

Title:

What's So Special About Refugees? Four Parameters for Scrutinizing Forced Migration

Bio:

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Abstract:

The central difficulty in social scientific categorizations of forced migrants is an excessive reliance on “ordinary” migration scholarship, which instinctively juxtaposes refugees to “typical,” unforced migrants as the reference category around which forced migrant categories are defined, individuated, explained, and stigmatized. Elsewhere, I argued for the affirmation of a “force factor” as a vital concept for meaningful theorization and analysis of forced migration phenomena. Expanding on this intuition, I propose four conceptual and empirical decisions that can – indeed, must – be made for a clear categorization and analysis of forced migrants. First, force factor timing: when exactly does forced migration happen, and when does it end? Second, the transnational nature of the force factor: to what extent is it exogenous as well as endogenous? Third, the significance of the migratory dimension: how significant a feature of forced migrants is their movement? Fourth, integration informality: what does typical real-world integration signify about refugees, and about their host communities? I argue that both migration and forced migration scholarship benefit from greater attention to these four parameters.

Keywords: migration, forced migration, refugees, displacement, force factor, war, violence

What, if anything, is special about refugees?

Below we survey four parameters worth carefully considering: (1) the timing of the force factor; (2) the transnational character of the force factor; (3) the relative significance of the migratory dimension; and (4) the informality of refugee integration. For each parameter, we examine common conceptual and empirical problems and suggest alternative approaches that avoid these temptations. Naturally, these are not exhaustive or comprehensive sets of dilemmas in the rich – and expanding – forced migration scholarship. These are simply recurring conceptual and empirical pitfalls: conventional wisdoms which, I suggest, sidetrack our understanding of forced migration. The proposed alternatives, furthermore, are not meant as dogmas, ultimate wisdoms, or as moral judgments of previous work. They are intended, rather, as analytic heuristics for anybody interested in refugees.

For clarity, let us open with two definitions. First, *forced migrants* or *refugees* (we will use them interchangeably) refer to those displaced by selective (e.g. persecution, ethnic cleansing, mass deportation) or generalized violence (indiscriminate terrorism, wars of attrition, deadly frontlines). We will refer to a narrower, legalistic category as “Convention refugee,” while “refugee” in our sense will be akin to Aleinikoff’s category of “flee of necessity” (Aleinikoff & Zamore 2019), regardless of distance traveled or civic status. Second, for reasons that will become clear below, I presuppose the centrality of the *force factor* in coherently defining and meaningfully investigating forced migrants. The force factor, simply, refers to the principal cause of forced migration: the activities of violent social actors who displace people in large numbers (Mandić 2022). Many of the common pitfalls in forced migration literature, I argue, involve ignoring, relativizing, or misunderstanding the force factor.

Categorizing, Contesting, and Clarifying

While much ink has been spent on the conflation of refugees with migrants, there is rarely any recognition that the conflation’s consequences *differ* by context and agent. Specifically, (1) *government* categorization, which is a statist exercise in national border and demographic management; (2) *refugee* self-categorization, which is a normal, human identity-formation exercise, meant to navigate cultural, political and economic environments that forced migrants find themselves in; and (3) *scholarly* categorization, which is an analytic exercise meant to study and explain migration dynamics. All three are fantastically complex and can differ dramatically across time and region. But the central thing to note is not only that these three categorizations do not converge on the same understanding of who a “refugee” is (indeed, it would be a miracle if they did). They also *should* not converge. These categorizations are inherently contested, and rightly so.

The first, government categorization, is a legalistic procedure rooted in the 1951 Refugee Convention and corresponding national laws. In this context, states typically conflate refugees and other migrants in order to block the former. Asylum in this statist sense has an extremely high threshold for “well-founded fear of persecution” on the basis of only a handful of possible “memberships,” as well as the necessary condition of crossing an international border. This already excludes almost all forced migrants globally, a majority of whom are internally-displaced; most of the rest fled force factors that do not even approach “persecution” in the Convention definition. In addition, restrictionist governments routinely abuse or misinterpret refugee laws to

mislabel *bona fide* asylum-seekers as “illegal,” “alien,” “irregular” or “economic” migrants to preempt or repress them. Much of migration scholarship has – rightly – documented the cruelty and absurdity of these practices, including for asylum frameworks (Bhabha 2018). Accepting state-driven categorizations alone would, by conservative estimate, restrict our gaze to less than 1% of Convention refugees living today (Garnier 2023, p.50; Margesson 2022). State categories, then, are an excellent *object* of study, but cannot themselves be reliable analytic tools to capture reality (Bialas et al. 2024).

Second, refugee self-categorization is often deliberately aimed at countering, undermining or transcending top-down, state-imposed legalisms (Vigil & Baillie Abidi 2018; Stier, *this volume*). Indeed, this subjective self-understanding by refugees themselves often rejects the stigmatized category “refugee” even when, legally or analytically, it may be suitable. In the eyes of many (perhaps most) refugees, the label is loaded with connotations of passivity, violence, illegality, trauma and parasitism. Eager to affirm their humanity, many forced migrants proactively evade “asylum-seeker” and related legal categories, preferring “worker” or “economic migrant” – even at the expense of losing certain rights in refugee camps. The self-identification of Syrian refugees, as Dinger’s (*in this volume*) rich ethnography demonstrates, is fatefully defined by informal labor market pressures. Facing economic precarity, Syrian refugees in Lebanon cope with tremendous flexibility and adaptability as they navigate the state’s rigid, discriminatory classificatory scheme. More generally, migrants are infinitely creative in their self-categorization processes, which in turn do not correspond easily with how others identify them. Immigrant and civic status categories in this context intersect in imaginative, counter-intuitive ways with conceptions of “home” (Taylor 2013), with ethno-racial categories (Waters 1999) as well as corporeal, gender, and aesthetic meanings (Velayutham et al., *this volume*) that have little to do with government labels. Indeed, one of the most dynamic aspects of refugee agency is how they construct their refugeedom by appropriating agency, dignity and power from the government categorizations that exclude and stigmatize forced migrants.

Finally, we turn to the third – scholarly – categorization, the subject of this article. When analysts conflate refugees and migrants, it is typically to subsume the former as a special, “residual category” of migration in general, leaving room for various distortions (Mandić 2022). Koser’s textbook *International Migration* (2016), for example, largely conflates forced and unforced migrants and therefore neglects the latter. Betts’ *Survival Migration* (2013) broadens the forced migrant categories so far that “survival migrants” include natural- and disaster-induced cases of flight; with climate change, almost every migrant thus becomes a “refugee” or “eco-refugee.” Nativist or restrictionist approaches, meanwhile, indulge in the conflation in order to scapegoat. Deciding to definitionally equate migrants with refugees, and then “migration crisis” and “refugee crisis” (p.27), Krastev (2017) claims refugees are responsible for no less than dismantling European democracy. In his influential *Who Are We?*, Huntington (2004) raises alarm about immigrants “coming from countries that generated refugees” (p.235). Ignoring the miniscule ratio of forced to unforced migrants in the United States, he implies that immigrants are economically-cumbersome, non-refugees from “countries that generated refugees” more so, and refugees *even* more so. Without clear parameters for what is and is not relevant for distinguishing a forced migrant, in other words, exaggerations and statist biases loom. Since government- and refugee-driven categories do not suffice for analytic purposes, how – if at all – do we distinguish refugees?

Below, I propose four such parameters.

Parameter 1. Force Factor Timing

When, exactly, does the force forcing migration happen?

This parameter is often obscured by our presentist biases: we tend to systematically analyze refugee flows only years, sometimes decades, after they transpire. In the meanwhile, we conjecture that refugee flow correlates, somehow, with the strife causing it. But the force factor appears radically different retrospectively than it did prospectively – including to the victims themselves. In hindsight, Jewish refugees are today described as having fled the Holocaust and the war itself. But most of them – by volume – fled anti-Semitic persecution in peacetime prior to the cataclysmic escalation of 1939, let alone the Final Solution of 1941. Since the most refugee-generating force factors are durable, since refugee flows transpire non-linearly, and since force factors are obscure and dynamic while refugee waves are clear and salient, explicitly elucidating the timing parameter is critical.

The question has two parts: *onset*, or when refugees begin to be expelled in significant numbers, and *duration*, or how temporary or persistent the danger is. Seemingly technical, both features are deeply politicized and value-laden. By drawing a line in conflict chronology, the former often involves a judgement about whether to include one or another belligerent's victims as refugees. If the Russian aggression in Ukraine is understood to begin in early 2014, predominantly Donbas, Crimean and Russophone refugees become the natural objects of attention and sympathy. But if, as is the norm, analysts only note refugees fleeing full-scale Russian invasion since February 2022, the forced migrant pool is dramatically skewed towards those from Western and Central Ukraine, while refugees fleeing Ukrainian artillery shelling of the separatist enclaves of Donetsk or Luhansk become practically invisible. The nationalist implications of the choices are stark.

On the latter variable – force factor duration – the idea that refugees are defined by their repatriation prospects makes the permanence of wars and persecution campaigns controversial. Belgians and Serbs during World War I were not considered refugees because – in the words of a founding father of refugee theory – they were “purely temporary movements” (Black 2001, p.64). Ironically, these same cases are today canonized, “classic” refugee prototypes, precisely because of the prolongation of German and Austro-Hungarian occupation and, hence, the displacement. Furthermore, if the force factor is deemed to be over when most refugees already fled from it, this jeopardizes asylum grievances. Many Iraqis in Turkey, Rohingya in Bangladesh, and Nigerians in Chad endure violence, trafficking and slavery outside their source society. Yet subsequent movement from neighboring bridge countries is considered “unforced,” free economic migration. This is an absurdity,¹ including because the original force factors continue to rage. Once we acknowledge the durability of Sunni militias in Iraq, Burmese regime persecution, and Boko Haram insurgency in Borno, it appears reasonable to treat these refugees as, at least in part, *continuing* to flee the original carnage when they leave Turkey for the EU, Bangladesh for Thailand, or Chad for Cameroon. Bridge country conditions are not sole, even main, causes of secondary migration.

¹ For a critique of the view that forced migrants are only owed protection in the first country of arrival but not in subsequent destinations – and the accompanying notion that refugees lack the right to migrate beyond the first state of entry – see Gibney 2015, pp.458-9.

Stateless forced migrants – of whom the UNHCR records 10 million globally in 2023 – further complicate matters.² If force factor onset was quite long ago, and that displacement led to protracted statelessness, how long can the force factor be considered relevant? Is it cross-generational, for example? The postcolonial expulsion of Palestinians was followed by seven decades of occupation and segregation, transferring refugee-ness to successive age-cohorts in Gaza and the West Bank. Anti-Palestinian rhetoric tends to focus on just how ancient the force factor onset was, prefers to demarcate the 1948 episode from all subsequent force factors (1968, 1973, 1982, the Intifadas, etc.), and denies the notion that children and grandchildren of *Nakba* migrants are themselves refugees. Pro-Palestinian analysts, logically, emphasize the mirror opposite. Studies of Kurdish, Masai, Roma and Karen displacement are characterized by similar temporal dilemmas.

To avoid nationalist biases, we must transfer force factor timing from opacity, where it typically rests, to the fore of scholarship. Two conceptual burdens have plagued a suitable approach to force factor timing. The first is the conflation of triggering events with causes of refugee flow. This is a notorious and chronic temptation of the social sciences. Some classical comparativists held that “triggering events are essentially superficial and should not distract one’s attention from the basic causal processes at work” (Mahoney et al. 2003, p.194). Others insist, as a philosophical matter, that investigation of “triggering causes” must complement “structuring causes” for an adequate explanation (Haslanger 2016, p.10). Given the qualitative and small-N nature of most refugee scholarship, it is important to dispense with extreme or puritanical approaches to the relationship between triggers and causes. For our purposes, let us simply distinguish particular temporally-bounded events – a terrorist attack, an aerial strike, an urban siege, etc. – from longer-term contextual causes – a guerrilla insurgency, a bombing campaign, the serial sieging of population centers by a belligerent, etc. Roughly speaking, the former helps explain *when* forced migration spikes; the latter help explain *why* it happens at all.

The second conceptual hazard is to conflate event and process. Force factors are notoriously processual, as the entire political science and sociology of war and violence has painstakingly demonstrated (Collins 2008; Malešević 2022; Kalyvas 2006). By a conservative estimate that treats minor wars as independent instead of episodes of longer conflicts, the average length of civil wars has tripled since 1945 (Hironaka 2009, p.1). The twentieth century’s longest civil wars were in the Philippines (246 months), Ethiopia (212), Somalia (191), Angola (189), Lebanon (189) and Afghanistan (168) – all leading refugee-generator countries (Ibid, p.27). The heightened internationalization of contemporary “asymmetrical wars” further prolongs and complicates conflict trajectories (Mann 2023, pp.306-9). Though this does not necessarily entail an increase in global forced migration in total,³ it does recommend that we analyze the force factor in phases/stages, with reversals and fluctuations in power-balances, and with cyclical ebbs-and-flows in levels of violence that bear on displacement. Finally, the social actors dispelling people often do so prior to formal war onset, or continue displacement in the post-conflict period – realities that are impossible to capture without years- or even decades-long process-tracing.

Refugees, we should never forget, are deliberate instruments of war (Lischer 2015; Salehyan & Gleditsch 2006; Stedman & Tanner 2003). These “weapons of mass migration,” as Greenhill (2010) called them, are employed repeatedly, episodically, and with varying levels of

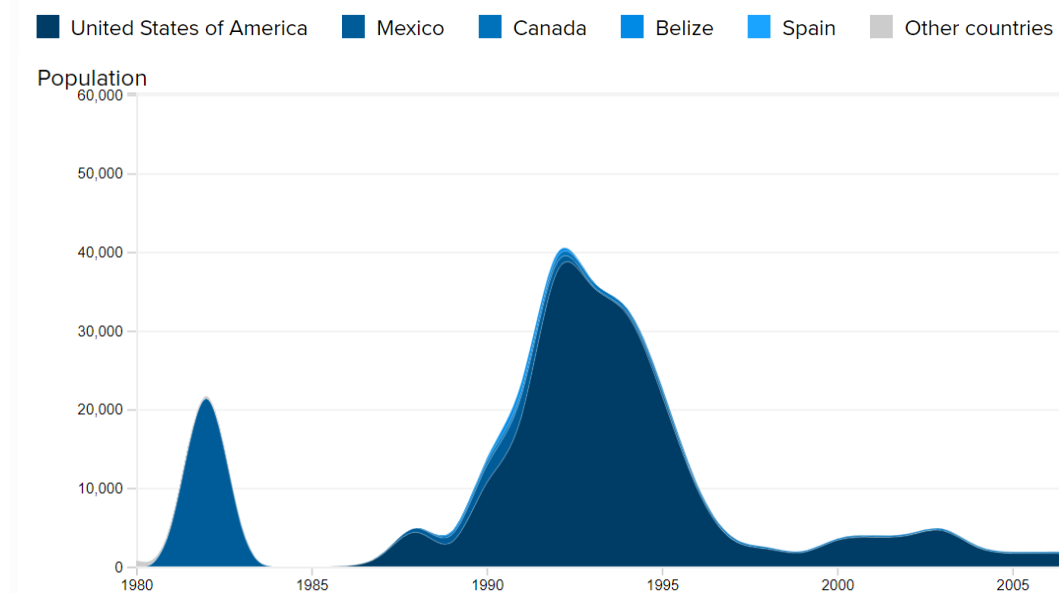
² UNHCR Annual Factsheets 2024, available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/ibelong/statelessness-around-the-world>

³ Contrary to the (understandably) alarmist yearly claims of the UNHCR, displacement levels are not increasing. Indeed, “the long-term levels have been quite stable over time” (Fransen & De Haas 2022, p.124).

intensity across time. Wars are not like earthquakes, tsunamis or hurricanes. They are, rather, like fires created by pyromaniacs.

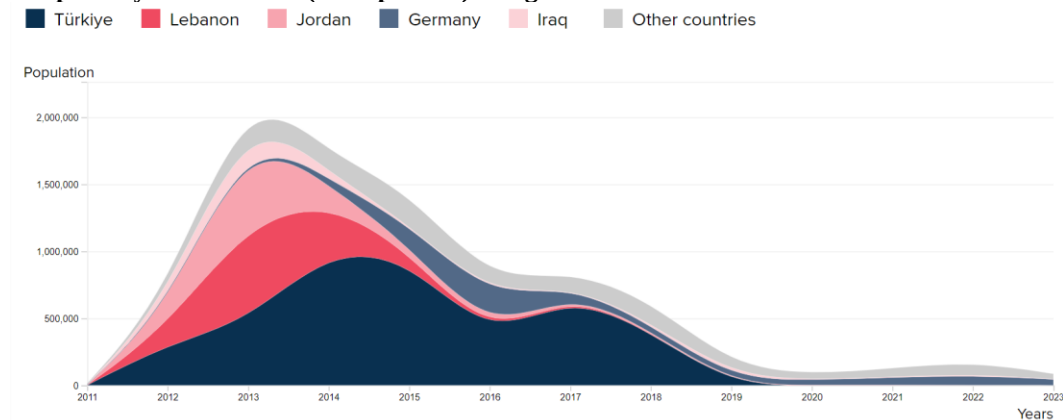
Let us turn now to the central empirical problem. The conceptual pedantry above was important because the underlying analytic and political stake is our interest in how exactly force factor intensity *interacts* with forced migration volume. Intuitively, the force factor should be perfectly correlated with displacement. In empirical reality, however, there is a fundamental asymmetry between the onset of refugee flow on the one hand, and the onset of the force factor itself, on the other. As a rough indicator of the variety of forced migration dynamics, consider only a few shapes from the UNHCR's Forced Displacement Flow dataset, reproduced in Graphs 1-4: four major wars from four continents that have displaced at least 100,000 people.

Graph 1. Guatemalan civil war (1960-1996) refugees

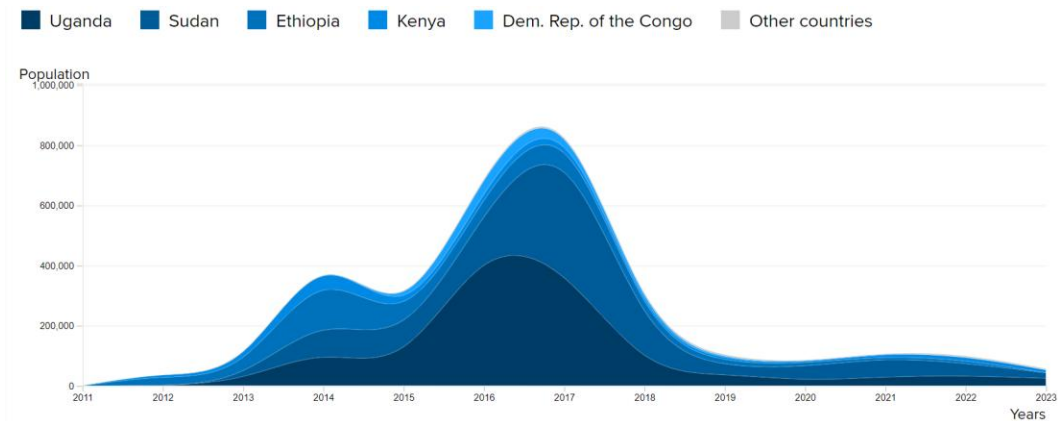


Notes: 1960-1980 missing data.

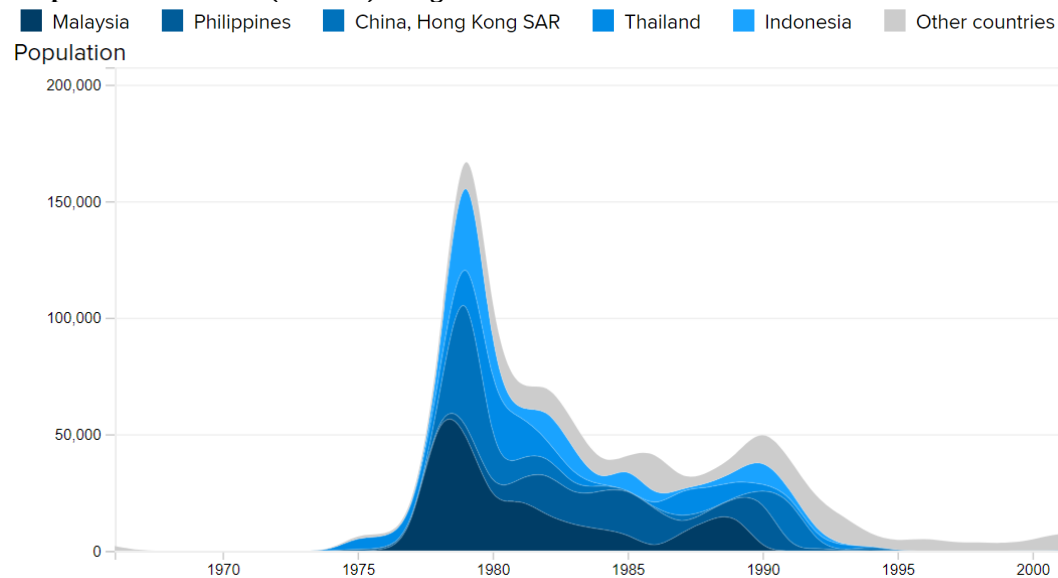
Graph 2. Syrian civil war (2011-present) refugees



Graph 3. South Sudanese civil war (2013-present) refugees



Graph 4. Vietnam war (1955-75) refugees



Notes: 1960-70s data poor, partial.

Source: UNHCR's Forced Displacement Flow dataset.

To be sure, these are extremely crude indicators that ignore IDPs, returnees, secondary displacement, and geographic ease of migration. Nevertheless, notice that refugee waves have no saliently consistent patterns. Indeed, it is only honorifically that we call them “waves.” Some of them, like Syria (Graph 2) are left-skewed, with majorities of refugees fleeing early. Others, like Guatemala after the mid-1980s (Graph 1), resemble normal distributions. In the case of Vietnam (Graph 4), we see post-war forced migration occurring with significant delay. All four are uneven, sometimes with multiple significant spikes in displacement volumes (South Sudan, Graph 3). The only certain commonality is a clear peak in each trajectory; dozens of other cases such as the Congolese, Yugoslav, and Yemeni civil wars also have such outstanding peaks in particular years.

So, what about indicators of the force factor, such as levels of violence in these conflicts? Do these peaks of displacement correlate with peaks of force factor intensity? Without in-depth analysis of these four conflict trajectories, which is beyond our scope, suffice it to say that these

four represent clear mismatches between force factor dynamics and refugee flow dynamics – for onsets, spikes, and peaks (McAllister & Nelson 2013; Mandić 2022b; Pinaud 2022; Young 1991). This is striking because these outliers were selected for extremely salient and severe force factors: extermination or expulsion were top-down government policies for at least parts of each of these wars. One would expect, therefore, significant correlation between force factor peak and displacement peak. Yet, even in these ideal-typical cases of deliberate refugee production, the spikes in refugee volume do not obviously correlate with objective levels of danger.

As best we can empirically tell, this is a general phenomenon. It appears that levels of violence have a curvilinear relationship with levels of forced migration. In a landmark yet largely neglected study, Bohra-Mishra & Massey (2011) find that initial low-to-moderate violence increases displacement but later, more “forceful” violence decreases it. Then, there is a “violence threshold” towards the end of the conflict that re-intensifies displacement. Their study of Nepal’s Maoist insurgency (1996-2006) is, sadly, the sole attempt to quantify and statistically associate forced migration with the force factor. The rest of the literature simply assumes that objective levels of danger drive refugee volume, that spikes in forced migration must be signs of violent escalation, and that forced migrants react rationally to objective changes in lethal circumstances. But Bohra-Mishra & Massey’s evidence shows the exact opposite: refugees flee not objective levels of insecurity, but *perceived* levels of insecurity.

There are several reasons for this analytic difficulty. First, while the onset of refugee flows is conspicuous, readily quantifiable and alarming to neighboring countries and international agencies, the onset of the force factor, in contrast, is localized, invisible, and deliberately obscured by propaganda and the proverbial “fog of war.” Second, while force factors begin incrementally and are then overshadowed by ever-greater calamity and atrocity, refugee flows do not appear to unfold in that manner. As noted earlier, left-skewed distributions of refugee volume are documented and common. In contrast, to the author’s knowledge, there is no known major civil war with a right-skewed pattern of violence. This is partly because persecution, ethnic cleansing, counterinsurgency operations, and certainly genocide tend to begin slowly, and then escalate. (Among many reasons is Kalyvas’ finding [2006] that protracted wars transition from discriminate to indiscriminate targeting). Simply put: the force factor is like Hemingway’s quip about how he went bankrupt: “Gradually, and then all-of-a-sudden.” But forced migration waves have no such form. If anything, they are often the exact opposite: sudden, then gradual.

We are left, in conclusion, with the need for epistemic modesty. On the one hand, we should specify and operationalize force factor timing as best we can, even at the risk of simplification. The alternative of disregarding it may lead to the blunder of trigger reductionism or, worse, unpleasant moral implications about comparative refugee worthiness. But the nature and extent of force factor simultaneity with refugee flows must be approached conservatively and carefully. If a major violent episode appears to be a critical juncture initiating mass migration, one must scrutinize preceding episodes to investigate contextual causes as well. When the force factor is especially severe (e.g. a speedy and highly-violent genocidal campaign), its simultaneity with peak refugee volume should be proven, not assumed. Above all, the guiding principle of examining force factor onset and trajectory is to allow for profound *lag effects* across time – including, potentially, across decades. There is no empirical basis for expecting forced migration to follow quickly, if at all, in the “footsteps” of bloodshed escalation.

Parameter 2. Transnational Force Factor

Is the force factor expelling refugees entirely endogenous?

One would be forgiven for thinking so, especially since refugees themselves report their flight motivation in very local, domestic terms. The inherited benchmark for understanding causes of forced migration, furthermore, is the Convention-specific idea of “persecution” – a purely endogenous category that is not only exclusively applicable to the refugee’s source country, but is mostly applicable only to the refugee’s source *government*.⁴ Death squads, gangs, blood feuds, ethnic rioters, and indiscriminate bombers are therefore all excluded. Meanwhile, non-legalistic alternatives – such as the promising but underdeveloped “index of danger” (Zolberg et al. 1986, p.153fn2) – have unfortunately failed to substitute for the wanting legalism. Social scientists thus fell prey to the endogeneity assumption simply by uncritically importing it from the lawyers’ toolkit.

Superficially, it appears to be a reasonable assumption. Indeed, if we recall that the traditional concept of “push factor” (distinguished from foreign “pull factors”) was endogenous by definition, it may perhaps even seem logically necessary. The national departure zone of the refugee is treated as the only possible source of her expulsion. This assumption takes a variety of forms depending on the exact unit of analysis, or “community,” to which the push factor is considered endogenous; but the nation-state is the most commonplace one. The approach excludes not only the arrival zone, but all regional and global powers, patron states, and various border-crossing non-state actors. If the refugee has never set foot in or interacted with these foreign entities, the thought goes, how could they possibly explain her flight?

Under closer examination, the assumption of force factor endogeneity is deceptively restrictive. It imposes fundamental constraints on the range of contributors to the domestic situation that expelled migrants. It involves, in other words, a consequential decision about the spatial ambiguity inherent to migration.⁵ Just as Parameter #1 (timing) is often dealt with by unrealistically containing *when* forced migration occurs, relegating all other flight decisions to lesser relevance, the assumption that the persecution index is to be found endogenously fundamentally narrows the *spatial* range of causes by single-mindedly restricting where the agents forcing migration are to be found. But these agents – ranging from warlord death squads to foreign arms exporters and governments imposing economic embargoes – are certainly not always local to the source country.

The stakes here are as profound as they are ignored. First, the conceptual decision to reduce the force factor to Convention-defined “persecution” within the source country alone is a political one: it absolves foreign state and international non-state actors from their criminal roles in triggering, catalyzing and causing displacement from abroad. Second, since source societies are overwhelmingly poor and unstable while major interventionist powers are overwhelmingly rich and powerful, we disproportionately lay the responsibility for refugee tragedy at the door of actors with low or no capacity to fix matters. Third, by obscuring the role of exogenous contributors to forced migration, we allow them to perpetuate a useful mythology of the “sympathetic bystander,” an “apolitical” or “morally neutral” third party observing tragedy it did not create.⁶

⁴ As legal scholars (Bhabha 2018) never tire of explaining: Convention “persecution” is defined with a tricky combination of objective and subjective criteria, is an extremely high and anachronistic threshold crafted with the Nazis in mind, and excludes in principle most violence that most forced migrants flee most of the time.

⁵ On migration theory’s inherent spatial and temporal ambiguities, see Manning & Trimmer (2013, pp.192-3).

⁶ Elsewhere, I have called this the “innocence complex” [ANONYM CITE].

The factual problem, meanwhile, is even more severe. The under-determination of the “persecution index” excludes, *ipso facto*, most force factors as they actually are. As an empirical matter of fact, most refugees for most of history have been displaced as much by exogenous actors – state and non-state – as by domestic ones in their locality. This empirical feature of force factor endogeneity is what we may call the Zolberg Thesis. Namely, despite appearances, the causes of refugee waves are deeply transnational (Zolberg 1983; Zolberg et al. 1986, 1989).⁷ The two principal drivers of forced migration are (1) separatism, or “reorganization of political communities” and (2) revolutions, or “abrupt changes of regime.” Both of them intuitively appear to be domestic, internal affairs, but nothing could be further from the truth (Zolberg et al. 1989, p.244, p.251). Military, political, diplomatic and economic interventionism from abroad – especially by major geopolitical actors and neighboring patron states – are as great a generator of refugees as so-called “internal” factors.

A central but forgotten tenant of Zolberg’s groundbreaking Thesis was the outright rejection of what he called an “internalist conceptualization” of refugees. Not only is external interventionism ubiquitous and highly consequential, but seemingly “internal” push factors are in fact themselves interactive endogenous *and* exogenous processes (including, counterintuitively, perceived asylum policies of minor destination countries, which influence levels of both refugee movement as well as anti-refugee repression). In sum, force factor endogeneity

not only is incorrect but also obscures the point that external parties by action—or inaction—can significantly influence the processes that generate refugees. Refugees do not appear simply because they are persecuted by government X or victimized by brutalizing rulers in weak states; such governments and states exist within a necessary structure of international support (Zolberg et al. 1989, p.264).

The Zolberg Thesis has been widely validated and expanded, including by the most comprehensive quantitative analysis of “root causes” of forced migration (Schmeidl 1997, 2001), whose most “striking finding is *the importance of foreign intervention in intrastate conflicts*” on predicting refugee stocks (2001, p.77; emphasis original). Schmeidl also found that conflicts involving interventionist powers from abroad produce greater *and* longer forced migration; that foreign military intervention and arms provision to local belligerents were major independent predictors of refugee movement; and, remarkably, that wars with foreign intervention were significantly stronger predictors than wars alone (p.84-5).⁸ Richmond (1993) likewise pointed out that the military-industrial complexes of major powers, globalization, and a quasi-criminal “arms bazaar” worldwide are systemic “predisposing factors” for refugee movements (pp.14-5). Other studies emphasize neoliberal policies and economic development projects (construction of dams, highways, stadia, industrial zones, etc.) as refugee-generators. A leading expert goes so far as to say that “the [global] North does more to cause forced migration than to stop it, through enforcing an international economic and political order that causes underdevelopment and conflict” (Castles 2003, p.18). This may be exaggerated, but the broader point remains: geopolitical and

⁷ For reviews, see Joly 2002, pp.4-9 and Piguet 2018, pp.22-3.

⁸ In his sweeping history of wars, Michael Mann concluded about interventionist powers: “Without the foreigners, the death toll and the refugee flow would be much lower” (Mann 2023, p.308).

geoeconomic order is crafted by powerful actors, for reasons unrelated to refugees, in such a way as to be a major contextual driver of forced migration globally.

Two principles can guide a wiser treatment of the force factor's transnational nature. First, the force factor must be *exogenized* in explanations of forced migration. Most refugee scholars, explicitly or otherwise, are interested in apportioning blame for the travail of the victims they study. But to do so fairly, it is imperative to dedicate as much – if not more – explanatory value to territories and regions “outside” the compartmentalized source society which tends to preoccupy them. Second, any student of refugees should be prepared to identify concrete *interventionist powers*: inter-state alliances, nation-states, and non-state belligerents with significant military exertion in refugees' source community. Even when official narratives and forced migrants' testimonials themselves make no reference to them, interventionist powers will likely impact the scale, direction, and composition of refugee waves.

Parameter 3. Migratory Feature Significance

Is their act of migrating the defining feature of forced migrants?

There is an unfortunate tendency to insist so, which often amounts to a migratory essentialism. The hegemonic definition of refugees remains as “having left their country and unable to return because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution based on their race, religion, nationality, political belief, or membership in a particular social group” (Nawyn 2003, p.107). This is sometimes called a “Convention refugee,” referring to the restrictive, statutory definition of the 1951 Refugee Convention.⁹ Blind importation of the Convention definition has rightly been blamed for the chronic failure of theory-building on forced migration. Social scientific approaches to refugees have often accepted – with minor if any modification – this legal framework and the narrow concerns and interests of policymakers and state managers (Castles 2003; Skran & Daughtry 2007; Stepputat & Sørensen 2014, pp.89-90). The “evident bureaucratic origin” of the term “refugee” has (Marx 1990, p.190) cast a long shadow over theory. The forced migrant's own humanity and perspective have consistently been sidelined in favor of the administrative gaze of nation-states, (I)NGOs and state intellectuals. In an early statement, Kunz (1973) called the former “the problem of the refugee”; the latter, “the refugee problem” (p.128n10).

The task, then, is to redirect ourselves to “the problem of the refugee.” To that end, critical refugee scholarship has scathingly critiqued the Convention definition for its anachronistic notion of “persecution,” its criteria for a “well-founded fear,” its omission of a myriad “particular social groups,” its exclusion of gender-based violence, etc. But despite the significant and often-venomous assault on the adoption of the legal category for scholarly purposes, there is – oddly enough – a central respect in which the Convention definition has remained *unscrutinized*: namely, the truism that refugees are *migrants*. Why should the migratory dimension “having left” be inherently most important? Sociologically, what exactly is that act supposed to signify that is so essential? The point here is not to deny the insightful and pioneering scholarship that pursued various definitional expansions, including ones that cover eco-migrants, sexual minorities or

⁹ On definitions, ambiguities, and the genealogy of “refugee,” see Fitzgerald & Arar (2018, pp.389-91). On the difference between “asylum seeker” and “refugee,” see Nawyn (2003, p.107-8). Those of us concerned about racism should worry that it is especially “in African contexts that the 1951 [Convention] definition seemed particularly inadequate” (Skran and Daughtry 2007, p.21).

stateless persons. It is, rather, to examine why one particular dimension of the Convention definition has remained unscathed as a supposedly-essential feature of refugeedom.

This condition – that refugees are inherently migrants – has not just been axiomatized (reasonable and necessary enough). It has been elevated to status of most significant parameter about the phenomenon of forced migration (an *unnecessary* theoretical blindfold). The migratory dimension of forced migration, in other words, has been assumed to be the most salient, relevant, empirically-viable, and theoretically-meaningful feature of the category. Vigorous and insightful theoretical examination of which migrants are excluded by definitional fiat proceed, nevertheless, with the insistence that migratory status remain essential. For example, “having left their country” and “unable to return” have been contemptuously rejected in favor of broader definitional criteria that include IDPs and expand *non-refoulment*, respectively. But the underlying notion that they *have in fact* “left” some locality to which “return” is possible or not, remains a dogma.

As a result, forced migrants have been relegated to mere special cases of migrants. A critical distinction from Brubaker & Cooper (2000, pp.14-15) helps capture the conceptual problem: the refugee has predominantly been theorized *relationally* (in reference and contrast to other migrants), not *categorically* (in reference to a shared experience; namely, being forcibly displaced). Put differently, forced migrants are treated as a Parsonian “residual category” in the sociological theory of migration.¹ With ordinary migrants as the unquestioned referential benchmark, it is assumed that the refugee does not “fit”; the only question then remaining is precisely *how it is* that she does not “fit.” There is a symptomatic division among migration scholars, broadly speaking, between those who treat the refugee category as a so-called “synectic residual” – hoping to integrate it successfully, one way or another, into conceptualizations of general migration (e.g. Piguet 2013; Castles et al. 2013); and those who treat it as an antinomic one – striving to minimize, dismiss, or otherwise exclude refugees to preserve extant migration theory (e.g. Massey et al. 1993; for critique, see Van Hear 2010, p.1535).¹⁰ Given the particularities of Parameters 1-2 above, we see that both approaches are very limiting indeed.

Let us proceed to empirical difficulties. Treating refugees as mere idiosyncratic migrants has contributed to their marginalization in scholarship, historiography and – until very recently – policy-oriented research (Gatrell 2017; Omata 2020; Black 2001). In absolute terms, forced migrants have obviously been a miniscule portion of all migrants over the centuries. Convention refugees, furthermore, are an *extremely* minor subset of migrants globally today: roughly 7%, according to one generous estimate (Schuster 2022, p.298). If one begins with migrants as the reference category to be generalized from, many inferences about refugees immediately become questionable. Whether it is their skewed gender and age demographics (Abbasi-Shavazi et al. 2018, pp.80-3), their poorer labor market integration (Fasani et al. 2022), their residential distribution and resettlement patterns (NASEM 2015, p.124), or the fertility rates of refugee women (Haug et al. 2002, p.346), forced migrants are unrepresentative minorities and, often, extreme statistical anomalies among migrants.

As a result, many of the most-elaborated social mechanisms of ordinary migration – circular migration, cumulative causation, seasonal migration, remittance dynamics, onward migration, brain drain, return migration, etc. – are often inapplicable to most refugees. The resulting temptation to neglect them within migration scholarship is, therefore, understandable and considerable. “If refugees are just another sort of traveler, they can begin to disappear as a focus of

¹⁰ Bouzanis and Kemp (2019) distinguish “synectic” from “antinomic” residuals (p.285), arguing that theoretical clarity and logical coherence depends on a proper distinction.

analysis” – the so-called “erasure through inclusion” hazard (Peteet 2005, p.24). Worse still, the conflation of refugees with migrants is a leading state instrument of exclusion, restrictionism, and anti-refugee violence. By subsuming forced into unforced migrants, therefore, we may unwittingly reinforce apologetics for nativism, xenophobia, and jingoism.

To give one final – but glaring – empirical specificity of forced migrants: trauma-related mental health conditions. Whatever characteristics they may or may not share with natives or unforced migrants in this-or-that case study, it is unambiguously clear that refugees are significantly more traumatized globally. A rigorous meta-analysis of 181 surveys sampling over 81,000 refugees found that 30% of refugees suffer PTSD and clinical depression (Steel et al. 2009). This is an order of magnitude more than the general population and, we can be certain, the ordinary migrant population. This particularity alone may have distinct impact on everything from acculturation and religious affiliation, to crime and suicide rates – an immense research agenda in the waiting.

How best to individuate refugees from migrants, then? The beginning of wisdom here is to replace the standard instinct to locate refugees on a forced/unforced migration continuum (e.g. Watters & Nawyn 2013, p.97), where migration is the least-common-denominator, with a forced migration-forced immobility continuum (e.g. Dowdall 2019), where the underlying variable is coercion. This ensures that forced migrants are studied categorically, not residually or relationally. It also opens up the spectrum for neglected comparative research. Refugees have much more in common with other victims of collective violence – slaves, hostages, POWs, child soldiers, rape survivors, trafficking victims, warzone civilians and even war casualties – than they do with traditional, over-studied migrant categories – labor migrants, the undocumented, urbanizing migrants, exchange students, tourists, second- and third-generation immigrants, etc. The key thing about forced migrants is not that they are migrants. It is that they are *forced*.

Parameter 4. Integration Informality

What does refugee integration signal about refugeedom, and about the receiving society?

Our approach to this question has dire analytic as well as political implications. If one assumes that integration terminates refugee-ness, the grievances and self-determination claims of many nationalist movements are at stake. The 1947 expulsion of fifteen million Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs was followed by fairly pervasive integration – so much so that hardly anyone studies these constituencies, let alone their descendants, as refugees. In contrast, the almost-simultaneous 1948 *Nakba*, which displaced less than a million Palestinians, remains a haunting collective trauma of the Middle East. As of this writing (early 2025), ongoing carnage in Israel has revitalized the claim that “most Gazans are refugees” (Moses & Rothberg 2014, p.34). Since the majority of Palestinians in Gaza are children, this implies that third- and perhaps fourth-generation descendants of 1948 and 1967 refugees automatically inherited the status. In discussing Parameter #1 above, we already disposed of the fallacy that the force factor expires with refugeedom itself. But could it be that forced migrants’ *integration* – or lack thereof – defines their asylum grievances?

A related conceptual problem is solipsism: treating refugee integration as a story about the *host society*, instead of the forced migrants themselves. The temptation to explore the receiving society’s magnanimity and strength is understandable, but dangerous. Emphasizing the host country’s levels of aid, charity, solidarity, and pity often degenerates into what Fassin (2005) called a “compassion-repression” framework. Namely, the humanitarian framing of pro-

integration arguments as questions of suffering, neediness and pity – instead of deservingness, right, and obligation – casts the host nation in an ethically superior light. The attention to *our* diversity, *our* hospitality, *our* openness, *our* institutions and – to be sure – *our* failings in integrating immigrants in fact diverts attention from the central issue: integration of asylum-seekers is a moral debt (not charity) that is owed to political subjects (not pity cases). In the case of the U.S. in particular, the “we are a nation of immigrants” doctrine is especially conducive to a self-congratulatory and nationalistic understanding of refugee integration. This includes, ironically, the vast literature criticizing the shortcomings of “our” immigrant policies: seemingly benign, it effectively treats refugees as mere convenient occasions to investigate American democracy and multiculturalism – the primary concern.

Far from a cosmopolitan act of generosity, however, refugee integration into wealthy, advanced societies may be a political and moral duty. Gibney (2015) sensibly suggested that a receiving society’s obligations to refugees be evaluated according to the demographic, economic and historical capacity to integrate. It follows that the host societies that should be integrating the greatest numbers of forced migrants are in fact integrating the least – both in absolute and in relative terms. Worse still, the relative responsibility of receiving communities for fueling the sources of displacement [Parameter #2] has led many to consider asylum not as a gift, but as compensation and reparation:

social scientists have questioned internalist (domestic) explanations for refugee movement, arguing that these accounts ignore the way that refugees are often generated by external states through their support of corrupt or violent regimes, international institutions that create or exacerbate international poverty and domestic restructuring, global warming or direct military interventions [...] Correspondingly, a number of normative theorists have suggested that asylum should in some cases be reconceived as a form of reparation for harm owed by individual states, groups of states or the international community to refugees (Gibney 2015, pp.459-60).

More controversially, if we accept that the major geopolitical states owe a greater debt to refugees because they disproportionately contributed to their force factor (the so-called “you break it, you buy it” principle [Schuerkens 2017, p.105; Alexander & Norris 2020, p.3]), the obligatory nature of integration becomes even more urgent for major military powers such as NATO members. The solipsism of studying one’s own immigration system, therefore, could be a poor substitute for discussing one’s own foreign policy.¹¹

Thus far, we have conflated asylum with integration. But isn’t the latter – through assimilation, acculturation, adaptation, etc. – meant to be informal as well as formal, a long term process of reciprocal acceptance?

Here we arrive at the central empirical flaw of refugee integration scholarship: preoccupied with marginal host countries, it fails to recognize that integration is, by state design,

¹¹ It is striking that even the most critical books on refugee integration in the U.S. (e.g. Sackett & Lareau 2023; Eaton 2015; Gowayed 2022) ignore completely the host country’s military impact on displacing those very people.

formally provisional but, in practical terms, long-term and real – if informal – for the vast majority of forced migrants. In other words, while asylum should entail a meaningful level of integration if granted in principle, in practice most of the time it does not. Most asylum claims are never granted, but most integration processes nevertheless occur despite legalisms and formalisms. The vast majority of forced migrants, though lacking formal asylum protections, are *de facto* integrated informally into where they find themselves: poor and underdeveloped societies neighboring the ones they fled.

A paradigmatic case is “Little Mogadishu,” a refugee enclave in Nairobi (Campbell 2006). Nominally there only “temporarily” and legally prohibited from residing outside camps, Somali, Ethiopian, Ugandan and other refugees in fact live and thrive in urban sites in plain view – generating profit, employing locals, opening schools, transforming youth culture, etc. One of the chief reasons that Kenya, like many host states, refuses to acknowledge and make *de jure* the *de facto* integration that has transpired (against their best efforts) is that the refugee ghetto of Little Mogadishu is a political embarrassment. Through black market trade and informal economic entrepreneurship, the refugees shed uncomfortable light on the rampant corruption and organized crime of Kenyan state institutions (p.399; p.405-6). Self-sustaining forced migrant economies throughout the world are treated similarly. Formally not allowed to be, the refugees are conspicuously and undeniably “here”: part of the society, economy, culture. To study most refugee integration, then, is to study such *informal* integration within weak, criminalized states.

It is a cliché that for forced migrants “there are only three durable solutions: voluntary repatriation, local settlement, and third country resettlement” (Stein 1986, p. 268). For concision, we will not discuss the profound obstacles of the first (Kibreab 2003; Crisp & Long 2018). But “third country resettlement” is so rare as to be, for all intents and purposes, impossible. For nearly half-a-century, the average global annual resettlement rate for refugees (IDPs and stateless persons excluded) has been less than 1% (Garnier 2023, p.50; Margesson 2022). Yet a substantial and budding literature focuses on UNHCR resettlement and its beneficiaries’ integration prospects. This is akin to studying the poverty of gender minorities by focusing on transgender lottery winners.

The only remaining “durable solution,” in practical terms, is integration into the locality where forced migrants find themselves. Namely, for most of them (IDPs), *inside* their source country and, for the vast majority of Convention refugees, in countries *neighboring* the ones they fled. If one considers the top ten refugee origin states across three decades, all major origin countries (with the exceptions of Vietnam, Sudan, and Angola) have neighboring states as primary refugee destinations. In 2022, 73% of the world’s Convention refugees resided in developing countries, most of which are classified as “low-income” (16%) or “lower-middle income” (29%). In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, only seven source countries account for 65.6% of all the region’s refugees: Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan, Angola, Rwanda, Burundi, and Democratic Rep. of the Congo. Needless to say, what they share with their neighboring countries is protracted periods of violence, unresolved histories of ethnic cleansing, and a general economic incapacity to absorb large numbers of people. Finally, this concentration of displacement in a handful of extremely poor countries has steadily increased. Between 1950 and the late 2010s, there has been a shrinking of the number of source societies from which refugees come (Fransen & De Haas 2022, p.110-6).

And yet, in a spectacular disservice, the refugee integration literature is characterized by an overwhelming selection bias towards wealthy Western democracies as host societies. These high-income countries – which host a miniscule share of refugees in both absolute and relative terms (Fransen & De Haas 2022, pp.122-3) – dominate knowledge production about the triumphs

and travails of forced migrant integration. The most-cited statement on refugee integration scholarship, Strang & Ager (2010), is symptomatic. The entire review revolves around wealthy European societies, especially the UK, which host only a tiny subset of forced migrants globally. There is not a solitary mention of a non-Western host country in the entire review. But there is no evidence to suggest that these integration dynamics are even remotely generalizable to where most non-encamped refugees reside. Kibreab (2003) argues that “refugees sheltering in Less Developed Countries [i.e. the vast majority] are the antithesis of those refugees in Developed Countries” insofar as the former do not tend to enjoy adequate civic rights, and are thus motivated to return “to recoup citizenship rights which they lost in connection with displacement and which they have been unable to achieve in exile” (p.24). Even if we do not follow Kibreab’s exaggeration, let us conclude that the selection bias is grave indeed.

We arrive, then, at the necessity to refocus our attention away from resettlement and legalisms of wealthy, rule-of-law states towards an examination of *informal* integration in poor countries with weak governance and frequent instability. This requires wrestling with a central contradiction of official government refugee policy in most host states. On the one hand, they recognize that the likelihood that most refugees return home in the short-term is negligible; forced migrants are thus framed as only temporarily “here,” not to be integrated in the long-term. On the other hand, given force factor duration and for reasons of political expediency, refugees are allowed informal, non-encampment integration with enough “looking the other way” to residential, economic, and cultural transgressions to become veritable urban realities with their own livelihoods, institutions, and places. Though unsanctioned and often illegal, these city refugee enclaves are – for all intents and purposes – the default models of integration in our world.

What about returning home? We noted above that most host states pursue a hopelessly- untenable policy of provisional “temporariness” for their refugee populations – even when they reside self-sufficiently for decades, across generations. This posture is serviceable to a more general nativist logic about integration: “If we help them now, they will repatriate, thus obviating the *need* to integrate them.” This conditioning of refugee hospitality on their temporariness is ubiquitous in history. As early as World War I, the much-celebrated humanitarian industry that embraced French, Belgian, Russian and Serbian refugees in Entente societies was highly qualified: the solidarity was premised on the knowledge, or hope, that they would and could repatriate. Belgian refugees were excellent objects of British war propaganda precisely because of their temporariness: “it was always the intention [...] that the refugees should be returned *en masse* to Belgium after the war” (Ewence 2017, p.76) and “their favourable treatment in Britain was partly based on the assumption that they would leave the country as soon as hostilities ceased” (Kushner 1999, p.23). Similarly, solidarity with Russian forced migrants was premised on the “expectation that refugees ‘will not be staying long in our midst. [After the war] the refugees will once more return to their own homes’” (Gatrell 2008, p.93-4).¹² A century later, this very same principle – anticipated repatriation as a reason to avoid integration – remains hegemonic in today’s asylum politics. Most countries in the EU, for example, condition their granting of “temporary protection” not on the prospect of integration, but on the expectation that recipients will return (Koser et al. 1998). Repatriation, meanwhile, remains rare and is often coercive. Integration – imperfect as it is – remains the only feasible outcome at scale.

¹² The hapless Armenian refugees, in contrast, were abandoned largely because it was understood that mass repatriation to an “ancestral homeland” was geopolitically impossible given developments on the eastern front (Watenpaugh 2010, p.1337).

Conclusion: Be Not Afraid of (Studying) Violence

I have argued for four parameters to understand refugees analytically. They are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Four Parameters of Forced Migration: Flaws and Alternatives

Parameter	Conceptual Flaw	Empirical Flaw	Alternative
1. Force factor timing	- Trigger reductionism; - Conflating event and process.	- Refugee volume is quantifiable, obvious; force factor is dynamic, invisible, controversial.	- Disaggregate contextual causes, catalysts, triggers; - Assume significant “lag effects.”
2. Transnational force factor	- Methodological nationalism; - Force factor endogeneity.	- The Zolberg Thesis: transnational causes of refugee waves	- Exogenize the force factor; - Centrality of interventionist powers
3. Migratory feature	- Migratory essentialism; - Refugees as relational, residual category.	- Petecet’s “erasure through enclosure”; - Forced-unforced migration continuum.	- Refugees as categorical category. - Forced migration-forced immobility continuum.
4. Integration informality	- Solipsism; - Compassion-repression moral economy.	- Most forced migrants are IDPs or in neighboring countries; - Miniscule subset of refugees in rich states.	- Abandon resettlement sampling; explore informal integration models, the norm. - Examine receiving societies’ foreign policy contributions to displacement.

After despairing “that there is no ‘theory of refugees’” and that “there is not going to be” (Black 2001, p.66), resigned scholars have urged the surrender of forced migration into the scholarly corpus of (primarily) migration and (secondarily) transnationalism and globalization. But a conspicuous alternative has been ignored: sociological studies of *violence*. If anything is to be considered special about forced migrants, it is the heightened level of coercion surrounding various aspects of their lives. This by-no-means implies that the migration literature is irrelevant for forced migrants, that refugees are passive billiard balls being pushed around without agency, or that unforced migrants do not suffer unspeakable hardships. But it does imply that we are just-as-likely to find insightful, useful, and relevant social mechanisms in the vast literature on war, as we are in the customary migration scholarship. Ignoring or marginalizing the force factor has had an exacting toll on studies of forced migration, including some of the serious normative and selection biases that this article has inspected. Much work remains to be done on the cross-fertilization with social science of violence – an agenda that would liberate forced and ordinary migration scholarship alike.

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