



Book review of  
Cohen, Robin & Van  
Hear, Nicholas (2020)  
*Refugia. Radical  
Solutions to Mass  
Displacement*. Oxon  
& Routledge. 148 pp.

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**BOOK REVIEW**

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**ABSTRACT**

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Professor emeritus Robin Cohen and senior researcher Nicholas Van Hear from the University of Oxford present *Refugia*, an utopian alternative to the salient challenges of mass displacement. The authors introduce Refugia as a fictitious, transnational archipelago in which Refugians (inhabitants of the archipelago) live in solidarity with Somewhereanders (inhabitants living outside of the archipelago). The book's main objectives include inviting readers to challenge assumptions they might have about the nation state political system, describing how Refugia could emerge as a valued and recognized entity among other nation states, addressing limitations raised by critics, and discussing aspects of virtual examples that support the authors' advocacy for Refugia. Refugia may be understood as an 'ideal type' – a term Max Weber coined to mean something in its purest form. Often, real-life examples may satisfy some or many conditions of an ideal type and still hold theoretical value (Editors of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 2018). The authors acknowledge Mayor of Amsterdam, Femke Halsema, for her work on Zatopia and compare it to the goals of Refugia.

The idea behind Zatopia came from a camp in northern Jordan called Al Za'atari, meaning shelter in the region. Unlike other camps in the world, Halsema was impressed by Al Za'atari. Residents at Al Za'atari lived in prefabricated homes, instead of tents, and received credit to use at the supermarket and to make phone calls to relatives back in Syria. There were hospitals, clinics, schools, restaurants, workshops, a robust business district of no less than 3,000 shops, and living wage work opportunities when Halsema visited. Given the circumstances, it seemed life was not so miserable in Al Za'atari; perhaps, individuals could have a second chance and the possibility of a life worth living (see Boldelier 2017).

Essential to the foundation of Refugia are the concepts of 'homemaking' and reaching for 'a life worth living' (Chapter 5). Of the 70 million people forcibly displaced in 2018 alone, no more than 100,000 were resettled (most spent 10 or more years in a camp before resettlement), while no fewer than 5,000 died in transit (Chapter 1). The attention and response of neoliberal governments and nongovernmental organizations emphasize temporary, more palliative structures to slow the effects of displacement instead of solving it. Cohen and Van Hear suggest that this approach was unsuccessful, unacceptable, and quite the opposite of 'a life worth living'. As the book progresses it becomes clear that some characteristics of Refugia, as an ideal type, are not so fictitious after all – nor are they void of historical context.

The question of identification for those crossing national borders has certainly surfaced in the past. For example, the Nansen passport provided an identification document for stateless persons from 1922 through 1938 in a time of constant conflicts, mass displacement, and territorial reorganizations (Chapter 5). Hieronymi (2003) describes the effectiveness of the Nansen passport for Hungarian refugees in finding jobs, material assistance, scholarships, as well as legal protection from the host country and the right to move to other countries accepting the Nansen passport after World War II. This is in essence what Cohen and Van Hear have in mind when suggesting that denizens of Refugia should have what they call a Sesame Pass/App/Chip. The advantage of the pass/app/chip would be data retrieval and versatility. Whereas a physical copy of a passport could easily be misplaced, stolen, or tampered with, a subcutaneously inserted chip could not (Chapter 5). Still, critics are concerned with data hacking when it comes to this proposal for electronic/inserted passes.

Questions of permeability aside, Cohen and Van Hear cover in great detail their proposal for Refugia, even revealing a blueprint for running a government. For example,

in larger refugiums (provinces of Refugia), the politics are de facto democratic, in that officials would be chosen by allotment (lottery). For smaller refugiums, the authors suggest assemblies meeting daily on pressing issues would replace the need for elected delegates and force people to work together. All assignments would be limited to short terms in order to preserve democratic principles (Chapter 5). Related to politics, the authors put great emphasis on the availability and accessibility of jobs in neighboring SomewhereLand, implying the use of work visas. The book also discusses a section of informal economy where Refugians can stimulate the economy and earn rewards for acts of goodwill that ordinarily go unrecognized in capitalistic societies (Chapter 5).

The authors admit they are still fleshing out problems with Refugia and it will inevitably always be a work in progress. Nonetheless, the authors argue if at least some conditions of Refugia have already occurred in the world, like at Al Za'atari and after the Second World War, then why could it not be replicated at a larger scale? After all, residents at Al Za'atari lived in dignified houses, had living wage jobs, and had plenty of shopping and dining choices awaiting asylum. Hungarians fleeing persecution in the previous century found jobs, scholarships, and opportunities to move to other accepting countries. However, Refugia has received its fair share of feedback from critics. One of the major criticisms in Chapter 6, ironically, is that in practice Refugia lets nation states off the hook for the damage they have done. With the exception of Antarctica, the entirety of earth's landmass has been claimed by nation states, where some areas have been claimed by two or more nation states coterminously. This creates war zones, conflicts in identity, and has political implications. The authors argue that rather than trusting nation states with resettling displaced people, the more humanitarian thing to do would be to replace them with buffer zones where Refugians (populations of displaced people) and SomewhereLanders (people belonging to recognized nation states) can move freely, coexist, and improve life for a commonwealth.

A significant number of critics call the authors' work utopian, but they are not complimenting the writers by doing so. Many critics feel Refugia assumes a commonality that does not exist across all populations of refugees. With so many differences existing among refugees – language barriers, cultural discrepancies, and reasons for becoming displaced – why would a Rohingya refugee in Bangladesh want to, or need to, associate with a Syrian refugee living in Turkey (Chapter 5)? Moreover, how could a feasible society be built and maintained under this assumption? The authors preface their response to this, by adding these same judgments do not escape modern nation states from having functional societies as well. Cohen and Van Hear simply contend they have the blueprints for a better society based on the notion that all Refugians and SomewhereLanders can unite in their dream to live successful, integrated, and harmonious lives. An advantage of this approach is for those who enjoy their lives in SomewhereLand, who do not need to become part of Refugia. Those who become unsatisfied in SomewhereLand, or those generally sympathetic to the conditions of displaced people, can join Refugia. Those in Refugia wishing to emigrate are free to move to other Refugiums or entities of SomewhereLand accepting such documentation.

With its utopianism and a mixture of reviews from its audiences, one might wonder who this book is intended for. Whether someone is motivated to read the book out of curiosity or skepticism, this book is arguably just as valuable at informing each type of reader. The book has proven itself worthy of investigation by journalists, upper

level university students, policy makers, and stakeholders in networks such as forced migration and refugee studies, peace and conflict studies, disaster studies, and development studies. In the opinion of this reviewer, *Refugia* stands as a testament to inefficiencies and injustices stemming from the current model of approaching displacement. *Refugia* offers a refreshing twist to what the world could and should be.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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