Preface

The political geography and moral economy of asylum

Didier Fassin

The “refugee question” is one of the most vexing of our times. Not only is the number of forcibly displaced persons in the world the highest on record, according to the United Nations, with more than 70 million people affected, including 26 million refugees strictly speaking, but their fate is increasingly worrying, as growing levels of rejection and violence put to the test the very principles of the 1951 Geneva Convention on Refugees. Once under the aegis of international law, refugees have become more and more vulnerable as many states refuse to provide them with asylum, letting them die at their borders and abandoning them to criminal groups or undemocratic governments.

The category of refugee has itself come to be problematic. Whereas it is supposed to confer an official protective status in the host country to persons being persecuted, or fearing persecution, in their home country, they are actually, in many contexts, stigmatized, victimized, and discriminated against in the same way as undocumented migrants. The legal boundary that distinguishes them from *soit-disant* illegal aliens, ensuring them in principle a series of rights, tends to blur as they experience precarious conditions, suffer from xenophobic reactions by nationals, and are subjected to police harassment all the same. Besides, as states artificially separate refugees and migrants, or actual and bogus asylum seekers, simply by enforcing stricter criteria of recognition, they delegitimize an increasing proportion of claims and automatically reduce the number of those granted protection while augmenting the number of those in limbo. Therefore, rather than considering refugees in accordance with their official designation, which only reflects changing norms and practices, it could be more relevant to think of them under the generic and much broader category of forced nomads, including asylum seekers, economic migrants, and undocumented foreigners. I have elsewhere proposed to analyze this coerced migration as a form of life that puts in tension the universal of a condition and the specifics of circumstances, the biological of threatened existences and the biographical of eventful being-in-the-world, the exclusion by law and its circumvention by practice. This form of life under dire constraints should not, however, lead to overlooking or minimizing the power of expectations and imaginations, far from the bare life that has

sometimes been ascribed to refugees by social scientists. *Displacement* can be read as a recognition of these tensions and an avoidance of these reifications.

In that regard, the wide range of situations examined by the authors distances them from the habitual ethnocentrism of public debates about the so-called refugee question, which is generally viewed through Western lenses in Western countries – in particular Southern Europe and the United States. The political geography of asylum is much richer. It shows that most displaced persons are on the African and Asian continents, and that not only is the distribution uneven across the planet, but it also takes distinct configurations. In the Global South, people in search of protection generally flee to a neighboring country: Zimbabweans in South Africa, Sudanese in Uganda, Somalians in Kenya, Rohingyas in Bangladesh, Afghans in Iran and Pakistan, Syrians in Jordan and Lebanon, Venezuelans in Colombia and Brazil. Although there are exceptions, in most cases, they are accommodated in large camps run by the United Nations or by local governments, the oldest of which are the Palestine refugee camps. Their registration generally suffices to grant them status and protection. In the Global North, by contrast, people who claim asylum often come from far away, having crossed numerous countries, encountered multiple obstacles, and spent considerable amounts of money to eventually find themselves stuck in a bureaucratic system in which officers and judges will decide whether they are granted refugee status or rejected as undocumented migrants. Each situation thus gives rise to a complex casuistry in which accounts, testimonies, documents, medical reports of body traces or psychic trauma, anthropological and geopolitical expertise about the home countries are mobilized. Most European countries proceed in this manner. In sum, one could speak of two forms of governmentality, with massive management in the South and individualized treatment in the North. Resettlement, favored by the United States, Australia, and Scandinavian countries, appears to be a sort of intermediate configuration. It consists of selecting refugees in camps of the Global South, generally on the basis of their vulnerability, to transfer them to the Global North. This simplified dual image is, however, rapidly changing. On the one hand, camps have multiplied in Southern Europe, where they are called hotspots, and the United States, where they are designated as detention centers; as well as on the other side of the borders in Morocco, Libya, and Turkey, in particular, as part of a process of externalization of the control of refugees in exchange for financial aid. On the other hand, asylum seeking is rapidly growing in Egypt, Uganda, Angola, and even more significantly South Africa, which at the peak of the so-called migrant crisis in 2015 notified more claimants than the entire European continent. Bringing together refugee camps and asylum seeking, internal displacement and international resettlement, local dwelling and global exile, this volume edited by Silvia Pasquetti and Romola Sanyal illustrates this diversity of situations and related stakes.

But this unequal distribution of refugees across the planet and the variety of corresponding forms of governmentality are underlain by a moral economy

of asylum that rarely receives the attention it deserves. By moral economy, I mean the production, circulation, and appropriation, critical or not, of values and affects regarding both the politics of protection and the people to be protected. A historical perspective, on which the authors insist in their contributions, is certainly useful to apprehend the evolution of these values and affects as well as their changing tensions. We may have had the illusion that in the aftermath of the Second World War a combination of sense of responsibility, ideas of solidarity, and sentiments of empathy had led to the signing of international documents guaranteeing sanctuaries, in reference to the etymology of the word asylum, for people who are victims of persecution or flee the risk thereof. In fact, as historians have demonstrated, *realpolitik* has always prevailed over good will, and the apparent generosity from the 1950s to the 1970s was mostly the result of the need for a workforce in Western countries and of the ideological contention of the Cold War. The partial closing of borders to the labor force and soon afterwards to family reunification, followed by the fall of socialist regimes, revealed that generosity in protection was no more on the agenda. In Western Europe, in the 1970s, Chilean and Argentinian political opponents fleeing right-wing dictatorships aroused admiration, while Cambodian and Vietnamese boat people who had escaped communist repression and were rescued in the South China Sea stirred up compassion. The former were seen as heroic combatants; the latter as tragic victims. But these affects and depictions declined in the 2010s when the political opponents were Syrians seeking protection from the Baathist regime and the boat people were sub-Saharan Africans risking their lives across the Mediterranean. Mistrust became common among officers and judges in asylum procedures and, rather than heroes or victims, claimants were suspected of being false refugees or potential terrorists, often with racist or even racist undertones. A new moral imagination has thus emerged, with the paradox that the increased severity in granting asylum is presented as a sign of respect for the preciously preserved refugee status. Moreover, when analyzing more closely the treatment over time of certain groups and their recognition as refugees, it is even possible to have a finer understanding of the changing moral economy of asylum. Children have long been a particular object of empathy, but as they are now administratively designated as unaccompanied minors, the obsessive verification of their age attests to an increasing suspicion. Women have recently been acknowledged as a special social group in certain circumstances when they are considered to be at risk of what is defined as forced marriage or genital mutilation, and so have gay people submitted to stigmatization and violence in homophobic environments. In the meantime, traditional criteria of recognition of asylum for political, religious, ethnic, or racial reasons have lost some of their effectiveness in the assessments of claims. Moral hierarchies are therefore implicitly established among causes of persecution and among suffering subjects. They reflect not only the representations one has of others in peril but also those one wants

to give of oneself. The authors of the present volume provide multiple case studies exemplifying these processes.

A great merit of *Displacement* is indeed to offer an exploration, in various historical contexts, of the multiple issues involved in the management of forced nomads beyond the spectacular images and disparaging discourses through which they are generally represented. The contributors thus allow the reader to perceive each situation under a new light yet from an open perspective, and to realize that this form of life has become one of the most acute prisms to apprehend the disquieting evolution of contemporary societies, as it is often from the margins of social worlds that their logics at work become visible.