“Refuge” and history: a critical reading of a polemic

Alexander Betts and Paul Collier, *Refuge: transforming a broken refugee system* (Oxford, 2017)

Abstract: Alexander Betts and Paul Collier’s book *Refuge* is focused on the problems of the present, and presents ambitious plans for the future. But the claims it makes about the causes of the crisis of European refugee policy in 2015, and the longer-term problems of what the authors call the ‘broken refugee system’, are historical. This essay offers a critical reading of the book from a historian’s perspective. It shows that the authors fundamentally misrepresent the history of the refugee system in order to attack the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, the agency (UNHCR) tasked with implementing the convention, and the entire rights-based approach to refugee protection. Presenting itself as a hard-headed and realistic plan for reform, the book is a tendentious polemic whose main concern is to assert the primacy of states’ interests—especially the interest of rich states in keeping refugees out.

Keywords: Refugees, UN Refugee Convention, UNHCR, Alexander Betts, Paul Collier, *Refuge: transforming the broken refugee system*

Alexander Betts and Paul Collier’s *Refuge*, rushed to print after the crisis of European refugee policy in 2015, is focused on the present and future. But history matters in this book, from the historical claim that frames it to the concluding thoughts. The authors diagnose the failings of the existing refugee system with a brief history of its

emergence and development, and skewer the errors of European policymakers with a history of the events of summer 2015. They present their reform proposals as new (an implicit historical claim), and finish the book with a counterfactual narrative of what the history of the "crisis" might have been had they already been adopted. How does all this history stack up?

The historical claim that frames the book has become a commonplace: "There are more people displaced than at any time since the Second World War" (1), over 20 million refugees out of a total of 65 million including internally displaced people. This statistic has popped up everywhere since UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, published it in 2016 (UNHCR 2016: 2 and passim). But it needs to be treated with caution. The situations that make people flee their homes also make it hard to count them. Double counting is common, and inevitable, as individuals are repeatedly displaced. UNHCR has fairly robust figures for the total number of refugees (people displaced across a border) going back to the 1950s, when its mandate was much narrower, but it only took responsibility for assisting internally displaced persons in the 1990s—the earliest formal statement I have found is from 1994 (UNHCR 1994).[1] Before then, attempts to count IDPs, who make up the bulk of the total, were sporadic. We don't actually know if more people are displaced today than at any time since the late 1940s.[2]

We can say, though, that the comparison of the two periods is unhelpful. By the end of the second world war, out of a global population of somewhere over 2 billion, between 100 and 200 million people were displaced: tens of millions in Europe, as

many as 95 million in China (Reinisch 2013: 72). If we take the 65 million figure as accurate for 2016, it is considerably lower in absolute terms, but *much* smaller in relative terms. The global population today is over 7 billion; the global economy is vastly larger, and states, international agencies, and NGOs are incomparably better equipped to assist displaced people. The comparison with the 1940s is not helpful, except perhaps for illustrating how much more manageable are today's problems of displacement. But Betts and Collier use the comparison rhetorically, to create a sense of crisis—one that demands, indeed necessitates, the solutions they propose.

Why, in this book's telling, is the "refugee system" as currently constituted not fit to meet this challenge? Here we have our first historical account for diagnostic purposes: it is failing because it is stuck in the past. The keystone of international protection, the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, was designed to assist individual victims of persecution, essentially political refugees from communist regimes. It was not intended to assist the whole populations lastingly displaced by conflict or state failure that are characteristic of our age of "global disorder" (ch1): little wonder that states increasingly ignore it. UNHCR, meanwhile, tasked with overseeing the Convention's application, is hidebound, self-interested, and wedded to an outmoded model of humanitarian assistance distributed through refugee camps—a model suitable for emergency relief in the 1980s developing world (41), where it emerged, but not for today's prolonged displacement crises. Most refugees try and avoid camps, and so fall off UNHCR's radar; those who don't avoid them see their lives placed "on hold" for generations.

The problem with this diagnosis is that it is wrong on every level. The 1951 Convention emerged from the recognition that interwar efforts to assist displaced populations—not individuals—had failed, most catastrophically for the Jews of Germany. Its definition of "refugee" explicitly embraces those populations covered by earlier, more specific legal instruments: Russian exiles denationalized by the Bolshevik regime, post-Ottoman Armenians, and German Jews. It then extends to include anyone who "owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country". This universal definition, still valid, was designed to assist whole populations displaced by conflict and state collapse in an age of much greater "global disorder" than today. But it did not offer any assistance to cold war dissidents: it was subject to a temporal limitation, applying only to people displaced *before* 1 Jan 1951 (UN 1951: article 1).

The misleading claim that the Convention is a cold war instrument targeting individuals is not a one-off error (4, 5, 6, 9, 34, 36-38, 40, and later). Nor is it a technicality: it is a fundamental misrepresentation of the origins of modern international refugee law. The 1951 Convention is a complex and nuanced legal instrument that has sparked considerable debate and substantive legal and socio-legal scholarship (Goodwin-Gill 2014; Van Selm et al. 2003). But Betts and Collier offer no engagement with that scholarship: they are deeply impatient with the law, and dismissive of rights-based approaches to refugee protection. Instead, they

repeatedly argue that the Convention is outmoded based on this origin story. But their origin story is wrong.

The limitations on the 1951 Convention deserve discussion. One was temporal. The other was geographic: though global in reach, the Convention only applied to people displaced from within Europe. Both restrictions were removed by the 1967 Protocol, which recognized the new and persistent displacements occurring across the world. By then, UNHCR was already operating far beyond its original mandate, and it is worth stressing how that came about. When 190,000 Hungarian refugees fled into Austria in the winter of 1956–7, the country asked UNHCR for technical and diplomatic assistance: a new refugee crisis in Europe highlighted the problem of the temporal limitation (Zieck 2013). At around the same time, Morocco and Tunisia asked UNHCR to assist them with some 200,000 refugees from the French war in Algeria: a crisis beyond Europe highlighted the problem of the geographical limitation (Ruthström-Ruin 1993: chapters 3-4). The fact that the refugee system extended beyond Europe at the request of newly-independent North African states undermines Betts and Collier's repeated claim that the Convention is Eurocentric (5, 34, 39). Later regional agreements cited as evidence that the 1951 Convention is outdated and Eurocentric, like the Organization of African Unity's Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa (1969) or the Organization of American States' Cartagena Declaration on Refugees (1984), rely heavily on it, too (OAU 1969; OAS 1984).[3]

This history also tells us something crucial: the international refugee system will extend, and function, only as far as *states* allow it to. The Convention was extended in time and space because states wanted this; UNHCR's operations have consistently outrun its legal mandate because states have invited or requested its intervention. Similarly, states can hinder or ignore the Convention, and constrain UNHCR's actions. You would not know this from Betts and Collier's account, however. They depict UNHCR as a wholly autonomous actor, "adapting incrementally—through opportunistic and occasionally pathological [*sic*] means" (38). For them, this "opportunism", not the increasing demands placed on it by the growing number of UN member states, explains the agency's expansion between 1950 and 2016 from 500 to over 9000 employees. (The authors make no effort to square their depiction of this 'opportunistic' expansion with their claim that the displaced populations the agency must support are unprecedentedly large.)

There are many grounds for criticizing UNHCR, and there is lively debate about how to make the agency more effective among practitioners, including UNHCR staff, and researchers. There is no point in rehearsing that debate here, though, because once again, Betts and Collier neither engage with it nor offer a serious and evidenced critique. Instead, they sketch a crude caricature based on a willful misrepresentation of the agency's history, making no effort to examine the ways in which host states and donor states constrain its actions. Their analysis of why so many refugees' lives are stuck on hold never seriously addresses the key actors, state governments. Not coincidentally, there is no evidence in this book that they interviewed a single member of UNHCR staff as they assembled this hatchet job. (As we will see, they

spoke to few if any refugees, either.) The question of sources is, of course, an important one for a historian.

Camps, meanwhile, are not UNHCR's invention: states around the world have used them to contain refugees since at least the first world war, as Britain did—using adapted and purpose-built facilities—both in the UK and further afield (British Government War Refugees' Camp 1920; Austin 1920). The agency may rely too heavily on them as a convenient tool for delivering humanitarian assistance, but it understands their limitations. It has developed and revised a policy on urban refugees to reach those who avoid camps, and explicitly seeks alternatives to camps where possible (UNHCR 1997; UNHCR 2009; UNHCR 2015; Crisp 2017).[4] But in all too many cases, alternatives are *not* possible: not because UNHCR is self-interestedly wedded to the camp ("Camps provided jobs: just not for refugees", 41), but because states continue to insist on containing and segregating refugees. If it wants to assist refugees, the agency often has no choice but to cooperate with states' efforts to contain them.

The authors' diagnosis of the causes of the current refugee "crisis" is equally misleading. Their chapter on "Global disorder" gives a superficial and very partial overview of the causes of increasing state fragility in parts of the world. For example, an abstract process called resource extraction "increases the risk of violent conflict" (23). But no companies actually *do* it, or suborn local state officials or sponsor armed opposition groups to ease their operations; no rich-country governments stage armed interventions to ensure access to such "resources"; no rich-country

consumers create the market for them. Similarly, “the rapid spread of lopsided democracy” (20) has produced governments in countries like Iraq and Libya that no longer have the autocrat’s resort to violence, but lack popular legitimacy. But this is presented as a failure internal to those societies: there is no discussion of the role externally-imposed sanctions and bombing, recent foreign military interventions, and continued meddling by regional or global powers may have played in creating the conditions for state collapse. It is not that the problems Betts and Collier identify do not exist. But they are highly selective both in the problems they choose to identify (“supremacist Islam” is a bad thing that creates instability; racist Buddhist nationalisms in Sri Lanka or Myanmar are not mentioned, though hundreds of thousands of refugees have fled those countries[5]) and in their attribution of blame for them.

The account of the 2015 “panic” (ch. 3) is more specific, but even more tendentious. The chapter begins with an account of the dissonance that emerged between the free movement of goods and labor within the Schengen area, on the one hand, and the policies and practices intended to manage the arrival of asylum-seekers in EU countries, on the other. This is serviceable enough, though strikingly focused on effective control (ie, prevention) of immigration. The view of the rest of the world—”conflict-prone regions” like the Middle East and North Africa (66); “zones of instability” like Central Asia, the Sahel, and the Horn of Africa with their “enormous populations” (66); the “ocean of poverty” in “the countries of the Sahel and beyond them the highly populated states of West and Central Africa” (68)—is the view from an armed stockade. It is perilously close to a long tradition of European racist

discourse about the demographic threat of the global south (Chatterton Williams 2017), whose key texts include Jean Raspail's racist apocalyptic novel *Le camp des saints*, newly popular with the far right across Europe and America (Raspail 1973; Moura 1988; Polakow-Suransky 2017: 4–5, 291–296).

The analysis of the proximate cause of the "crisis", the Arab uprisings since 2011, is shakier. We learn that the uprisings did not overthrow any monarchies because "although autocratic, the monarchies of the Middle East had significant on-the-ground legitimacy" (71)—which may or may not be true, but most of them also had enormous cash resources for buying off opposition, unlimited foreign backing for repressing it, or both. Much worse is the historical narrative of the events of summer 2015. For Betts and Collier, the "crisis" was that EU refugee policy was no longer effectively keeping refugees out. The stockade appeared, for a moment, to be breached. Searching for someone to blame, the authors fix an extraordinary degree of responsibility on the German chancellor, Angela Merkel: her decision to accept Syrian refugees is presented not as a reaction to but as the primary cause *of* refugee flows into Europe.

There is a strong undercurrent of misogyny here. No male politician is treated with the same hostility that Collier and Betts reserve for Merkel, not even authoritarian racist demagogues like Hungary's Viktor Orbán. She is their prime example of the "headless heart", as though the canniest and most calculating politician in Europe were a giddy little girl. (The simplistic formula of the "headless heart" and "heartless head" becomes extremely wearing with repetition.) Observers hostile to Merkel

have noted that her decision, though it risked stoking the far right, buttressed the chancellor's centrist position in the short term by drawing support from parties on the left (Streeck 2016). Longer-term considerations may also have figured: the cost of refugee integration serves as fiscal stimulus to the German economy, while German policymakers are keenly aware that with its aging population the country requires one of its periodic mass influxes of foreign labor (Fratzscher and Junker 2015; OECD 2015; Trines 2017).[6] Take a broader view than Betts and Collier, with their blinkered focus on the danger of mass immigration, and there is plenty to suggest that Merkel's decision was based not on the "headless heart" but on her usual hard-headed (if hasty) calculation of her own and Germany's self-interest.

The authors' obsession with the specter of immigration also means that they caricature the effects of Merkel's decision to open Germany's borders. This, they say, triggered a mass movement of refugees, splintering the EU's fragile unity, tipping the balance for "leave" in the UK's Brexit referendum and causing "thousands of deaths due to drowning" (109) among the refugees. This account pins responsibility for structural problems in EU and British politics on the new arrivals, but makes Angela Merkel responsible for countless individual decisions taken by Syrian refugees. Because of their stockade mentality, Collier and Betts have no interest in understanding events in the world outside—in this case, in Syria and neighboring countries. To understand the rising numbers of Syrians trying to get to Europe in the summer of 2015, and to find someone to blame, they search within Europe and settle on Merkel (a chief instance of the book's own thoroughgoing Eurocentrism). Like most anti-immigration scaremongers, they enormously overstate

the importance of “pull” factors but show little understanding of the complex dynamics that influence individuals’ decision to leave.

Between 2011 and 2015, the Assad regime, whose ruthless bombing of civilian populations has been the principal cause of displacement from Syria (Gutman and Raymon 2013; Balanche 2018: 24), had steadily lost ground. Drastically overstretched and unable to command more than a cowed acquiescence from most of the people under its control, it was slowly decaying. But in the summer of 2015 its external allies, Hezbollah, Iran, and Russia, ramped up their support for a key strategic partner. Meanwhile, whatever lukewarm support America and the European states had offered the Syrian opposition since 2011 rapidly withered after ISIS rose to prominence in 2014: Assad successfully presented himself as a lesser evil (Hersh 2016).[7] This ensured that, while the regime was still not in a position to win the war, it was no longer of losing it (to exhaustion if not to a divided opposition).

For the millions of Syrians who were already refugees in neighboring countries, this changed their calculations. Before 2015, Syrians who fled could reasonably hope that the regime would collapse in the medium term, allowing them to go home. By the middle of 2015 that hope was wavering. (Russia’s air campaign, from September 2015, postponed it indefinitely.) At the same time, the situation in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan was worsening. All those countries had done a remarkable job of welcoming and hosting huge numbers of Syrians. But as more time went by and their numbers only grew, Syrians could sensibly assume that their welcome would wear thin. Popular and political hostility was likely to increase, and with prices rising fast,

and access to employment limited at best, their economic situation was also steadily deteriorating.

In this diplomatic, political, and economic context, and with rich countries neither adequately supporting the "havens" nor resettling more than paltry numbers of Syrians themselves, it was not surprising that many Syrian refugees with the means to do so decided to move on. Germany's decision to accept refugees, once the latter had begun walking through the Balkans in large numbers, may have influenced the direction of travel within the EU, but it emphatically did not "cause" their departure from the region itself. Nor did it cause a "huge… expansion in the people-smuggling business" (228), or thousands of deaths by drowning: those are caused by EU immigration restrictions and the absence of legal safe passage. Betts and Collier condemn the market distortions that refugee camps create in poor countries (159), but they are dead set on maintaining and reinforcing the vastly greater distortions created by rich-country immigration restrictions.

The story so far could hardly be bettered as an example of tendentious historicizing. To recap: the book starts with a misleading historical claim about the scale of current displacement. It gives an account of the existing system of refugee protection that is based on an unsustainable set of historical claims about that system's origin and development, ignoring the role played in its functioning and malfunctioning by the principal actors, namely states. Then comes a partial historical account of the events of summer 2015, skewed by the authors' obsession with keeping immigrants from poorer countries, whether refugees or not, out of Europe. Betts and Collier assemble

a grab-bag of historical “evidence”, but display no actual historical thinking: no concern to establish an accurate chronology, examine and contextualize a range of different sources, or question the motives of the actors involved; no testing of counter-hypotheses; no attempt to understand complexity, rather than impose a monocausal explanation on the path of events. This is a weak foundation for their ambitious plan to reform the “broken refugee system”.

That plan is buttressed by another unsustainable historical claim: that it represents a “new approach” (9), a “new paradigm” (9). The refugee system, the authors say, needs to address displacement as a development opportunity: instead of treating refugees as passive objects of pity, UNHCR and other agencies should unleash refugees’ potential as productive economic actors. But this is precisely what major institutional actors in refugee protection have argued in every decade since the 1920s, when League of Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Fridtjof Nansen planned to resettle 50,000 Armenian refugees in a vast agricultural project in the Soviet Caucasus (Hope Simpson 1939: 36-38; Marrus 2002: 119-21; Laycock forthcoming). In 1967, as UN high commissioner, the Aga Khan stressed that refugees could “become a great asset to their new country provided they can be included in the constructive work of development, rather than being allowed to remain in idleness in camps at the expense of the international community” (Aga Khan 1967). UNHCR’s current policies on supporting urban refugees and avoiding refugee camps are underpinned by similar thinking. But the success or otherwise of such projects and policies has never been in the control of the agencies involved: they depend on the willingness of states to support them.

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After the historical framing of Part I, the authors proceed to a “rethink” of the refugee system in Part II, which makes up the bulk of the book. With “four big new ideas” (11), Betts and Collier address the ethics of refugee protection, the “havens” where most refugees live, the best means of assisting them while incubating post-conflict recovery, and the international institutions that must step up to the plate.

The chapter on ethics (ch. 4) is particularly problematic. Its misrepresentation of the ethics of refugee protection is evident from its subtitle, “The Duty of Rescue”, and from the simplistic analogy the authors use to illuminate it. Our responsibility towards refugees, Betts and Collier say, is like that of a bystander towards a child drowning in a pond: we have a duty to get them out of the water, perhaps to dry them off and find clean clothes, but we should feel no obligation to house them till they turn 18 then put them through college. This is a pat analogy that implicitly infantilizes refugees, based on the questionable assumption that a thought experiment involving an individual in peril can usefully elucidate the ethics of responding to mass displacement. It is also obviously false. Refugees are not passive victims, like a child stuck in a pond who needs to be rescued. They are people who have rescued themselves—who have got out of danger by seeking refuge elsewhere. The ethics of refugee protection is not about a “duty of rescue” at all.

The rest of the chapter ostensibly sets itself the goal of distinguishing between the categories of “refugee” and “migrant”, while actually working energetically to conflate them. There is no mention of the right of refuge, no reference to the rights of refugees (as enshrined in the 1951 Convention), and no discussion of whether these can ethically be sustained, but there is a long section (110-117) arguing that there is no fundamental right to migrate. The chapter, like the book as a whole, seeks to bypass the issue of rights, which can be legally protected, and focuses instead on subordinating global refugee law to rich-country immigration restrictions. They speak of creating a hard-headed but compassionate “partnership based on comparative advantage and fair burden-sharing” (107-108): its purpose is to keep refugees out of rich countries.

Having set out their atrophied notion of ethics, and dispensed with the notion of rights, Betts and Collier move on to their reform proposals. By comparison with their stinging critique of the existing system, these are blandly technocratic. They are also wholly unrealistic, because Betts and Collier continue to ignore the role within that system of its principal actors, states. They start with “havens”—the countries like Turkey and Uganda where most refugees live, and where the authors would prefer them to stay. But most host states are unwilling to grant refugees full access to the labor market, as the 1951 Convention requires. Betts and Collier are unwilling to challenge states or defend refugees’ rights under the Convention, so they propose “special enterprise zones”, where refugees can be set to work without being given free access to either the labor market or whatever legal protections the host states afford citizen workers. Multinational companies will be attracted to invest in

production, as well they might when offered a captive and rightless labor force, while rich-country consumers can “buy refugee” and congratulate themselves on their ethical shopping. This solution apparently went down well with “the world’s business leaders at Davos” (ix), and you can see why, but it is not a plausible plan.

Can refugees’ rights be adequately defended under this plan? Obviously not. Betts and Collier glibly assert that “there is no reason why the model could not be adapted to ensure respect for human rights and consistency with a set of ethical practices”, but give no concrete details of how that “respect” might be ensured. They say that “the model should not function on the basis of any kind of coercion but offer sufficiently attractive opportunities to attract refugees to choose to work within and live close to these spaces” (173), but give no thought to the inherent coerciveness of allowing refugees to work in an SEZ but barring their access to a livelihood anywhere else. In a book that is so dismissive of the rights-based refugee regime, these weak gestures are mere window-dressing.

There are, anyway, more practical obstacles. Betts and Collier are seeking to “create a ‘win–win’ outcome that suits both Northern donors and Southern hosts” (151)—a formula that strikingly ignores refugees. To be successful, such a model needs to operate “at scale” (passim): that is, to make a difference to tens of millions of lives. There is no evidence that it can. Setting up a pilot project in Jordan is one thing: the Hashemite Kingdom, a foreign policy minnow, is a relatively stable state firmly in the economic and diplomatic orbit of the EU and USA. It hosts about 650,000 Syrian refugees as well as tens of thousands of Iraqis (not to mention Palestinians). Iran,

meanwhile, hosts just under a million, Pakistan well over a million, Sudan over 400,000.[8] Will the major western states allow special enterprise zones in Iran and Sudan to employ refugees, to the benefit of both countries' economies (and rulers)? No, for the same reason that Britain and France scotched Fridtjof Nansen's plan to resettle Armenian refugees in the Soviet Caucasus: because they viewed it as a huge tranche of economic development funding for an enemy state. State interests override humanitarian concerns.

I mention states first because Betts and Collier persistently neglect the role of states as key actors in every sphere they describe. But even more culpable is their neglect of refugees. Overwhelmingly, in this book, refugees feature in the abstract. A few individuals are mentioned by name, like the "young man named Abdi [who] runs a small video games studio" (163) at Nakivale camp in Uganda, or Munyompenza, "a Rwandan businessman who has expanded his maize-milling business over many years" (164). These are cheerful and simplistic caricatures of entrepreneurial refugees, and Betts and Collier neither ask their opinion, nor give any information about how and when they encountered them. Even in the tiny number of cases where they quote a refugee directly, like Farid at Zaatari camp (129), source information is not always given: was he talking to them, or are they quoting from someone else's work? As far as I can tell, only two footnotes in the book refer to direct conversations with refugees. One of the people they mention appears to be fictional: "Amira, a Syrian refugee whose situation is typical of many" (8). Meanwhile, the authors find space to cite, and credit, any number of individual authority figures, mostly white and almost all male. Achim Dercks, "of the

Association of German Chambers of Industry and Commerce", gets to give his views on Syrian refugees in Germany (134). But no Syrian refugees in Germany are asked for their views of Achim Dercks.

Absent any meaningful engagement with actual refugees, Betts and Collier provide no credible evidence that this plan would be acceptable to them. Here, though, we can draw some lessons from their pilot programmed in Jordan, small-scale project in a small country though it is. The Jordan Compact has been running since 2016, with limited success (Howden et al. 2017; Barbelet et al. 2018). Offering refugees legal work in the King Hussein bin Talal Development Area does not help them get there on Jordan's tenuous public transport network. The kind of work available there is not necessarily suitable, either for the university-educated Syrians that Betts and Collier are so keen to keep out of Germany or for the rural populations who represent a large proportion of Syrian refugees in northern Jordan, whose expertise lies in agricultural and not factory work. And in a state like Jordan, an authoritarian regime with a highly informal economy, refugees may think twice about committing to a job that comes at the whim of the government and requires them to expose themselves fully to the state bureaucracy. There are many reasons why a refugee might prefer to fall back on a combination of humanitarian assistance, however limited, and casual but discreet work in the informal economy. The Compact has created relatively few jobs, and as I drafted this piece the Jordanian government announced a limited but much less rigid system of work permits for Syrian refugees—accompanied, however, by a spike in the number of expulsions.[9]

The proposals for incubating post-conflict reconstruction and reforming international governance are more weakly articulated still. It is not controversial to suggest that support for refugees from a war-zone should attempt to incubate skills and capabilities that will assist with post-conflict reconstruction. But whether SEZs can achieve that is doubtful: Betts and Collier want everyone from shepherds to obstetricians to be working in the relatively narrow range of jobs these zones can support, and in conditions that minimize their control over their own lives. The authors express enthusiasm for refugee "entrepreneurialism", in its proper place, which is to say in poor and middle-income countries. (They do not consider it "entrepreneurial" when a Syrian refugee weighs up the costs and benefits and decides to invest in a risky but potentially rewarding journey to Europe.) But they quickly leave Abdi and Munyompenza behind as they outline the airy contours of their SEZ plan: it is clear that the main economic players in the scheme are to be large foreign companies, attracted by preferential terms and perhaps subsidized by rich-country taxpayers. They, in turn, may buy from host-country suppliers who hire refugees. But there is little scope for refugees to be anything but laborers in this model: how this will incubate recovery is unclear. One might also expect host country governments to object when international companies they have subsidized to operate in SEZs shift production over the border once peace returns. Betts and Collier flag this issue up, only to dismiss it: "Fortunately, global capitalism does not work like that: it is not a zero-sum game" (189). As ever, they are impatient with political realities.

Meanwhile, their suggestion that political recovery can be incubated by organizing Syrian refugees into toy parliaments-in-exile with "real" though strictly limited responsibilities (196) is grossly condescending. The bitter struggle for survival that the war has triggered, and the geopolitical rivalries that have sustained it, are not petty squabbles that can be neutralized by letting the children vote on how to spend their pocket money. The absence of any meaningful consultation with Syrian refugees is all too obvious in this risibly implausible plan for running their lives.

Ironically, given Betts and Collier's derision of the agency elsewhere, the toy parliaments plan depends for its implementation on the oversight of UNHCR. Like their plans for refugees, their assumptions about UNHCR and their plans for its future all too clearly indicate the absence of any consultation with its staff. As far as I can tell, in the whole main text of the book there is not a single example of a quote from or meeting with any of the agency's staff, whether in the field or at headquarters. And yet the authors allow themselves an almost unbounded attack on the agency. As I noted earlier, that attack is largely misplaced: as well as ignoring UNHCR's long-term commitment to just the kind of "development" approach that Betts and Collier claim to espouse, it also deliberately ignores the determining constraints placed on the agency by states. The authors' willful neglect of the chief constraint on international governance persists in their chapter on "rethinking" the institution, making their plans not just sketchy and speculative but unrealistic too. For two authors who relentlessly present themselves as hard-nosed and practical realists (as opposed to the moralizing *New York Times* editorialists, sanctimonious and "saintly" human rights defenders, the boringly procedural lawyers, and poor

giddy Angela Merkel with her “headless heart”), the utter implausibility of their proposals is striking. “Realism” is a well-established approach in Alex Betts’s home discipline, international relations. It is a limited and limiting one, but even the narrow analysis that is possible within a realist framework immediately reveals how unrealistic this book’s proposals are. Realists stress the primacy of *states* in international relations.

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On one level it is important to respond to this book’s arguments. We should stress that to be effective, assistance to refugees must recognize both the diversity of situations they face and the range of skills and experiences they individually bring to them. We should note that while states are not the only actors in international politics, they are the most powerful: any analysis that willfully ignores this fact is untenable, as is any proposal for reforming international governance that aligns itself only with the most selfish interests of the most powerful states. We should make clear that supporting refugees in their efforts to rebuild their lives cannot be done through a one-size-fits all technocratic solution that relies implausibly on the goodwill of rich states and generosity of multinational corporations, but must instead combine humanitarian and development assistance with patient and unrewarding work in multilateral organizations and in the courts of host countries and rich countries alike to defend refugees’ rights and increase the effective protection afforded by the 1951 Convention. We should recognize that when rich countries try to exclude refugees from their own territories, they encourage major

host states to adopt hostile and restrictive policies towards refugees too. We should argue that when rich countries enact such restrictive policies towards refugees (and other migrants) at their borders, it does not open political space for providing greater economic assistance to those kept at a distance, but rather rewards and encourages the most xenophobic and isolationist currents in our politics. Most of all, we should make clear that any proposal to improve the lives of the world's refugees needs to start by talking to refugees, not David Cameron, King Abdullah or "the world's business leaders at Davos".

But on another level, such a response would be missing the point, because it assumes that Betts and Collier are making an argument in good faith, with the aim of helping refugees. They are not. No-one with the constructive aim of improving the current international system of refugee protection could allow themselves such a tendentious and ill-informed account of its origins and functioning, or so wholly ignore its key actors. No-one with the constructive aim of making UNHCR better could allow themselves such a partial and hostile account of what it actually does and why, ignoring both its long-term commitment to development assistance for refugees and (more important) the constraints placed on it by states. No-one with the constructive aim of helping refugees could so casually dispense with rights-based protections, so ruthlessly insist on stripping them of any control over where they live and how, or listen to so few of them while writing a book this long.

The refugee system is operating, as usual, at breaking point. Constructive and well-founded arguments to reform it could vary enormously. They might stress the

responsibilities of different actors, making more cautious or more radical demands on states, envisaging a larger or smaller role for civil society, the private sector, governments, and international agencies. They might differ over the rights and obligations of refugees, of states, and of citizens. From such a well-informed debate, creative new solutions to the problems that refugees face might emerge. This book, however, is not making a constructive argument. The speculative and implausible "reforms" it proposes are no more than a pretext for an attack on UNHCR, an attack on the 1951 Convention, an attack on refugees' rights—which is to say, an attack on human rights, within a narrowly economistic and exploitative worldview. And the purpose of this destructive argument is not to help refugees, but to keep them out by any means possible.

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[1] For UNHCR's historic figures on refugee numbers, see http://popstats.unhcr.org/en/overview (accessed 13 Feb 2018).

[2] The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, which attempts to gather reliable statistics, has only been operating since 1998: http://www.internal-displacement.org/about-us/ (accessed 13 Feb 2018).

[3] The former explicitly states (article VIII.2) that 'The present Convention shall be the effective regional complement in Africa of the 1951 United Nations Convention on the Status of Refugees.'

[4] The agency has also published a number of evaluations of the implementation of these policies, which are readily available online. Betts and Collier briefly mention the 2009 policy, dismissing it as having "little impact on the lives of most urban refugees" (141) without discussing the constraints on its implementation. They do not mention the policy on alternatives to camps at all.

[5] The flight of Rohingya from Myanmar is mentioned, but attributed to "inter-ethnic tensions [rather] than to state repression", blamed on "majority violence from which the state was unwilling, and possibly unable, to protect them" (28). This whitewashing of the historical persecution of Rohingya by the Burmese state and its security forces shows just how far Betts and Collier are ready to take their refusal to attribute any responsibility, ever, to the actions of states.
[6] The first two pieces cited here appeared in November 2015: Betts and Collier cite neither. That year's refugee flows also triggered fiscal stimulus across Europe in another form: the allocation of enormously increased sums to border security at the level of the EU and of individual states.
[7] Detailing the way foreign intelligence services became mesmerized by the threat of ISIS, Hersh shares their mesmerization, and consequently downplays the Syrian regime's brutality.
[8] All figures are the most recent available at time of revision—usually 2016 or 2017—from http://reporting.unhcr.org/ (accessed 13 Feb 2018).
[9] This paragraph owes much to discussions with Ann-Christin Wagner, who did a year of ethnographic fieldwork with Syrian refugees and Jordanian host communities in 2016.