



The Deconstruction of Refugees and the Reconstruction of History

By Peter W. Van Arsdale

A review of States and Strangers: Refugees and Displacements of Statecraft, by Nevzat Soguk. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (Borderlines Series, No. 11) 1999. 328 pp.

The Deconstruction of Refugees

I would characterize Nevzat Soguk as either a neo-liberal operating in the guise of a post-modern deconstructionist, or a post-modern deconstructionist operating in the guise of a neo-liberal. This is not a trivial distinction, nor an attempt to play semantic games, but my attempt to classify a brilliant theorist (known for his work in political science) whose book has a great deal of merit—but whose writing at times seems aimed more at discursive analysis for the sake of analysis than at the plight of refugees *per se*.

States and Strangers: Refugees and Displacements of Statecraft is the strongest deconstructionist piece of refugee writing that I have encountered in years. For Soguk, each primary term in the refugee field—including the term “refugee” itself—is subject to careful, nuanced, calculated analysis. Effectively drawing from—among others—the writings of political scientists (e.g., Jack Donnelly), anthropologists (e.g., Liisa Malkki), philosophers (e.g. Michel Foucault), and legal specialists (e.g., Ved Nanda), he deconstructs the meanings of terms such as sovereignty, territory, country, homeland, and state. To his credit, he bolsters his deconstructions with often-useful reconstructions, such as this: In cutting across space, the refugee creates a new “space” not subject to traditional notions of boundaries and boundedness. Also to his credit, as the reader eventually discovers, his deconstructions lead him to expressions of compassion for displaced persons (especially refugee girls and women).

Early on, in Chapter One, Soguk makes one of his strongest contributions. In deconstructing a vast array of refugee literature, he presents five emergent themes. I would summarize his at-times wordy deconstructions as follows: (1) Refugees as “disruptive,” (2) refugees as “victims,” (3) refugees as “transitional,” (4) refugees as “requiring solutions,” and (5) refugees as “problematic.” He implies that what I would term “imaginings” embedded in the literature have both added to, and

subtracted from, these themes. (John Sorenson, in his powerful book *Imagining Ethiopia* [1993], provides better insights than anyone else on how this can occur.)

The State and Issues of Intervention

Central to his work is the notion of nation (borrowing a phrase from Ernest Gellner). He cleverly describes what he terms the hierarchy of citizen/nation/state, and does so in ways that challenge notions spanning the disciplines of political science, sociology, and history in particular. Constructed in statist ways to maintain and perpetuate statist (read: realist) objectives, he believes this hierarchy to be ultimately all-pervasive and yet all-constraining. “The privileging of the citizen/nation/state ensemble as the hierarchical imperative to life activities [is key to the] narrative of modern political life” (p. 18).

Soguk believes that the modern nation-state (at least as defined by those in the West) has been shaped in large part by a statecraft that has had to deal with displaced populations. In the very process of marginalizing such peoples, the state has been sharpened as a polity. Unfortunately, in so doing, refugees have only infrequently benefited. If the well-known anthropologist Fredrik Barth (a pioneer in systems-interactive and ethnic analyses) were to paraphrase Soguk’s thesis, I am confident that he would say something like this: Since the 17th century the modern state—and statecraft—have been sharpened by external forces represented by the foreigner-alien (and increasingly in the 20th century, by the refugee *per se*).

Soguk’s forays into what I would term the epistemological and etymological origins of the modern citizen, the foreigner, the alien, and ultimately the refugee are intriguing. Relying heavily upon his knowledge of French history, he provides a number of ideas new to me. One in particular is that the foreigner-as-alien evolved into the foreigner-as-refugee in ways which both strengthened and consolidated the emergence of the modern sovereign state.

We find some of Soguk’s most interesting insights in Chapter Five, where he deals with the interplay of statecraft and humanitarian intervention. Building upon the writings of others, he contends that narrations of intervention have developed which are by no means neutral. This type of narration regards:

... the state and its sovereignty as primary, assigning a secondary status to the problem of humanitarian crisis, and comprehends humanitarian interventions as tertiary responses by which resources of the territorial order of states are marshaled to respond to the crisis and to restore the peaceful order of the state (p. 186).

Interpreted from a realist perspective (which he only alludes to indirectly), state-based power and statist objectives remain paramount even when humanitarian objectives are being espoused. Most of the discourse on the crises enveloping displaced people—which seemingly should be distanced from state/power considerations when true humanitarian interventions are being considered—is instead bound up with it. He goes on to credit scholars such as Jack Donnelly for interpretations bridging the humanitarian and human rights fields, especially as the development of an increasingly global human rights regime is considered.

Still in Chapter Five, Soguk lays out a polarized spectrum which he believes has been perpetuated by many scholars of humanitarian intervention. Across its expanse, this spectrum is inextricably bound up with issues of state sovereignty. At one extreme (perhaps best represented in the writings of Thomas Weiss and John Dunn), humanitarian interventions serve as markers in the erosion of state sovereignty. At the other extreme (perhaps best represented in the writings of Ved Nanda and Jack Donnelly), humanitarian interventions are increasingly part of an emergent—and U.N.-affiliated—international governance system.

The Refugee Experience

Soguk is at his best when he is probing the literature. For example, Chapter Two (on refugees and human displacement) contains a fascinating account of the origin of the term *refugee*. He notes that the English term refugee is the Anglicized derivation of the French term *réfugié*, a term itself traceable to the high medieval period. Apparently the first English usage, applied to a specific incident of displacement, is attributable to the 1685 expulsion and flight of some 200,000 Huguenots from France. This occurred after Louis XIV revoked the Edict of Nantes, “thus shattering a fragile religious and political compromise between French Catholics and the Protestant French Huguenots” (p. 59). Having recently returned from Nantes myself, this historical reference struck a personally resonant chord. At several points later in the text, he comes back to the Huguenot expulsion as illustrative of early-modern state sovereignty, in turn linking this to the role of the French in the creation of the early nation-state.

While interested in analyzing the term “experience,” through most of the book Soguk falls short in his attempts to characterize actual refugee experiences. Several of his chapters include important quotations which give some hint of these formative events and processes, yet he then moves—often too quickly—into abstract analyses which inadvertently serve to diminish “experience” in the life of a displaced person. Fortunately, as he nears book’s end, this oversight is corrected. He includes this powerful vignette, taken from the work of anthropologist Susan Forbes Martin (1991: 17):

Two of the young and pretty girls were taken to the front of the boat and raped. Everyone heard everything, all of the screams. That is what I remember, the screams. After a while the screams stopped, the crying stopped and there was silence.

He then goes on to decry what so often has been done to refugee girls and women, and to openly state his support for scholarship which will address the amelioration of such atrocities.

At times Soguk becomes too engrossed in what I would term social science jargon, and this distracts from the book. For example, in discussing statecraft we find this sentence: “We must . . . say more first on statecraft, that is, how the state is awarded its centrality, and then on ‘refugeecraft,’ that is, how the refugee’s body enables the borders and boundaries of the state” (p. 37). The term “awarded” distracts from his argument on modern state formation, and the term “refugeecraft” is but an awkward addition to the literature. Another example: Near book’s end (p. 244) he sums up a central portion of his work by stating: “I have tried to examine how, historically, ‘refugeeing’ may have figured in the processes of ‘statecrafting’.”

The writings of Michel Foucault are rightly recognized as distinguishable, and distinguished. He continues to inspire scholars interested in such topics as the role of the state in the lives of individuals. In this book, Foucault's name is invoked often. For example, at one juncture Soguk builds upon Foucault's notion of the "polyhedron of intelligibilities" as he discusses the myriad of processes and events that characterize refugee lives (p. 252). At another juncture, he builds upon Foucault's notion of "procedures of exclusion" which in turn can become "procedures of inclusion" as statecraft works upon the refugee (p. 119).

The Relevance of Refugee Research

In a recent essay entitled "The Relevance of Refugees" (1999), I describe three areas which I believe are deserving of further attention by researchers. These are human rights, empowerment, and identity formation. Soguk touches on all three, but is especially sensitive to identity formation. Not surprisingly, his theoretical approach allows insights into identity as refugees themselves define and accomplish it—and as various agents and agencies "external" to refugees also do. He is fascinated by the ways in which "peculiar identities . . . are constructed, assigned, negotiated, resisted, and, most importantly, fixed in the image of the modern state" (p. 27).

Five areas are described by Soguk as deserving of further attention by researchers. Each is important. First, it will be necessary to assemble further data on the various forms of "resistant practices." He believes this will allow better understanding of the differential reactions of (e.g.) Bosnians and Kurds to their plights. Second, he believes that—in complement to our understanding of "the refugee"—we must gain greater understanding of the changes in strategies by which the notion of the "citizen-subject" has been historically produced. Indeed, in a number of places in his book he uses a "refugee-citizen" countrapuntal approach to good effect. Third, we must gather more substantive information on the operative roles of international NGOs. Are they contributing to deterritorialization or reterritorialization, or both? Fourth, he asserts that non-Western histories of statecraft and refugee development likely contain much of value, but that too little is known of them. Fifth, and of greatest future importance, we must continue to pursue research on the role of gender in human displacement.

What is Nevzat Soguk's greatest accomplishment in this book? It is not in describing the refugee condition, nor in the provision of suggestions to ameliorate refugee suffering, nor in the making of policy that will enhance humanitarian undertakings. His greatest accomplishment, one still worthy, is best described in his own words: Demonstrating "that the effect of the refugee discourse is a problematization of the refugee that both erases the refugee's agency and effaces the refugee's humanity under the sign of the refugee in order to privilege the state's territorial role" (p. 257). If he and I were to meet, we would undoubtedly concur that our paradigmatic orientations and research strategies are dramatically different, but that—among several points of agreement—refugee voices themselves are not being heard fully nor effectively. The discourse provided by refugees themselves is that which is most essential.

Works Cited

Martin, Susan Forbes. Refugee Women. London: Zed, 1991.

Sorenson, John. Imagining Ethiopia: Struggles for History and Identity in the Horn of Africa. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993.

Van Arsdale, Peter W. "The Relevance of Refugees." *Anthropology Newsletter* (April, 1999), pp. 13 – 15.

Peter W. Van Arsdale, Ph.D., is Senior Lecturer and Research Fellow at the Graduate School of International Studies, University of Denver.

© 2001 Center On Rights Development