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Refugia: Radical Solutions to Mass Displacement

Tyler Correira 

BOOK REVIEW

Refugia: Radical Solutions to Mass Displacement. By Robin Cohen and Nicholas Van Hear. Routledge, 2020, 148 pp. ISBN: 9781138601567.

HISTORY Published 30 January 2023

Robin Cohen and Nicholas Van Hear's **Refugia** (2020) imagines a grounded Utopian vision for a transnational framework to address human displacement. Currently, 80 million people have been forced from their homes worldwide, constituting the largest global crisis of displacement on record (UNHCR, 2020). This is compounded, the book argues, by a dearth of confidence in the United Nations' (UN) three "durable solutions" of local integration, voluntary return, and resettlement (UNHCR, 2020, p. 48); the re-emergence of xenophobic right-wing populism; and, in the wake of Donald Trump's presidency, divestment from international institutions supporting refugees (in particular, the UN High Commission for Refugees and the UN Relief and Works Agency). Thus, the authors propose a concrete version of the utopia they call "Refugia" as an empirically informed and imaginative transnational polity that

responds to contemporary mass displacement.

The authors begin by surveying options posed by various actors who have called for the establishment of refugee communities beyond mere settlement, starting with "insider critiques" from those within the community of refugee scholarship (p. 36). This includes T. Alexander Aleinikoff and Leah Zamore's "Arc of Protection," which implores states to ensure the safe mobility and asylum access sought by refugees and collaboratively seek solutions to displacement, as well as Alexander Betts and Paul Collier's "safe havens" and similar proposals for "integration" or "incubation" of refugee communities in contact with hosts (pp. 39–41). They expand their scope to include proposals of a "refugee nation" (advocated by California entrepreneur Jason Buzi) and "refugee islands" (proposed by Egyptian billionaire telecom owner Naguib

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Sawiri and more expansively modelled by Dutch architect Theo Deutinger) (pp. 44–46). The authors also reference Femke Halsema's *Zatopia*, a proposed autonomous zone where "refugees can work and study, build their own economy, maintain their schools, and manage their community" (p. 53), which they argue is closest to their vision for *Refugia*. Each model bears crucial flaws, though, from the inherent insufficiency of solutions relying on nation-states that have precipitated the problems they presume to address, to the implied segregation and historically demonstrable targeting of refugee populations held in camps or forcefully relocated, to the as yet unactualized potential of more radical alternatives.

Without having found a single model to draw from, the authors look towards prefigurative political actions that could be amalgamated into a more complete configuration. For example, Zaatari camp's proximity to Jordan's Hussein Bin Talal Development Area, which motivates economic activity within the refugee camp, could satisfy the need for enriching work. This can be combined with the politics of autonomous settlement and spatial occupation in refusal of borders (the "jungle" near Calais and Idomeni on the Greece–Macedonia border), as well as the maintenance of diaspora connections and sharing of otherwise unused resources remotely (vacant homes in the Bekaa Valley of Lebanon), alongside practices of communal care, cultural expression, and grassroots education (as in Rojava in northern Syria). Drawing from this, the authors imagine a transnational polity grounded in practices of sheltering and homemaking, durable housing and infrastructure building, politically oriented memory making, and articulations of justice. They explore the possibilities opened by digitization and global diffusion of finance (e-commerce and global

remittance) and politics (indabas, agoras, transnational elections, global parliaments and congresses). They emphasize creative, educational, and digital labour practices performed remotely, in tandem with rearticulations of liquid social identities—identities that cannot be reduced to affiliation to a nation-state but reflect complex and shifting relations to many groups and formations; to one's locality but also a diffuse or diasporic identity; to one's "job" but also to the otherwise unacknowledged forms of (most often gendered) care, voluntary activity, and contributions to a social whole.

Understandably, Cohen and Van Hear rely upon the aesthetic imaginary of *cities* to synthesize these diverse practices, because they function both as *oikoi* (economic and household entities) and as *poleis* (political entities). One might draw from practices of homemaking, work, movement, and education to construct democratic and transnational structures of governance and solidarity, public spaces (the *agora* as both a market and a gathering space), procedures for office (use of electronic voting to expand the scope of citizen assemblies paired with short-term tenure for official positions chosen through sortition), and issuance of passports. Even though the text is short, the authors' program for a transnational refugee community is impressively panoramic, further exemplified by their generation of language around their utopian polity: "*Refugia*," but also "*refugiiums*," "*refugians*," and "*solidarians*" (individual cities, citizens, and their supporters); "*Somewhereland(s)*" (the states that "host" or tolerate each refugium); and "*ecotones*" (the spaces wherein each refugium borders a *Somewhereland*, facilitating social exchange rather than barriers). This extends even to the dialect refugees develop, termed "*Fugee*" (p. 56). However, aside from outlining proposed solu-

tions the actualization of Refugia is difficult to envision. Rather than prescribe best practices, illustrative vignettes are offered. Set in the near future, these vignettes envisage how refugians might formulate answers concerning issues like voting on the acceptance of new members, some being non-refugees or holding strong identarian beliefs (pp. 12, 33–34). Minute details are considered, including the everyday experience of designating a refugian to deliver workshops for currency, “cred” (pp. 99–100), and the emergence of unique social practices, such as naming—“Omni” and “Luna” being popular choices (p. 78)—public events—a dance troupe performing for the commemoration of the “Elysia” refugium (p. 79)—and delegating voluntary work in other localities (pp. 12, 56–57).

The authors’ formulation of the Sesame pass is particularly interesting. Such a passport operates as a card, app, or subcutaneous chip. It functions to identify refugians, authorize safe passage, and document one’s currency holdings, entitlements to public goods, and status determinations (pp. 91–93), although the authors do not state **who** might be in charge of its implementation—an important oversight if the operations of Refugia are opposed to centralized governance. Nevertheless, Cohen and Van Hear predict that such an object would render the connections between refugians tangible as members to a larger whole. Without disparaging their work, the implications of this technology are not exclusively positive, especially how the Sesame pass is vulnerable to state or corporate surveillance—not necessarily their own polity but, as the authors mention, illustrated in the role that Cambridge Analytica played in state actors’ interference with elections around the world. Their response is twofold. First, they note that such an object will become increasingly

valuable given the extent of its functions—an importance with which no one would disagree, given its centrality to the authors’ program. Second, fear of terrorists posing as refugees, the authors contend, undermines much of such criticism—which seems rather distant from the original problem. In fact, they have not engaged with the stated issue of **surveillance**, which intersects with the **bureaucratic** functioning of states and corporations. Beyond the problem of individual rights and digital protections, the financial, economic, and biometric functions of the Sesame pass find precedent not in grassroots traditions but in the techno-bureaucratized state capitalism, which has precipitated the problems the authors are responding to. In this sense, it is rather confusing that we **agree** upon these conditions.

Further, it is surprising that the authors do not offer a response insofar as it is also agreed that state-centric solutions to mass displacement entrench the rights of states over the needs of (displaced) peoples and that top-down solutions are fraught with issues of mismanagement and retrenched neoliberal exploitation. Accordingly, at times, Cohen and Van Hear present too optimistically what is still a meaningful and holistic synthesis of grassroots responses to displacement—a critique they attend to somewhat in the final section of the book. However, the Sesame pass as a pillar of their program would require revision if they had dealt, for example, with the problem of xenophobia not as the outburst of a right-wing or populist current **within** nation-states but as embedded in the very structure of their techno-bureaucratic institutions. In following, the book would need to pre-emptively respond to the manners by which camps, settlements, enclaves, and urban squatting communities are targets for state violence that precipitate mass displacement, the same

states that enforce a system of passports.

The authors of *Refugia* might respond to such a critique through a praxis-based approach that draws on the participatory spirit of anarchist thought—both in content (with reference to “autonomous and anarchist forms of living” [p. 75]) and conceptually (in reference to “prefigurations” [p. 58]). It is refreshing that their approach **withholds** proposal of more than formal mechanisms for determining responses to potential problems—mentioned governance structures, assemblies, transnational elections, participatory democracy, and **agora/indaba** spaces. Some of the vignettes dispensed through the book also contribute to this by prefiguratively narrating what a refugee participant assembly **might** decide if confronted by a host of difficulties (see especially pp. 12–13, 33–34). Perhaps the foreseeable problems posed by the Sesame pass don't require Cohen and Van Hear themselves to respond but will be an early topic for the deliberation of the hypothetical citizens of *Refugia*. In the meantime, for their far-reaching, imaginative, and empiri-

cally informed solutions drawing directly on contemporary grassroots praxis, the authors deserve acclaim. For maintaining the open possibility of a tangible democratic future for refugees and solidarians alike, Cohen and Van Hear's *Refugia* is doubly important.

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