

***The Making of the Modern Refugee***  
by Peter Gatrell: Oxford University Press, 2013.

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As public discourses across the world concerning the “refugee” invoke more fear and anxiety than ever before, *The Making of the Modern Refugee* is a timely intervention. Indeed, it brings a breath of fresh air to the discipline of Refugee/Migration Studies when scholars move beyond the cliched trope of the “refugee” as an exteriorized subject--refugees “as subjects of external intervention rather than as actors in their own right” (p. 281)--and instead remind us “how ... there were *many ways* to be a refugee” (p. 13; italics mine). In examining the “making” of what he calls the “refugee regime,” Gatrell seeks to explore the heterogeneity, contingencies, and, at times, contradictions in experiencing refugeehood and the articulation thereof, ironically often “by those who never came face to face with refugees” (p. 13). The novelty of Gatrell’s study is that instead of taking it as a *naturalized* category, he considers the “refugee” in its full complexity: he demonstrates how the refugee, both as an agential subject and a cultural trope, is an ever-evolving, space-time contingent category that has been subjected to the discourses of power, and also functions as a site of resistance to the same.

Citing a host of case studies and a diverse range of archival sources,

Gatrell historicizes the refugee in the twentieth century, and quite ambitiously in the contexts of Europe, Asia and Africa. The first section of the book, "Empires of Refugees," comprises two chapters that situate the European exodus until the First World War in its history and context, and in so doing critiques what Gatrell aptly calls "the nationalization of the refugee" (p. 51) project. Split into four chapters, the second section, "Mid-Century Maelstrom," discusses the impact of the Second World War, with particular reference to the ethnic cleansing programs that immediately followed. Chapter three focuses on the politics of hierarchization and the underpinnings of classist ideologies that characterized the series of European migrations during the "mid-century maelstrom"; chapter four is on the "birth" of Israel and how it impinges upon on the Jewish-Palestinian question; chapter five is on the tumultuous events of the India-Pakistan Partition in 1947; finally, chapter six is on the upheavals and exoduses in east Asia from 1937 to 1950. Section three, "Refugees in the Global Cold War and its Aftermath," flag posts the Cold War. In three chapters, Gatrell discusses the issue of migration in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Burma, Algeria, Sudan, Afghanistan and several erstwhile Soviet states, while in the last chapter briefly touching upon the refugee voices concerning their "homecoming."

In this book, Gatrell offers a salutary corrective by retrieving the "refugee's perspective," what he calls the "refugee voices," toward breaking the defeating silence in (most of the) existing studies on similar themes, wherein speaking *about* the refugee ordinarily turns to speaking *for* the refugee. Invoking images, testimonies and representation both *by* and *of* the refugee, Gatrell questions the inevitability of imagining the refugee, as is done more often than not, from the *outside*, as "victim of *unstoppable* forces" (p. 49; italics mine). Contrary to the social construction of the modern refugee as a passive subject of "external intervention," Gatrell's striking and powerful instances of refugee activism--in Belgium during the First World War, in Greece during the

1930s, in India during the 1940s and in Malaysia during the 1970s--point to how refugees can and do “[self-]express their predicament” (p. 12). On a different note, the term “external intervention” recurs six times in the book, which is symbolic of the significance of the rhetoric of *externality* that overwhelms the discourse of refugeehood.

What is most interesting, however, is Gatrell’s interdisciplinary approach to his theme. Clearly, he brings a number of disciplines into conversation: politics, history, sociology, cultural studies, and to a great extent, visual studies. Speaking of which, Gatrell often illustrates his arguments--for example, the context of some Estonian refugees (p. 103-05) and that of some Hungarian refugees (p. 144)--by referring to certain images that are, I wonder why, not printed/included in the book. Having said that, I find him at certain times struggling to balance breadth with depth. In a book that promises to cover the theme sweepingly across three continents and the twentieth century, the elision of the (Central) Americas is glaring. In fact, Gatrell never explains why his spatio-temporal choice in terms of the architecture of the book--his periodization based on World War I, World War II and the Cold War, and his focus on (certain parts of) Europe, Africa and Asia, which seems way too neat--is any better than what he says he wanted to avoid: “to be dominated by the history of US intervention” (p. 13).

One of Gatrell’s pressing concerns, characterizing the twentieth century, is the overlap between the birth of the modern nation-state and the manufacturing of the modern refugee. This is reminiscent of Foucauldian archeology. Then again, the book falls short of fleshing out the philosophical discourse of modernity, and how it encourages certain kinds of (im)mobility and discourages some others, a phenomenon hinted at provocatively by Bauman (2013), who is not referenced except for a passing bibliographic mention on p. 3. The author argues that the humanitarian, aid-dispersing endeavors undertaken by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the 1951

Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, alongside various nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), have actively contrived our image of them, but hardly engages with the array of developmental literature.

As a South Asia specialist, I find Gatrell's treatment of South Asia very cursory, to say the least. To take but one such instance, the author writes:

Only when making an ironic comment on the lack of official recognition did they speak of themselves as "refugees" in need of protection (*sharanarathi*), a term that carried demeaning connotations. Normally they claimed to be *bastuhara*, meaning people who had lost their home, hearth or "foundations" (*bastu*), or *pursharathi*, believers in self-help (p. 158).

If we are to believe that the book probes into the "making," which is to say, an archaeology of the discourse, then the author ought to have addressed these questions: what is the line that separates the *sharanarathi* from the *bastuhara*, or the *bastuhara* from the *pursharathi*? What made the terms discursively meaningful when (and where) these were being used? How did the valency of these terms figure within the discourse of "rehabilitation" and "development," and precisely within the Gandhian notion of "*seva*" (selfless service), and the Marxist-Ambedkarite critique thereof?

While I feel that the author has prioritized breadth over depth, *The Making of the Modern Refugee* seems more a painstakingly detailed "history" rather than, as the title suggests, the "making" of the refugee. Nevertheless, with a topic and sources as vast as its, the book has made significant, deep and potentially enduring scholarly forays in the study of refugee(hood), particularly at a time when national borders are increasingly rendered porous. Nevertheless, the dialectic of the familiar

and the foreign pitted against notions of refugeehood and territoriality becomes the very condition of understanding and organizing the “space” we inhabit.

## References

Bauman, Zygmunt, 2013. *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge, UK & Malden, MA: Polity Press.