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What is the force of forced migration? Diagnosis and critique of a conceptual relativization

Danilo Mandić[1]

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Abstract

Theorizing of forced migration and refugees has been paralyzed by excessive reliance on migration theory. This article suggests the need to transfer conceptualizations of forced migration to sociological theories of violence. To that end, a preliminary step is argued to be indispensable: the affirmation of the force factor as a vital concept for meaningful theorization of refugee phenomena. Conceptual and empirical reasons are offered to resurrect the force factor's centrality. First, I suggest the need to resolve the conceptual residuality of "forced migration" in sociological theory, proposing manageable terminology for the task at hand. Second, I sketch conceptual and empirical reasons that the force factor is a viable and urgent candidate for our theoretical toolkit. Finally, I assess in depth the shortcomings of three prominent relativization conditions: (1) unwitting severity; (2) processual dilution; and (3) political-economic indeterminacy. By overcoming onerous relativization habits, we open horizons for coercion-centric theoretical insights on forced migration.

Keywords Migration · Forced migration · Refugees · War · Violence

This article proposes we bring the *force* back into forced migration. The steering intuition is that sociological theory has paid too much attention to forced migrants *qua* migrants, but not nearly enough to the force factor displacing them. Conceptualization of the force factor – a challenge that sociologists are uniquely-positioned to tackle – has been stifled by three relativization maneuvers. By detecting and critiquing them, I suggest a return to a coercion-centric concept drawing on the sociology of violence.

We proceed in three steps. First, I suggest the need to resolve the conceptual residuality of "forced migration" in sociological theory, proposing manageable

✉ Danilo Mandić
mandic@fas.harvard.edu

[1] Sociology Department, Harvard University, 604 William James Hall, 33 Kirkland Street, Cambridge, MA 02138, USA

terminology for the task at hand. Second, I sketch conceptual and empirical reasons that the force factor is a viable and urgent candidate for our theoretical toolkit. Finally, I assess in depth the shortcomings of three prominent relativization conditions: (1) unwitting severity; (2) processual dilution; and (3) political-economic indeterminacy.

Beyond residuality

The concept of refugee-ness is notoriously capacious enough to include strained, even contradictory, ideas and phenomena. Daring assumptions about volition, duress, victimhood, humanity, and nation-state sovereignty are often furtively injected to make refugees appear – or *dis*appear – as legitimate theoretical explananda. Metatheoretically speaking, the forced migrant is a Parsonian "residual category" in sociological theory (Bouzanis & Kemp 2019), which has stubbornly struggled to incorporate or exclude it vis-a-vis recognizable migrant concepts.[1] Deserted by other fields, forced migration was dumped at the altar of ordinary migration theory – itself reluctant to give it asylum. Not only does the refugee not "fit," but we don't precisely know *how it is* that she does not "fit."

Hence forced migration has been undertheorized and marginalized by the discipline.[2] Sociological theorizing of refugees is confined to three parochial avenues: integration, citizenship, and the inadequacy of this-or-that "label" for the heterogenous population at hand (for review, see Stepputat & Sørensen, 2014). Refugees are evoked tangentially for sociological theory-building in related domains such as hyper-ghettoization of mobility regimes under globalization (Shamir, 2005:203–208), the hermeneutics of translation and cultural brokerage (Jijon, 2019:145, 154), ethnic boundary-making (Wimmer, 2009:247, 257, 263), regulation of movement as state-building (Torpey, 1998:15–6), construction of traumatic memory (Simko, 2020:52, 71), the Simmelian social type of the stranger (Karakayali, 2006:315, 324), and a Bourdieuian migration paradigm (Kim, 2018:263, 275). Almost always, "refugee(s)" is mentioned once, in passing, as an illustration of a theoretically-auxiliary point. On those rare occasions when it is otherwise, they are (*i*) bundled with related "exotic" categories of migrants – defectors, spies, guerrillas, smugglers, slaves, mobile forced laborers, etc.; or (*ii*) contrasted, as salient outliers, to non-stigmatized, "normal" categories – diplomats, tourists, business travelers, study-abroad students, international athletes, urbanizing middle classes, etc. Unforced migrants, meanwhile, dominate the theoretical agenda.

[1] Bouzanis and Kemp (2019) helpfully distinguish "synectic" from "antinomic" residuals (285). Indeed, there is a general division among migration scholars between those (e.g. Piguet, 2013; Castles et al., 2014) who treat the refugee category as a synectic residual (hoping to integrate it successfully, one way or another, into conceptualizations of general migration), and those (e.g. Massey et al., 1993) who treat it as antinomic (striving to minimize, dismiss, or otherwise exclude refugees to preserve extant migration theory).

[2] It is indicative that the phrase "forced migration" has appeared only four times in *Theory and Society*, always tangentially (Autry, 2013; Sanghera et al., 2011; Joppke, 1996; Frank, 1975); and a single time in *Sociological Theory* (Campbell, 2009:153), to be excluded from genocide, the subject. Incidentally, Campbell's argument – that genocide is an exercise in social control, not deviance – bears much more directly on refugees than he allows.

Terminology

I define *forced migrants* as those displaced by selective (e.g. persecution, ethnic cleansing) or generalized (e.g. war, anarchy) violence and coercion. This includes civilian/military captives and war-trafficking victims, as well as Convention refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced persons (IDPs). For orientation: this includes all of Betts' "survival migrants" (Betts, 2013) plus IDPs; Castles' (2003) refugees minus "development-induced" migrants; Bhabha's (2018) "distress migrants" without escapees from economic insecurity alone; and all "three categories" from Zolberg et al. (1989) plus those fleeing state collapse without "societal or international violence" (30) which, nevertheless, "make normal life impossible" (33). For present purposes, *ordinary*, *voluntary* and *unforced* migration will be used synonymously and interchangeably; they are contrasted to *involuntary*, *refugee*, or *forced* migration. Those engaging in the latter are referred to as *refugees* or *forced migrants*. State recognition, self-perception, relative suffering, and entitlement are not differentiating criteria.

Sociologists who seek to expand the already-overloaded concept of "refugee" will be disappointed that I restrict myself to conflict-induced displacement at the expense of ecological, developmental, and economic refugees (Castles, 2003; Richmond, 1993:12; Fitzgerald & Arar, 2018:392). In this regard, I endorse a rather conservative – dare I say reactionary (Hirschman, 1991)? – return to more traditional classificatory schemes that gave *coercion* theoretical primacy. Specifically, Zolberg et al.'s (1989) classic conceptualizations of "violence," "life-threatening violence," and "flight-inducing violence" (31–33) remain sensible, and are tacitly accepted as our best escape from existing theoretical impasses. Others will be surprised that I include migrating war captives – such as hostages and sex slaves (Vance, 2000; Green, 2004) – in forced migration. As I suggest below [Obscuring perpetrators], the standard omission of captives is itself symptomatic of a broader failure of social theory to incorporate refugees into their proper context: that of the sociology of violence and war (Centeno & Enriquez, 2016; Malešević, 2010; Collins, 2008).

Finally, most vitally, *the force factor* is a political or military event involving violent social actors who displace significant numbers of people in a relatively-sudden interval. As such, it can be thought of as principal mezzo-level cause of contemporary refugee movements. Such events – wars, revolutions, insurgencies, repression campaigns, state collapses, etc. – are unmistakably complex: the term "factor," like in mathematics, reminds us that forces (e.g. insurgent atrocities and counterinsurgency massacres) multiply to create spirals of violence that cumulatively generate refugees. Nevertheless, despite tendencies to deny it [Overextension], such events can reasonably be identified as discrete temporal episodes – of the sort worth cataloguing for Tillyian theory-building (Tilly, 2002). The violent social actors (armed regimes, revolutionary militias, foreign air-forces, war mafias) are concrete, discernable agents who – often deliberately – enact displacement and dictate preliminary refugee dynamics. They, too, are eminently identifiable (Ball, 2000).

These definitions are unorthodox, and naturally objectionable to lawyers, policymakers and case workers. The reader is invited to accept the terminology for the restricted purpose of the present argument alone: to embrace the force factor, instead of relativizing it, as a promising conceptual locus that can reinvigorate forced migration theory. We may remain agnostic about the practical value, and skeptical

about the feasibility, of using this terminology in the real world. The prevailing critique – that such "labels" "objectify people by […] turning them into standardized cases" (Stepputat & Sørensen, 2014:89) – is irrelevant. I undermine conventional wisdoms regarding both the most common "standardization" practice (namely, the *relativization* of the force factor to make refugees approximate other migrants), as well as the kind of "cases" they are assumed to be (namely, cases of *migrants*). All the while, refugee subjectivity remains entirely intact.

Resurrecting the force factor

Against the advice of foundational refugee theorists,[3] force factors have been chronically overlooked. "In general," a review of sociology's contribution found, "research into forced migration has given more attention to those affected by it than to the processes causing the movements" (Stepputat & Sørensen, 2014:94). Classic sociological theories (Petersen, 1958; Kunz, 1973) indulged in considerable mystification and essentialization of The Refugee at the expense of what displaced her.[4] Successive conceptual work remained preoccupied with category-bounding and ideal-typifying forced migrants in relative (i.e. refugees vis-à-vis ordinary migrants) or absolute terms (i.e. refugees as social forms), ostensibly to reaffirm their agency and humanity. Worse still, research that *had* paid attention to force factors often endorsed a reductionist, technocratic and government-serving legalism known as "persecution" as the only credible desideratum. The price paid for the neglect was considerable: sociology has relinquished what is intuitively its domain to political theorists (Gibney, 2004), economists (Collier, 2013), philosophers (Agamben, 1995), and historians (Gatrell, 2013) who have done theory-building on "our" behalf. A recent study – the first ever of its kind – of U.S. foreign policy's generation of refugees since 2001 (Vine et al., 2020) reminds us of the ethical cost of this neglect.

My central contention is that discarding the force factor has done more conceptual harm than good. Before proceeding to the main, "degenerative" (Lakatos, 1976) research agenda below – namely, to resist standard relativizations – I should make transparent three pre-empirical presuppositions of my own:

(1) If forced migration is to be at-all conceptually meaningful, it must – as a bare tautological minimum – have a force factor, *somehow characterized*, generating it. Put differently, a theoretical account of refugees that denies, by omission or explicit dismissal, the existence of force factors altogether is not just ill-advised, but incoherent. This I consider equivalent to promoting a concept of "mass incarceration" (e.g. Western, 2006) while denying the existence of any kind of penal state.

[3] Zolberg (1983); Zolberg et al. (1986, 1989). Though literature reviews routinely pay courteous homage to this work, its central theoretical contribution – that *structural violence* is the ultimate explanandum of refugee waves – has steadily receded in significance. As we will demonstrate [Refugee agency conflation], this thesis has not only been ignored, but misrepresented.

[4] For instance, what Kunz (1973) called "forms" of displacement (by flight, force and absence) are in fact *causes* of displacement and non-repatriation (i.e. force factors) masquerading as social types ("Civilian evacuees," "The Banished," "Travellers" [sic], etc.) (140).

(2) What matters about refugees is not that they are migrants, but that they are forced. Accordingly, the relational reference category for forced migrants should not be other migrants, but *other constituencies enduring the force factor* causing displacement: those stationary populations bearing the brunt of war, revolution, and state-formative violence (civilian casualties, the conflict-injured, forced conscripts, warzone dwellers, "collateral damage" victims, entrapped "no man's land" residents, etc.). I assume, to wit, that there is nothing inherently valuable – and even less logically necessary – in the decision to conceptualize refugees as subsets or outliers of migrants. "Forced migrant" is certainly a relational, not categorical designation (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000:15). But its relationality has been rigidly wedded to a singular set of people (i.e. those on the move), leaving the burdensome misimpression of a categorical "essence" (i.e. the movement).

Violence sociology: Insights

In addition to these conceptual reservations, there are compelling empirical reasons for a theoretical change of course. Namely, the hegemonic neglect of the force factor has impeded natural incorporation of a lively body of empirical work into middle-range forced migration theory. Ascetically stated, this work has found that expelling civilian populations is a *normal* and *frequently-deliberate* instrument of contemporary war (Schmeidl, 1997, 2001; Jenkins & Schmeidl, 1995; Kaldor, 2013; Malešević, 2010), nationalist state-building (Mann, 2005; Zolberg, 1983; Zolberg et al., 1989; Mylonas, 2013), and revolutionary struggle (Brubaker, 1995; Goodwin, 2001; Zolberg et al., 1986; Koehn, 2019). I stress that these features of forced migration are not abstract matters of capricious taste or conjectural guessing. These are significantly-substantiated, empirical sociological breakthroughs on nationalism, revolution, ethnic conflict, violent mobilization, state coercion, and social movements that should – until they are superseded – be treated as operationally convenient for conceptualization efforts. My argument is not that these discoveries are novel, but neglected; they are not uncontroversial, but preferable to existing presuppositions and emphases. To mention only the most compelling reason: we cannot afford to dispense with the empirically-grounded distinction between refugees *as by-products* and refugees *as intended policy*. By opting for a regrettable relativization of the force factor, sociological theory not only sabotages promising conceptual cross-fertilization across related domains. It also contaminates and retards ordinary migration theory, to which refugee scholars have obsessively gravitated.

Finally, a notational apologia is in order. The proposed phrase *force factor* alludes to the much-maligned concept "push factors" from neoclassical economics and migration theory. If this label should seem to the reader somewhat anachronistic, that is not far from my intention: to return to an appreciation of just how coercive migration can be. Bluntly: refugees *are indeed* being pushed. This is not an endorsement or vindication of defective frameworks that migration scholarship has rightly forsaken (Castles et al., 2014:28–31). "Push-pull theory" has deservedly been criticized for (*i*) overly-rationalistic decision-making models (Richmond, 1988:13; Richmond, 1993:10), and (*ii*) for denying migrant agency, effectively relegating refugees to billiard balls being tugged and shoved across borders by vast, impersonal forces (Watters, 2013:100; Hein,

1993:49). There are excellent, enduring reasons to criticize the over-use of such kinetic metaphors in migration research. The backlash, however, has gone too far. In our understandable effort to curb rational choice theory, and to combat caricatures of migrants as passive "magnets" or "marionettes" jostled around by macro-structural forces, we have undertheorized fundamental causes of refugee-production.[5] Indeed, in their fervor to resurrect migrant agency, some theorists [Refugee agency conflation] have allowed the irrelevance of migration drivers to become dogma. As labeled, therefore, the force factor is a fitting conceptual *aide-mémoire*.

Relativizations

We turn to a critical examination of a dominant theoretical current that seeks to *relativize* – by diffusion, omission, substitution, narrowing, minimization, or a combination of these – the force factor behind forced migration.[6] I specify three of the most common intellectual maneuvers towards relativization, analyzing several leading variants of each. Exemplars are scrutinized from classic (Peterson 1958; Kunz, 1973) and contemporary (Fitzgerald & Arar, 2018; Castles, 2003; Hein, 1993; Richmond, 1993; Marx, 1990) sociological theorists of force migration; and other prominent treatises (Betts, 2013; Hayden, 2006).

I refer to these three *assumptions* or *conditions* of force migration conceptualization, though it is not always entirely clear what their status is in theoretical work that deploys them. Sometimes, force factor relativization is done *definitionally*: via refugee demarcation, like spousal death sufficiently defines "widow[er]s." At other times, the relativization is *axiomatized* pre-empirically: it is assumed, like natural causes of spousal death for widow(er)s. It is also treated *parametrically:* as an empirical parameter of forced migration in the real world – like the ratio of natural to premature spousal deaths among widow(er)s. On other occasions, the relativized force factor serves as a *contrasting trait*: a distinguishing empirical characteristic that excludes related migration categories – like uxoricide vis-à-vis natural spousal death among widow(er)s. Elsewhere, it serves as a *merging* trait: a not-so-unique characteristic that amalgamates forced and unforced migrants – like grief vis-à-vis widow(er)s and other bereaved people. The norm in forced migration theory, regrettably, is to combine several of these with inadequate transparency regarding the a priori/*posteriori*, postulated/empirical, and expanding/contracting scopes and statuses involved. The result, reviewed below, has been question-begging and conceptual confusion.

All three conditions are understandable exaggerations. Understandable, because they were intended as correctives to flawed and cruel tenants about refugees. But exaggerations, nevertheless, because they overcompensate with flawed oversimplifications of their own and – in some cases – offer remedies worse than the disease. Furthermore, these relativizations have been routinely interwoven and conflated even though they are in principle independent of each other. Disentangling them and (more importantly) their

[5] In the context of post-Cold War U.S. foreign policy in particular, systematically recognizing such causes has only recently been attempted (Vine et al., 2020).

[6] I immediately hasten to say that relativization is *not* the same as denial: none of the excellent forced migration theorists examined below do anything approaching the latter.

limitations and flaws, is a step not just towards relaxing all the assumptions, but on protecting each from the others. Finally, to stress the obvious: these three conditions are not exhaustive of extant work in the field; there is nothing logically or causally necessary about them; many refugee scholars do not embrace the assumptions criticized below; and many (indeed, infinite) alternative conditions could be concocted to theorize forced migration. These are merely three of the most recurrent and – I endeavor to show – wasteful assumptions.

The scholars and thinkers under scrutiny below are, to be clear, intellectual giants in the field. Without their pioneering contributions, forced migration would not exist as a field of theoretical inquiry. Their political and ethical engagements, furthermore, are the finest exemplars of applied sociological work, in my judgement. My critical tone is therefore not to be confused in any way with a lack of admiration and gratitude for their outstanding, enduring contributions.

Unwitting severity

This assumption has two components. The first, more obvious, holds that the force factor is peculiarly severe either in absolute terms or relative to familiar, presumed "push factors" for ordinary migrants. At most, existential, life-and-death stakes are imputed over-and-above risks to livelihood and non-lethal distress. Refugees are assumed to be fleeing specially discriminating, dangerous, violent, deadly, acute, persistent, or otherwise unforgiving circumstances. At least, what refugees are escaping is thought to be somehow extraordinary in rarity, magnitude, cruelty, or sheer oddity. Contrasted to labor migration, "the major risks to be managed [by refugees] are to life and limb rather than the maximization of a household economic portfolio" (Fitzgerald & Arar, 2018:395). In asylum politics, government designations of "safe" (e.g. Iraq) and "unsafe" (e.g. Syria) countries serve as proxies for differentiating economic migrants from refugees.[7] Such demarcations are often plagued by propaganda and exploitation of refugee suffering (Stedman & Tanner, 2004; Fassin & d'Halluin, 2007). But the severity conjecture remains indispensable.

The second component – tacit and insidious – is that this force factor is *unwitting*: that the sources of severity are highly diffuse, non-agentic, and/or unintended (e.g. ["Syria war is such a mess."] → ["Heaven knows who dispelled all those people."]). This partially echoes the folk-sociology of policymakers: interventionist, persecutory, and failing states have strong interests to make refugee-production appear accidental and unanticipated (Tempo, 2008; Zolberg et al., 1989). Just as social theory adopted many government-serving tenets regarding other aspects of refugee life (Skran & Daughtry, 2007), it has often succumbed to the seductive view that force factor severity

[7] In scholarship, severity is often operationalized as volume of displacement: the bigger the refugee wave, surely, the greater the force factor (e.g. [Syrian refugees > Iraqi refugees] → [Syrian civil war severity > Iraqi war severity]). Ethnic proportions of visible refugee movements and the inconspicuousness of IDPs are another basis for comparative severity (e.g. [salience of Kurds fleeing Syria > salience of Alawites inside Syria] → [anti-Kurdish force factor is more severe]). But severity is also controversially inferred from relative "shock value" and "issue-fatigue" surrounding protracted conflicts, with selection bias towards "fresh" force factors in early stages (e.g. Syrian war in 2015) at the expense of "monotonous" later stages that objectively expel far more people (e.g. Syrian war in 2020). All the while, the fact that displacement (e.g. 2010, 2017 Iraqi refugee waves) peaks years after force factor onset (e.g. 2003 Iraq invasion; 2014 ISIS ascendency) is readily mistaken for a rise in severity.

emerges in a sort of socio-political "vacuum"; a bewildering "fog of war" that overwhelms the theorist with its density; or a "perfect storm" of converging pressures that, if they had been separate and distinguishable may have been manageable, are too overwhelming to disaggregate. Refugee flight becomes, in this way, an "overdetermined atrocity" (Stewart, 2012) – like a firing squad in which no single shooter was causally responsible for the execution because, alas, it would have happened anyway.

Macrotheorizing

The most common maneuver assuming unwitting severity is to disseminate the causality across a variety of structural/systemic domains and levels of abstraction. This comes with an emphasis on macro- (indeed, *macro*-macro-) sociological causes across temporal and spatial ranges that vastly distance us from concrete refugee constituencies and – more importantly – what precisely they are fleeing on the ground. By analogy: it is true that a firing squad could not kill a prisoner without an entire socio-political cosmos around them. Study of the latter is proper and necessary. But if one insists on analyzing the execution strictly as part of the industrial revolution that enabled their equipment or air friction ratios that facilitate the bullets' flight, the macro-analytic arc begins to appear unreasonable.

From Peterson's (1958) foundational statement to contemporary grand-theoretical approaches (O'Reilly, 2012:39–66), refugees have been imagined – somewhat oddly[8] – as fundamentally global. "The distinguishing factor of the sociology of forced migration," Stepputat & Sørensen (2014) note, "is that it has developed in tandem with studies of voluntary/economic migration and focused attention on the social dynamics of the migratory process and processes of global social transformation in both areas of origin and destination" (94). We return to the bias regarding "of the migratory process" shortly [Processual dilution]. But the fact that "processes of global social transformation" have dominated refugee theorizing has three unfortunate implications: (*i*) as the "in both areas" clause indicates, causes and consequences of refugeedom are allocated equal emphasis – both are swept up in the fateful, all-encompassing wave of societal change; (*ii*) attention is diverted away from concrete micro- and mezzo-level actors such as warlords and armies (for whom refugee-production may be a *modus operandi*) to often-nebulous macro-agents such as neoliberal elites and global decisionmakers (whose contribution to "global social transformation" is indirect and analytically-elusive); (*iii*) given that these "processes of global social transformation" are so comprehensive and international, mass displacement tends to be conceptualized as an unintended consequence or systemic by-product rather than as normal, intended instrument of nationalist violence.

As reinforcement, a triumphalist "transnationalism" school of thought (Caglar, 2015; Van Hear, 2014; Castles, 2003:20–21) over-stated its case on refugees. It is one thing – quite proper – to reject the "container model" and "methodological nationalism" as diagnosed by Wimmer and Schiller (2002).[9] It is quite another,

[8] *Prima face*, it is not-at-all obvious why: the overwhelming majority of displaced are IDPs in a handful of countries, while ten states in only two-to-three regions have accounted for over two-thirds of all refugees for decades (UNHCR, 2018). It is striking that refugee-production – one of the *least* globalized and *most* spatially-segregated migration branches – has been allowed to serve as symbol of global macro-phenomena.

[9] It is forgotten that Wimmer and Schiller (2002) conclude by equadistancing themselves from "methodological fluidism" – a "Schilla," they call it (600) – and from "methodological nationalism." Transnationalism approaches to refugees have certainly overindulged in the former.

however, to subsume theories of forced migration into a hazier "global sociology" of "global connections and processes" (Castles, 2003:24–5), of a "transnational exile complex" (Betts, 2014:71), of "transnational communities" and "diaspora theories" (Castles et al., 2014:41–43), of "transnational social spaces" (Faist, 2000), and of "transnational migrations" (Binder & Tošić, 2005). Indeed, "attention to multi-locality" has been singled out as a "distinguishing methodological aspect" of sociology's contribution to forced migration research (Stepputat and Sørensen (2014:94), inspiring calls to subsume "refugee theory" into transnationalism *tout courte* (Black, 2001:66).

At this level, middle-range theorizing of forced migration is subdued by the injunction to concentrate on vast realms of fluidity, hybridity, and complexity far above the refugees' heads. The "sociology of forced migration" is said to be "part of a much broader project" (Castles, 2003:21), with constant allusions "to broader theoretical explanations of the structural causes of forced migration" (p. 27) and "macro-theoretical frameworks [for] broader contexts and systems" (Triandafyllidou, 2015:28) at the expense of concrete force factors. The coercive role of states – if not the nation-state altogether – is thought to be weakening or dissolving as transnational ideologies, identity-formations, capital flows, and social capital empower refugee communities. Ironically, Koser (2007) found that refugee transnationalism, if anything, empowered restrictionist states, not forced migrants – an indication that a great deal of wishful thinking about border-transcendence characterized this subfield. What remains, nonetheless, is a knee-jerk suspicion of nationally-bounded explanations and a reluctance to dwell on tangible force factors in localities (e.g. blood feuds, localized gangs, village militias) whose operation cannot fetchingly be prefixed with a "trans-". Meanwhile, the sociology of violence has shown that localized, micro-level interactions are what truly matters (Collins, 2008).

Obscuring perpetrators

A second, related approach is to neglect or omit entirely the particular state and non-state actors – especially foreign (Zolberg et al., 1986) – that engage in battles, massacres, expulsions, bombings and the like. Much ink has been expended on the supposedly-intractable problem of refugee agency.[10] Less attention has concurrently been paid to the equally-urgent and theoretically-intriguing question of the agency of those *causing* refugees to agentically escape to begin with. Sometimes, the concreteness of specific governments, military coalitions, social movements, organized criminals, etc. is buried in overdetermination theses. At other times, the agency of violent social actors is analytically castrated to include only trivial, reactive, or tangential non-violent activities. In these ways, perpetrators of refugee displacement become passive, impotent or vague categories. One sees this even in stylistic conventions, as theorists prefer the passive voice to describe displacement: forced migration "happens," "occurs," or "transpires" (but is rarely "made," "done," or "planned"). More often than not, refugees "migrate," "flee," or "escape" (but are less frequently "expelled," "hunted" or "chased"). When migrants do appear as direct grammatical objects, they are

[10] See, inter alia, Richmond (1993); Bakewell (2010); Agamben (1995).

"persecuted," "oppressed" or "hounded" *sans* any indication of who exactly is behind the persecution, oppression, or hounding.

Castles' (2003) handling of forced migrant "policymakers" is representative. The central puzzle is said to be that governments "fail to meet their objective" or "achieve the opposite" of their intentions: "Why do policymakers fail (or refuse) to see what is happening around them?" (25) is the stated enigma of refugee theory. Illustrations of this mystery, without exception, are of oversights and counterproductive restrictionist measures (not, say, of military invasions, diplomatic recognitions, or arms sales). Various explanations are then auctioned off – bureaucratic parochialism, Mertonian unintended consequences, neglect of sociologists and expertise, etc. – to encourage more assertive "theory" that would give the hapless "politicians and bureaucrats" some perspective (25–26). The basic presupposition remains: it is only the *symptoms* of forced migration that elites, in their blundering ignorance and naivete, can influence. These "policymakers" (not, say, army commanders, bellicose foreign ministries, or air forces) are not conceptualized as creators of refugee-production. Quite the contrary: they are passive recipients of refugee dynamics and consequences outside their control. Indeed, Castles' ridicules the very notion that "policymakers" meaningfully effect migration. The pompous presupposition of "Ministers and bureaucrats" that migrants are "something that can be turned on and off like a tap through laws and polices" (26) is all-too-easy to caricature. But it begs the question: in Saudi Arabia's campaign in Yemen or Russia's operations in East Ukraine, "policymakers" *did indeed* have the power to increase Houthi and Donbass refugee flows "like a tap."

Diminishing intentionality

The third version holds that, whether or not the force factor is diffuse and agentic, its severity is nevertheless inadvertent – a kind of sociological *force majeure*. This has special resonance for those interested in absorbing refugees into victims of natural or economic disasters (Bates, 2002; Richmond, 1993). Misfortune and contingency thus receive greater weight than they deserve. Various "indices," "continua," "spectra," or "paradigms" of force factors (e.g. Chatty, 2010:18; Mason, 2000:241) uncritically place evidently-deliberate, manmade violence alongside non-agentic, accidental disasters with no acknowledgment of the theoretical significance of intention. In a conceptual framework of death, by analogy, it is not obvious that the phenomenon of firing squads is akin to roadkill and heart disease.

In their excellent synthesis of refugee sociology, Fitzgerald and Arar (2018) capture the prevailing view on unwitting severity:

> Movement takes place on a continuum of compulsion. At one pole, options are limited, all choices are bad, and the difference between leaving and staying is death, be it at the hands of a death squad or starvation in an infertile land. At the other extreme, people who hold passports that allow them to bypass visa restrictions in the Global North and who have high levels of financial, human, and social capital face no great penalty if they stay home and can choose among a menu of destinations. Between these extremes are people who must leave to achieve their expectations of a dignified life. A challenge for refugee status determination is that whereas the extent to which migration is compelled by

> violence lies on a continuum, individual cases must be shoehorned into categorical definitions (393).

To appreciate the subtle suppression of agentic intentionality as backbone of force factors, this mapping of the forced migration terrain is worth analyzing in depth. First, note the familiar severity condition discussed earlier: "the difference between leaving and staying is death." On the one hand, the "death" risk is allowed to be man-made or not: while the "death squads'" "hands" are eminently agentic, the "infertile land" is not necessarily anthropogenic (and even if it is, it is a tenuous and indirect human agency). On the other hand, the "leaving and staying" is *presumed* to be agentic on the part of the migrant (one of the "bad choices," but a "limited option" nevertheless). This seemingly-natural step in fact elbows us towards unintentionality of force factors. Namely, a classic ambiguity in such over-cited examples arises: is the life-or-death movement that of a passive migrant *in captivity* being transported into near-certain death (Petersen's, 1958 choiceless "forced migrant"), or of an agentic decision-maker fleeing a deadly threat (Peterson's "impelled migrant")? Fitzgerald and Arar (2018) exclude the former (those for whom: [attempting staying = death] *and* [leaving = death]) in favor of the latter (those for whom: [attempting staying = death] *but* [leaving = life]).

This is by-no-means the authors' failure. On the contrary, it is an apt depiction of the conventional wisdom: "Almost all migration involves some kind of compulsion" (Mason, 2000:241), but fully-compulsory cases somehow disqualify themselves with their extremity. The net effect is that many shades of forced migration are simply banished from theory: hostages, forced recruits, coerced smugglers, administrative detainees, military "sex slaves," prisoners of war, and captives escorted into death. One could imagine, for example, an alternative "compulsion continuum" with greater theoretical care of these cases (which, incidentally, are bedrocks of ethnic cleansing [Shaw, 2015; Petrović, 2019]). Such a hypothetical continuum would, inter alia, make the intentionality of the perpetrators very conspicuous indeed. It is easy to ignore those who are threatening lethal force if its recipients are excluded altogether. The "death" risk thus becomes a "choice" – and the agents who purposefully create it vanish.

Second, it is indicative that the two "poles" on the "continuum of compulsion" are life-and-death survival migrants on the one hand, but *tourists* on the other. But why should the "greatness" of the tourists' "penalty" or lack thereof for "staying home" be the relevant variable on this continuum? What exactly are tourists "compelled" by? A travel agency's marketing? Peer pressure? Wanderlust? Boredom? Surely something is awkward in even entertaining this "compulsion" as being on a range alongside cluster bombs, artillery shelling, burning villages, or the cited "death squad." Insofar as severity is applicable to the tourists' force factor *at all*, it is strikingly devoid of a willing, active perpetrator who is forcing the tourist. Either "compulsion" is being hyper-deflated beyond any normal usage, or – perhaps – this tourist belongs on a separate continuum of *non*-compulsion altogether. Meanwhile, the effect of such scope-bounding is to inject the vague impression that no-one is wittingly enacting compulsion. Thus, while the most severe category of migration-under-compulsion (i.e. captives) are severed off the continuum, a not-so-obvious category of migration-*without*-compulsion (i.e. tourists) are affixed.

Third, note how the quote's conclusion delivers a skeptical distancing away from violence as a central (let alone necessary) aspect of the force factor. "[T]he extent to which migration is compelled by violence" is singled out as so relative as to pose a "challenge" requiring unpleasant "shoehorning." This is a curious proviso to offer. It implies (*i*) that *violence* – not urbanization, poverty, or natural disaster – deserves singling-out as an obfuscating, unreliable criterion; and (*ii*) that the "challenge" of "shoehorning" is somehow made worse, not better, by the range of ways that violence can "compel" migration. Both of these are objectionable to sociologists of violence (Ball, 2000; Collins, 2008; Malešević, 2010). Regardless, purposeful "compulsion" is again made theoretically tangential. Since violence requires perpetrators, and since collective violence of the sort that creates refugees often does so deliberately, this concluding relativization effectively discourages theorists from pursuing a well-established social scientific avenue: refugee-production as a bedrock of nation-state formation. By problematizing and marginalizing violence, such conceptualizations of the force factor clear the way for the misleading impression that haphazard contingencies, accidents and missteps are what produces refugees.

In sum, notwithstanding the authors' cogent article, this purported "continuum of compulsion" is distorting. It is, more accurately, a continuum of primarily *non*-compulsive migration that obscures common and obvious agents behind compulsion. To give an analogy from a likewise-sensitive realm: it is akin to a continuum of sexual assault that (a) excludes rape entirely; (b) includes innocent dating on one of its poles; and (c) cautions theorists that, since the extent to which sexual predation results from physical pressure is on a relative continuum, survivors may have to be "shoehorned into categorical definitions." Such is the peril of the unwitting severity assumption.

Beyond the innocence complex As the adage misattributed[11] to John Kennedy has it, defeat is an orphan. In our context, the force factor behind forced migration – understood by consensus to be tragic and malicious – has been causally "orphaned" in theory, and thus in analysis. In fact, it has many "parents" (state and non-state alike) too shy to admit their involvement. Among them are not just persecutory failing states of the underdeveloped world, but militaries of global and regional powers who ubiquitously generate refugees when it suits their geopolitical purposes (Skran & Daughtry, 2007:19). To be sure: the unwitting severity condition did a tremendous service by drawing our attention to neglected macro-structural and contextual forces; by de-individualizing the persecutor paradigm inherited from the 1951 Convention; and by divorcing political questions of blame and culpability from empirical questions of cause and consequence. But it has proven exceedingly restrictive. It diverts attention from a fundamental refugee reality: forced migration – no accident – is done by design (Mann, 2005) and by identifiable agents (Ball, 2000).

Processual dilution

This assumption holds that the force factor is in fact multiple succeeding factor*s* over a continuous period – a *process*, not a discrete event or two – that tend, on the whole, to

[11] Mussolini's foreign minister published the proverb in his diary in 1942 (Keyes, 2007:234).

make the original occasion for displacement seem unremarkable. This approach pivots, in other words, the theorizing of forced migration to the migratory journey itself (away from analysis of the source society towards bridge societies *en route*) and to post-migratory outcomes (notably, integration and its discontents) in destination societies. Pre-migratory turmoil becomes mere prelude. The result is excessive theoretical "thinning" of original force factors with a hopelessly-comprehensive temporal scope.

Overextension

The most forceful statement of this condition simply (over)applies a staple intuition of sociological theory: that even the most seemingly-discrete event (e.g. a migration) is better understood as process. From figurational (Baur & Ernst, 2011) to processual sociology (Abbott, 2016), this is a cherished insight in leading treatments of narrative (Griffin, 1993), path dependence (Mahoney, 2000), social mechanism (Demetriou, 2012), and temporality broadly (Abbott, 2001). Regarding forced migration, Kunz (1973) was apparently the first to object to the treatment of refugee "migratory actions as single-vector movements," although he only went a solitary step further: "although single-step refugee moves do exist, there are others which can be more validly conceptualised as two-vector moves with separate forces activating each step" (126). The discovery of "secondary migration" after initial settlement and "internal migration" endogenous to the source country (Hein, 1993:49) made original displacement appear dated. Moreover, refugees' "goals and opportunities to achieve them change over the course of time and multiphase movements" (Fitzgerald & Arar, 2018:393), further encouraging a multiplicity of "forces" for different "phases"/"vectors." The opaque concept "transit migration" (Düvell, 2012; Collyer et al., 2012) did little to inhibit the endless parsing.

The ad infinitum jeopardy is obvious: three-vectors, four-vectors, *n*-vectors easily follow. One need only consider Kunz's case of Jewish refugees fleeing into one territory ("anticipatory" forced migration), only to find it occupied in turn ("acute" forced migration) (135). Upon reflection, this "two-vector" movement Kunz theorizes is readily expandable to *n*-vectors with tremendous qualitative differences in force factor across vectors. To begin with, why select movement from one territory into another, when Jewish escapees from the Warsaw Ghetto, who moved a hundred meters outside it, were engaged in the most "acute" movement of all?[12] Distance, it turns out, is a poor criterion indeed. What about the relative severity of the force factor at various times of the migration, then? (Though he obscures it, *that* is in fact Kunz's own yardstick: a "vector" is a leg of the journey that has a significantly-different severity level in his "push-pressure" kinetic model [1973:134]). Sadly, this returns us to hopeless regression. Jewish refugees with >1 "vectors" faced greater exposure to ultimate deportation into death camps than non-refugees in second-"vector" bridge societies. Of 75,000 Jews deported from France in 1941, for example, two-thirds were

[12] Among those, very few found sanctuary in Christian Warsaw until liberation ("single-vector"); but most fled onwards to rural Poland ("two-vector"?), a neighboring country ("three-vector"?), or multiple subsequent international sites (who's counting?) such as Switzerland, Palestine and Shanghai. Once again, captive forced migrants are omitted: the most unspeakable "one-vector" move was, of course, of Warsaw Ghetto residents transported by rail into the death camps. The reasons to exclude these movements from the migratory process are as weak as the reasons to include movements from outside Poland onward.

refugees from other occupied countries because they "were easier to identify and more likely to be denounced" (Bade, 2008:212). Not only does the "acute"/"anticipatory" distinction fail us here; but we now have a reason to treat every subsequent movement as cumulatively riskier than the preceding one.[13]

Furthermore, a variety of critical junctures along the way complicate where one leg of the journey begins and another ends – including non-Nazi actors' behaviors as critical interactive variables. Consider the fate of 937 Jewish refugees interdicted at Ft. Lauderdale in 1939. Unceremoniously turned back to Europe, many of them went to France and Holland. Within a year, Nazi invasion reached them, forcing many into further flight and death camps (Ogilvie & Miller, 2010). These *n*-vector migratory trajectories are manifestly more processual than the simple two-step that Kunz was fetched by. But is it meaningful to treat this as a single continuous process, given the circularity? Doesn't the interactive nature ([U.S. interdiction] x [Nazi persecution]) of the force factor recommend designation of multiple discrete events? Adding salt to the wound, many "vectors" have equal severity (e.g. successive displacements in 1939 and 1944) but are caused by opposing parties (e.g. the *Wehrmacht* and Red Army, respectively). The biography of renowned sociological theorist Zygmunt Bauman (whose wife was a Warsaw Ghetto escapee) is an illustration: first exiled from Nazi-occupied Poland to the USSR, then again from communist Poland to Israel two decades later, his refugee trajectory could easily be elongated to an entire lifetime. These and other temporal dilemmas illustrate that it is not-at -all-obvious why a discrete "vector" should not simply be bounded with a *relatively* clear beginning and end – with, as a logical consequence, a clear force factor. Instead, the standard practice is to analytically-expand the migratory process as widely as possible, up-to-and-including disregard of what drove the vicious cycle (e.g. the Nazi war machine) to begin with.

In extreme form, the hyper-processualization condition makes the migration long enough to transcend even the refugees' lifecycles. The force factor is imagined as some sort of trans-generational, perhaps centuries-long course. Marx (1990) urges sociologists to embed forced migration into a breathtaking processual journey well-beyond the life-span because "people may have become refugees […] in a distant past, perhaps by inheriting the status from their forebears" (190). Surely madness this way lies. Whatever else "becoming a refugee" is postulated to mean, it must entail some reasonably-finite period of transformation from non-refugeedom to refugeedom. Otherwise, an *ad absurdum* could explain contemporary South African refugee dynamics by tracing Afrikaners to the force factor of the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 and the Huguenots who, Haddad (2008) reminds us, were history's first refugee wave. In weaker form, theorists of Palestinian displacement often pay greater attention to the "politics of memory" around the 1948 *Nakhba* (e.g. Sa'di & Abu-Lughod, 2007) than to contemporary force factors (i.e. Israeli occupation, incursions into Gaza, de-development policies [Roy, 1999; Finkelstein, 2018]) that displace the vast majority of *living* Palestinians.

None of the above is to deny long-term outcomes, nor to inhibit macro-historical sociological analysis. Force factors do indeed "linger" in intriguing and pernicious

[13] Insofar as the Nazis' industrialized mass murder is what determined "acuteness" and was being "anticipated," force factor severity escalated: Germany transitioned from a *two*-step ghettoization/internment policy followed by transportation to death camps, to a *one*-step directly-to-camps policy (Bade, 2008:212).

causal ways. Inter-generational transmission of trauma in refugee families, for example, is a well-documented fact and an urgent humanitarian calamity (Nawyn, 2013:113; Sack et al., 1995). But it does not mandate theorists to analytically-dilute the original traumatic event in the manner of second- or third-generation refugees' oral traditions, ideological regurgitations, and various nationalist imaginations (on the latter, see Sen, 2014; Hobsbawm & Ranger, 2012; Hein, 1993:51). Refugees themselves commonly harbor "exile ideologies" (Castro, 1997) that demonize the force factor by artificially prolonging its life – like a seemingly never-ending "original sin" of the hated persecutor-regime. However sympathetic we may be to such an outlook, it is theoretically barren.

Cumulative causation

Second, processual dilution is done through affirmation of "cumulative causation," a bedrock of migration theory, to refugee phenomena (for review, see Hugo et al., 2018:10). The cultural and economic feedback mechanisms by which migration makes further migration less risky, less costly, and more realizable for greater segments of the migrant population have been widely studied for ordinary, unforced migrants. Force migration sociologists then leapt to discover similarities and differences (Cheung & Phillimore, 2014; Fozdar, 2012; Lamba, 2003), leaving force factors woefully behind. Among outcome variables, divergences between refugee waves' destinations, integration levels, and timings of arrival, predominate. Among explanatory variables, causes preceding or unrelated to force factors – especially networks and social capital – predominate (Castles et al., 2014:44–45). In what commonly ends up being the *long durée*, refugee destinies are theorized to begin with societal inequalities preceding displacement, and to end with integration divergences. In the middle, the mishaps that inspired movement fade away. Even ostensible critiques of social capital explanations – such as Chatterji's (2013) Bourdieuian conceptualization of refugee "mobility capital" – rely tremendously on cumulative causation.[14]

It is obvious why such insights resonate with students of refugee waves: the forces at play in causing displacement (e.g. Boko Haram or al Qaeda) are not necessarily the same ones sustaining it (e.g. migrant smuggling networks through Agadez) or blocking it (e.g. West African asylum regimes). Not only are migrant waves self-reinforcing (Massey et al., 1993:449–454) but, as de Haas (2010) points out in a neglected insight, both migration-facilitating *and* migration-undermining feedback mechanisms operate. The import of these ideas is undeniable, but the consequence has been the gratuitous erosion of attention to force factors. The fact that Boko Haram and al Qaeda directly generate massive refugee waves does not subtract from the theoretical "bite" of cumulative causation (namely, its self-perpetuating mechanisms). On the contrary: an entire realm of cumulative refugee-generating dynamics specific to the force factor have been ignored by sociological theory: the self-fulfilling prophesies and self-propagating violence of civil war (e.g. the familiar spiral of violence between Nigeria's

[14] Employed to explain internal-displacement vis-à-vis long-distance forced migration, Chatterji's (2013) "mobility capital" ultimately collapses back into "networks, cash, know-how, and skills" (296) – social and human capital. The causal weight of violence from India's partition, meanwhile, is downgraded.

counterinsurgency campaign and Boko Haram). These, however, are force factor-specific (Kalyvas, 2006).

In sum, the customary processual dilution by cumulative causation constrains us by focusing on *post facto* forced migration but excluding the cumulative effects of refugee-creation processes. If the sound of a firing line shot causes hundreds of prisoners to panic, leading to a deadly prison riot followed by urban unrest and lethal mayhem across multiple cities, the original execution remains theoretically significant. The fact of the self-reinforcing mechanism does *not* obviate the need to explain firing squads.

Dissociation

Finally, processual dilution takes the form of over-broadening the disruption or suffering of the refugee to *such* an extent that one dissociates from the historical moment during which the displacement occurred. Migration systems theory, for one, nurtured a fascination with bi-directional and reciprocal exchange of people alongside ideas and capital over significant time spans (Castles et al., 2014:43–44; Chatty, 2010:12–14). This encouraged us to (*i*) extend study of refugee trajectories to include reciprocal effects such as colonial precedents or post-war repatriations, even if it takes decades of processual "stretching" and submersion of national cases into regional and continental dynamics; and (*ii*) incorporate forced migrants into *other* movements (including non-human) that clearly preceded and are unaffected by "temporary" disruptions such as wars, revolutions, and state-formations. Marxian theorists and global political economists – for whom "the 'refugee' is an indicator of world systems dynamics" (Hein, 1993:45) – likewise immersed us so deeply into global capitalism that we lost interest in concrete episodes of displacement in periphery and semi-periphery societies (O'Reilly, 2012:28).

Marx (1990) pursues this instinct to its logical conclusion. The refugee is defined "as a person whose social world has been disturbed" (190). In turn, the "social world" – an audaciously thick concept – "is not confined to a particular place or limited by territorial boundaries" (Marx, 1990:195). It is even less bounded temporally: "*all* the person's movements and *all* the changes in his or her condition can be attended to" before and after displacement (197; emphasis added). The social world appears to include all rituals, rites-of-passage, ceremonies, labor practices, social networks, "simplex" and "multiplex" relationships, and more (196). Stationary Zulus, the nomadic Masai, Polish labor migrants, mental asylum patients, prison inmates, and Afghan refugees, are likened and evoked with equal ease, because what brings them together is an amorphous, ever-flowing series of displacements and betrayals.

By sheer erosion, the force factor is lost. Forced migration becomes entrenched in a "social world" with mysterious properties, including being temporally fixed enough to suffer "total destruction of the refugee's social world," but also unbounded enough to have "persistence even as he or she moves" (196). It is so broadly processual that it includes "various stages of the person's career" and refugee "camp life," but might also be "destroyed" or "almost collapsed in flight" (197) at a singular point in time. The reader is compelled to conclude either (*i*) that *multiple*, discrete social world*s* succeed each other and that, even though only one was truly disrupted, sociologists must conceptually integrate them all as part of the refugee's travail; or (*ii*) that a single,

continuous social world metamorphoses in such elaborate and complex ways that distinguishing any initial force factor causing "disturbance" is in poor analytic taste.

Let us leave aside the non-trivial definitional question of how we could know when exactly a "social world has been disturbed."[15] The deeper problem – symptomatic of the processual dilution assumption – is that the initial displacement is subtly given equal or less theoretical significance than a welter of obviously less-salient events. Marx clusters so-called "preceding" events (i.e. the causes of displacement) with *en route* and post-migratory events, consigning the entire bunch "firmly in the well-established field of [unforced] migration studies" (190–191). As a higher purpose, meanwhile, in "order to make better sociological sense," we must "devise methodologies that will allow us to unravel the complex process of migration" (191) by comparing pre- and post-migratory social networks. Hence at one pole is the Holocaust survivor ("no one left in the world"), in the middle are Afghan and Ethiopian refugees ("able to maintain some links and establish new ones"), and at the other end East German refugees ("maintained or quickly established full-fledged networks") (197). In this way, the causes of displacement (the Holocaust or East German totalitarianism) are effectively declared insignificant: they are assumed to be adequately-explained by ordinary migration theory, to which such matters are relegated. Post-migratory processes, in contrast, are elevated in significance as a kind of ghostly afterglow of the original expulsion. Hence the degree to which the refugee's family has been exterminated (*directly* determined by the nature of the force factor) becomes comparable to the degree of accumulated social capital in the destination society (*un*related to the force factor).

Retaining pivotal events To its credit, the processual dilution condition raised probing theoretical questions of temporality, including: when exactly the force forcing migration happens; how prolonged the original force for displacement is; when forced migration transitions into unforced; what integration into receiving societies signals about refugeedom; and which continuities from pre- to post-migratory phases matter.[16] By demonstrating how difficult the temporal bounding of the force factor as a singular event is, the processual dilution assumption fruitfully opened the gates to important empirical contributions.

A remark on the underlying causal issue that inspired this condition is also in order. The insistence on processuality aims at rectifying a suspected over-emphasis on a single or few discrete traumatic incidents that supposedly "essentialize" the forced migrant – like a disease its patient, or a rape its survivor – as victim for life. This kind of stigmatization is morally and politically disgraceful, not to mention that it feeds a pernicious "humanitarian repression" paradigm well-diagnosed by Fassin (2005) and others (Rajaram, 2002; Augoustinos et al., 2015). Processual dilution has likewise been

[15] Marx (1990) muddies the water further when he evokes an even vaguer "boundless social universe, too large and complex to be comprehended, but which affects all we think and do" (193), of which the refugee's pivotal "social world" is only a part. The "extent to which personal social worlds are disturbed and transformed" appears to be equated simply with the *constancy* of social networks (191). But the eagerness to integrate social anthropological approaches to "the social world" unfortunately collided with pragmatic, mezzo- and micro-level "social network" theory.

[16] Innovative alternatives to processual dilution, which do not sacrifice the discreteness of force factors but nevertheless address these questions, include Bohra-Mishra and Massey (2011); Gibney (2015:458–9).

a precious corrective to simple-minded fixations with proximate causes, or *triggers*, at the expense of contextual causes, or *catalysts,* of forced migration. The former are short-term, fleeting, and rare events. The latter are long-term, systemic and chronic reasons inducing flight. With elongated processes as our units of analysis, we circumvent a superficial "trigger reductionism" that fails to contextualize the "last drop in the bucket" or the "match that lights the fire." In these respects, one can understand the reluctance to part with processual dilution, no matter how extreme.

Notwithstanding, there *is* such a thing as *too much* of a good thing. Proximate causes matter. So long as we do not overindulge by ignoring contextual causality, there is no shame in examining and conceptualizing them.[17] Excessive stigmatization of any attempt to treat "triggering" events as discrete temporal entities is too onerous. Indeed, extant theorists who attempt to camouflage pivotal events as "mere triggers" end up – in actuality – reaffirming the very force factors they hope to assume away. Thus Richmond (1993) identifies "precipitating events" as "[s]udden changes in the economic, political, social or environmental situation" such as "the outbreak of war, internal revolution or the institution of racist or religious programmes and genocidal policies" (16). As it happens, this is a fairly-comprehensive list of principal drivers of refugee-generation over the past century (Zolberg et al., 1989). If these are relegated to mere "precipitations" of grander processes, so be it. But by discounting the centrality of coercion, we surrender our theory's capacity to understand, anticipate, and – on a Quixotic note – *prevent* refugee-creation.

Political-economic indeterminacy

This condition treats the force factor as, for all intents and purposes, evenly economic and political. Whether on ethical, conceptual, or methodological grounds, the endeavor to identify primarily political causes of displacement is held to be exclusionary, simplistic, or impossible. In large measure, this is an (over)reaction to traditional attempts to differentiate refugees from migrants that have – with varying sophistication – persistently relied on the distinction between political and economic force factors causing movement (Skran & Daughtry, 2007:20–1). Ordinary/voluntary *economic* migrants escaping poverty and unemployment, the intuition goes, are qualitatively different from refugees escaping persecution, carnage and other *political* forces. In reasonable, moderate form, these two are postulated to be on a continuum, and the boundaries between them are explicitly specified to be at least context-dependent (Hein, 1993:44; Zolberg et al., 1989:270–271), at most blurred (Foster, 2007:14). But critics have taken the liberty to ascribe a sillier, strong-form version by which political and economic forces are "treated as separate and mutually exclusive categories" (Schuster, 2015:297). Escape from the alleged absurdity is then sought in

[17] Theoretically, eminent refugee scholars who conceptualized force factors have also offered the most effective scrutiny of trigger reductionism by postulating (*i*) revolutions and (*ii*) polity reconfigurations as contextual causes (Zolberg et al., 1986). Empirically, researchers routinely differentiate catalysts from causes: Bohra-Mishra & Massey (2011), notably, operationalized "root causes" (e.g. poverty) and "proximate causes" (e.g. violence escalation) in such a way as to distinguish them from "intervening variables" (e.g. social capital) which – in their view – do not even deserve to be called causal (7–9).

"mixed," "modern," "irregular," "temporary," "transit," "survival," or "distress" migration categories that reunite the two migrant subsets under one happy roof.[18]

Bemoaning "the problematic distinction between economic and political migrants" (Hein, 1993:47) has become a cliché – an initiatory rite for theoretical musing on refugees. Countless reminders stress the "practical impossibility of distinguishing 'political' from 'economic' refugees" (Wellmeier, 1998:196); that "it is extremely hard to distinguish between […] economic and political factors" (Castles, 2003:15); that it "is impossible to completely separate economic and human rights [i.e. political] motivations" (17); and that "many migrants feel compelled to move for a combination of reasons that include political, environment and/or economic incentives" (Watters, 2013:97). Some apparently consider this a pre-empirical axiom (Hayden, 2006); others, an empirical conclusion (Chatty, 2010:17).[19] By analogy: a concerted effort has been made to equalize birds' seasonal migration due to temperature changes with birds' escape migration from predatory invasions.

Honorary economic migrants

The assumption is primarily affirmed by importing economic determinism from ordinary migration theory – especially its World Systems and globalization-as-neocolonialism strands – to "counterbalance" politics. Since unforced migration scholarship is preoccupied with wages, labor opportunities, credit markets, and other economic "push factors," the role of military and diplomatic interventionism is hardly

[18] The conceptual shift to "mixed migration" (van Hear et al., 2009; Schuster, 2015) has arguably been crudest in upholding the indeterminacy. The claim is not merely that "asylum seekers have multiple reasons for mobility" besides asylum (Castles, 2003:17) – a truism no-one disputes. Rather, it is the peculiar notion that, since refugees are accompanied by non-refugees and endure non-political horrors (especially in camps), their original displacement can be conceptually merged with that of ordinary migrants. Schuster's (2015) treatment of Afghan refugees (299) is symptomatic: forced migration from Afghanistan is evoked as a prototypical "mixed migrants" case – supposed proof of the inadequacy of politically-determined forced migration. Given post-Taliban migration, their de facto integration into Pakistan, the decades-long duration of displacement, levels of repatriation, economic and education hardships, and oscillating status-designations by governments, Afghan refugees are offered as ultimate proof of the futility of "unmixing migrants" and the folly of "insistence on neat categories" (ibid). Meanwhile, there is not a single mention of a prominent force factor – namely, the 2001 Anglo-American invasion of Afghanistan – that surely distinguishes the fate of Afghan refugees in this period.

[19] Scholars who pursue empirically-disaggregating political from economic "push factors" often confess that their exercise is a fool's errand, prefacing their attempts with profuse warnings and qualifications about operationalization. The methodological difficulty of disentangling political from economic forces behind migration is occasionally *itself* offered as proof of rough parity between them. Adhikari (2013) found that migrant decision-making in conflict-induced displacement is deeply intertwined with non-political considerations "even when life is under extreme threat" (88). Shellman and Stewart (2007) affirm "economic" and "security factors" almost equally regarding Haitian refugees. Others find political force factors causally dominant (Schmeidl, 1997; Lundquist & Massey, 2005; Stanley, 1987). We need not adjudicate, nor bother to extract a scholarly consensus regarding causal primacy. But it is sobering to acknowledge that theoretical work on forced migration – clinging to the indeterminacy condition, even at the price of conceptual paralysis – has lagged *far* behind practical empirical "legwork" that has sensibly, pragmatically operationalized the distinction across a variety of historical and regional contexts. Indeed, sociologists of violence have been so sophisticated as to produce forensic analyses of force factors with precision worthy of war crimes courts. Notably, Ball (2000) and colleagues (Krüger et al., 2013) analyzed Kosovo Albanian refugee dynamics for the Hague Tribunal, aiding historic war crimes convictions. Celebrated as an exemplar of "public sociology" (Hagan et al., 2006:338–340), this momentous accomplishment of force factor analysis has been ignored by theory entirely.

theorized at all, while the geopolitical clout of major states is tied almost-exclusively to economic statecraft (via the Washington Consensus and NAFTA, notably). The criterion textbook on international migration (Castles et al., 2014) even excludes the political domain entirely from its overview of theories on migration-perpetuating mechanisms, which are only "social," "economic" and "cultural" (45).

On those rare occasions when migration theory considers the link between refugees and foreign policy in particular, the impact is again credited to economics. In Massey et al.'s (1993) classic review, the singular mention of refugees is in the context of a "hypothesis" derived from World System's theory:

> Political and military interventions by governments of capitalist countries to protect investments abroad and to support foreign governments sympathetic to the expansion of the global market, when they fail, produce refugee movements directed to particular core countries, constituting another form of international migration (448).

Two objections are due. First, the "interventions" of powerful governments need not be motivated by capitalist protection of "investments abroad," but by coercive-intensive protection of military infrastructure, deterrence capacity, geopolitical position, or diplomatic honor (Schmeidl, 2001). The "foreign governments" – sometimes entire foreign societies – under attack are not necessarily faulted for their resistance to "the expansion of the global market" (e.g. Somalia, Libya). The governments given support, furthermore, need not be "sympathetic" to capitalism, or preoccupied with economic considerations, at all (e.g. South Sudan, Afghanistan). Second, the indicative phrase "when they fail" presumes that refugees are created only when foreign intervention blunders: that forced migration is an unintended or occasional consequence of foreign policy that – when it succeeds – does not displace civilians. In reality, major powers (e.g. China) intervene (e.g. in Myanmar) *for the purpose* of dispelling populations (e.g. the Rohingya), while successful interventions may generate greater refugee waves than unsuccessful ones (Zolberg et al., 1986:159–160, 163–165). Economic eclipsing of politics overlooks such research avenues.

A related stipulation insists on economic globalization as the essential context into which forced migration is embedded. Castles' (2003) is the canonical statement of this tendency.[20] The reason "there can be no compartmentalized theory of forced migration" is said to be the inseparability of "U.S. political and military domination" from "economic globalization" (27) and global North-South inequality. By "compartmentalization," Castles does not mean (as would be perfectly reasonable) some hermetic extraction of forced from unforced migration (akin, perhaps, to separating self-perfecting markets from their Polanyian social base). He means, more ominously, that one cannot theorize forced migration with heightened emphasis on *political* force factors without a heavy dosage of economic determinism. Thus to "theorize forced

[20] Though Wallerstein and colleagues were undoubtedly more orthodox Marxian, the forced-migration-as-globalization theorists significantly preserved the World System infrastructure by substituting North-South for core-periphery. Though unacknowledged as such, Zolberg et al. (1989) were the earliest to directly conceptualize refugees as elements of the "globalization of social conflict" (230–2), but without sacrificing the political sphere. For a critique of economic reductionism in analyses of migration determinants, see Richmond (1988:11–13).

migration" becomes "to link it to economic migration" because they are both "forms of expression of global inequalities" (17). Political force factors are acknowledged, but not without reflexive attribution to "Northern economic interests" which "play an important part in starting or prolonging wars" (18). Even something as geopolitical as post-Cold War "military intervention[ism]" is ascribed to the desire to impose transformational models of economic development serving "Northern" economic interests and ideologies (19). War and "conflict" are held to be outcomes of divergent economic growth and North-South inequality, but hardly the other way around (17). Ultimately, the very "distinction between forced migration and economic migration is becoming blurred as a result" of globalization (Ibid), implying that *even if* political differentiation made sense once upon a time, it no longer does.

The end result is an undue fogging of basic refugee realities. It is tendentious enough that "Causes of Force Migration" is just one of six commended theoretical directions, the rest of which are entirely divorced from force factors (Castles, 2003:28–29). But the legitimizing selection of three particular "causes" is remarkable: "[i]nformal economies in the North as a pull factor" and "[w]hy forced migrants go to one country rather than another" are leveled with the force factor endogenous to the source society (28). Even if one concedes that "development refugees" are forced migrants, this aggressive conceptual drift from the political sphere is misleading. The "pull factor" that Castles has in mind (black markets, smuggling networks, transnational remittances) is a catalyst of a primarily-political push factor which is clearly causal in *some* deeper sense. Choice of country, meanwhile, is almost entirely dictated by the curse of geography: the overwhelming majority of refugees are in a country neighboring the one they fled – and those host societies are universally poor, underdeveloped and unattractive destinations.[21] To isolate refugees' choice (if one can call it that) of "one country rather than another" as a *cause* of forced migration is a leap of faith relying on economic reductionism.[22] Meanwhile, political causes exogenous to the source society – such as foreign interventionism, military alliances, "contagious" rebellions in neighboring countries, irredentist and pan-nationalist insurgencies, etc. – are entirely forgotten.

Refugee agency conflation

A second variant of this assumption rejects the political/economic characterization of force factors on the grounds that such a distinction prejudges the voluntary/involuntary nature of refugee agency.[23] To avoid the prejudice, Richmond's (1988, 1993) influential theory of reactive migration allows his "proactive"/"reactive" dimension to vary entirely independently of the "economic"/"sociopolitical" dimension. The result: a breathtaking typology of as many as 25 kinds of refugee movements (1993:19–21), nine of which are christened "political" in every possible permutation: "political-political," "political-economic," "political-environmental," "political-social,"

[21] More than half of all refugees come from just three countries, and more than two-thirds come from just five: Syria, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Myanmar and Somalia (UNHCR, 2018).

[22] In other words, Castles (2003) misplaces these two "Dynamics of Mobility" considerations *into* the "Causes of Forced Migration" (28), where they evidently do not belong. The misplacement only becomes reasonable if one presupposes the indeterminacy condition.

[23] At worst, "economic" is treated as a surrogate for free migration, but "political" was presumed to imply *un*free migration. For review and critique of the conflation, see Zolberg et al. (1989:30–31).

"political-bio-psychological," "economic-political," "environmental-political," "social-political," and "bio-psychological-political" (19–20). Surely this typology – which amounts to an ontological denial of an autonomous political sphere – defeats the practical purpose of differentiating between spheres to begin with. Desperate to assume away the dreaded inference ("political" = "involuntary"), Richmond risks rendering violence meaningless. If he were not so keen to preserve the indeterminacy condition, it would have been much more frugal to *approximately* differentiate political force factors from the rest – a move that would not have jeopardized his otherwise-brilliant "reactive migration" concept.

In a similar spirit, Hayden (2006) refuses to grant politics its due for fear of entanglement with the enigma of refugee volition. Instead of nervous overtheorizing of the hybridity of economic and political spheres, however, he opts for *under*theorizing via wholesale rejection of overlapping categories. In a single conceptual discharge, Hayden does away with the political/economic force dichotomy along with the voluntary/involuntary *and* violent/non-violent distinctions at once (474–479). This throws the proverbial "baby" (voluntary/involuntary) out with the "bathwater" (political/economic and violent/non-violent) because the former is a consideration of refugee *agency*, but the latter are plausible, legitimate characterizations of force factors *regardless* of the agency question. Put differently, the nature of refugee motivations – obviously heterogenous and compound – becomes unnecessarily conflated with the nature of force factors – which may, without contradiction, be much less-ambiguously political.

In his superb *tour de force,* Hein (1993) is likewise hesitant to give politics higher status. Reasons include that states have abused the idea "that refugees and immigrants had different motives" (correct, but irrelevant), and that "overemphasiz[ing] individual psychology" (47) is inherent to differentiating political from economic force factors (incorrect, and irrelevant *even if* it were true). His balanced argument – a reconciliation of "nominalist" and "realist" perspectives on the refugees/migrant distinction – carefully avoids political designations for political phenomena. Opting for a strained evenhandedness, Hein suggests that once we disaggregate five dimensions of forced migration, each school of thought may claim victory for different reasons in different domains (e.g. regarding causes of refugee crises: [refugees ≠ migrants] → ["realists" are right]; but, regarding social organization: [refugees = migrants] → ["nominalists" are right]).

This line of escape is not very satisfying. The supposed-symmetry is only enabled by: an overall neglect of "Causes of Refugee Waves" (Ibid:47–49) in favor of post-migratory realms of refugee-migrant convergence; a specific neglect of the unquestionably-political nature of Zolberg's "globalization of social conflict" approach, which is misleadingly presented as economically-politically hybrid and therefore "blending realist and nominalist perspective" (47; cf. Zolberg et al., 1989:30–31, 230–232); a neutered interpretation of "the role of the state" that excludes refugee-generating policies but over-accentuates welfare and economic policies (Hein, 1993:53–54); and an imputation to the "realist perspective" of the hardline, gratuitous view that "the distinction between economic and political migrants [i]s the primary conceptual basis for distinguishing types of international migration" (55).

Brilliant as these intellectual acrobatics around the "fire" of politics are, they are redundant. It is perfectly feasible to recognize force factors as primarily political

without prejudging forced migrant psychologies, motives, decisions, or volitions. If a sudden increase in predator populations in an ecosystem propels a mammalian herd to move from one habitat to another, the primarily predatory (not seasonal) nature of the cause of their displacement does not prejudge how agentic the mammalian herd is.

Duties

Finally, political-economic indeterminacy takes the form of eschewing characterization of the force factor *altogether* (not merely its over-specification) on the grounds that it distracts from moral and legal obligations (Gibney, 2015; Williams, 2014). Betts' (2013) influential concept of "survival migration" is a notable example of such dismissal:

> [W]hat matters is not privileging particular causes of [forced] movement but rather clearly identifying a threshold of fundamental rights which, when unavailable in a country of origin, requires that the international community allow people to cross an international border and receive access to temporary or permanent sanctuary (5).

This recurrent objection to "privileging" certain causes is premised on two anxieties that sociology need not share: (*i*) that *any* characterization of the force factor is doomed to be as exclusionary and reductionistic as legal definitions are in regard to "persecution"; and (*ii*) that the conceptualization of forced migration via the force factor somehow interferes with a proper determination of what the "international community" owes refugees. Regarding (*i*), Betts forcefully reminded us that Convention-inspired obsessions with "persecution" (i.e. *pro-active* state force) as the ultimate criterion disregard "deprivation" (i.e. state force by *omission*) (3). This disregard was indeed chronic and cynical. But it does not follow that we should abandon any attempt at theorizing the force factor as political for fear of collapsing back into legal fetishisms. This would be akin to arguing that, since gender-based violence laws have been woefully inadequate for centuries, we must eschew conceptualization of rape altogether for fear of reinforcing legalistic apologetics for misogyny. There is no such dilemma. We can *in parallel* refine the laws to include marginalized victim categories *and* continue to theorize rape, rapists and their enablers without regressing to a low-minded reductionism of gender-based violence. It is perfectly possible – indeed, as Betts' empirical analyses of African cases and Yemen themselves show, *necessary* – to incorporate war, government violence, regime collapse and other manifestly political processes into our explanatory account.

Furthermore, (*ii*) overlooks that definitions and concepts are purpose-dependent. A conceptual scope that works for one agenda (e.g. pressuring governments to deliver protection; Bhabha, 2018) may be useless for another (e.g. exposing those very governments' anti-refugee violence; Blumi, 2018), and vice-versa.[24] If one aims to

[24] The "international community" that Betts evokes as potential protector also happens to be a major contributor to refugee-production (Vine et al., 2020; Gatrell, 2013; Blum, 2003; Zolberg et al., 1986). But determining the obligations, under international and human rights law, of major powers to "survival migrants" is possible without any empirical investigation whatever into how those powers generate forced migration. This is obvious to any refugee advocate or practitioner, who knows this to be the regular, pragmatic approach.

affirm foreign governments' asylum duties, it makes good sense to confine the scope (as Betts does) to persons who cross an international border. If, however, one aims to understand nationalist repression and government coercion, this scope becomes unreasonable (IDPs are the bulk of forced migrants). Moreover, just because a given research agenda (e.g. understanding rapists) may be a cruel and deflecting exercise undermining another urgent purpose (e.g. pressuring universities to protect sex-assault casualties), that does not disqualify the former altogether. It is plainly not necessary for us to abandon attention to the force factor in order to deal with its nefarious consequences. To forbid "particular causes" (i.e. political ones) from being "privileged" is tantamount to an arbitrary conceptual veto.

Repoliticizing violence It may be objected that these have been abstruse, faultfinding assessments that become inconsequential in practice. Surely when concrete case studies present themselves – Koreans fleeing Kim Jong Un, Venezuelans fleeing Maduro – the political-economic indeterminacy assumption becomes benign. Having surveyed three variants of the condition somewhat abstractly, let us conclude with a tangible empirical example to highlight the stakes. A striking illustration of how extreme – indeed, dogmatic – the denial of political primacy can be is found in Hayden's (2006) use of this Salvadoran refugee's testimony (479):

> We decided to stay in our settlement; but in March, when they assassinated Monsignor [Archbishop] Romero, the persecution against us became stronger. First, the Guard would come in shooting. Then, they would break into the houses, search them and take everything the people had. If there was a store, they would take everything in the store, spilling drinks on the ground, hacking up the bread with their machetes; they would also steal radios and anything else of value. They would chop up the doors with their machetes, kill the animals, and then kill any people who stayed inside their houses. They would force old women who couldn't run out of their homes at gun point, and then beat them (479)

This quotation was selected to illustrate "the ways that economics is intricately intertwined with the violence," "so much so that any effort to extricate the two seems perverse" (ibid). Yet this particular recounting of terrorism and violent abuse of civilians is an ideal typical example of a political force factor *par excellence*. Indeed, one would be hard-pressed to find a better instance of a political episode ("assassinated," "persecution," "come in shooting," "kill any people," "force old women," "at gun point," "beat them") with a political actor ("Guard") than in this story of a war-torn Salvadoran village.

After calling such a judgement "difficult" and "perverse," Hayden draws the obvious (and correct) conclusion: "Most people would simply concur that this qualifies as violence, maybe even persecution" (479). In a twist, she then defies this intuitive interpretation by reminding us of "the general economic climate" of poverty, the supposedly-curious ordering of "all these rather disparate actions together," and the vandalism and cattle-killing (479–480). Instead of standard coercive intimidation, the deployment of machetes on foodstuffs is thought to be "economic" action whose

significance matches the violence itself. Indeed, these details are thought to be *so* "economic" as to negate the overall political nature of the assault being described. To be sure, "tak[ing] everything in the store," "spilling drinks" "hacking up the bread," "steal[ing] radios," plundering "anything else of value," and "kill[ing] the animals" are obviously economic harms. But to describe the force factor propelling these people as even remotely *equally* economic as political is surely so pedantic as to be deceptive.

Hayden's zeal to preserve political-economic indeterminacy of the force expelling Salvadorans then culminates:

> '[A]nd then kill any people who stayed inside their houses' receives *precisely the same treatment* [emphasis added] as 'they would chop up the doors', 'hacking up the bread' and even as 'they would also steal radios'. At least this is true at the syntactic level in the quote given by [the source] Camarda. We do not have access to paralinguistic and non-verbal cues (480).

This relativization is threefold significant. First, the notion of "same treatment" is interpolated by arbitrarily picking three economically-salient details ("door," "bread," and "radio") against a singular politically-salient detail ("kill any people") while excluding half-a-dozen other details of primarily-political, anti-human violence. This permits the illusion that the main context being described – namely, *violence* – does not even approach the "same treatment" that theft and vandalism enjoy in the narrative. Second, a so-called "syntactic level" – which apparently does not include frequency or sequential ordering of the recounted details, both of which undermine the economic emphasis – is casually said to make looting and pillaging more salient than coercive intimidation and death. Property damage is elevated above murder. Finally, and somewhat "perversely" (to borrow Hayden's own term), it is insinuated that *if we had* "paralinguistic and non-verbal cues," we might confirm that theft and property damage were just as pertinent as being terrorized by a death squad. All the while, the allegedly "economic" harms inflicted are never considered as integral to political violence.

If this critique should appear harsh, I hasten to praise Hayden's (2006) otherwise-outstanding argument, including her superb treatment of the intrinsic role of empathy and responsibly in refugee conceptualization (484–485). However, this vivid illustration of force indeterminacy captures the undue theoretical drift away from coercion and violence, and towards a depoliticization of the self-evidently political.

Conclusion

Drawing on insights outside of migration theory, I have argued for a conceptual shift to a clear affirmation of the force factor as an inescapable and fertile postulate. Refugees are theoretically significant *not* because they are a specially-exotic, hybrid, or impotent migration category. Rather, they matter because they are manifestations of dynamics of modern warfare, nationalism, revolution and state-formation. As such, they are a precious window into theories of violence, irrespective of their over-studied migratory features. To explore the plethora of promising sociological discoveries in this direction, our discipline should significantly relax its relativization conditions regarding force

factors. These assumptions are obstructive, unrealistic, and superfluous. Sociology will be well-served to seek refuge from them.

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Danilo Mandić Lecturer in Sociology