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Hostility to refugees and asylum seekers

Tony Kushner

Human history is the story of migration, both voluntary and forced (albeit that these two categories of movement have never been self-contained). In reality there has always been a mixture of positive and negative stimuli – on the one hand, seeking material and other opportunities, sheer wonderment and the desire to explore what is out of sight, and, on the other, economic necessity to escape poverty and starvation, war and persecution. All these factors have intersected and underlie each individual decision to become a migrant, and taking the longue durée, more recently within and outside the nation state (Manning, 2013).

The term ‘refugee’ dates only to the late seventeenth century and was self-coined by the Huguenots to explain their status as deserving recipients of asylum in receiving countries within the Protestant world. The absence of terminology, however, should not disguise the reality that refugees have been a constant feature of history. And recent attempts to create a ‘myth of difference’ between those coming from Europe and the Third World are, as B. S. Chimni argues, ‘self-serving and refugee studies has done little to combat this’ (Chimni, 1998: 357, 360, 368). Refugees, across time and place, have something in common as have attitudes and responses to them.

Refugee studies is a recent academic pursuit. The Journal of Refugee Studies was first published in 1988 (Zetter, 1988), and this interdisciplinary field is still in its infancy. Dominated by law and the social sciences, the focus has been on contemporary issues including the legal status of refugees and asylum seekers and the problems they are facing in transit, temporary and permanent settlement. Earlier generic studies dating from the work of John Hope Simpson (Simpson, 1938, 1939), Jacques Vernant (Vernant, 1953) and Malcolm Proudfoot (Proudfoot, 1957) were equally concerned with the now of refugee crises of the Nazi era and the early Cold War.

What typified these early studies was a belief that refugees were a temporary and ultimately solvable problem. As Hope Simpson somewhat optimistically wrote in 1939 before the outbreak of the Second World War, if it was successfully dealt with at its root cause, ‘the refugee problem in Europe would reduce itself to that minor feature of international life which it ought to be’ (Simpson, 1939, p. 546). Simpson had in mind the mid-nineteenth century when refugees were relatively few in number and confined to prominent individuals (such as Karl Marx) or small groups of political exiles (Kushner, 2017:10). Sadly the refugee crisis has had a longer life than Simpson, Vernant and Proudfoot anticipated. At the end of
2018, the global number of refugees stood at 70.8 million, up over two million from the previous year. It consisted of 41.3 million internally displaced people; 25.9 million ‘formal’ refugees and 3.5 million asylum seekers, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in June 2019. This is the highest level ever recorded, exceeding (indeed over double) that at the end of the Second World War when the figure stood at over 40 million, itself a record total (Proudfoot, 1957: 32; Marrus, 1985: 297).

With a recognition that refugees, the internally displaced and asylum seekers are here to stay (indeed, with a world in increasing crisis and instability, including climate change, the numbers are likely to increase even further in the twenty first century), there is a growing move to historicise their existence (Gatrell, 2013; Noiriel, 2012 [1991]). There is still much to be done, especially as refugee studies tends to relegate history to a footnote. There is, as Jessica Reinisch and Matthew Frank argue, ‘an overwhelming presentism within the field of refugee studies’ (Frank and Reinisch, 2017: 8). Historians, however, are equally at fault. As anthropologist, Liisa Malkki has stated, the refugee ‘remains curiously, indecently, outside of history’ (Malkki, 1996: 398). More prosaically, Peter Gatrell, who has written by far the most geographically comprehensive history of the modern refugee, highlights how ‘Refugees have been allowed only a walk-on part in most histories of the twentieth century, and even then as subjects of external intervention rather than actors in their own right’ (Gatrell, 2013: 283).

The enforced liminal characteristic of the refugee – homeless, stateless and hard to define – is at the heart of antagonism towards them. This is in spite of, or even because of the 1951 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees which limited those under its scope geographically to Europe and chronologically to the Nazi era. Since then Gil Loescher notes that ‘International law seeks to define the minimum that should be offered to refugees’ (Loescher, 1989: 9; Tuitt, 1996). Refugees themselves have internalised this marginality and have often rejected the label. Hannah Arendt, a refugee two times over (first from Nazi Germany and then from Vichy France), wrote from her new place of refuge in wartime America, ‘we don’t like to be called “refugees”. We ourselves call each other “newcomers” or “immigrants”’. She added that in pre-war France ‘we were even more sensitive about being called refugees. We did our best to prove to each other people that were just ordinary immigrants’ (Arendt, 2007 [1943]: 264).

Vernant, a decade later, and using the gendered language that was utilised in the 1951 Convention and the use throughout of ‘he’, also noted that

What stamps the refugee as a man apart, justifying his classification in a special social category, is his inferiority, he is inferior both to the citizens of the country which gave him shelter and to all other foreigners, not refugees, living in that country.

(Vernant, 1953: 13)

The difficulty in placing refugees in the nation state (and in the historical archive given their temporary, fluid status where their impermanence has often left only the faintest of marks) has led to specific attitudes towards them which in turn has impacted on their treatment.

As with attitudes and responses to most if not all oppressed groups, the ‘refugee’ is regarded with ambivalence rather than sheer hatred. Hostility, in theory, is mitigated by belief in the concept of asylum with its classical origins and presence in the foundations of all major religious faiths. In practice, however, it has often been articulated in the modern world in the form of virtue-signalling to show the liberality, decency and tolerance of liberal or emerging democracies without a full commitment to offering a permanent home to the persecuted. There has been a huge gap between the rhetorical commitment to the
right of asylum and the actual granting of it. If ‘history’ is turned to for those who want to have a ‘usable past’ to endorse more generous policies today, it is likely to lead to disappointment. As refugee historian Lyndsey Stonebridge warns: ‘We’re on shaky ground indeed if we think we simply need to retrieve a lost humanitarian impulse’ (Frank and Reinisch, 2017: 6).

On a symbolic level, however, the commitment to asylum has been key in constructing the identity of first Revolutionary France in the late eighteenth century (Noiriel, 2012 [1991]), then the United States of America (as with the Statue of Liberty, erected in 1886 and its ambiguous claim to welcome ‘Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free. The wretched refuse of your teeming shore’ (Higham, 1978 [1955]): 23), and the United Kingdom (Kushner and Knox, 1999) and more recently post-war West Germany/unified Germany (Schuster, 2003a). Occasionally, when other factors have come into play (for example, France after the First World War when it was short of manpower), pragmatic factors allowed the commitment to asylum to have substance in terms of significant refugee entry, including in this case hundreds of thousands of Armenians and White Russians (Cross, 1983), or Germany in the second decade of the twenty-first century, when a deep sense of its shameful recent past prompted Chancellor Angela Merkel to let in 890,000 mainly Syrian refugees in 2015, following the outcry over the death of three-year-old Alan Kurdi, washed up on a Turkish beach.

Even then, it has not followed that the refugees themselves have been given a universally warm welcome. The case of Karl Marx in Victorian England is revealing. He was allowed in because of a xenophobic belief that Britain was intrinsically better than the ‘dangerous’ continent, with the arrogant assumption that his diseased, revolutionary world view would be effectively neutralised in a stable democracy. In practice, he and other refugees were regarded with disdain and often treated negatively (Porter, 1979). Still, it would be wrong to dismiss the neglected and often brave work of organisations and individuals in the modern era who have fought for refugee rights whether as a whole or for specific groups trying to find asylum. There is thus a secret history of the largely undocumented worked to help refugees on a practical level whether in the global north or south.

Alongside such ambivalence towards refugees through the racialised and hierarchical application of asylum where the ‘right’ individual or group was helped and allowed entry (for example, bourgeois German Jews during the 1930s who were regarded as cultured as against the mass of poverty stricken East European Jews who were viewed as uncivilised, racially unfit, ill-disciplined and a revolutionary menace) (London, 2000), was outright hostility towards them. Recognising the potential sympathy that might be evoked by the term ‘refugee’, they have been re-labelled as ‘undesirable aliens’ at the fin de siècle and 1930s, ‘displaced persons’ after the Second World War and then in the last decades of the twentieth century and into the new millennia as ‘bogus asylum seekers’ or ‘illegal immigrants’, the last term shortened to one word in racist populist discourse: ‘illegals’ (Kushner, 2006: 5–7).

And as Arendt noted, the word ‘refugee’ itself has often been loaded and negatively received. In memory, refugees from Nazism are amongst the most validated and celebrated in the history of forced migration. At the time, they were treated with deep suspicion in places of refuge such as Britain. There in 1938 the Jewish Refugee Committee became the German Jewish Aid Committee because ‘refugee’ had developed negative connotations (Kushner, 2006: 6). There thus remains a (particularly western) tradition of anti-refugee political movements, newspapers and later media, articulated in politics and culture as well by ordinary people, that remains under-researched as a specific topic in its own right.
Indeed, there is often only passing reference in more general works on xenophobia, populism, fascism and neo-fascism, and other forms of racial, ethnic and religious intolerance to a discrete and continuous anti-refugee discourse. An example is John Higham’s magisterial and pioneering study of American nativism, *Strangers in the Land*, originally published in 1955 and covering the period from the mid-nineteenth century through to the 1920s. Focusing on anti-Catholicism, antisemitism, anti-Irish and anti-German sentiment as well as white supremacy, specific animosity to refugees (or support of them) was absent from Higham’s narrative. The treatment of refugees in academic literature reflects their marginality on an everyday level.

Regarded as, at best, a temporary phenomenon (in spite of all historical evidence to the contrary), they add complications to the study of migration as well as that of racism and prejudice. Chimni notes that ‘every refugee differs from another in the circumstances which force her to flee’ (Chimni, 1998: 360) which does not mean that they have nothing in common – including in their treatment. Inevitably they will vary in terms of politics, class, wealth, education, age, gender, sexuality, place of origin, religion, ethnicity, skin colour and so on – as, accordingly, will their treatment. It is this complexity that perhaps explains their general absence from consideration in the study of intolerance where boundaries (for example between the study of antisemitism and anti-black racism) are rarely overcome, in spite of the pioneer efforts of scholars such as Paul Gilroy, Bryan Cheyette and Michael Rothberg (Cheyette, 2013; Gilroy, 2000; Rothberg, 2009) in the sphere of cultural and literary studies and Colin Holmes, Panikos Panayi and myself in history (Holmes, 1988; Kushner, 2006; Panayi, 2010) and John Solomos in Sociology (Solomos, 2003 [1989]). As Rothberg argues, there is a politics of collective memory involved. Aiming to overcome it, he asks ‘When memories of slavery and colonialism [for example] bump up against memories of the Holocaust in contemporary multicultural societies, must a competition of victims ensue?’ (Rothberg, 2009: 2). But in the case of scholars confronting anti-refugee politics and sentiment, there is perhaps an even greater challenge: refugees come in all shapes, sizes and colours. What unites them is their refugeedom viewed positively, negatively and ambivalently. They do not ‘fit’ into classic theories of racism, Marxist or otherwise, but are still frequently victims of racialisation.

Refugees do not themselves, it must be stressed, cause a ‘problem’. Revealingly, the politicisation of anti-refugee sentiment is more often articulated in countries or localities where refugee numbers are extremely low. Warnings against the menace posed by refugees has been uttered on an almost daily basis by Viktor Orbán, the extreme nationalist Prime Minister of Hungary, and its dominant political force in the new millennia. In 2018 Hungary, which has amongst the lowest refugee population in Europe, admitted just 670 applications for asylum. Asylum seekers have been kept at bay by the erection of a 100-mile plus fence stopping any crossings on its southern border with Serbia and Croatia. According to UNHCR statistics, 84% of the world’s refugee population are located in the developing world. Whilst there are exceptions, these much greater numbers have not been negatively politicised as they have been in the global north.

It remains that the words ‘refugee’ and ‘problem’ are incessantly and almost automatically coupled. ‘Refugee’ has become, like many other minority groups, but in a peculiarly all-encompassing way, an outlet for fears and frustrations of real problems in culture, society and politics such as unemployment and job security, housing, crime, health, terrorism and international instability. The ease with which populist and other political parties have mobilised against them in the early twenty-first century (in both liberal and illiberal countries, including in sections of the left and progressive world – the ruling Social Democrats in Denmark
in 2019 are, for example, pushing through harsh restrictive measures) is an indication that hostility towards them needs to be taken with the utmost seriousness, including in academic work on intolerance.

As David Goldberg has insisted, racism is not singular. Indeed, the title and contents of this volume insists upon its plurality (Goldberg, 1994). In this light, Liza Schuster has argued that the treatment of asylum seekers (and I would add refugees as a whole), can be defined as racist (Schuster, 2003b: 244). She follows a definition of racism that it is based on ‘any argument which suggests that the human species is composed of discrete groups in order to legitimate inequality’ (Miles, 1989: 49). Schuster defends her position by arguing that ‘asylum seeker’ is no longer simply an (almost exclusively western, post-1980s) legal category for those awaiting a decision on their application for refugee status. Instead it is now ‘a term that is used unambiguously, and immediately conjures up cheat, liar, criminal, sponger – someone deserving of hostility by virtue not only of any misdemeanour, but simply because he or she is an “asylum seeker”’. It is, she adds, ‘a figure that has by now become a caricature, a stereotype, in the way that “Blacks”, “Jews” and “Gypsies” have been and still are’ (Schuster, 2003b: 244).

The label ‘refugee’, as emphasised here, has much more ambiguity associated with it than the ‘asylum seeker’ which is almost always regarded with hatred and suspicion. But if the former can evoke pity (which in turn can lead to patronising treatment of refugees and the removal of their agency and even voice), the figure of the refugee is also associated, as Vernant perceptively noted as early as 1953, with producing ‘an element of anxiety’ (Vernant, 1953: 12). Vernant’s analysis of why this was the case still holds validity over half a century later. The crux is, as he underlined, is that ‘The refugee is, in the first place, a symbol of instability’ (Ibid).

For some postmodern writers, the state of exile is a place of freedom, spared from the tyranny of the nation state and the imaginative limitations of restrictive borders. But for the less rarefied, those ‘whose homeland is nowhere’ are seen as a potential threat (Vernant, 1953: 13). It explains the speed with which refugees desire and our encouraged to integrate, often being at the forefront of attempts to define their country of adoption in the cultural realm. Arendt, writing critically in the middle of this process, stated ‘We were told to forget; and we forgot quicker than anybody could imagine … after four weeks in France or six weeks in America, we pretended to be Frenchmen or Americans’. She added that ‘The more optimistic among us would even add that their whole former life had been passed in a kind of unconscious exile and only their new country now taught them what a home really looks like’ (Arendt, 2007 [1943]: 265). The Hungarian refugee and satirist of English mores, George Mikes, relayed a joke doing the rounds in London during the late 1940s: ‘A German refugee was offered naturalisation but he indignantly exclaimed: “What? Without India?!”’ (Mikes, 1986 [1984]: 190).

Vernant adds that alongside being a living embodiment of a world in flux, ‘the refugee is the unknown’. Immigrants, even if disliked, have a clear homeland from where they chose to leave, but the refugee no longer has a country, ‘he has been cast out by his group’ (Vernant, 1953, 13). ‘He’ is thus both inferior to other foreigners, but potentially more dangerous. ‘His’ lack of paperwork, or the perception that it is unreliable, leads to a first contact, in Vernant’s analysis, that ‘provokes an inevitable conflict’ (Vernant, 1953: 14). The refugee or asylum seeker is thus put into a placeless place – a camp or reception centre that reinforces her/his liminal status and most recently geographical anomalies such as the Italian island of Lampedusa where they can be processed remotely (Zolberg, 1999: 73; Cuttitta, 2014; Mazzara, 2019).
Schuster highlights how ‘Just as there is a hierarchy among migrants who may be included, so too is there a messy and complex hierarchy among asylum-seekers, a hierarchy of the excluded’ (Schuster, 2003b: 245). She emphasises class and gender as complicating factors, noting especially how in state asylum processes in many western countries, there is an ‘unequal and particular treatment of women’ (Ibid). Indeed, as has become clear, the language of the 1951 Convention and of early studies of refugees assumed that refugees – essentially political dissidents in the writers’ minds - were exclusively male.

What is complicated about anti-refugee discourse is that it combines at different times and different places with a variety of other ‘isms’ and ‘phobias’. In the late-nineteenth century through to at least the 1940s, it was heavily influenced by antisemitism (or more accurately, antisemities), a hostility that came from all parts of the political spectrum. More recently, Islamophobia has been a major feature of attacks on refugees, as has in more specific movements, anti-Gypsy racism. Racisms with imperial and post-imperial origins have been employed against those coming from Africa and Asia, skin colour being an important factor in hostility to refugees coming from the developing world. Indeed imperial thinking has deeply influenced both hostility and humanitarian impulses towards refugees, just as the rise and especially the decline of empires has led to massive refugee movements (Panayi and Virdee, 2011; Shaw, 2015). And yet refugees constructed as ‘white’ – for example those from former Yugoslavia in the 1990s – were also racialised, revealing again the essentially complex nature of anti-refugee racism (van Selm, 2000). Alongside sexism, homophobia has played a role in the treatment of refugees in relation to gender and sexuality.

It is, however, the power of nationalism and national exclusivity and concomitant xenophobia (which then collectively influences international responses to refugees) that has singled out refugees for special treatment from the nineteenth century onwards. The ‘good’ refugee (following the narrative of deserving status – that is one escaping from a regime hated by the receiving society – then gratitude, loyalty and contribution) might be included within the national story, but unlike migrants recruited for work purposes, the refugee is often perceived as at best a burden and at worst, a threat to the stability of society. Thus an analysis of what the refugee or asylum seeker is accused of is a good guide to the anxieties, both domestic and international, of each particular age. Within the histories produced of particular refugee groups – Huguenots, Jews and East African Asians are classic examples – an apologetic tradition emerges that emphasises only contribution and downplays any animosity faced, whether from state or populace (Gwynn, 1985; Medawar and Pyke, 2000; Nasar, 2018).

What then does this suggest about future research directions? There is a need for those working in many different fields to recognise that animosity to refugees complicates understanding of responses to broader categories of the excluded. Thus, for example, whilst refugees might be regarded within with wider migration studies, despite their huge and growing numbers, as a relatively small group (and one that do not always fit broader trends in movements), reactions and responses to them are both part of and apart from wider categories of migrants.

Indeed, the study of anti-refugee racism is valuable because it forces connections to be made in scholarship that is still too often divided by specialisms, groups studied and rigid ideology. The argument of Harry Goulbourne relating to Britain that

... whilst relations between different European groups or between different groups of white people gave rise to patterns of discrimination, the emergence of racial differentiation and the subsequent race relations... arose out of the dramatic contact and integration of Africans and Asians
still holds great sway (Goulbourne, 1998: ix-x, 26–9). In contrast, the fundamental argument here is that the ambiguous status of the ‘refugee’, and other racialised migrant groups, suggests strongly that the ‘colonial/imperial past’ (Goulbourne: ix) is not always the only factor determining whether racism is present or not. And as is the case with refugee studies as a whole, rather than be subsumed in other fields, the analysis of anti-refugee racism has its own internal dynamics within traditions of intolerance (Kushner and Lunn, 1989).

There is something in what is perceived as the unsettling nature of refugeedom (and even more so in the recent legal construct of asylum seeker) which deserves to be studied in its own right. This includes the long bureaucratic restrictionist history (moving from the creation of ‘paper walls’ in the 1930s through to real ones as in Hungary or demanded by President Trump in America’s border with Mexico in the twenty-first century), as well as the deep and uneasy social, cultural and political engagement with the figure of the refugee. The need for this specific focus, ironically, extends to the so-far largely ahistorical field of refugee studies.

What I am advocating is far from studying anti-refugee racism in isolation or as a static, unchanging phenomena. Instead, an inclusive approach will enable an understanding of the strength of anti-refugee hostility (and the limitations of pro-refugee sentiment and action, reassuring and important though these are) and greater understanding of how racisms and other intolerances mutate throughout history and geography. Through this we can begin to understand how, since the turn of the millennia, in a world of constant and ubiquitous surveillance close to 50,000 refugees have been allowed to drown in one of the world’s most busy shipping waters – the Mediterranean – desperately trying to find safety and a chance to rebuild lives in ‘Fortress Europe’.3

Notes

2 Schuster links this definition to Robert Miles but it is critiqued by this sociologist of racism who attributes it more to John Rex.

References

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