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POLISHING TREADMILLS AT MIDNIGHT

IS REFUGEE INTEGRATION AN ELUSIVE GOAL?

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Abstract

It is often said that justice requires us to treat like cases alike. Accordingly, the U.S. refugee resettlement program provides all refugees—no matter where they are from, no matter their pasts—with very similar funding and services. Refugees, however, are far from alike. In this essay, I invoke Borgmann’s distinction between a “thing” and a “device” and draw on stories from my work with a resettlement agency to argue that our current, employment-driven system is in need of reform. Instead of being restricted to generic programs, refugee resettlement agencies should be funded to help each family achieve social integration in ways that best suit them.

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IS REFUGEE INTEGRATION AN ELUSIVE GOAL?

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“What more can you do for wayward strangers than to shelter them?”

-Richard Ford, Independence Day

In the summer of 2009, two refugee families from Burma arrived in Knoxville, Tennessee, where I used to live. They appeared that evening in our city’s humble airport, carrying between them everything they owned—in three bags. No luggage was lost, but nearly all else had been.

I used to work with Bridge, a non-profit agency that resettles refugees—people who flee their home countries due to persecution for their religion, ethnicity, or politics. These families fled Burma and lived close to one another in Malaysia for two years until they traveled to Knoxville on the same flight. Both families identified ethnically as Chin and religiously as Christians. The parents in one family spoke no English, while those in the other spoke English fairly well. At Bridge, our case managers secured and furnished apartments for these families, but far from one another, in different parts of the city. Later, I wondered why. Wouldn’t they want to live in the same apartment building? And couldn’t the English-speaking family help the other? I’m not a case manager, but looking back, it seemed to me that we had done these families a grave disservice. Alone in a strange city, they were now separated from the only people they knew. Surely we had made a mistake. Then again, perhaps there simply weren’t two apartments available in the same location. I still had much to learn about the constraints on refugee resettlement in the U.S.

Almost three decades ago, the philosopher Albert Borgmann distinguished between a “thing” and a “device.”¹²⁶ On Borgmann’s terminology, to encounter a thing is also to engage with the unique context from which that thing is inseparable. A kayak is a thing, inseparable as it is from weather and water, from the risks and rush of paddling. “The experience of a thing,” Borgmann wrote, is “a bodily and social engagement with the thing’s world.”¹²⁷ In contrast, a device is valued mostly for whatever purpose it serves, or its end product. A rowing machine is a device, and it’s prized above all for the fitness that it so efficiently delivers. Things, furthermore, are often displaced by devices. This is no surprise. To experience a thing, you need particular times and places, but a device is far more flexible. Devices dissolve both time and place, unburdening us of the troubles that come with things. Why bother hauling kayaks all day when you can spend half an hour on the rowing machine? So, as the bustling life of the hearth gave way to the cozy ghost of central heat, the oven is outdone by the microwave, and the jam session supplanted by the iPod. For the convenience of the device, the world of the thing is sacrificed.

Uprooted from their cultures, shucked of their contexts, refugees are like devices. At Bridge, we were often only vaguely familiar with the worlds from which refugees had been divorced. Moldova, Somalia, Burundi—really, how many Americans know much about such far-off places? Though we strive for cultural understanding, some of our ignorance is by design—for the sake of efficiency and privacy, resettlement agencies are not told why refugees fled their native lands. Instead, official documents communicate biographical “data” very briefly, usually with just a single word or phrase: name, country of origin, date of birth, gender, education, work experience, religion, ethnicity, and medical conditions. Little else is revealed. Like the inner workings of a new car or laptop, a refugee’s past is carefully concealed. Is it any wonder, then, that the lingo of resettlement stresses the goods that refugees will deliver? Refugees scheduled to travel to Knoxville were “in our pipeline,” we used to say, and we spoke of the employment “slots” in which refugees would be

¹²⁶ Albert Borgmann, *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life: A Philosophical Inquiry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 40-43. [Click here to preview this book.](#)

¹²⁷ Borgmann, 41.

“placed.” I wouldn’t be surprised to learn that similar language is used in resettlement agencies nationwide.¹²⁸

Part of what is insidious here is the subtle suggestion that, like devices, refugees are only valuable for their end products. Once employed in entry-level work, they give us the goods—fast food, stocked shelves, and shiny fitness equipment. The official goal of the U.S. resettlement program is “self-sufficiency,” which means, in short, paying one’s own way as soon as possible. A refugee is deemed self-sufficient when she pays for her own rent, utilities, food, and other basic needs with little or no public assistance. Given the aim of self-sufficiency, perhaps agencies like Bridge can’t avoid reinforcing a refugee’s device-like status, for they are funded to promote that goal—and nearly it alone. In other words, such agencies are rarely funded or authorized to invest in other goals—in advanced education, say, or skilled job training. The assumption is that refugees’ social *integration*—another buzzword of the system—will be achieved best by securing their low-rung, *economic independence*. Yet, in practice, that assumption often lacks credibility.

His name is Innocent, and he’s a refugee from Burundi who cleans an academic building at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. The job pays slightly more than minimum wage. Better still, it comes with health insurance—a luxury that most refugees struggle to afford once their Medicaid expires. Yet, after four years in the U.S., Innocent knows only a few words of English. He can’t read the bulletin boards that he passes in the hallways or the school newspapers that he picks up. Last year, I taught an ethics class in that building and had my students read Dave Eggers’ *What Is the What*—an account of a Sudanese refugee who lived in camps in Ethiopia and Kenya before being resettled in

¹²⁸ Such language might be described as “objectifying” refugees—that is, as portraying them as items that need to be spoken for, not as subjects capable of speaking and acting for themselves. Following a host of other scholars, Sara L. McKinnon observed that such objectification occurs “through the refugee aid structure involving refugee-experts who create policy and programs, aid workers who implement the policy, and refugees who receive the aid....In this structure refugees are misrecognized as nonspeaking subjects when political officials and service agencies speak and provide services on their behalf, without speaking ‘to’ and ‘with’ refugees of their needs.” [See Sara L. McKinnon, “Unsettling Resettlement: Problematizing „Lost Boys of Sudan” Resettlement and Identity,” *Western Journal of Communication*, volume 72, issue number 4, October - December 2008, page 397.](#)

Atlanta.¹²⁹ For me, Eggers' articulate protagonist stood in stark contrast with the silent sweeping outside our classroom. Innocent is self-sufficient. He's paying his own way. Yet, for many reasons, his social integration remains elusive.

"But I am an engineer," I heard her say, "and the U.S. needs me to clean hotel rooms? I won't do it." Like a small percentage of other refugees from Iraq, Rasha came to Knoxville with money of her own. For them, as for all refugees, Bridge furnishes apartments and encourages them to accept their first job offer. But there is often resistance from those who, like Rasha, have personal savings. Often fluent in English, these refugees move to nicer apartments, purchase their own furniture, get cable TV, and kick back, waiting for better job opportunities to come around. Some seek to renew their professional credentials, but often without success. From week to week, Rasha visits with friends—Iraqis and Americans—and chats on her cell phone. She goes to restaurants. Her son plays soccer for his high school team. Hurdling Bridge's self-sufficiency plan, Rasha and her son are on a fast-track to social integration.

Or are they? Perhaps this is the problem: The strictures within which agencies like Bridge operate don't allow us to grapple with the meaning of integration in individual cases. Justice, it is often said, requires that like cases be treated alike. Accordingly, all refugees—no matter where they are from, no matter their pasts or ambitions for the future—receive very similar funding and services. After all, they are all refugees. But how alike are they? Eventually, Rasha and her son will exhaust their savings. What then? As a former engineer, her math is good enough to tell her.

Sensing that real integration would take more than the provision of a common core of services—more, that is, than furnished apartments, health visits, food stamps, children enrolled in school, and employment assistance—resettlement agencies often go above and beyond those contractual requirements. Such efforts, however, are usually generic and haphazard. We cluster refugees together by ethnicity so they can retain some of their cultures, but proximity sometimes feeds divisions that were hidden to us. We help those from agrarian backgrounds connect with community gardens, but they'd rather go to the

¹²⁹ Dave Eggers, *What Is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng* (New York: Vintage, 2007). [Click here for more information on this book.](#)

mall and send their kids to church camp. To others, we give additional resources for learning English, but they start their own non-profits, elect leaders, and stick with native languages. We show them where to buy foods like those in their home countries, but McDonald's is fast and cheap.

Here, I pause and acknowledge the temptation to try to define “integration” and to speak—as many others have spoken—of the allegedly necessary “stages” of a refugee’s “successful adjustment” to life in the U.S.¹³⁰ Or I might join the push to delineate “areas” in which integration could be achieved and “measures” for its achievement.¹³¹ But I want to resist those allurements, for I suspect that, like our current system’s emphasis on economic self-sufficiency, those roads lead only to more, one-size-fits-all approaches to resettlement that would leave far too many refugees inadequately clothed. Define “integration,” carve it up into bite-size portions, and you’ll find that many refugees will decline the meal. Speak English? Entry-level work? Political participation? Own my own home? No thank you, they’ll say. Failed cases, we’ll call them, as we sigh and absolve ourselves for having tried.

Integration is a worthy goal—who, after all, wants to be severely alienated?—but the meaning of that ideal must be tailored anew to suit each individual or family. If we want to accommodate the diversity of refugees’ experiences and aspirations—that is, if we really want to welcome the *stranger*—we must abandon all cookie-cutter solutions. So, my suggestion for systemic reform takes another direction. I propose that local resettlement agencies be vested with the authority and flexibility to develop Individualized Resettlement Plans (IRPs). A refugee’s IRP would not be designed *for* her by her case manager,

¹³⁰ Dennis Hunt, for example, has spoken of four “phases of refugee adjustment” and six “categories of services necessary for supporting the refugee in his or her attempt to adjust successfully,” suggesting that “the refugee’s needs” in each of these areas “must be recognized and addressed.” [See Dennis Hunt, “Refugee Adaptation in the Resettlement Process,” in *Lessons from the Field: Issues and Resources in Refugee Mental Health*, pages 18-20; 25-26.](#)

¹³¹ For example, while the authors of “The Integration of Immigrant Families in the United States” acknowledged that “integration” is an “elusive term” that “will have different meanings for different people,” they also undertook a data analysis that focused “less on cultural measures of integration than on measures more directly correlated with social and economic mobility”—measures of, e.g., cross-generational changes, language acquisition among school age children, and welfare use. They also confessed that “the measures of integration that we include are incomplete, as we have omitted a number of key issues (e.g., civic and political participation and homeownership). Nor have we included a number of measures that could be used to gauge the receptivity of the receiving community to immigrants.” [See Michael Fix, Wendy Zimmermann, and Jeffrey S. Passel, “The Integration of Immigrant Families in the United States,” *The Urban Institute*, July, 2001, pages 2, 18-31.](#)

employment coordinator, or anyone else. Instead, the refugee herself would develop her IRP in conversation and cooperation with agency staff members.¹³² They would pose questions like these: What do you need? Where do you want to live? What would you like to learn? What kinds of work and recreation would you like to pursue? What are your dreams for your children? The particular services that the agency provides for *this* refugee, and the timeline over which those services are offered, would depend on such conversations and the IRP that is drafted in light of them. Services and timelines—and the funds and staffing to match—would vary from case to case.

I know what you're thinking: My proposal is ugly. Too difficult, you'll say. Even unwieldy. Developing an IRP would be a lengthy process of making compromises and seeking mutual understanding. Agency staff members would have to describe social and economic realities that present barriers to refugees' ambitions. However, these early frustrations would be rewarded later, for refugees would be less inclined to find fault with plans that they had a strong hand in writing, and their achievements would be more meaningful for all concerned.

But my proposal would also be more costly. Surely, when given the choice, many refugees will opt for college-prep programs, wish to learn new trades, want to start their own businesses, and much more. To realize the IRP approach, resettlement financing will have to change. More funds will have to be flexible. A commitment to quality will have to intrude on our current love affair with efficiency. But these changes will be worth the effort, for, by helping to draft her own IRP, a refugee might reclaim some of her stolen thing-ship. She could secure a new world or context that, as partially *chosen*, she might recognize as her own.

Our nation's resettlement program is a wonderful endeavor. Thanks to it, Americans save the lives of thousands of people like Innocent and Rasha each year. But the very ground on which that program labors must change, for its faults are deeper—and their

¹³² Similarly, McKinnon wrote: "I urge, as many have, for state actors and service providers to look to refugees groups first in making decisions about the particulars of resettlement policy and programs. This includes speaking with refugees about their needs both before and after resettlement to ensure that they are provided with useful resources. It also means enabling refugees in resettlement with the power to enact those policies and programs." See McKinnon, 411.

ramifications more tragic—than we have detected so far. If, like devices, refugees are stripped of their worlds and shoved unwillingly into a system that values them mostly for their end products, they can't attain any genuine integration. The rowing machine can never recover the kayak's aura. So, in the absence of IRPs that promote self-chosen integration, our current system will continue to leave refugees with only another, cheaper brand of "integration"—one that befits a mere device. Consider the suitcase, for example: It's made to suffer any context.