The Social Construction of the Refugee: Borders and Imperialism

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Figure 1

WRITER'S COMMENT: Upon reading The Social Construction of What by Ian Hacking in my Religious Studies class Religion, Magic, and Science, I became interested in the nature of the terminology we use and the political ramifications they may have. The Palestinian, Syrian, Bosnian, and more recent Ukrainian refugee crisis highlighted the loaded nature of the word refugee as public policy, and people's livelihoods were all tied to this label and its seemingly ever-changing definition. The negative connotation of the word, specifically to describe people of color fleeing political and economic instability as well as ethnic cleansing, was troubling to me. I wanted to explore why the word has come to define a particular type of person while excluding others, directly affecting their access to asylum, safety, and the public perception their plight comes to mean in the media and the societies they are attempting to assimilate into. Through my research, I began dissecting this phenomenon and delved deeper into the social construction of refugeehood and its effect on Syrian refugees.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: Tasnim picked up one of the core issues in our Religious Seminar on Magic, Science and Religion—the realization that these categories are socially constructed. We had many lively debates about the implications of this realization. Students eagerly adopting the idea without, to my mind, fully comprehending its implications. But not Tasnim, who grabbed onto the idea and subjected it to a rigorous investigation using a very relevant example. She studied the use of the term "woman refugee" in different contexts, making judicious and creative use of search engines. Compiling the data she had generated was a challenge, the difficulty of which is elegantly disguised in her

final product. She also confronted the limitations of her research, noting baldly that no social consensus exists about social construction. It will be hard for the reader not to be convinced by a position that is so clearly and crisply argued, evidence of the power of Tasnim's prose.

—Naomi Janowitz

Words regularly metamorphize, continually altering their meanings, usage, and connotations with time, owing to man's propensity for evolution and reform. Therefore, social constructionism, a term used to describe the sociological, historical, and philosophical projections that shape the conception and usage of words and ideas, is often used as a model to explain such changes in societies' ever-evolving landscape. Although at times used liberally due to its propensity to explain or illuminate societal homogeneity, it often lacks nuance and evidential support as it is used to point out a phenomenon rather than explain or dissect why such a word or phenomenon exists. Ian Hacking's *The Social Constriction of What* sets out to analyze the idea of social constructionism by examining the works of authors who use it to describe or present such claims. However, Hacking believes these works were not written to explain but rather to raise consciousness, which is deemed the value of social constructionism.

Although it is a thought-provoking book that achieves its goal, taking a case study of a topic may further illuminate such claims to the reader and begin to grapple with why certain terms make their way into our lexicon and take root, forming our discourse and perceptions of certain people or ideas. Hacking briefly discusses the women refugee in the second chapter; however, he fails to discuss the term in-depth, as it was employed merely as an example rather than the central claim in his argument. Therefore, by taking Hacking's central claim on the subject, that the label woman refugee is not an inevitable category, but a classification used to describe one's circumstance and current conditions leading to her displacement and arrangement within society, one can use this to explain other phenomenons. One can thus apply this to another topic within this

vein, the refugee in the post-modern world and the word's effect on modern policy making, the international perception that comes with being belied with this term, as well as the socially constructed nature of borders that necessitated the category of the refugee.

Who Is A Refugee?

One must start by reaffirming that the refugee, defined as one who is displaced from their native land or home in order to flee war, persecution, or natural disaster, is not socially constructed as their plight and persecution is plain to see; however, the idea is. As Hacking describes, social constructionism is made or molded during a specific time and influenced by certain forces, policies, or movements present at the time, thus altering the usage and definition of the word (Hacking 125). Therefore, the word refugee emerged at a certain time and place and through the coining of the term by a particular person with established authority. The word refugee was first used to describe French Protestant Huguenots who fled France after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, which was used to grant minority religious denominations civil rights and religious freedom (The Origin of Refugee). Thus, the word has historically been used to describe displaced people fleeing from political instability or persecution. The word was standardized in 1951 during the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, which defined and outlined the usage of the word in the political and humanitarian sphere after the effects of World War II and European mass displacement. It is defined as follows: Owing to a 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; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it. (The 1951 Convention)

Taking this into account, one can expand the usage of the word through the reading of Andrew E. Shacknove's article, *Who is a Refugee?* which aims to examine the various definitions of the world in recent history as well as analyze the implications the adopting of these definitions can have on the population it is trying to represent. He claims that refugeehood is not captured exclusively through persecution or alienation, as these stipulations are sufficient but not necessary (Shacknove 277). Therefore, a better definition than, say, the international one defined through the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees might encompass those who are displaced not exclusively through political events that destabilize society but rather any "person whose home state has failed to secure their basic needs" (Shacknove 281). Therefore, citizenship and nationality are key terms in defining a refugee and whether they qualify for international amnesty. Arriving back to social constructionism, one can see that the debate to define, in order to help, refugees is strife with difficulty as the one who defines it will ultimately be the one to decide how the word can be levied to their advantage. The refugee has often been compared with other social groups in order to characterize and alienate them, as defining something inherently limits it.

Failure of The Word and its Usage

In the post-modern age, the word has come to be redefined due to increased globalization, the near-constant status of ongoing wars, as well as the politicization of the term to serve governments, drive elections, and journalistic discourse surrounding the now contentious topic. Expanding on the word's social constructionist nature, one can see through the reporting of ongoing refugee crises how the word is levied to describe and include some people while not others. Presently, new labels are forming; such as the migrant worker, internally displaced people, irregular migrants, and illegal aliens, further complicating the parameters used to describe people fleeing persecution; however, the refugee is still viewed as a neutral

term, most often used in journalistic reporting on the matter. However, one thing remains, these words often fail to humanize and explain complex structural causes for such a vast exodus of people. The Bosnian, Somali, and, more recently, Iraqi, Syrian, and Afghan humanitarian crises have highlighted that the vocabulary used to describe certain people feed a narrative in the host nation tasked with taking them in. The narrative around refugees is one of economic, political, and cultural threat as the discourse surrounding them and their plight is not seen as humanitarian but one of disturbing political and national hegemony.

The development of rigid borders as well as strict immigration laws has necessitated and heightened nationalism sentiment, as the other is very clearly established, forming a hostile and animus point of view towards those who are not part of the in-group. Despite calls for international connectivity and globalization, the border space has generated social categories of whom we let in or keep out in order to mitigate supposed risk and codify those who violate borders. Transgression of the border is thus viewed as a threat to sovereignty and a hindrance to the nation-state's ability to safeguard borders for those who reside within them (Ibrahim 1467). Therefore, when this rhetoric is spread through the media, it feeds public discourse, which in turn informs governments' risk management as opinion in public spheres reflects policymaking and data response. Citizens adopt these fears, which exchange the inherent risk they face to the other, weaponizing and dehumanizing the refugee to become a liable threat to democracy, stability, and cultural and national homogeneity.

Media Coverage of Syrian Refugees: A Narrative of Exclusion

Therefore, one can examine the social construction of the word refugee in relation to the media reporting that has taken place since the Syrian Civil War broke out in 2011. Currently, there are 13.5 million displaced Syrians, with 6.8 million Syrian refugees being

hosted in 128 countries, highlighting the severe humanitarian crisis that has taken place since 2011 (The Origin of Refugee). However, through examining the media coverage of the crisis, one can see the marked impartiality of the word's usage as well as the negative connotation the word has adopted, especially to describe people of color fleeing persecution to neighboring Europe. Although journalists are tasked with unbiasedly educating readers about a conflict, rather than sympathizing and advocating for immigrants, the role of the journalist, and more broadly, popular media outlets' coverage of news stories, is integral to how the public responds to such information. The CNN Effect, a term coined in the 1990s to explain the relationship between media coverage and policy action, further points to the fact that the language and coverage of certain stories affect public perception, which in turn alters how we use certain words and the subliminal connotations that become attached to them (Day 56).

Even the simple framing of a humanitarian crisis over a civil war can alter public perception of who a refugee is and if they gain the world's sympathy or ambivalence. Thorbjornsrud and Figenschou's qualitative and quantitative analysis of Turkish newspaper coverage of the Syrian conflict found that the media's framing of the people in question influenced public perception. For example, refugees were framed between victimhood and posing a potential threat dichotomy to the nation. Males were depicted as possible criminals and women and children as innocent and needy, highlighting the disparity the word comes to mean when placed in front of a qualifying attribute (Thorbjornsrud 3). This points to the importance of framing in relation to the divulging of news to the masses, as words can be adopted to represent renewed meaning if used in conjunction with highly connotative vocabulary.

One must further examine Europe's use of the word in order to further illuminate the deeper significance this label holds. Data conducted by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees through analysis of European press coverage of the Syrian refugee crisis illuminates this fact further. During the beginning

of the crisis, tolerance was the overarching theme dominating news outlets. Although reports of drownings and death on the Mediterranean Sea were common, the overarching theme was cautious humanitarianism. This drastically shifted after the wide circulation of three-year-old Alan Kurdi's pictures in the media, with increased calls for humanitarianism and increased acknowledgment of the plight of refugees (Georgiou 8). Although this oscillation of attitude would shift throughout the ongoing situation, the press continually frames refugees' arrival as a set of consequences that Europe will have to solve or eliminate. One can see the framing of their supposed inherent criminality or innocence plays a role in how they are perceived as well as how the receiving nation state's citizens respond to the refugees' presence and plight. Underlying racial undertones are also present, as more broadly, ethnicity and nationality play a role in who gets labeled a refugee and which connotative meaning the word begins to inhabit to the public. Therefore, those who wield the term have considerable power to influence public opinion and policy.

How are Refugees Socially Constructed?

Therefore, the narrative surrounding refugees is highly politicized, but none more so than the root cause of the inception of the word. Borders and rigid national hegemony through a national and international debate about what constitutes a citizen and an alien is central to understanding why refugeehood and the status this label affords its inhabitants are so contentious. Therefore, one can argue that the social construction of borders has led to the inception of refugeehood, which in turn becomes an additional social construct man adopts to understand the world and exclude the other from acquiring rights, resources, and dignity. National or tribal hegemony was once determined through lineage, relative geography, and being born into, invited, or initiated into the in-group. Although the exclusion of the other has existed since personal autonomy was established, mankind has

continually adopted vocabulary to explicitly exclude those they deem dangerous, radical, or of unsound thought or opinion.

In civilization's infancy, borders were roughly determined through physical demarcations such as mountains, rivers, and forests, as was the case for the world's oldest civilization, Mesopotamia. Mesopotamia is considered the first civilization to expand and, in turn, protect its borders from other settled tribes in the region, forming the first borderland. In ancient Greece and Rome, borders became more important as they determined citizenship, a new framework that would further influence the modern discourse surrounding citizenship and its effect on refugeehood. One's citizenship could thus determine land ownership, access to resources as well as rights to vote and hold office. Therefore, ideas surrounding borders grew to include ideology as well as geography. This sometimes manifested in physical walls to separate nation-states, further redefining modern ideas surrounding national borders. However, communities were still heavily defined through people rather than geography, as traveling from city-state to city-state and outside Greece or Rome's jurisdiction was relatively easy.

The Treaty of Westfalia in 1648 would additionally alter our shared understanding and adoption of the modern definition of borders as it outlined the modern state system and laid out, "The condition under which state could acquire valid title to territory either by discovery, cessation and annexation" (Jabeen 954). Therefore, colonialism and Western imperialism were the driving forces to establish borders and the strict implementation and interpretation of citizenship, which affords those who acquire it certain rights, privileges, and status within society. This necessitated vocabulary be created to define these new phenomena as ideas, political ideology, or simply one's supposed inferiority, that will hinder them from proselytizing with the dominant in-group, are sufficient reasons to build walls, fight wars, and protect racial or ethnic "purity." Refugees come to adopt these labels once they cross borders, further illuminating the highly structural rigidity we have come to define our world.

The recent shift to globalization has further complicated the label's efficacy as the language people use to describe themselves and others is becoming more fluid. However, ethnocentricism and strong national sentiment keep citizens from extending the inclusive language to include others, merely embracing more labels to describe themselves. Taking, for example, the European Union's open-border policy creating a supra-state region within member states' borders, one can see that society is partially open to open borders; however, only if the border includes those it deems beneficial and homogeneous to the dominant ethnic and cultural ideology. Europe, although rich in national and ethnic diversity, is mostly homogeneous in its 'European Identity.' However, this is challenged when members feel threatened by individuals of differing faiths and nationalities, as is the case with the present discourse surrounding refugees from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Therefore, taking in these individuals is viewed as an avenue to a marked decline in morals, liminality, and stability within the region, further pointing to a policy of exclusion or ambivalence as exclusion is easier to justify than inclusion. The social constructionist nature of the refugee has evolved due to the overemphasis on national borders, cultural and national hegemony, as well as a grandiose impression of a nation's collective consciousness.

Conclusion

Although radicals may express the invalidity or unnecessary nature of the refugee label in modern discourse, one would be wise to note that war, exclusion, and national or racial superiority narratives exist and will continue to exist as long as mankind prospers. Thus the use of such words will be preserved by the status quo and proliferate well into the future. However, the subliminal meaning this label has come to hold is demoralizing, dehumanizing, and robs those who are labeled with it agency and autonomy. Refugees were once doctors, teachers, mothers, daughters, and sons, and

erasing these self-identified labels to be instead substituted with the refugee can be dehumanizing.

These labels have come to mean different things within the social and political discourse as refugees have different rights than asylum seekers, illegal aliens, and legal residents within each respective country, making these labels necessary to ensure vulnerable people get the resources they need. However, outside the political realm, refugeehood can come to denote a compassionate and humanitarian response rather than the animus hostile one in use today. A person's race, ethnicity, or country of origin should not make one refugee more desirable than another, nor should it pit individuals against one another. Therefore, recognizing that refugeehood would not exist without borders is the first step to redefining this label.

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