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ARTICLE REVIEW

How Not to Fix the Refugee Crisis — A Response to ‘Refuge’

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In *Refuge: Transforming a Broken Refugee System* co-authors Alexander Betts and Paul Collier argue for engaging a comparative advantage theory to address refugee protection globally. The book was first published in early 2017 and political economy professor Behzad Yaghmaian quickly responded in the review, “How Not to Fix the Refugee Crisis.” In the review, Yaghmaian warns that the theory underpinning Betts and Collier’s plan for fixing the refugee system could actually, “exacerbate the very problem [they seek] to solve.” As described by Yaghmaian, “The basic premise of the theory is that countries must specialize in the production and export of commodities in which they have a comparative advantage.”

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To apply the comparative advantage theory to refugee protection, Betts and Collier propose that countries located near those where most refugees originate, predominately in the global south, become “safe havens” due to their similarities in geography, language, culture, and religion, while economically wealthy Western countries provide the “safe havens” with technology, funding through aid and loans, and preferential trade agreements, instead of resettling refugees themselves (Betts & Collier, 2018, pp. 28-31). In no uncertain terms, Yaghmaian asserts that Betts and Collier’s proposal, “...will worsen the refugee crisis we currently face.” He then goes on to outline why.

Yaghmaian first identifies that Betts’ and Collier’s proposal legitimizes attempts by Western states to end refugee resettlement within their borders. Yaghmaian notes how the theory, originally applied in international trade, is fundamentally Eurocentric and “...designed to maximize and protect the interests of rich Western states.” While Yaghmaian’s assessment is accurate in that Betts and Collier’s proposed solution perpetuates Eurocentric or in U.S. terms Western-centric and predominately white hegemonic power structures, he misses the opportunity to address whose interests in Western states are being maximized and protected. It is obvious that Yaghmaian is referring to government officials and people already in positions of power. But his argument against Betts and Collier’s proposal would have been strengthened by considering the limitations of benefit to Western states. He could have also shown the losses to those residing in Western countries when their governments attempt to and increasingly succeed at dismantling their refugee resettlement programs, at times by using the arguments presented by Betts and Collier. With Brexit in the U.K., and the administrations of Viktor Orbán in Hungary and Donald Trump in the United States, among other examples, it is evident that not only do individuals seeking refuge lose but the people living in these countries lose the many benefits and opportunities that come from living in more diverse societies.

Yaghmaian also questions Betts and Collier’s use of the, “much disputed and artificial distinction between refugees and economic migrants,” which they engage throughout *Refuge*. Yaghmaian refers to the example from the book in which Betts and Collier argue that in 2015 when Germany shifted from its role as a donor to one offering open refuge, they effectively

turned refugees into “economic migrants” (Betts & Collier, 2018, pp. 119-120). Yaghmaian rightly identifies Betts and Collier’s distinction between individuals moving to seek refuge from conflict and physical violence from those fleeing economic uncertainty as “highly problematic.” He explains that, “the drivers behind people’s movement and willingness to take risk are more complex than Betts and Collier portray.” Yaghmaian’s assertion that people’s movement is spurred by a variety of factors is true globally and must be a valued and understood reality by those seeking to build a better refugee system.

A clear example of the “highly problematic” distinction between refugees and economic migrants occurred during the 2015 Bay of Bengal crisis. Thousands departed from Bangladesh by boat, some of whom were young people from Bangladesh seeking economic security and reprieve from climate change induced chronic flooding while others were religious minority Rohingyas from Burma seeking refuge. Together they found themselves abandoned and adrift at sea. This happened while countries along the Andaman Sea refused to bring them ashore as they debated what their responsibilities might be to house and care for them. These people suffered in part because of the distinction that Betts and Collier advocate for, between refugee and migrant seeking economic safety.

Yet, while Betts and Collier question economic motives as an impetus for moving, they do acknowledge and provide a proposal for the economic needs of refugees. The solution presented in *Refuge* is the development of Special Economic Zones (SEZs). The development of SEZs provides Yaghmaian’s final critique of Betts and Collier’s fixes to the refugee system. Yaghmaian emphasizes that SEZs have, “long been criticized for their violations of the labor rights and human rights of their employees.” He also laments Betts and Collier’s only recognition of these concerns is to note: “Given the combination of international-organization oversight, media scrutiny and the reputational concerns of large corporations, the risk of abuse is remote” (Betts & Collier, 2018, p. 236).

Yaghmaian concludes that, “Betts and Collier have provided us with a timely opportunity to discuss some real problems in refugee protection. *Refuge*, however, is not the pathway to autonomy, dignity and empowerment for the refugees.” This was true at the time

Yaghmaian's wrote his review and has come into focus even more starkly as many countries, both in the west and global south, face the challenges presented by the global COVID-19 pandemic. We are in a time where we must find meaningful solutions to global migration that respect and uphold the rights of all migrants. While Yaghmaian succinctly outlined the problems with Betts and Collier's "solutions" to fixing the refugee system, the emphasis should be on developing systems that accurately address the myriad reasons people move away from home and do not further exacerbate divisions between those seeking asylum as it is currently defined and those seeking security but not as a refugee.

Reference

Betts, A., & Collier, P. (2018). *Refuge: Transforming a broken refugee system*. Penguin Books.