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The Refugee-Migrant Distinction Since 1945: The Emergence of an Interdisciplinary History

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Historicizing the Refugee Experience, 17th - 21st Centuries
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‘The refugee-migrant distinction and the need for bridging analytical divides’

Abstract:

In this epistemological paper, I discuss the existing and potential historiographic connections between the history of refugees and the history of migrations. I focus on the ways in which this dialogue could help scholars overcome the analytical divisions between migrants and refugees through decentered and self-reflexive approaches.

Introduction:

For the past thirty years, the lexicon of migrants and refugees has occupied –one could argue, returned to occupy– a prominent position in many public debates and political conversations around the globe. This prominence has been accompanied by lexical variations, ranging from the officially sanctioned to the vernacular, from the supposedly positivist and descriptive to the more indirect, allusive or metaphorically-encoded.

One dichotomy that has gained particular currency is the distinction between migrants on the one side, and refugees on the other. These categories are now routinely understood as referring to two separate, or at least two imperfectly-overlapping, types of people, increasingly distinguished on an axiological hierarchy of ‘deservingness.’

The production and entrenchment of this linguistic and cultural separation between refugees and migrants can be safely attributed, in a large measure, to the performative force of law and bureaucratic practices –in particular those of the Global North. In these domains of knowledge, one of the two categories in question, ‘refugee,’ has a definition –and this is also the case, by symmetry, of the non-refugee (Helton, 2003).

Although the adoption of the 1951 Convention was far from the universalist, human-rights-inspired turning point that it came to be viewed as, the important point is precisely that it has since been regarded as such. Regardless of its own contingent history, this irksome, revered or endangered bedrock of the current ‘refugee regime’ propagated the idea that the quality of ‘refugee’ could be ‘recognized’ based on a positivist set of criteria. The verb is as important as the noun here: the quality of ‘refugee’ is supposed to exist prior to, and independently of, its formal recognition. That essentialist fiction has perpetuated a widespread understanding of refugees as a distinct, identifiable, and objective category of people.

The first to note the impracticality and biases attached to this legal positivism, which predated the 1951 instrument, were not legal scholars, but rather people who were denied the official label and the rights that came with it, and bureaucrats who had to handle ‘refugee’-ascertainment criteria on a daily basis (Chen, 2012: 128–172; Akoka and Spire, 2013; Ballinger, 2020: 13–4; Akoka, 2020: 182). Starting in the 1980s, social and political scientists set out to assess the legitimacy and document the effects of the refugee/non-refugee dichotomy. Soon mired in protracted debates between realist and nominalist approaches over which sociological basis, if any, there was to the representation of refugees as a specific category, they gradually shifted their focus to the multifaceted, refugee-labelling processes themselves (Zetter, 2007).

For all its knowledge-production benefits, this literature had the unfortunate effect of reinforcing the analytical singularity of refugees compared to other people on the move, which the insular institutionalization of refugee studies cemented even further. Today, this binary remains alive and well, because of its political performativity and usefulness, both for those who want to keep foreigners at bay and for those who want to protect them. While it allows liberal states to legitimize increasingly illiberal bordering practices against those migrants they do not recognize as refugees, it offers migrants' advocates a rare legal tool to pry borders open at least for those viewed as the most vulnerable (Pastore, 2015; Kukathas, 2016; Crawley and Skleparis, 2017; Hamlin, 2021).

For a long time, historians appeared to remain on the sidelines of this conversation. It has been said –and raucously deplored (Marfleet, 2007)– that history came late to the ‘interdisciplinary feast’ of studying refugees and refugee policies, to use one of Gatrell’s vivid images (2018: 47). That diagnosis of chronic disinterest is now obsolete, insofar as it was ever valid –I will return to this point. Nowadays, few would dispute that the history of refugees is rapidly nearing its coming-of-age, as a full-fledged critical history on par with other branches of social and political history it is catching up on. Its literature is characterised by an effort to do two things at once: on the one hand, documenting the experiences of refugees (whatever the scholars choose to mean by this) across time and space and the ‘shifting terrain’ (Mayblin, 2017: 6) of the institutional evolutions they were faced with and took part in; on the other hand, historicising and seeing through the logics of power that have molded discursive –and often highly consequential– categories.

In recent years, the number of publications looking at the refugee categorization and experience from a historical perspective has been growing fast. In particular, the events that unfolded in the Mediterranean in 2015-2016 elicited renewed interest and funding for conferences about the history of refugees. These gatherings, which often featured pluridisciplinary line-ups, in turn gave way to a number of collective volumes, usually introduced by theoretical reflections (Angoustures, Kévonian, and Mouradian, 2017; Agier and Madeira, 2017; Ruiz Ibáñez and Vincent, 2018; Bresselau von Bressensdorf, 2019; Jansen and Lässig, 2020; Taylor, Akoka, Berlinghoff, and Havkin, 2021).

Recent years have also seen the publication of more and more self-proclaimed refugee-themed monographs, connecting the lived experience of the subjects under scrutiny with the context-specific issues surrounding their legal, political and social status (Gatrell, 2019; Burgess, 2019; Ballinger, 2020; Jennings, 2020; Adler, 2020; Nasaw, 2020; Kaplan, 2020; Schenderlein, 2020; Meng-Hsuan Yang, 2020; Lipman, 2020; Taylor, 2021; Robert, 2021; Balint, 2021). Although the preferred focus has been the 20th century, new probes into what refuge and refugees meant in the Early Modern period (Stanwood, 2019) and in the 19th century (Aprile and Diaz, 2021) have provided a deeper historical perspective. Some have even tried to intertwine their insights into trans-epochal accounts (Ther, 2019 [2017]; Diaz, 2021), a standpoint also adopted by didactic handbooks (Spohnholz, 2021).

For their part, non-historians have kept producing works that contain important historical analysis. Their prisms have ranged from the legacy of colonialism (Mayblin, 2017), the obstacles and deterrence mechanisms preventing people from claiming asylum (FitzGerald, 2019), detention (Loyd and Mountz, 2018) or status determination (Akoka, 2020). The opportunistic and rather misleading subtitle of this last work, ‘A history of the

refugees/migrants distinction' (my trans.), bears witness to the afore-mentioned topicality of the refugee-migrant distinction. That same binary has been squarely at the center of another important politico-cultural study which incorporates historical reflections (Hamlin, 2021). This landscape has been further enriched by countless journal issues and individual articles, some of which I will rely on below.

Every single one of these recent studies acknowledges the difficulties raised by the definition of refugees, and point at the constructedness, contingency, and mutability of the category. Only a few of them, however, offer practical solutions to stay clear of the fallback essentialist approach –one that implicitly presumes what scholars claim to historicize and critically assess, i.e. the distinctiveness of the 'refugee experience.' Finding ways to articulate legal, cultural and social realities has been notoriously hard across the social sciences and the humanities. Refugee history has yet to find its epistemological balance, its own 'post-structural structuralism' (Green, 1994; Thébaud, 2007: 171–3) which will allow it to account for both refugee-related structures and their contingency.

What I would like to do in this historiographic paper is engage with the recent scholarship to discuss this reflexivity challenge, which stems from the dual character of the 'refugee' designation: in-the-world and in-the-text, category of practice and category of analysis. The stakes are far from insignificant. Students of migration are well aware that analytical terms in their field can influence lay categories in the social world, as part as the social scientific discourse's 'double hermeneutic' theorized by Giddens (1987). The terms used by historians and others ultimately impact –by creation, alteration or legitimization– social, cultural and normative categories applied to, and used by, people. In the historiography, 'refugee' has mostly been used as a pragmatic and undiscussed placeholder for more fine-grained and

historically sensitive terms that vary depending on particular contexts and cases. I would contend, however, that this is to consequential of a term –especially for those whom it leaves aside– for historians to use it *a priori*, as an axiomatic and uncritical appellation.

Let me first briefly acknowledge where I am speaking from. I am currently designing a new object of study around asylum at European airports in the 1980s and 1990s. I have also just finished a book consisting in a modern microhistory of a tenement building near Paris, many occupants of which happened to be migrants (Langrognet, forthcoming). These two projects, one complete, one in its early stages, are both concerned with the way people on the move experienced, navigated, negotiated, appropriated, acted upon and cared (or not) about categories of difference wielded by their peers and by institutions.

The overall argument I would like to develop here is the need for refugee historians and migration specialists to join forces in order to bridge analytical divides. I will first argue that there is already, in migration history, an extensive literature about refugees that needs to be taken into account, and that migration scholars have interesting experiences to share when it comes to categorial deconstruction (1). In that regard, a major component of the historians’ efforts to bypass the intellectual traps of refugee analysis has to be, in my view, the ‘decenterment’ of their studies’ design, attempted in both migration and refugee histories. By that I mean a deliberate positioning across classic chronological, spatial and demographic lines (2). With this in mind, I will lastly address some of the innovative approaches that may offer critical tools to deal with refugees in history (3).

1. The experience of migration history with refugees and deconstruction

When specialists in refugee studies lamented the absence of refugee histories, it was never entirely convincing. True, few English-speaking historians had claimed the mantle of ‘history of refugees’ or ‘refugee history’ for themselves. But since the early stages of migration historiography, numerous works had embedded violence-related migrations and lay or state-sanctioned ‘refugee’ labels within their studies of migrant populations and policies. Some even included early –if generally inchoate– interrogations about the contours of the refugee category and other proximate designations.

To take only examples from the scholarship about France-bound migrants in the 20th century, people fleeing the Spanish Civil War or Italian fascism (Stein, 1979; CNRS, Groupe de recherches 30, 1991; Milza et al., 1991), survivors of Eastern European persecutions (Green, 1984) and of South-East Asian wars (Condominas and Pottier, 1983) were made visible among the first migrant populations under study. Soon came a burgeoning attention to the categorisation issue (Temime, in Milza *et al.*, 1991: 57–71; Noiriél, 1991; Girault 1996). So-called refugees also featured prominently in the first cross-cutting histories of public opinion, policies and demographics devoted to immigration (Schor, 1985; Noiriél, 1988; Lequin, 1988; Milza and Pechanski, 1994).

This presence of refugees in migration histories was reinforced by a newfound, Weberian sensitivity to citizenship issues in the late 1990s and 2000s. At that time, migration scholars started paying more attention to borders, State-led controls and regulations –in part as a reaction to exclusionary politics, September 11 and projects of massive overhauls of immigration law on both sides of the Atlantic. In that context, several sociohistorical inquiries probed into the day-to-day negotiation of state-sanctioned normative categories, including refugee status

(again, to speak only of France, see Noiriel, 1998; Caron, 1999; Dufoix, 2002; Lewis, 2007; Gousseff, 2008).

Even the above-mentioned rarity of self-proclaimed refugee histories was questionable. Once we escape bibliographic mono- or even bilingualism, histories featuring the usual translations of the word ‘refugee’ in their title appear in greater numbers (e.g. Havrehed, 1987; ten Doesschate, 1993; Lundh and Ohlsson, 1994; Benz, 1995; Beer, 1997; Del Pozo Artigas, 2006; Leuzzi and Esposito, 2006). The bibliography expands even more, of course, once other terms associated with displacements, flights and returns are also searched for. Refugee history seems to have been a well-populated desert after all. In any case, migration historians are used to such Mr. Jourdain-like aha moments –think of the 1990s, when they were told by social scientists that they should investigate a brand-new object called the immigrants’ ‘transnationalism,’ which they had been studying, under other vocables, at least since the 1960s.

As they had with the transnational turn, however, several migration historians have been quick to swallow their pride and jump on the refugee history bandwagon in both fact and name. By bringing their own experience with constructivism to the ‘feast,’ they will hopefully help guard refugee history against its essentialist tendencies.

Migration history as a genre has long been marked by analytical separations which gradually turned into problematic shortcomings when the constructivist and postmodern critiques gathered momentum. To this day, some of the divides that cut through migration historians’ frameworks are like the ‘gum[s] from the sidewalk that they can never quite seem to scrape from their shoes’ (Jacobson, 2006: 75). Ethnicity, identity, nation, gender, race or even age are all categorial distinctions that migration specialists, and migration historians among them, have

a hard time handling without reifying –even when deconstruction through historicization is precisely their point.

Recently, scholars promoting relational and constructivist approaches to refugees have been keen on drawing a fledgling analogy with gender studies (Akoka, 2020: 11; Banko, Nowak and Gatrell, 2021: 1, note 3). This is a fair connection, since gender studies actually spearheaded the deconstructionist campaign of historical studies in the 1990s. This is only fitting in other respects as well, since the evolution of gender –and race, for that matter– displayed striking similarities with ongoing debates in refugee scholarship, among which an early empowerment agenda and a recurrent fear of counterproductive relativism.

Instead of digging further into gender, I would like to pivot to ethnicity here, especially since self-proclaimed refugee historians have paid scant attention to this literature. Starting from their inception in the 1960s, ethnic histories have produced rich knowledge about the migrants' social and cultural adjustments. However, the relevance of the monographic framework was – and still is, to a large extent– rarely questioned, with community studies reinforcing an atomistic and essentialist conception of ethnic groups ('Poles,' 'Italians,' 'Chinese,' 'Jews,' etc.). The result is a mosaic of side-by-side communities endowed with a putative independence that often resembles ontological sealing. And because many scholars presuppose, by construction, the existence of ethnic groups, this logically precludes any real understanding of the contingent dynamics of 'ethnicization' and group construction.

As refugee specialists later would, some migration historians realized that ethnicity had to be approached as something fundamentally negotiable and relational (Conzen *et al.*, 1990; Vecoli, 1993). But their calls long remained unheeded. Until very recently, the majority of scholars had

no appetite for a more fluid, less determinist, ‘intermigrant’ sort of social history, which would have renovated the structuralist tradition of interethnic history (Bayor, 1978). Besides, the research on ethnicity has displayed a tendency to obliterate differences between the migrants themselves within each ethnic group, preferring instead ‘multichrome mosaics of monochrome identity groups’ (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000: 33).

As in refugee matters, the ontologizing power of discourse (legal or otherwise) has thus been hard to resist in ethnicity-centered migration histories. However, a way forward was opened by ethnographers, who started to describe how ethnic categories were established, reproduced and negotiated in everyday interactions (see Pachucki, Pendergrass, Lamont, 2007), including in the case of refugees (Hassoun, 1997). In their wake, sociologists developed new models that were specifically aimed at fending off essentialism and teleology, and allowing for intersectional approaches to group-producing mechanisms. One of these was Andreas Wimmer’s ‘boundary-making’ framework (2016).

In this context, the claim that ‘refugee is not an identity –neither national, nor ethnic or cultural– but an institutional category, related to a circumstance in life, a moment in history, a local event’ (Agier, in Agier and Madeira, 2019: 21, my trans.) sounds highly problematic. In order to manipulate the ‘refugee’ category in a reflexive way, a lot can be gleaned from the manner in which migration scientists have learned to deal with other parameters of difference. Parameters in which the state, by the way, played no less of a role in entrenching them in the social world than in the case of ‘refugee’. In any event, exchanges of ideas can and go both ways between the two historiographic (sub-)fields. Recent innovations in migration history and refugee history demonstrate as much.

2) The importance of decenterment

Since they deal with minority, domination and exclusion, histories of migrants and refugees are by construction ‘decentered’ histories (Zemon Davis, 2011). That is to say that in addition to producing knowledge on particular people, institutions and social structures, they function as heuristics that can shed light, from the ‘margins, on dynamics running through society as a whole. The ‘comprehension of exiles and refugees appears as a way, as a particularly effective way to understand their environment and, by extension, the very reality that produced them’ (Ruiz Ibáñez and Vincent, 2018: 14–5, my trans.). This constitutive decentrement also has a critical component: in placing the spotlight on people identified as lesser normative than others, it allows to question, explore and debunk the naturalism of the norm itself—be it nations, borders or even sedentariness. It is in light of this double dimension that Gatrell has been able to argue that refugees ‘belong to the mainstream rather than the margins’ of history (2013: 283).

I would like to argue that this proclivity for the edge, the confines or the crossroads should be emulated, at a methodological level, in the design of refugee and migration histories. By this I do not primarily refer to the need for studies into long-overlooked contexts, however crucial that may be, in particular to ‘provincialize’ European and North-American refugee histories and reveal Southern and global forces. Here, I want to address the importance of deliberately constructing objects of study across classic analytical separations, in order to better retrieve the meaning of historical processes—including historically-situated ‘refugee-making’ dynamics (Gatrell, 2013; Kramer, 2020).

Let’s turn first to chronological and spatial boundaries. The decision of going across and over moments of apparent political, legislative or economic changes can reveal continuities that are

not otherwise apparent and restore the contingent context of the said inflexion. In histories of migration as well as in refugee history, this has proven a rewarding tactic. By going over 1951, as well as other supposedly cardinal junctures of Italian history such as 1943, 1945 and the 1947 Peace Treaty by which Italy officially renounced its claims to most of its colonial empire, Pamela Ballinger has been able to demystify both the supposed brevity of Italian decolonization and the radical novelty of post-WWII refugee movements (2020). This recalled the earlier concern of Vazira Zamindar, who had decided to leave an open ending to post-Partition refugee history in South Asia –a condition for showing, she argued, the contingency and complexities of people’s moves (2007: 7). By contrast, one could contend that taking the 1989 time-boundary for granted led María Cristina García to overemphasize the influence of the end of the Cold War over refugee policy, and downplay the continuities in the longer restrictive turn to which herself was aware of (2017: 15–65).

Going over ruptures such as major wars or legislative changes can also reveal connections that would otherwise be lost between or among immigrants or refugees of one period and the next: network and diaspora-type connections, but also family or even personal and intimate ties. In my own work, I have documented the itinerary of an ordinary individual in the first half of the 20th century who hailed from a small village in Southern Italy. He and his close relatives cumulated intersecting experiences of migrations to escape banditism-induced violence, internal and international journeys as strolling musicians, deportations, transcontinental and transoceanic industrial emigrations, flights for safety, temporary travels and return movements. In addition, over the course of his own life from 1886 to 1953, the study’s male protagonist successively or contemporaneously navigated and negotiated many official (*étranger, emigrato, rimpatriato, naturalisé, réfugié, apatride d’origine italienne, sinistré, sinistrato*) and vernacular categories related to his social and political membership –dots hitherto largely

unconnected. When he befriended a couple of evacuees from the north of France during WWII, this had to be interpreted by factoring in his previous experience with refugees in WWI and his own traumatic flight on the *'route de l'Exode'* in 1940. And it was little wonder that those people were among the only ones to whom he confided himself when he became 'stateless' after being denaturalized by Vichy authorities (Langrognet, 2019).

As if not more pervasive in the historiography of migration and refugee are spatial separations. Methodological nationalism is a big part of the story, and has been extensively discussed elsewhere since Wimmer and Glick Schiller's seminal article (2002). This explains why nationals and foreigners are often regarded, *ex ante*, as intrinsically different types of people, as are internal and international migrants, colonial subjects and foreign migrants, or migrants and refugees. A corollary of this bias derives from the researchers' frequent statistical obsession. Their reliance on nationally- and administratively-bounded numbers to counter or justify historical claims permeates the collective psyche through graphs, colorful cartographic projections (Houtum and Bueno Lacy, 2020) and aquatic metaphors (Schult, 2021). Ignoring the genealogy and biases of the statistical data leads to preventively super-impose national divisions over more continuous experienced geographies and diasporas, and also neglect migrant cohorts that are deemed too small to matter, instead of being assessed on their own terms. This can explain, for instance, why the history of migrants from the Balkans in Western Europe in the 1910s has yet to be written (see Gatrell, 2008).

Unreflexive time and space boundaries often contribute to the above-mentioned fragmented approaches to the social fabric, understood by default as a collection of discrete bundles of people. However, some historians of migrations have started to select demographic cohorts in ways that dodge the classic sample selection biases, in particular by using topographic

delineations (Esch, 2012; De Bock, 2018; Barton, 2020; Langrognet, forthcoming). Despite its presentist flaws, ‘superdiversity’ started to be interesting, not as a descriptor but rather as an observation platform (De Bock, 2015). The entire point of these proposals is not to downplay, but rather to better contextualize and intersectionalize categories of difference. Thereby, a variety of experiences and processes come to the fore, including many that hardly fit the in-the-world denominations.

Self-proclaimed refugee histories have also started paying attention to other, not-refugee-labelled migrants. However, only integrating into the mix the ‘excluded’ from the asylum process (Akoka, 2021: 13) will not cut it. It is certainly true that placing the focus on asylum-seekers, rejected or not, is enough to debunk the migrant-refugee dichotomy (Mountz, 2010). But the historicization of ‘refugee-ing’ (Madokoro, 2016: 7) can and should go further by devising more deliberately non-refugee-centered experimental settings. This strategy could advantageously be incorporated into current theoretical efforts at building comprehensive historiographic frameworks.

3) The quest for innovative approaches

For maximum critical returns, refugee-ing should then be looked at in a way that encompasses migrants and non-migrants with very different degrees of skin in the refugee-making game. ‘Refugee history cannot just be about refugees’ (Gatrell, 2017: 178). Instead of downplaying their plight, by the way, casting wider nets will make the worse degrees of hardship strikingly human and relatable. Showcasing experiences along a continuum, with their ebbs and flows and complexities, does not imply erasing differences—quite the opposite. It has been years since

such a holistic approach has been on migration historians' to-do list (see Lucassen and Lucassen, 1997).

Studies multiplying perspectives have taken a step in that direction (Madokoro, 2016). More recent projects promise to yield precious insights as well, such as 'Lubartworld' led by Claire Zalc. Built as a transnational prosopography of all Jewish inhabitants from a single Polish town, the project has been deliberately tailored to avoid 'refugee' as a category of pre-selection and instead let a high diversity of trajectories to emerge (including non-migrant ones).¹

In that regard, microhistory remains underused in refugee history, despite its long-noted ability to make people agency visible in that context, while keeping established categories at arm's length (Audoin-Rouzeau, 2008: 244). A hybrid memoir (Dekel, 2019) and the reconstruction of microgeographies of flight (Kaplan, 2020) have lately underscored this potential. For all its difficulties, the microhistory of migrants can rely on increasingly accessible and manageable sources (Langrognet, 2019).

At the other end of the spectrum, global narratives have yet to emerge –that is, in the full, transnational sense of the term. They will have to build on the connections scholars have started to draw between refugee, colonial and postcolonial histories (see Banko, Novak and Gatrell, 2021: 7–8). Tracking the circulations of people and ideas between different parts of the globe could provide the missing links between mere comparisons of different refugee-enacting contexts. This is not to say that comparison cannot be validly employed for historicization purposes. But one should be wary of the analytical hypertrophy of the social structures chosen as the contexts in comparison and, once again, of artificial migrant pre-selections (Green, 1994).

¹ The project is entitled: "Migration and holocaust transnational trajectories of Lubartów Jews throughout the world (1920s-1950s)." See <https://lubartworld.cnrs.fr/en> (last accessed August 30, 2021).

Intersectionality is yet another bridge over analytical fault lines (Cho, Crenshaw, McCall, 2013). Promising volumes have shown how gender and other systems of difference in which migrants take part, such as refugee-labelling, nation, race and class, could influence each other (Schrover and Moloney, 2013), albeit sometimes with a fixist understanding of womanhood (Chakraborty, 2018). Once again, a tradition of intersectional, post-structuralist migration histories should inform future efforts, whether it concerns gender and citizenship (Smith, 1997; Bredbenner, 1998; Guerry, 2013), or gender, ethnicity and class (Kessler-Harris, 1977; Green, 1997).

Age has been added to the categorial cauldron as well, mainly thanks to the rapidly expanding bibliography on refugee children from the Spanish civil war (cf. i.a. Marques, 1993; Alonso Carballés, 1997; Centre d'histoire de l'Europe du vingtième siècle, 1999; Angoustures, 2003; Limonero, 2010; Keren, 2012; Breakwell, 2018; Qualls, 2020), as well as a growing number of studies on children displaced in the context of World War II and the policy responses their plight elicited (Baumel-Schwartz, 1990, 2012b; Cohen, 2006; Zahra, 2015; Gigliotti & Tempian, 2016; Taylor, 2017; Gnydiuk, 2021; Faure, 2021). Other child refugee experiences, like those of the Armenian genocide survivors (Kunth, 2018; Maksudyan, 2020), the evacuees from Biafra (Ibhawoh, 2020) and Vietnam (Sachs, 2011) or the Cuban “Pedropaners” (Conde, 1999; De los Angeles Torres, 2004) have only attracted sparse attention. Only a few of these studies have hinted at a constructivist and intersectional view of either refugee-ing or childhood (see e.g. Baron, 2017). Inter-children efforts, as it were, have shown that refugee children could be scrutinized without separating them from their peers (Sierra Blas, 2009; Langrognet, 2018). As for young girls, they have barely started to be studied as well, after having long remained in the shadows (Baumel-Schwartz, 2012a). Other multifaceted experiences of difference, such as

“refugee soldiers” or “slave refugees,” which had long been looked at with little critical examination of the categories at play, have also started to be addressed in a more constructivist way and articulated to parameters of age, race, ethnicity and gender (Glymph, 2017; Panter, 2019). Insofar as ‘refugee-ing’ can be treated as another differentiation system, it probably has to be understood in its connections with others.

This does not, however, diminish the difficulty of finding a new lexical framework to deal with the ‘refugee’ as category of practice from a critical distance. ‘The most promising work [in the history of refugees] may be that which finds an analytic vocabulary capable of placing these perspectives [which blur the refugee-migrant distinctions] into a dialectical relationship’ (Kramer, 2020: 12). For one thing, notions of forced and mixed migrations, uncritically used by many for want of better terms, have long proven their limitations. The former has rightly been put into question as ‘too narrow and misleading. [...] It is insufficiently differentiated, and it obscures the fact that there is almost always, even in the case of flight from immediately threatening violence, a more or less significant element of will or choice involved in the act of migration.’ (Brubaker, 1995: 204–5). Having noted the general failure to interrogate the term ‘forced migration’ as an analytical concept, Zetter for his part was unable to offer more than a typology of drivers and spatial patterns, leaving aside the most problematic element, force (Zetter, 2018). As for mixed migrations, insofar as it is conditioned upon the ontological of understanding of the forced/non-forced binary, it suffers from the same shortcomings as other approaches of mixedness (Barbara, 1994). Similar concerns can be raised about supposedly more bias-proof categories that have been put forward, such as ‘displaced people’ or ‘Geflüchtete.’

Anthropologists have offered their own suggestions, which are not that convincing. Agier has suggested out-of-fashion categories such as '*errant, métèque, paria*' (wanderer, metic and pariah) to account for what he calls the 'modes of being a migrant' (2019). He does not explain, however, how the historical and cultural situatedness of those terms would make them any more practical as analytical categories than 'refugee' or 'asylum-seeker'.

For a number of years now, Peter Gatrell has been promoting a framework of 'refugeedom,' a term he coined after a Russian word. The main feature of this approach is that it 'does not presuppose that only the state-refugee nexus is primary and foundational' (Banko, Nowak and Gatrell, 2021: 2). This capacious matrix lets perspectives on refugee-labelling pop up from many sides, including from the migrants themselves, whose voice and agency are rightly regarded as a pillar of the critical analysis of refugee-labelling as a multi-stakeholder process, so to speak. 'Think *with* refugees about refugee history': this is the injunction from Manchester (*Id.*: 3). Echoing very similar calls in in other corner of the social sciences (see e.g. Robbins and Engelke, 2010: 625), the idea is to enrich the analysis by combining an emic, endogenous understanding of the refugees' experience with the etic, outside-in exploration of its evolutions.

Pointing at the ability of refugeedom to probe beyond and beneath the nation state, Gatrell has also suggested that this could lead to 'think through oceans,' by which he means identifying 'cultural and social linkages across time and space' (2017: 172). Once again, one could lament that a refugee historian did not engage with migration historians' previous attempts at intertwining migrations across sea masses through periods and space (Gabaccia and Hoerder, 2011) or that it left aside environment-related migrations, which have started to be looked at from a historical standpoint (McLeman 2014; Armiero and Tucker, 2017; García, forthcoming). More importantly, what refugeedom leaves largely undiscussed is the question of how and on

what basis one shall operate the selection of the ‘refugees’ to be ‘thought about and with.’ Meanwhile, ‘migrants’ and ‘people on the move’ remain analytical springboards of choice when historians want to discuss refugee-ing from a non-predetermined vantage point (Madokoro, 2016: 6–7; Oltmer, 2019: 47). Being more recent than ‘refugee’ and not being generally defined by law –although ‘migrant’ has received normative definitions in official demographic and statistical nomenclatures– these two expressions have the advantage of not being as liable to perilous confusions between their analytical meaning and the observed historical reality.

The concept of refugeedom should and will surely be debated further. As it remains in a relationship of epistemological dependence on the ‘refugee’ category, it does not really unmoor the historians’ theoretical ship from a priori refugee ontologies. For that reason, it could trip into the same quicksands as approaches built around ‘refugeecraft,’ ‘refugeeness,’ ‘refugeehood’ or ‘refugeetude’ (Soguk, 1999; Schrijvers, 1999; Haddad, 2008; Nguyen, 2019).

As regards ‘refugee-making’ which I used in this paper after Gatrell and Kramer, or ‘refugeeing’ following Madokoro (2016), they both evoke the processual, mutable and participative character of boundary construction, and seem open enough to convey the part refugees played in shaping modern states. What they do not reveal to the naked eye, however, is the Western-centric, postcolonial component of modern refugee construction processes and their genealogy. Postcolonial scholars have argued that any framework developed to contend with the modern history of refugee-making has to be fully integrated with the long and enduring legacy of the colonial project, its white supremacist foundations, and its war-fueled enactments (Chimni 1998; Espiritu, 2014; Mayblin, 2017; Wu, 2019; Hamlin, 2021). Political scientists and legal theorists have shown how racial and ethnic discriminations play a central role in migration

geographies and policies (Fine, 2016). Critics of exclusion-based sovereignty regimes from the Global North have been calling for a migration governance that would take into account historical injustices and relations of global domination (Souter, 2014), and argued that modern migrations from the Global South had to be viewed, in fact, as a decolonization process and not through the prism of refugees and economic migrants (Achieme, 2019). By tying contemporary migration processes to that specific context, they have convincingly warned that this particular genealogy should not be obfuscated by transhistorical flattening through anthropologically-inspired, blanket refugee concepts. For their part, historians of slavery have argued that the role of former slave populations played in shaping the notion of ‘refugee’ called for a longer genealogy of the modern legal category that goes back to the American Revolution (Gallagher, 2021). This amounts to saying that there is more than one historical connection between the racial and colonial history of the Global North and modern refugee-making processes. How refugeedom or other frameworks articulated around notion of citizenship and belonging incorporate this dimension while not diluting it is yet another hurdle for historians.

Conclusion

As a lawyer noted pointedly a few years ago, ‘one should not take law too seriously when it comes to the scientific analysis of the question of refugees’ (Maison, 2008: 323, my trans.).

In refugee history, acknowledging and acting upon the constructed character of refugee labels and policies has gone from a negligible afterthought to an inconsequential introductory leitmotiv, before growing into the main purpose of the entire genre, now firmly banded around, and probably defined by, its critical banner. The quest for inserting its approaches and narratives into the historical mainstream is also well under way.

Nevertheless, joining the mainstream should also mean tapping into existing research. It is a pity that refugee historians never quite find the ‘space’ to look at migration historiography (see Ther, 2019: 291, note 20; Banko, Nowak, Gatrell, 2021: 6, note 29). As this paper has shown, a better connection between the various historiographies across the refugee-migrant fault line would reveal a broader refugee literature than usually thought. In that respect, a proper history of history about refugees and related categories is urgently needed. More importantly, such connections would certainly, given migration history’s experience with analogous challenges, yield intellectual fodder that could help eschew unwarranted analytical separations. In particular, accounting for refugee production could certainly build on efforts made in other studies of other dynamics of identification and belonging. There, historians have started to develop approaches that, by design, avoid predetermining from the outset the processual and contingent processes they are looking at, and make room for agency, contingency and intersectionality. Such strategies to control for the ‘epistemological unconscious’ (Bourdieu, 1972: 168) could inform and refine the new vocabulary and frameworks that are being developed in refugee history, such as the ‘refugeedom’ matrix, as long as they intend to get over the ‘how-refugees-became-refugees’ aporia. Such models will also have to account for the cross-cutting colonial legacies that scholars have identified throughout the modern refugee-making processes. As recent studies have illustrated, these theoretical innovations will be helped by the diversification of contexts under scrutiny, their connection and their comparison –as well as a chronological and typological expansion of the hunt for source material, an issue this article has left aside but which will be central in future history’s directions.

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