Identity, Place, and the Refugee Experience

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DARCY C. MUELLER

Abstract

The refugee experience is informed by a modern nationalistic mindset. As refugees forced to flee their nation and shelter in a nation whose identity they do not share, refugees are in a uniquely vulnerable position in society. Such vulnerability manifests in the international push for voluntary repatriation of refugees despite the increasing difficulty of quick repatriation that results in refugees being viewed as invaders. These sentiments have led to many refugees existing under the invisibility bargain in which they contribute to a country's economy without benefits of cultural acceptance as can be seen with Columbian refugees in Ecuador.

Introduction

Territorial and national belonging plays a significant role in shaping identities and identity groups. The current world order ties identity with the geographical locations of home and nationality. Such classification allows for an othering of people who do not live within the assigned borders of a nation and share the resulting cultural values of a specific nation. This othering through unique identity and social contract structures that exclude those outside of a specific national identity inherently disadvantages refugees who have no clear place in a world order that values national belonging when determining identity. Without a clear place in a nationalistic world, refugees are commonly seen as threats or burdens to the nation in which they seek refuge. Refugees are shut out of the formal and informal support systems in their host nations and are disadvantaged in efforts to participate in the political and social structures in the nation in which they seek refuge. While experiencing these disadvantages, refugees are expected to contribute to the economy of their host nation. They are further kept out of fully participating in their host nations as the global system surrounding refugees assumes refugees will and encourages refugees to return to their nation of origin as quickly as possible. This essay will examine the options presented to refugees upon arriving in a host nation. These options being repatriation, the most popular and desirable method, 3rd country resettlement, and remaining in the host country. While repatriation is the most popular method it is also the least secure method as it demands the end of the conflict or issue that forced refugees to flee their home country. As the timeline of the ending of this conflict is entirely outside of the control of the host nation, repatriation runs the risk of becoming refoulment. Unlike repatriation, which demands that refugees may safely return to their home country, refoulment forces refugees to return to their host country before it is safe to do so. While against international law, this custom is still practiced and is a constant threat to refugees.[1] The second option of 3rd country resettlement is desirable for many refugees who are fleeing from long term insecurities, this is a rare option which less than 10% of refugees will receive.[2] The third option,

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[1] Susanna Dechent, "Operation Sovereign Borders: The Very Real Risk of Refoulement of Refugees," *Alternative Law Journal* 39, no. 2 (June 1, 2014): 110–14, https://doi.org/10.1177/1037969X1403900209.

[2] "Facts about Refugees and Asylum Seekers," *Refugee Action* (blog), accessed March 27, 2023, https://www.refugee-action.org.uk/about/facts-about-refugees/.

which directly leads to the invisibility bargain is to remain in the host country as a refugee. This paper will also examine. how the intersection of identity and territory informs these options in addition to the invisibility bargain of Colombian refugees in Ecuador to conclude the intersection between identity and territory negatively impacts the refugee experience.

International Expectations for Refugees

The global refugee system favors voluntary repatriation. Under this idea, refugees would voluntarily return to their home nations shortly after leaving and would not need to be resettled in another country. While repatriation within a short time span is rarely realized, the notion of voluntary repatriation continues to inform refugee policy on an international scale. In 2023 251 million dollars is expected to go to voluntary repatriation as it continues to be the UNHCRs preferred method of handling refugees.[3] Such a goal was upheld in the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees which sees one of the main four objectives being supporting the improvement of conditions to allow refugees to safely return to their host country.[4] The entire refugee system is built to return refugees to their nation of origin instead of helping them resettle in a different country. Such a system creates a culture of xenophobia against refugees that is directly tied into the identity of place as refugees are blocked from joining an identity group they were not born into.

When refugees fail to quickly return to their home nations they are seen as alien invaders. They face hostility from the government and citizens of their host nations that limit their opportunities and well-being.[5] Without adequate tools to help refugees with third country settlement, refugees will continue to be viewed as aliens and threats in their host nations. They will be unable to form a new identity that reflects the identity of the nation they are living in as they are constantly blocked from full political and social integration. Refugees are not accepted into their host nations due to coming from a different nation with a different identity. They are expected to be unseen by the citizens of their host nations and are limited in their interactions with locals. The diverse cultures and identities of refugees are seen as a threat to the identity of a host nation and this allows for refugees to be seen and discriminated against as a threat.

The notion of othering can be seen as soon as refugees enter a host country as they are encouraged to go to refugee camps. While these camps are presented as beneficial through creating a centralized location to provide aid for refugees, they also isolate refugees from the political and economic environments of their host nations and instead place them in highly stressful artificial environments of the camps. "Camp-based refugees and their offspring are often denied basic rights, such as freedom of movement, access to land and the labor market, and the ability to establish a livelihood. Refugee camps are often located in remote, isolated and inhospitable areas, making it impossible for refugees to grow their own food and contribute to the

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[3] "UNHCR and Involuntary Repatriation: Environmental Developments, the Repatriation Culture, and the Rohingya Refugees," accessed December 23, 2022, https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/isa/bam01/.
[4] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "The Global Compact on Refugees," UNHCR, accessed March 27, 2023, https://www.unhcr.org/the-global-compact-on-refugees.html.
[5] Michele G. Shedlin et al., "Sending-Country Violence and Receiving-Country Discrimination: Effects on the Health of Colombian Refugees in Ecuador," *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health* 16, no. 1 (February 2014): 119–24, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10903-013-9777-9.

local economy."[6] Despite the geographic and social isolation of camps they are the most encouraged option for refugees. Such a system is a result of the xenophobia surrounding refugees and the desire to keep refugees from entering the geographical location associated with an identity that is not theirs.

The territorializing of identity makes it so refugees are not wanted in cities and towns and find it difficult to be accepted when they settle in these towns. Refugees who opt not to settle in camps are not given the same rights and protections as refugees in camps. They commonly lose their refugee status and instead become 'illegal aliens'. "As 'aliens' rather than refugees, they occupy a precarious and ambiguous status, enjoying neither the rights of… citizens… nor the protection and limited material support of refugees in settlements."[7] These refugees are blocked from full participation in the political and social structures of the locations they are self-settled in due to the fear that they will assimilate into their new location instead of being voluntarily repatriated. This concern is a direct result of the identity of place as refugees are seen as foreigners who will threaten a national identity because they come from a different location. Such paranoia forces refugees to participate in the economic systems of their host countries without openly practicing their cultures. This phenomenon, known as the invisibility bargain, is seen with Colombian refugees in Ecuador.

The Invisibility Bargain in Ecuador

Refugees being expected to contribute to the economies of their host nations while being denied equal access to the political and social spaces has been coined the invisibility bargain. "Invisibility bargain constrains migrants' identities and political participation, demanding their economic contributions plus political and social invisibility in exchange for tolerance of their presence in the host country."[8] Refugees are seen as outsiders and invaders who threaten the culture of the nation in which they seek refuge. As such, their presence is only tolerated when they are undetectable by the citizens of the host nations. Such a dynamic is seen with Colombian refugees in Ecuador. The invisibility bargain is directly formed by the identity of place as it is a way for Ecuadorian citizens to protect their national and political identity from a perceived threat.

Ecuador has been seen as a migration haven for the past twenty years. However, this policy has economic motivations as Ecuador experienced a mass exodus following an economic crisis in 1999.[9] Following this economic crisis, Ecuador transitioned from being a large producer of emigrants to also becoming one of the largest recipients of immigrants in Latin America. Colombians fled to Ecuador to escape violence resulting from state abandonment, guerilla and paramilitary standoffs, and international drug trafficking. (Ackerman) The Colombian refugees who

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[6] Crisp, Jeff, "The Case Against Refugee Camps," Refugees International, June 6, 2017, https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports/refugee camps.

[7] Tania Kaiser, "Between a Camp and a Hard Place: Rights, Livelihood and Experiences of the Local Settlement System for Long-Term Refugees in Uganda," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 44, no. 4 (December 2006): 597–621, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X06002102.

[8] Jeffrey D. Pugh, "Negotiating Identity and Belonging through the Invisibility Bargain: Colombian Forced Migrants in Ecuador:," *International Migration Review*, August 14, 2018, https://doi.org/10.1111/imre.12344.

[9] Simone Bertoli, Jesús Fernández-Huertas Moraga, and Francesc Ortega, "Immigration Policies and the Ecuadorian Exodus," *The World Bank Economic Review* 25, no. 1 (2011): 57–76.

settled in Ecuador were able to help revitalize the Ecuadorian economy through increasing the number of people in the Ecuadorian workforce but they were only welcomed to Ecuador to become a part of the workforce and have faced increased hostility as the political narrative surrounding forced migrants shifts.

Ecuadorian citizens have increasingly stereotyped and discriminated against Colombian refugees. This has decreased the level of security enjoyed by Colombian migrants, especially those who are undocumented, and has limited their ability to participate in Ecuador's formal and informal economic and social circles. "Colombian migrants report high levels of discrimination, and nearly two out of five had been victims of a crime within the past year… They also reported little trust in Ecuadorian institutions, were reluctant to participate in civil society, and tried to keep a low profile to avoid being targets of scorn."[10] Such experiences and the consequential relationship between Colombian migrants and the state shows the negative impacts of the invisibility bargain. Migrants are afraid of participating in the political and social aspects of Ecuadorian society and of publicly expressing their Colombian identities as a result of the discrimination they have experienced due to their refugee status.

Such a relationship between migrants and the state they are claiming refuge in is due to the link between place and identity that drives the invisibility bargain. Governments feel a responsibility for the citizens of their nations and the citizens of a nation feel a greater camaraderie with those who they perceive as being similar to them. Such a similarity is typically defined by a shared culture and history. As such, nations develop their own identities and feel a greater loyalty and responsibility to those who share their national identity. Within this framework, refugees and other irregular migrants occupy a uniquely vulnerable position. They no longer have the protection of being surrounded by people and government who share their national identity and are commonly not fully accepted as members of their host nations. As a result, refugees are forced to depend on support from connections they have with people who left their home country before them or on international aid.

The lack of trust between Colombian refugees and the state of Ecuador forces them to either live in camps with limited social mobility and unique risks associated with camps or live in Ecuadorian towns and cities without protection from international aid agencies or the Ecuadorian government. Those who do choose to live in towns or cities in Ecuador typically live in poorer neighborhoods with organized crime and poor living conditions (Brown). Such conditions increase the risks for refugees and makes it more difficult for them to access work and resources. Resultingly, many Colombian refugees are reduced to begging or prostitution for survival.[11] This is further compacted by the invisibility compromise as refugees are commonly also denied employment and housing opportunities when they are clearly not Ecuadorian. Such discrimination makes it even more difficult for them to relocate to safer locations with more employment opportunities.

The notion of a shared identity of place creates a culture of xenophobia against Colombian refugees that allows for them to

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[10] Pugh, "Negotiating Identity and Belonging through the Invisibility Bargain."
[11] Brown, Kimberley, "Colombian Refugees in Ecuador Trapped in Loops of Poverty and

Insecurity," The New Humanitarian, January 13, 2021, https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2021/01/13/colombian-migrants-marginalised-ecuador-refugees.

be negatively stereotyped without efforts to truly understand or get to know refugees having to be made by the local population. Resultantly, Ecuadorians typically have a negative stereotypical view of Colombian refugees and believe they are criminals or members of guerilla groups.[12] As refugees are considered foreign and are not offering any commonly recognized returns, such as income through tourism, they can be seen as lesser than and marginalized within Ecuador. Such marginalization and discrimination takes place despite legal provisions for Colombian refugees that should give them the benefits of fitting into the Ecuadorian social contract. The Ecuadorian constitution was amended in 2008 to allow refugees the same access to social provisions as Ecuadorian nationals.[13] However, this amendment does not reflect reality for many refugees. Discrimination negatively impacts the well-being of Colombian refugees as they try to access services in Ecuador.

Due to living in remote locations and discrimination, refugees find it difficult to access healthcare. Colombian refugees are commonly asked to go to doctors' offices at absurdly early hours or aren't treated till after every Ecuadorian. They are also only partially treated such as being given a diagnosis but not medication.[14] Poor living spaces and inadequate access to healthcare increase the risk of poor health outcomes for Colombian refugees. The connection between identity and territory makes it so Colombian refugees are secondary citizens as they are not from the same territory and do not have the benefits of a shared identity. Without the loyalties of shared identities Ecuadorian citizens do not feel the need to

support Colombian refugees and this bleeds into the healthcare industry despite these refugees' right to equal access to healthcare and to the best treatment available.

In addition to the impacts of limited access to healthcare and facing discrimination when seeking healthcare, Colombian refugees struggle with the negative health impacts of food insecurity. Refugees in Ecuador suffer from food insecurity because of a multitude of unique factors including disrupted social networks, economic insecurity during resettlement, discrimination, and inadequate government and charitable support.[15] Refugees face health consequences from being forced to eat expired food that has been donated and from chronic malnutrition from being forced to ration limited supplies of an inadequate variety. Such practices keep refugees from being able to get sufficient nutrition to sustain their basic health needs. In addition to the risk of starvation, chronic malnutrition also increases risks for other health concerns and Colombian refugees are especially vulnerable to food insecurity in Ecuador. This concern is not properly addressed in Ecuador as Colombian refugees do not have equal access to a political voice to demand their basic needs be met as a result of the invisibility bargain.

While refugees face discrimination in the healthcare industry and the health risks associated with food insecurity they also find it more difficult to plan for the future than their citizen counterparts. As they are expected to return to their home nation, they are commonly denied opportunities to lay down economic and cultural roots in their host nation. For Colombian refugees in Ecuador one way this

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[12] Shedlin et al., "Sending-Country Violence and Receiving-Country Discrimination."
[13] Shedlin et al.
[14] Michele G. Shedlin et al., "The Impact of Food Insecurity on the Health of Colombian Refugees in

Ecuador," *Journal of Food Security* 4, no. 2 (May 12, 2016): 42–51, https://doi.org/10.12691/jfs-4-2-3.
[15] Shedlin et al., "Sending-Country Violence and Receiving-Country Discrimination."

barrier manifests is through limitations in access to quality education for those who choose to self-settle in Ecuadorian towns and cities. Many Colombian refugees in Ecuador do not have documentation to denote their refugee status. A lack of documentation can be a result of limited access or due to a decision to not self-identify as refugees to authorities. However, regardless of the motives, limited documentation makes it more difficult for refugees who ought to be enrolled in school to get access to primary and secondary education. A UNHCR report found that, "among all youth ages 15-19, those with legal status… are significantly more likely than those either in the application process or without documentation to attend school: 75.9 vs 47.1 percent in Quito, respectively, and 89.7 vs 74.2 percent in Lago Agrio."[16] Education systems are commonly built with the undertones of the intersection between territory and identity. Access to education often requires identity documentation. While this is typically not an issue for citizens, who commonly have easy access to forms of identity documentation such as a birth certificate, these requirements can pose a serious challenge for forced migrants. When forced to flee their homes, many forced migrants are unable to bring their identification documents with them. For refugees who do not register their presence with local authorities, this commonly means they are forced to self-settle without identification documents and cannot get access to institutions, such as schools and standardized tests, that require identification documents.

Additionally, those that do have identification documents still face unique challenges in attending school whilst holding refugee status. Refugees are often expected to travel unrealistic distances to go to school and are commonly forced to take placement exams to enter schools due to the inability to provide proof of their past educational attainment. However, these entrance exams are often built around the Ecuadorian school system and Ecuadorian history that Colombian refugees have not studied. As a result, many fail the placement exam and are ineligible to continue their education at the same level they were studying when they fled Colombia (Donger et al 28). Furthermore, refugees face stigma and discrimination from their peers and teachers. These students do not usually know what resources to turn to when they do face discrimination in school and will often drop out of school due to security concerns. The same report also found, "In Quito, 52.8 percent of youth reported that they did not feel safe in school, as well as 24.7 percent in Lago Agrio. Many also reported being the victim of physical violence in school – 27.1 percent in Quito and 9.3 percent in Lago Agrio."[17] As children face physical intimidation, discrimination, and assault at school they are less likely to feel safe attending school and are more likely to eventually drop out.

Such barriers and discrimination on both an official and unofficial level make it more difficult for refugee children to enroll in schools and make them less likely to stay in schools even when they are able to successfully enroll. These increased difficulties and consequential limited opportunities are informed by the importance of territory in determining identity and loyalty. Ecuadorians, including

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[16] Authored Elizabeth Donger et al., "We Would like to Extend Our Deep Gratitude to Jen Leigh, Miriam Chernoff, Abby Rudolph, Matthew Mimiaga, Lina Zhou, Janine Hightower and Harry Han for Their Analytic Support. We Would Also like to Thank Ben Leaman and Susan Lloyd McGarry for Their Expertise and Dedication in Copyediting and Layout.," n.d., 71.

[17] Donger et al.

those in charge of the school system, want to help and benefit other Ecuadorians who they believe fit their identity and are a part of their tribe. As Colombian refugees are not raised in Ecuador with Ecuadorian identity, they are seen as unwelcome intruders to the cohesive identity of place and suffer from policies and discrimination that limit their educational opportunities.

Conclusion

The state-centric structure of the modern world order creates a phenomenon in which location and identity are intertwined. People commonly feel an attachment to their location and allow their location to play a role in shaping their identity and worldview. As a result, refugees who are not a part of the social structure and identity structure of the nation they enter find themselves facing significant difficulty when attempting to build their lives and create new social connections in their host nations. They are commonly forced into the invisibility bargain and must contribute economically to the country in which they are seeking refuge without being able to access the political and social sectors in these nations. This system makes it significantly more difficult for refugees to fully settle and integrate into their host nations and build strong social and economic lives within these host nations. The intersection between territory and identity creates the most disadvantages for refugees as they are forced to be stateless in a state-centric world order.

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