



# Book review of Parekh, Serena 2020. *No Refuge. Ethics and the Global Refugee Crisis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 280 pp

**DARIO MAZZOLA** 

The urgent plight of refugees continues to call for genuine and innovative theoretical engagements and *No Refuge*, the most recent book from leading political theorist and Northeastern University philosophy professor Serena Parekh, is excellently apt to the task. Parekh had already convinced her readers by authoring an original encounter between the political theory, science of refuge and Hannah Arendt's thought in *Refugees and the Ethics of Forced Displacement* (Parekh 2017). In that work, she grounded her theory of refuge into the especially informative account of world crises in the provision of asylum she continues in *No Refuge*. Yet in this latter, she allows herself to advance more freely from the Arendtian theoretical framework she is an expert of, and which here remains presupposed, in the background.

*No Refuge* can therefore span well in-depth and breadth over empirical and philosophical aspects of the refugee crisis – or rather, of the refugee crises, as Parekh argues (p. X). This mixed descriptive-normative approach is so rich and encompassing that it is not immediately easy to identify its specific target and this becomes clearer to the reader only while following the original development of Parekh's presentation of the matter and the arguments she advances correspondingly. This scope, however, undoubtedly makes the book an excellent introduction to refuge, and not merely from the viewpoint of political theory. Indeed, *No Refuge* reminds of the most successful contributions in the area (Carens 2013; Miller 2016) by successfully appealing to both the specialist academic and the interested layperson.

The book covers all the main foundational questions: the definition of refugee and the basic history and structure of the global asylum regime (Chapter 1); the normative foundations of refuge and of the corresponding duties to apply and respect it (Chapter 2); the principles justifying these latter and, quite objectively, also theories which seem to oppose or restrict them (Chapter 3); the concrete situations most refugees find themselves stuck in urban destitution and refugee camps (Chapter 4); the deterrence policies constituting the 'prices' asylum seekers are made to pay (Chapter 5); the concept of 'structural injustice' which reframes the issue in terms of global responsibilities to (re)act (Chapter 6); and conclusions including a practical outline of

## BOOK REVIEW

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what we can do both individually and collectively. In a preface entitled 'Turbulence and Fear', Parekh even engages directly with popular concerns relating to security and displays the pragmatically insightful and effectively popularizing potential of the book.

From the order in which Parekh presents the matter, the titles, and by following her systematic exploration, the idea of the distinction between multiple crises of refuge emerges as the central claim of the book. Two most important crises are: the humanitarian crisis 'of the arrival of large numbers of asylum seekers, the struggle that ensued in Europe, and the political changes that resulted from governments' handling of it' (p. 3) and the crisis of 'how refugees are treated while they are refugees' (p. 17). The two are of course strictly intertwined. Parekh's engagement with the former is accurately descriptive, but she also recalls the principles of morality and international law which should sustain responses. The critique to the latter is the culminating part of the book and the one to which Parekh assigns the greater normative energy. Coherently, she holds that by becoming aware of the role of Western countries, one can develop practical strategies of intervention. These strategies will take into consideration the fact that citizens belong to a dysfunctional international structure and participate in it and will be tailored to its comprehensive reform.

Even if mostly implicitly Parekh's contribution is characteristically imbued of attentiveness to concrete experiences – first of all, those of refugees – and practical problems in politics. In this, Parekh continues to follow Hannah Arendt, as in her previous books. Thereby, Parekh is able to correct perspective distortions which risk rendering debates over asylum too abstract. For instance, she recalls that the vast majority of refugees are hosted by states in the Global South and that resettlement is presently offered to a tiny 1 per cent. She also expounds with rare clarity over some historical and empirical reasons why the refugee regime is in a situation of constant crisis: it has in fact been founded over premises that were topical at the end of the last world war but are now outdated. These points influence the considerations Parekh advances here and are thoroughly discussed in her previous book as well (Parekh 2017).

Parekh's pragmatism is also such that, while she introduces the main relevant philosophical aspects, she does not lose sight of her goal to engage with them: for instance, she treats utilitarian and deontological groundings of the right to asylum as equivalent – an assumption which could be challenged, but which holds in practice. Her attention to historical, social, and political realities surfaces again as she shows to be aware of the importance of the cultural and legal sources of the right to refuge. She also offers a kaleidoscopic atlas of refugee suffering, and if this exposure of nightmarish tragedy can overwhelm the reader, it recreates the experience of living and at times even of studying the global crisis of asylum committedly. Parekh also mentions some of the essential causes at play in the most important refugee scenarios, from Syria to Bangladesh and Eritrea, even if with the succinctness that is imposed by not focusing on any of them in detail (e.g., p. 102 and following; pp. 108–112; 127 and following).

The first comment about Parekh's outstanding achievement would certainly be an encouragement to pursue her original and fruitful way of treating asylum even further. For instance, Parekh declares herself to be 'agnostic' over the relative responsibilities of Western powers for the disaster in Syria, and she objectively yet synthetically recalls two opposing views (p. 173 and relative notes). Perhaps, a fuller assessment of the case – which was not in the aims nor in the possibilities of *No Refuge* – would vindicate one of the two. More generally, an immersion in the contexts, roots, and dynamics of each refugee crisis would unveil another global crisis of asylum – a third one, that is, but not in order of importance. And this would in turn help us rethink both problems and solutions in a way that is less insulated from broader processes in international affairs.

Similarly, Parekh's treatment of 'turbulence and fear' (pp. IX and following) is a recommendable step forward in tackling the concerns of citizens – and often the alleged motivations of politicians. Yet disciplinary expertise on the matter might even suggest reconsidering the complexity of the problem. For example, the sociologist Marzio Barbagli, who has written several books on migration and security (for a recent summary: Barbagli 2008), not only problematizes the answers provided by Parekh but uses such questions to advance a more general point. He notices that it can be misleading to treat 'migration' – and refuge, which is part of this phenomenon and deeply entangled with it – as if it were a unitary and invariable object. Sociology does instead reveal that the matters at the centre of the political debate over migration and refuge vary substantially from Lebanon to Europe, and even from Italy in the 1970s and Italy in the 2020s. Obviously, taking these questions into proper account is important for the general direction of studies in the political theory of asylum and migration, even more than for Parekh's own approach, which is already deeply attentive to such realities.

By opening doors to such critical reflections, Parekh's book represents an important advancement even for what it does *not* contain or does not cover fully. However, the wealth of data, stories, and crucial normative arguments it *does* contain – and weave together in a compelling and engaging way – make it a badly needed and extremely useful work for academics and citizens alike. Finally, by avoiding 'reckless optimism and reckless despair' (pp. 196 and following), Parekh soberingly sets the tone for continuing this important conversation in the near future, after having originally and innovatively revived and reviewed its substance.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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