displaced because of other life-threatening conditions, such as natural calamities, from refugee designation. This rigid categorisation of displaced persons continues to produce social bodies whose fates are routinely determined by the assumption of sovereign borders and the exclusionary ontology upon which borders are predicated (e.g., Dempsey 2020; Hiemstra 2019; Myadar 2020). As such, the current global refugee regime has excluded more uprooted individuals from its mandated protection than it has included.

At the heart of the process of making and unmaking refugees is therefore the politics of labelling and categorisation that institutionalise the global refugee regime and social capacities the labelling dictates in return. As Gupte and Mehta (2007, 22) suggest, labels are assumed as ‘objective, efficient,

routine, and indispensable ... and [are therefore] consequential when enforced by authoritative state agents.' Labels sustain 'a recursive relationship with policy-making processes in that they are tools to aid such processes which themselves have bearing on how labels are formed, and what meaning they hold' (Ibid). But beyond the veneer of administrative objectivity, the categorisation of people through labels allows radically different outcomes for those differently labelled by given bureaucratic formulae.

In understanding the social ordering created by the global refugee regime, Tazreena Sajjad (2018) provides a useful insight. According to Sajjad (2018), the consequence of labelling who is a refugee and who is not ultimately defines "the experience of forcible displacement into a one-dimensional status that both captures a specific moment in time, and crafts the individual as being ahistorical and neutral in relationship to a (benevolent) state." Yet, labels have "immense personal, political and practical significance associated with productive and prescriptive capacities" (Sajjad 2018, 46). Labels such as 'refugee,' 'economic migrant' and 'illegal migrant,' for example, carry particular sets of assumptions that narrow the political and social capacities of those so labelled (Ibid). One who is categorised as a refugee is seen as deserving of protection, while one who is excluded from the category is often commodified as an economic migrant or not deserving of the protection of basic human rights (Sajjad 2018).

The categorisation of displaced persons as refugees or not refugees is ultimately rooted in and governed by the state-based system of global governance. Globally-displaced populations have been forced to negotiate their fates within and across the system that is predicated upon what Hannah Arendt (1951, 282) refers to as 'the old trinity of state-people-territory.' The hegemonic structure and power relations produced by the global order of the nation-state determine the hierarchy of protection of globally-displaced persons.

In exploring the politics of making and unmaking refugees, the collection of papers in this issue thus probes the contradictions between the principles of international statecraft that are predicated upon the based on the sanctity of states, and the forces that defy the assumption. The state-centred approach fails to attend to intimate, embodied, affective and emotional landscapes in understanding and problematising the effects of the regulation of forcibly displaced peoples (e.g., Hakli and Kallio 2014; Hiemstra 2019; Hyndman 2019; Koopman 2011; Mountz and Hyndman 2006). By de-centring the state and challenging the traditional production of geopolitical knowledge, this section draws attention to the intimate and finer scales of displacement and forced mobility (e.g., Dempsey 2020; McNevin 2019; Shindo 2019; Vayrynen et al. 2017)

The special section both engages and challenges the asymmetry of power embedded in the state-centred world order in an effort to situate the ongoing, slow and visceral violence experienced by globally-displaced persons and to

elucidate the intimate and embodied geographies such violence produces. By doing so, we also highlight the power of human agency and collective activism to challenge, subvert or otherwise negotiate the symbolic and physical grids of borders, surveillance and control within the global world order.

Building upon and contributing to the debates on the critical geopolitical understandings of states, displacement and bordering, this special section aims to advance our theoretical understandings of refugee regimes as a critical geopolitical issue by addressing the following questions:

- How does the current global refugee regime contribute to the process of making and unmaking refugees? How can scholarly attention to the processes of making and unmaking refugees help elucidate the violence and power of the state-centred global order regulating migrant bodies? How are these individuals shaped by the geopolitical framings of migrants and refugees?
- How do migrants counter, challenge, and resist sovereign hegemony that excludes, regulates and surveils them within this process that designates them as (un)worthy?
- How does sovereign hegemony shape the geographies of care and responsibility? In designating who is a refugee or who is not, how do states allocate 'humanitarian' efforts to those who are in need?
- In understanding the process of (un)making refugees, how do we understand the interim zones such as asylum camps as well as diaspora politics?
- How do we situate the "self" within the processes of the broader global refugee regime? How do we unpack the relationships among place, belonging, and self when one is violently displaced?

These questions collectively probe the process of making and unmaking refugees and how this process manifests at various scales, from the international refugee regime to rescue boats to asylum camps to the intimate scale of the self. Each scale offers a particular window into the ways the current global refugee regime legitimatises and delegitimizes those who are displaced because of forces beyond their control, hierarchising human lives according to superficial rules that are predicated upon the sanctity of states.

The section begins with Bose's paper that investigates the hegemonic structure and power relations produced by the state-centred global order and its implications for the making and unmaking of refugees. Through his analysis of the responses by the Canadian and US federal governments to the Syrian refugee crisis in 2015, Bose demonstrates how a complex grid of domestic and international policies continue to define social bodies to be included or excluded within national sovereign borders and how by doing so these policies routinely define who is a refugee and who is not. Canada resettled nearly 55,000 individuals through its refugee programme in the two

years since the Syrian war started, while the US progressively cut its acceptance of Syrian refugees to nearly zero during the same period.² Yet, despite the disparity between the US and Canadian responses to the current refugee crisis, the primacy of national interests continues to outweigh each state's international and humanitarian commitment to assist refugees. As Bose demonstrates, while the need for sanctuary and protection is as great (or greater) than ever, the Covid-19 pandemic has allowed a number of states to achieve what would have otherwise been unthinkable – shutting the door on refugee resettlement as a key pillar of international law and protection.

Dempsey's paper provides geographies of forced migration within the EU as a lens through which we can understand the complex process of making and unmaking refugees. It explores intersections between politics and political subjectivities enacted by forced migrants within the Dutch asylum system. Within this murky process of un(making) refugees, these migrants experience processes of displacement, state-surveillance, alienation and vulnerability as their legal status restricts their mobility and postpones employment. However, her research illuminates, in spite of this regime of state control and surveillance, migrants challenge and subvert the hierarchical control of everyday spaces and the embodied geopolitical violence in asylum camps. Drawing from original fieldwork, Dempsey examines various Dutch asylum camps as a site of generative struggle, the intersection of key forms of geopolitical control of asylum seekers (e.g., surveillance, categorisation, segregation, and exclusion), with that of migrant agency, counter-hegemonic efforts, and networks that are forged, grounded in and stretched beyond asylum camp borders.

Hyndman, Amarasingam, and Naganathan's paper further illustrates migrant agency and collective activism. The authors' examination of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora in Canada offers a unique vantage point to understand the complex process of making and unmaking refugees. The authors examine the tale of migrants on a broader arc of time and space beyond the border regime that allows or denies migrants' entrance into a particular sovereign space. Drawing on interviews and focus groups with members of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora in Canada, the authors argue that examining diaspora activism primarily through the prism of securitisation and extremism flattens understanding of diaspora activism and how it evolves over time. Understanding the diverse relations that members of this community have with the militarised violence in Sri Lanka requires that scholars and policy-makers move beyond the securitisation discourse and look more closely at the ways in which transnational activism is increasingly rooted in frameworks of international law, human rights, and social justice.

In her paper, McDowell demonstrates how different meanings are provided for those who are included or excluded within the sovereign-based framings of the world order. She does so by specifically focusing within a frame of duty and care afforded to those who are considered deserving of a state's duty and care

and denied from those who are excluded from such basic human rights. As McDowell demonstrates, geographies of care and responsibility are becoming more limited, focusing on the immediate needs of those on the 'inside' or who are perceived to belong. She allows readers to zoom into the operation of the humanitarian vessel *Aquarius*, a ship that intercepts sea-borne migrants in distress in the Mediterranean. McDowell's analysis of search and rescue activities (SAR) in the Mediterranean urges us to think about the ways in which geographies of care and responsibility intersect and collide with the geopolitical framing of how people are categorised as refugees, migrants or illegals. She suggests that through unpacking the legislative and ethical frameworks shaping SAR activities in the Mediterranean, we can observe a distinct 'geopoliticizing of care and responsibility' whereby these individuals become pawns in wider power dynamics within the European Union.

To bring our affective and intimate understanding of globally-displaced persons to the forefront, Myadar's paper focuses on a story of single person, Abdi, who trekked his way from Migwa, Somalia to Tucson, Arizona. Inspired by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's concept of the power of a single story, the article zooms into the lived story of one person's journey as he navigated the processes of making and unmaking him a refugee within a broader international refugee regime. In some ways, Abdi's journey illustrates the uncanny ways the global order operates, how this order makes and unmakes refugees, and how this process is as unpredictable and treacherous as the road Abdi took to flee from violence in his village. Abdi's story also symbolises human agency and the individual's power to negotiate, counter, subvert or otherwise reorient geopolitical orderings to the most intimate scale of geography: the self.

Indeed, this collection contributes to investigations of refugees and forced mobility by shifting the focus away from a solely governance perspective in order to draw attention to intimate and finer scales – including the scale of the self. We highlight diasporic activism and applaud the ingenuity and tenacity of refugees by bringing their stories to the forefront. Our scholarly accounts examine the processes of (un)making of refugees via the exclusionary hierarchies of bureaucratic administration and the biased, often politically-charged categorisations that exist in the various, complex spaces of migration and asylum.

With this collection, we invite more sustained conversations that draw attention to and focus on the current global refugee crisis. We hope these conversations will continue to draw attention not only to the violence that drives people away from their homelands but also the violence of exclusion of the current global refugee regime.

Notes

1. For more on the exodus of refugee Huguenots see, Golden (1988).

2. This trend is expected to reverse with Biden administration pledging to increase the annual cap of refugee admissions to 125,000 (The White House 2021).

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