

## **Rethinking Displacement: A Book Review of**

**Irfran, A. (2023) Refuge and Resistance: Palestinians and the International Refugee System. Columbia University Press.**

**Laker, F. (2021) Rethinking Internal Displacement: Geo-political Games, Fragile States, and the Relief Industry.**

**Carney, M. (2021) Island of Hope: Migration and Solidarity in the Mediterranean. University of California Press. Berghahn Books.**

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In three recently published books on migration, the interdisciplinarity of the subfield is evident in the authors' varied critical interpretive approaches through ethnographic, historical, and Foucauldian methodologies. While they all adopt a critical lens, they diverge in their different methodological traditions, each perfectly suited to the examination of their subjects. These books offer a chance for scholars of all stripes to stretch their intellectual legs in sampling other disciplines' migration literature. Indeed, migration scholars would be ill-advised to ignore works that perhaps are not the most aligned with their own approaches, as these three works offer significant lessons for all who study or work on migration in its various forms.

These new and timely books offer focused contributions that advance the field by elucidating understudied populations, institutions, or dynamics in the humanitarian literature. Anne Irfan (2023) provides a record of the origins and trajectory of Palestinian refugees and their relationship to the United Nations organization dedicated to responding to their needs. Frederick Laker (2022) specifies the IDP protection regime and applies a Foucauldian analysis to the Ugandan case. And Megan A. Carney offers an ethnographic study of informal reception dynamics in Sicily (2021). Overall, their greatest combined contribution is in centering the agency of migrants and displaced persons, as well as contesting the humanitarian classification system by engaging with the implications for those who are either excluded or deprioritized.

**Irfan, A. (2023) *Refuge and Resistance: Palestinians and the International Refugee System*. Columbia University Press**

*Refuge and Resistance* is an historical account and analysis of Palestinian refugees and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). Irfan's work is meticulously researched, and her blended approach – of complementing archival work with non-archival publications and interviews to avoid replicating power structures – is not only commendable but also yields an artful recounting of events. She deftly weaves lurid anecdotes and striking photographs into a vivid composite of the trajectory of Palestinian refugees since their initial displacement in the Nakba in 1948 through 1982 when the Palestinian nationalist movement (the PLO) was driven from their bases in refugee camps in Lebanon.

Irfan traces the interactions between Palestinian refugees and UNRWAS in this period in the five fields where UNRWA operates – Jordan, Lebanon, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and Syria. Although Irfan was obligated to focus her fieldwork efforts on Jordan and Lebanon due to access restrictions, and indeed it would have been ideal had she been able to access all five fields, she nonetheless has produced a well-substantiated and convincing account and argument, through an approach that centres Palestinian refugees' perspectives and experiences, in particular those of the Nakba generation.

The book's main argument contends that grassroots activism has long shaped the Palestinian struggle for international recognition, statehood, and political rights as a forcibly displaced, stateless people. In turn, this critically shaped their relationship to UNRWA and resulted in dynamics where the international regime shaped their plight, and, by way of their activism, they too impacted UNRWA and the international regime. This is significant, because much of the previous literature on the subject characterizes displaced people as passive victims in the

care and at the mercy of international elites. Irfan, however, relocates the agency from elite actors to Palestinian refugees. In so doing, she shifts their conceptualization as passive victims to highly active political actors, resisters, and advocates for their own rights. More broadly, Irfan makes an important contribution in demonstrating that some of the world's most vulnerable and least empowered peoples can greatly influence global politics at elite levels. What's more, she foregrounds that this can be achieved through grassroots organizations to the same extent as more formal organizations or possibly even more.

The book is divided into two parts. The first traces the origins of the Palestinian refugee crisis, the Nakba, and UNRWA's establishment and initial operations. It explains how Palestinian refugees became refugees while the international regime was establishing the current humanitarian system, which left stateless refugees particularly precarious. Significantly, Irfan conceptualizes UNRWA as a quasi-state, as it was the primary organization through which Palestinians were able to negotiate their rights as well as one of the only ones to unite them in their lived experiences across the five fields. The second part specifies Palestinian resistance during this period, demonstrating how Palestinians contested the political nature of their displacement and that grassroots refugee camp actors played a significant role in shaping the UNRWA regime.

Though her treatment of and acknowledgement that the events of the Nakba are contested is quite brief, this is appropriate given its denial is contradicted by compelling and substantial evidence. She draws from this evidence and contributes further to it in her chronicling of the origins and process of Palestinian displacement. This said, while it is laudable that she was able to find and interview refugees who experienced the Nakba, the number of these is quite limited and, even for an historical work with a critical sensibility, the work clearly would have benefited from greater engagement with a greater number of individuals.

Nonetheless, although it is becoming more commonplace to centre migrant or displaced persons' narratives, Irfan's book is a significant contribution in that few other monographs (if any) have done so for Palestinian refugees in the forced displacement literature. Most of those that are organizational studies have focused on UNHCR, making one that specifies the establishment, trajectory, and dynamics of UNRWA a seminal work that should be well received by many.

*Refuge and Resistance* is recommended reading for historians interested in international organizations and the Middle East region; scholars of international organizations and the United Nations and humanitarian system in particular; and, more broadly: migration, displacement, social movement, and activism scholars; and humanitarian practitioners.

## **Laker, F. (2021) Rethinking Internal Displacement: Geo-political Games, Fragile States, and the Relief Industry**

Frederick Laker's *Rethinking Internal Displacement* offers the migration literature a thorough examination of the regime that aims to serve internally displaced persons (IDPs). The book is divided into three parts. The first describes the origins of the IDP regime, and the second explains the regime's structure and the discourse analysis undertaken that demonstrates how the regime reproduces power, privilege, and paternalism. The third and final part discusses the impacts of the regime, demonstrating how its discourse served to maintain government power via the Ugandan case (1994-2010). The author explains the Foucauldian concept of heterotopia (i.e., how power translates into physical space) and its application to IDP camps as places of discourse that allowed elite actors to maintain power.

While the main aims are largely descriptive, Laker's specification of the history, structure, functioning, and impact of the IDP protection regime is a much-needed contribution. The book's greatest contribution is establishing a framework to think about IDPs and the regime that aims to serve them, which most humanitarians or scholars of relevant subjects might not be able to fully or correctly identify if asked. So much of the forced displacement and humanitarian literature within migration scholarship is centered around refugees that this work represents a broadening of focus that should enrich scholars' and practitioners' understanding, deepen their commitment, and strengthen their capacity to better respond to a more diverse group of displaced people.

While there may be a case for the concept of heterotopia and its reproduction of power through space, to later claim that the "the establishment and running of IDP camps may be less about providing protection to destitute vulnerable people and more about inscribing the interests, privileges and prerogatives of the humanitarian industry and fragile states into physical space", the author really should have been clearer in his indictments or used a different unit of analysis. It is to no one's surprise that states respond to international structures and norms to serve their own interests. In the same vein, all organizations are motivated by their own interests as well. However, any analysis of behemoth institutions and regimes should be careful in assessing to what extent various actors within them are responsible for power reproduction. Differences between the problematic aspects of the humanitarian sector and fragile states seriously undermine Laker's argument, given disparities in interests and agency.

What's more, Laker's claim that international organizations are immune to criticism and that state's bear the brunt of the blame for their citizens' protections is puzzling when there exists a great amount of literature doing just this even when limiting one's scope to the humanitarian literature, not to mention the broader political science literature. Therefore, many will likely find the assessment unfair and lacking nuance, without broadening the analysis to wrestle with other, less "conspiratorial" explanations (to use the author's own description). Overall, however, the work should offer opportunities for relevant actors to reflect upon the highlighted shortcomings and to subsequently strive for improvement.

Nonetheless, *Rethinking Internal Displacement* is an important work and will be particularly useful for scholars of migration and the humanitarian sector, international organizations, and those who are partial to discourse analysis and Foucault. Most of the introductory chapter and later empirical portions would be useful to humanitarian practitioners, however, much of the remaining chapters are likely inaccessible given the theoretical methods and approach.

**Carney, M. (2021) *Island of Hope: Migration and Solidarity in the Mediterranean*. University of California Press. Berghahn Books**

Carney's book is an ethnographic work whose primary contribution is the specification and documentation of migrant solidarity work in Sicily, one of southern Europe's first port of entry for migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea. Throughout the book, Carney demonstrates how migrant solidarity, or informal reception and integration services, interact with austerity policies in Sicily, one of the primary points of entry in southern Europe for migrants crossing the Mediterranean in the wake of more formal and state reception institutional and policy failures.

Carney's work makes clear contributions to the ethnographic migration literature by delineating how both formal and informal forms of reception occur in the European context. It also successfully specifies different forms and meanings of migrant solidarity work as a set of practices and an "economy of affects", whose primary objective is to support migrants in self-determination in their journey. Some of these forms include partaking in alternative housing, participating in creative community events and spaces, or collaborating in multicultural food spaces as both a source of livelihood and transformation.

One of the main contributions of the book is the author's efforts to shift the perception of the "migration crisis" to one stemming from neoliberal politics and economic policies. It contributes to scholarship on migration as well as the social relations of care labor in neoliberal capitalist contexts. Throughout the book, Carney engages with the politics of

irresponsibility resulting from neoliberal state agendas that continue to relegate the responsibility of care increasingly onto non-state actors.

The primary, most obvious strength of the book is its ethnographic approach, making much of it highly readable in its narrative form. The images taken by the author and other relevant media sprinkled throughout help to bring the subject alive and make it even more convincing. Further, one of the central tenets of her approach is to centre migrant perspectives without over-relying intrusively on their contributions. Carney achieves this to a respectable degree by chronicling migrants' experiences of reception and solidarity work as closely as possible but largely drawing on solidarity workers as sources. This reflects her highly ethical commitment to combatting the substantial omission of these perspectives in other work. Some of the most poignant events documented during her fieldwork were her observations of the reception of migrants on a vessel arriving in real time, a funeral for migrants who perished at sea, and the final two chapters about "foodways" and migrant youth experiences. Carney's ethical sensibility is equally evident in her aim to dispel the image of migrants as victims without agency and subject to European ideals of childhood and maturity. She argues that casting them as such further limits their mobility and autonomy, resulting in more hindrances to integration and/or the successful realization of the migrant's journey and goals.

This is a highly relevant and significant work, which centres around an understudied form of migrant reception. The book helps readers understand more informal modes of migrant reception in the context of the failings of more formal ones. While this deals with one instance of "street-level hospitality or reception", versions of these dynamics are plausibly happening in other places that are also the first port of a call for new arrivals. However, the book does not give us a sense of whether these dynamics are idiosyncratic of Europe or, indeed, of Sicily. Though ethnographic approaches tend to foreground the particularities of a case over the potential for generalization, it would have been useful to have had some substantial qualification or indication of the broader applicability in other ports-of-entry in Europe and other regions.

This book will appeal especially to critical and ethnographic migration who want a better sense of different kinds of reception and how they operate but also for scholars interested in austerity politics and its impacts. Some policy makers, humanitarian practitioners, and other non-academics involved with migration work would also benefit from reading this book, though some might struggle with the more critical elements and language.

These books all deal with often-overlooked populations in concentrating on IDPs, Palestinian refugees, and individuals engaging in informal modes of reception in Sicily. They also focus on

how migrants are protected or not, at least to a certain extent. In treating this theme, all authors display an ethical sensibility that is inherently critical of certain institutions: in Laker's, the entire humanitarian system, in Irfan's an individual humanitarian organization, and in Carney's mainly state entities. While it certainly is (or can be) admirable to shed light on the failings of "the establishment" with the goal of improving it, too seldom do critical works move beyond the whistleblowing step to engaging with or offering concrete solutions. When debating philosophical questions this is not necessarily urgent, but in dealing with empirical matters like migration and displacement that impact so many people's lives, it is unclear what we all are doing this for if solutions are not part of the conversation. Assuming they are offered at all, they often are given a cursory treatment in the final few pages without any substantial evidence suggesting what might actually work, having spent the majority of the work assessing what is wrong instead of how we might attempt to fix it. While it is fair that each piece of scholarship cannot hope to be everything all at once, in an era of ever-pressing problems, it is necessary that our scholarly works do not mimic each other to such an extent and strive to inform aims beyond just whistleblowing. We live in a golden age of awareness-raising, yet what we really need is knowledge-generation that better informs the decision-makers, practitioners, and grassroots actors who are positioned for problem-solving.

Nonetheless, all works are richly detailed and paint highly convincing portraits of three disparate migrant institutional ecosystems: in Carney's case of Sicily, its austerity experiences, and the migrant reception and solidarity work Sicilians have undertaken; in Laker's, of the IDP regime and the Ugandan case; and in Irfan's, a history of the Palestinian refugee experience, nationalist movement, and political relationship with UNRWA.