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Refugia: Radical Solutions to Mass Displacement

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Refugia: Radical Solutions to Mass Displacement by Nicholas Van Hear and Robin Cohen
Book review by Sana Murrani
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Refugia provides a pragmatic utopian vision as a solution to end mass displacement for refugees and all forms of displaced people. The book suggests a design of a polity that is transnational in its entity and formation, with Refugians (citizens of Refugia) seen as creative agents who are imagining and co-building their own kind of polis. The book references the mainstream academic views of refugee and displacement politics, identity and home-making practices as the authors frame their perspective on Refugia. With backgrounds in development studies, both authors have extensive research experience in forced migration. Refugia covers a wide range of research examples (historic and current) and practices from anthropological research, design, architecture, and planning that support and confirm the authors' own thinking process regarding the need for unique, alternative, and novel ways of approaching the challenge of mass displacement. The book begins with an overview of Refugia 2030 (with a misspelled/grammatically wrong Arabic date) that explains the governance, economy and overall character of this utopian vision.

The book is easy to read and understand and is written and structured well. It provides examples from practice on city/society formation. At just over 100 pages, it packs a lot of very complex issues as the authors attempt to explain what Refugia is, how it operates in a nation-state-like context without it being one, and how it formulates society (including identity and community), economy and security, and sustains its future. The book follows a conventional structure of an introduction, followed by a rich exploration of the making of Refugia's society (chapter 2), comparing it to other alternative visions (chapter 3), and then presenting Refugia now (chapter 4) and how to make it work (chapter 5). The book closes unconventionally (one would expect a conclusion) with a sixth chapter that engages with all the critiques and heated debates around the validity of Refugia as a concept and as a solution to end mass displacement.

Each chapter (barring the 6th) ends with a utopian scene where a certain future vision of this transnational entity is enacted. These vignettes are at times humorous and at other times are dark, portraying glimpses of the future reality of Refugia and Refugians. The presence of these vignettes suggests an interesting parallel narrative of creative writing, though their scarcity means that their contribution to the development of the chapter is tokenistic more than integral and reflective.

The book can appeal to undergraduate and postgraduate students in social science fields of study, in particular sociology and anthropology, as well as the fields of design, architecture and planning. Global challenges of mass displacement require interdisciplinary and collaborative thinking between researchers from across the social sciences, arts and humanities, as well as displacees' active participation, which I return to below. Even though the book is written by two scholars from the Global North with expertise in development studies, the discussion of issues including home-making and society formation are highly relevant to scholars from the fields of design, architecture and planning. The book would have made a stronger contribution to these fields, however, if it had engaged with scholarly work by Nabeel Hamdi (1991 and 2004), Muna Fawaz (2013) and Simin Davoudi (2018).

Written by committed solidarians (described in the book as people who are citizens of nation-states around the world – or so call 'somewherelands and are in support of 'Refugians'), Refugia is built on the assumption that nation-states will give out territories and lands (referred to as 'refugium') for the creation of this liquid transnational entity. Yet it is not clear how and why nation-states would do this, especially given the numerous moments in history where such decisions have either failed or gone horribly wrong for the displacees (referencing here the Palestinian struggle or the continued Hong Kongese fight for meaningful independence). This raises further questions: How can nation-states make such decisions better? How can nation-states deny/approve similar requests for independent territories demanded by other marginalised communities?

The authors refer to Refugia as a place that is governed democratically by Refugians as if all forcible displacees form a homogenous entity who are morally just, united by their labelling as 'refugee', 'asylum seeker', and 'migrant'. The book refers very little (and in some cases too late) to pressing and socially determining issues such as intersectionality and equality, racism and xenophobia between displaced peoples themselves as well as labour divisions, skills acquisitions, and variations in educational status. Starting with a focus on Syrian refugees' contribution to Refugia in the form of the design of the flag and an anthem is an example of the authors' lack of awareness of the prejudice this may create for other displacees with different heritage and backgrounds. Syrian refugees are seen as the 'chosen' and the 'privileged' refugees, especially by those who are identified as economic migrants, such as those from Sub-Saharan Africa. These divisions and beliefs are exacerbated by how Western governments responded towards the so called 'refugee crisis' in 2015 and the focus of the media on Syrians. The book assumes a blanket approach to Refugia in its applicability and scalability across the globe without engaging a decolonial lens or approach. Examples of the work that would have enriched this discussion on the applicability and validity of Refugia worldwide might have included Sara Ahmed (2003), Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2012).

Refugia as a transnational entity concept that transcends the meaning of a nation-state nevertheless includes many of the features of a nation-state. Across the chapters, Refugia starts to shape into a nation-state; it has a flag, an anthem, a language ('Fugi'), a passport/ID ('Sesame Pass'), a currency ('Credex'), commerce and security laws and regulations. Perhaps thinking alternatively, there was a need to challenge all conventional manifestations and forms of constructs of nation-states. Refugia would otherwise fall into the trap of excluding stateless people and non-nationals, just as the current nation-state system does.

There is also very little mention of the trauma of displacement and ethics of engaging with displacees who are in various mental, emotional, and physical states of trauma and recovery. Who makes the decision for the inclusion of all voices within the virtual assembly of Refugia and the making of its laws and planning of its growth? Is it mostly through the work of academics, researchers, and/or solidarians from the Global North? Even though there are highly reputable academics and researchers referenced in the book, the diversity and inclusivity of displacees' voices are minimal. It would have been more fruitful to engage displacees in an empirical study to develop a creative and alternative construct as to what Refugia (or some other entity) would look like. What would become of Refugia as a concept if it were to be engaging now (in its conceptual and fragile state) with displacees? I should think the first thing displacees would change is its name, Refugia, as it connects strongly to a process of labelling they are tired of.

The book has a number of interesting and creative ideas for the formation of alternative societal entities or a meta-nation/polis that acknowledges the complexities the world is facing with the causes and mobilities of mass displacement. Contrary to the numerous critiques it has received, it never claims to bring forward concrete solutions but rather suggests ideas for a just world in the absence of effective solutions. There is a value in creative thinking and alternative imagining of new societies and social worlds especially for the creation of new habitats. Ideas such as Refugia push the boundaries of worldmaking and experimentation that challenge global issues such as mass displacement, migration, and global mobility with manifestos that eventually shake up the discussion and distil change in the making of transnational polity for spatial justice.

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