From Forced Migration to Displacement?

David Owen [ID]*

ABSTRACT

Should the multi-disciplinary field of Forced Migration Studies (FMS) re-orient itself around the concept of "displacement"? This short intervention situates this question against the background of the transition from Refugee Studies to FMS, as well as external developments in the realm of protection. It draws attention to how the concept of displacement has become more central to both policy and academic discussion in FMS before considering what difference such a re-orientation might make conceptually, ethically, and politically. It concludes by suggesting that FMS might be conceived as standing between and across two larger fields of enquiry: Migration Studies and Displacement Studies.

KEYWORDS: forced migration, displacement, refugees, place, field

"The birth of a discipline", as Chimni remarks, "is not an ahistorical process; disciplines begin and evolve, suffer ebbs and flows, in response to external developments".[1] The question of whether the *field* (not discipline) of Forced Migration Studies (FMS) should engage in an act of re-founding by explicitly reorienting its focus from forced migration to displacement is no exception to this rule. In part, the pressure for such a re-orientation comes from a development that was internal to the transition from "Refugee Studies" – a multidisciplinary area that became a relatively cohesive field of enquiry (with its own journals and institutions) in the 1980s – to FMS (or, more equivocally, "Refugee and Forced Migration Studies") in the early 21st century, a transition that itself involved the relationship between external developments and internal pressures. In part, the push to re-orientation comes from external developments in the causes and forms of current global trends in patterns of displacement, *and* in the changing perceptions of, and responses to, these patterns.

The internal development is a product of the increasing attention paid by FMS to internally displaced persons (IDPs), as well as the wider range of forced migration relative to those with a claim to refugee status (Betts' introduction of the term "survival migration" in his eponymous 2013 work can be seen as one example of an attempt to capture this point). On the one hand, the shift to FMS enabled a greater critical focus on the concept of

1   B.S. Chimni , "The Birth of a 'Discipline': From Refugee to Forced Migration Studies", *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 22 (1), 2009, 11–29, 23.

refugeehood that decisively shifted discussion beyond the dominance of a juridical framing of the refugee towards a wider investigation of the background structures that supported the generation of forced migration and the political character, function, and limitations of the international refugee regime with respect to the protection of "necessary fleers" (to borrow Aleinikoff and Zamore's phrase[2]). On the other hand, the expansion of focus and, in particular, the new focus on IDPs aligned with (and perhaps helped to legitimate) a "humanitarian" turn. This was a site of significant debate in academic-policy circles. Thus, for example, in 2007, James Hathaway, a leading international scholar of refugee law, used his keynote address to the *International Association for the Study of Forced Migration* to respond to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' increasingly bold policy concerning IDPs by insisting on the political distinctiveness of refugees and the failure of need-based humanitarianism to acknowledge this specificity.[3] While, in a reply to Hathaway's argument, Adelman and McGrath argue that most refugees under UNHCR protection had fled conflict, not persecution, and that to the extent that IDPs meet the same criteria, they should be entitled to the same treatment.[4] It was also a site of critical reflection with Chimni arguing that the formation of FMS was connected to, and enabled, the development of "political humanitarianism" as a form of neo-imperial power exercised by the Global North over the Global South.[5] Moreover, while IDPs are forced internal migrants, the adoption of the former phrase in the norm entrepreneurship of Cohen and Deng in the 1990s already points to a potential tension and ambiguity between the legal use of "migrant" in international policy domains to refer to transnational migrants and the academic use of "migrant" to cover both internal and transnational forced migrants, as implied in FMS's encompassing of IDPs and development-induced displacement of persons. One response to this ambiguity, consonant with 'political humanitarianism', is expressed in the UNHCR's strategic reconceptualisation of its role in terms of "displacement" as the general organising concept:

> We will engage across the entire spectrum of *forced displacement*, with refugees, internally displaced, and stateless people, endeavouring to ensure access to protection, address factors that may contribute to further displacement or onward movement, and give a stronger impetus to both solutions and prevention. In particular, we will ensure a more decisive and predictable engagement with internally displaced people, in collaboration with our partners, and guided by the policy, coordination and operational arrangements established by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee. We will do this in a manner that takes into account our different responsibilities for different categories of *forcibly displaced people*.[6]

With this move, refugees and other forced migrants are brought under the aegis of the concept of displacement. A similar transition towards "displacement" as the general field concept can be traced in the editor's introduction to the *Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*, whose Part Titles include *Shifting Spaces and Scenarios of Displacement* and *Root Causes of Displacement*, in which they consistently turn to the concept of displacement

---

[2]   They introduce this phrase to describe all those who have reasons of practical necessity to flee their home states in T.A. Aleinikoff & L. Zamore, *The Arc of Protection*, Stanford University Press, 2020.
[3]   J. Hathaway, "Forced Migration Studies: Could We Agree Just to 'Date'"?, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 20(3), 2007, 349–369.
[4]   H. Adelman & S. McGrath, "To Date Or To Marry: That is The Question", *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 20(3), 2007, 376–380. For discussion, see S. Martin, *International Migration: Evolving Trends from the Early Twentieth Century to the Present*, Cambridge University Press, 2014, 89–90.
[5]   Chimni, "The Birth of a 'Discipline': From Refugee to Forced Migration Studies".
[6]   UNHCR, *UNHCR Strategic Directions 2017-2021*, 2017, available at: https://www.unhcr.org/media/unhcrs-strategic-directions-2017-2021 (last visited 12 Aug. 2024), 14. My italics.

to characterise the locus of the field.[7] Thus, for example, in commenting on the ethical commitments of the field, they remark:

> It is, we hope, this commitment to upholding the human rights of *displaced persons* within the framework of international legal commitments and ethical values, wherever they may be located ... which connects scholars working on refugee and forced migration studies across the Humanities and Social and Political Sciences.[8]

Or, again after reflecting on the diversification of loci of academic reflection in this field, they suggest: "The diversification of regional perspectives in academic research will also be paralleled by the increasing number of regional initiatives designed to respond to, and attempt to prevent, *displacement*."[9] From a normative perspective, similar shifts can be tracked, to mention just a few cases, in political philosophy with Phillip Cole's *Global Displacement in the Twenty-First Century: Towards an Ethical Framework*,[10] in law with Jane McAdam's suggestion in her work *Climate Change, Forced Migration and the Law* of the responsibility to focus "on the needs and rights of the displaced irrespective of the cause",[11] and in international relations with Alex Aleinikoff's argument for focusing on "the *fact of displacement* due to climate change" and for embracing "*a right not to be displaced*" against the background of "an emerging consensus around a comprehensive approach to climate migration, one that seeks to *avert* displacement, *minimize* displacement, and *address* the harmful effects of displacement".[12]

As these last illustrations indicate, the major external developments concern both the seemingly ever-increasing official numbers of IDPs (breaking new records in most recent years) and, non-coincidentally, what might be described as "environmental causes of nonvoluntary movement". Thus, for example, in their 2019 thematic summary report on disaster displacement, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre states:

> Disasters have triggered around 265 million displacements since IDMC began collecting data on the phenomenon in 2008, more than three times the figure for conflict and violence ... . The problem is likely to grow and become more intractable in the future. Weather-related hazards account for more than 87 per cent of all disaster displacement, and the impacts of climate change and the increasing concentration of populations in areas exposed to storms and floods mean that ever more people are at risk of being displaced.[13]

It would be a mistake here to attend only to "reactive" and not also "anticipatory" forms of displacement in the context of environmental challenges,[14] and hence, the numbers of persons who are displaced in this context are likely to significantly exceed the figures for disaster displacement alone and call for different kinds of response.

---

[7]   F. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al. "Introduction", in E. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al. (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*, Oxford University Press, 2014, 1–20.

[8]   *Ibid.*, 6.

[9]   *Ibid.*, 13–14. My italics.

[10]   P. Cole, *Global Displacement in the Twenty-First Century: Towards an Ethical Framework*, Edinburgh University Press, 2022.

[11]   J. McAdam, *Climate Change, Forced Migration, and International Law*, Oxford University Press, 2012, 240.

[12]   T.A. Aleinikoff, "Climate-Induced Displacement and the International Protection of Forced Migrants", *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, 91(2), 2024, 421–444, 422.

[13]   IDMC, *Disaster Displacement—a Global Review*, 2019, available at: https://www.internal-displacement.org/publications/disaster-displacement-a-global-review/ (last visited 12 Aug. 2024), 5.

[14]   See J. Draper, "Anticipatory and Reactive Displacement", in J. Draper & D. Owen (eds), *The Political Philosophy of Internal Displacement*, Oxford University Press, 2024, 73–91.

These internal and external developments point to the increasing salience of the category "displacement" as a general organising concept for bringing together heterogeneous phenomena that have become, or ought to be, matters of political concern and that stand in a range of different relationships to human agency. Should we then embrace a turn of the field towards a focus on displacement as the central organising concept?

1. THE DIFFERENCE OF "DISPLACEMENT"

What difference would such a re-orientation make? One recent attempt to conceptualise displacement for this context is provided by Ali who offers the idea of "a process of coercive disruption"[15] to "valued ways of living and functioning".[16] The strength of this proposal is that it makes visible "an array of different pressures and constraints, as well as strategies of evasion and resistance, which are obscured by conflating displacement with the event of forced migration"[17] and allows it to accommodate those who are rendered immobile by these pressures and constraints and those who move. However, it has three significant limitations. The first is that the concept of displacement is used to refer not only to a process but also to a condition[18]: when we speak of a subject being displaced, we can be talking about either the process or the condition, and while emphasising the former is important in making visible the realm of pressures and constraints that come prior to (and may even prevent) forced migration, stressing the latter is key to understanding the harm of being placeless people, a harm that can extend across generations in refugee camps (consider the fate of Palestinians in camps in Lebanon). The second is that it effectively conflates non-voluntary actions (of leaving or remaining) with coerced actions in a way that does not accommodate the way in which, for example, climate change or environmental disasters can restructure the choice-set of agents, leaving them with no valuable options to choose but the necessity of choice. It is an important point about the concept of displacement that it registers the non-voluntary character of choices made by agents; one might speak of voluntary (re)location but not voluntary displacement. The third is that, despite Ali's focus on displacement as 'a *process* happening *in place*',[19] the concept of place is not given significant attention in his account (more on this shortly).

A first contrast to note is, then, that the concept of displacement has a wider scope than that of forced migration encompassing cases of mobility and immobility. A second point, as Santi Amantini has stressed, is that there are distinctive harms (such as the loss of one's home environment) that attend displaced persons qua displacement, regardless of whether they cross borders, which are often elided by a focus on border harms (however, this focus is politically intelligible under current conditions).[20] At least some of these harms can be experienced by those who are born into contexts of protracted displacement (such as the Palestinians in exile) or those who inhabit towns where much of the population has fled[21] because the loss of home environment is the loss of a "place" – not just the "space"

[15] A. Ali, "Conceptualizing Displacement: The Importance of Coercion", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 49(5), 2022, 1083–1102, 1086.

[16] *Ibid.*, 1084

[17] *Ibid.*, 1083–1084.

[18] See, for example, G. Ramsay & H.H. Askland, "Displacement as Condition: A Refugee, a Farmer and the Teleology of Life", *Ethnos*, 87(3), 2020, 600–621.

[19] Ali, "Conceptualizing Displacement: The Importance of Coercion", 1085.

[20] See L. Santi Amantini, "Reparative Responsibility for the Harms of Forced Migration", *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 2022, 1–19, available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/josp.12493 (last visited 20 July 2024) and L. Santi Amantini, "The Harms of Internal Displacement beyond Human Rights Violations", in J. Draper & D. Owen (eds), *The Political Philosophy of Internal Displacement*, Oxford University Press, 2024, 17–34.

[21] A point forcefully made by P. Ochoa Espejo, "The Place Left Behind", in J. Draper & D. Owen (eds), *The Political Philosophy of Internal Displacement*, Oxford University Press, 2024, 238–253.

occupied. This last point not only illustrates the natural connection that a displacement turn establishes with diaspora studies, but also raises an intriguing and important question for a field organised around the concept of displacement: "what is the 'place' in dis*place*ment?"

2. THE PLACE IN DISPLACEMENT

It is a feature of the concept of "forced migration" that while it can encompass both internal and transnational migrants, its focus is on the non-voluntary *movement* of persons; in contrast, while one standard use of the concept of displacement is to refer to forced migration, it has a wider extension. One that I have already mentioned concerns exiles who were born in exile (such as the children of refugees). However, because "place" is a multidimensional and layered concept, displacement may also refer to a variety of other contexts in which the relation to place is negatively transformed in one dimension or other. This is relatively clear in cases such as the dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their lands and life-worlds in settler colonial states, it can also encompass at least some forms of gentrification that coercively disrupt the ability of multigenerational local communities to sustain their place-based ways of life, as well as the quintessential individualised form of coercive displacement: deportation.[22] But the experience of displacement can also take other forms in which it is the *place* that changes, not (necessarily) the *space* occupied:

- Borders crossing over people: for example, the history of Alsace from 1870 to 1945, which oscillated between France and Germany, the Partition of India, the fragmentation of what was Yugoslavia, and the break-up of empires (such as Spanish, Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, British, French, and Soviet). Displacement in this form has been a ubiquitous feature of the modern world in which borders replaced frontiers.
- Colonialism, whether settler or administrative, reshaped not only who could go where, when, and to do what, but also sought to restructure identities and relations to place through a variety of legal, administrative, educational, and military mechanisms (alongside land expropriation and other dispossessing measures).
- Denationalisation ranging from the mass denationalisations of the Jews in 1930s Nazi Germany to the more recent example of citizens of Haitian descent in the Dominican Republic, as well as the individualised use of denationalisation exemplified by the UK, most famously in the case of Shamima Begum.

This may be seen as an advantage of a "displacement" turn because it helps to make visible both the importance of place in human lives and their flourishing, and the various ways in which the use of displacement has been an instrument of national and international governmental projects and not simply an unintended effect. The wider frame of displacement also helps link the patterned character of the contemporary global context of displacement to a history of prior displacements in a way that foregrounds the role of displacement in the making (and reproduction) of the contemporary global order as a (racialised) structure of positional difference in which the freedoms and privilege of some are intrinsically related to the dominated and disadvantaged status of others. Yet, the expansive potential of displacement might also be seen as a problem with its potential to render the kinds of concerns that FMS has been concerned to address less central to the reoriented field.

---

[22] See M.J. Gibney, "Is Deportation a form of Forced Migration?" *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 32(2), 2013, 116–129.

3. THE DILEMMA OF DISPLACEMENT

There are, it would seem, some potential intellectual advantages to re-focusing FMS on displacement. It is, however, an ethically important feature of the field of enquiry with which we are concerned that, from its early foundations and continuing across the transition from Refugee Studies to FMS, it has seen the point of its epistemic labours as directed to ethical ends and political transformations, not least in pushing back against the tendency of humanitarian policy to treat forced migrants (internal or transnational) as passive victims of circumstance, rather than active agents in the making of their lives.[23] This point highlights what may appear to be a significant downside to embracing the concept of displacement – the one that led me to suggest that the UNHCR's adoption of it was continuous with the project of political humanitarianism – namely, that displacement is a process that one undergoes and a condition one inhabits, not something that one does. The worry here, then, is that this framing of the field foregrounds "displaced persons" as beings who are subject to actions and events, rather than, as "migration" does, the agency of those who move (a point that applies to nearly all[24] of what is described as "forced migration" as much as so-called "voluntary migration").

It is, moreover, not hard to see how this feature of the concept of displacement may be politically mobilised to bolster the interests of powerful states in distinguishing the initial movement of those who flee to a place of first refuge as "forced displacement" from (unauthorised) secondary movement from that place as "(irregular) voluntary migration". Within the frame of political humanitarianism, this distinction has a coherence that aligns with the interests of powerful states and offers justificatory support for their use of "remote control" policies.[25]

At the same time, the focus on displacement can also support the intensification and penetration of the gaze of international organizations into states where displacement occurs but the directing of this gaze will hang on what is identified as displacement and who decides what is identified as displacement. Thus, for example, Landau, focusing on the Global South, 'links the emergence of the "urban refugee" as object of study to trends within the humanitarian and humanitarian studies field towards "visibilization": to identifying and exposing the vulnerability of varied groups and defining them in terms that make them suitable objects of humanitarian action'[26]; while Buxton, focusing on the Global North, draws attention to the ways in which the politics of labelling entails that who and who is not recognised as an IDP may be governed by the location in which the displacement takes place and how those displaced are socially identified through the example of those displaced by Hurricane Katrina in the United States and the policy of not categorising them as IDPs (despite the United States, after initial reluctance, accepting significant foreign aid in dealing with the hurricane's aftermath).[27] This contrast highlights the ways in which what counts as displacement, who counts as displaced, and what forms of representation and intervention by the international community are judged appropriate, vary depending on the constellations of power and interest of national and international actors engaged by the events in question. It is relatively easy to see how this variability manifests the use of the concept of displacement in a way that, to

---

[23]   This has been a central feature of the field from B.E. Harrell-Bond, *Imposing Aid*, Oxford University Press, 1986 to D. Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason*, University of California Press, 2011 and beyond.

[24]   One exception may be deportation as coercive action on the physical body of the deportee.

[25]   For an overview of "remote control", see D.S. Fitzgerald, *Refuge Beyond Reach*, Oxford University Press, 2019.

[26]   L.B. Landau, "Urban Refugees and IDPs", in E. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al. (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*, Oxford University Press, 2014, 139–150, 140.

[27]   R. Buxton, "Internal Displacement in the Global North", in J. Draper & D. Owen (eds), *The Political Philosophy of Internal Displacement*, Oxford University Press, 2024, 160–176.

echo Chimni on the birth of FMS, 'creates opportunities for and legitimizes western intrusions into the non-western world'.[28]

Yet, it might reasonably be objected that both these features are already apparent in relation to FMS, and that the concept of displacement can also be mobilised as a resource against political humanitarianism in several ways. Thus, for example, Santi Amantini in her analysis of one of the harms of displacement in terms of the loss of home environment draws attention to the importance of displaced persons gaining access to the varied resources required for place-making and, specifically, home-making[29] – a point also stressed from a different theoretical direction by Saunders.[30] Their focus is on people who are physically displaced in or from localities or states, which informs their views on what resources are required to enable place-making and the recreation of a home environment either in the location from which they were displaced or in a new space, but we might generalise the point to encompass other forms of displacement involving diverse dimensions of the concepts of place and home (perhaps we should see decolonisation as a global project of home-making?). This line of thought can be supported by the argument provided by Aleinkoff in relation to climate-induced displacement with its foregrounding of a right not to be displaced.[31] It can also be bolstered by the historical perspective that the focus on displacement makes available, concerning the formation of contemporary global order and the construction of global background injustice.[32] The important work that has emerged within FMS on migration, empire, and decolonisation[33] can be expanded through a focus on displacement, which is better placed to benefit from, and contribute to, the burgeoning field of imperial, colonial, postcolonial, and decolonial studies, as well as to debates concerning reparations for historical injustices such as slavery, colonialism, and indigenous dispossession.

It is, moreover, a significant feature of this field that it entails centring the perspectives of those subject to, and shaped by the experience of, displacement in its various historical and contemporary forms. Elements of the critical edge of such a refocusing can be seen in existing arguments questioning the value of organising the field in terms of the concept of 'forced migration'.[34] This means not only that it supports the diversification of sites of knowledge production beyond the Global North, but also their reconfiguration within the Global North in ways that acknowledge the place of class, race, and other structural dimensions of positional difference in exposure to displacement as an instrument or effect of, typically, governmental policies or social processes. To the extent that this critical perspective emerges within a multi-disciplinary field of study of displacement, it also enables the recognition of commonalities and the formation of solidarities between diverse groups of people who have been subject to displacement. It provides a framework within which, for example, working-class communities broken up by processes of gentrification can see their experience in terms that align with the condition of Columbian farmers displaced by the coercive actions of large corporations.

Thus, while a re-orientation of the field through making the concept of displacement central would not avoid the ambivalence that characterised the turn from Refugee Studies to

---

[28]   Chimni, "The Birth of a 'Discipline': From Refugee to Forced Migration Studies", 18.

[29]   Santi Amantini, "The Harms of Internal Displacement".

[30]   N. Saunders, *International Political Theory and the Refugee Problem*, Routledge, 2017.

[31]   Aleinikoff, 'Climate-Induced Migration'.

[32]   While this was already partially available from the perspective of FMS, which could highlight the place of the slave trade, major indentured labour transfers, forced internal migration of indigenous peoples, and mass population transfers as part of the formation of the contemporary global order and its inequalities, the wider scope of the concept of displacement enables a fuller picture of the ways in which this order was forged.

[33]   See, for example, E. Tendayi Achiume, "Migration as decolonisation", *Stanford Law Review*, 71(6), 2019, 1509–1574, and L. Mayblin, *Asylum after Empire: Colonial Legacies in the Politics of Asylum Seeking*, Rowman and Littlefield, 2017.

[34]   See, for example, A. Vergara-Figueroa, *Afrodescendant Resistance to Deracination in Colombia. Massacre at Bellavista-Bojayá-Chocó*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

FMS, it may have positive effects. There are always risks attached to the act of re-founding a field of enquiry, just as there are to that of re-founding a polity. The key issue is not whether such a turn is justified, but whether it is vindicated by the insights and emancipations that it makes available – and that, obviously enough, cannot be known in advance.

One response to the inevitability of the fact that any move in this context is a wager is to hedge one's bets. This is essentially what the amalgamation "Refugee and Forced Migration Studies" does; tolerating a loosening of coherence in order to sustain and develop institutional structures and allow for diverse lines of enquiry – including those that help motivate the current reflections. There may also be good intellectual, ethical, and political reasons to retain the reference to migration in the articulation of the object and scope of the field. Intellectually, because forced migration is both a form of migration and a site of contestation, since the line between forced and unforced migration is, at once, empirically blurred and normatively significant. In this respect, the relationship with Migration Studies is important for this field of enquiry. Ethically, because it affirms a focus on the agency of those who are displaced. Politically, because borders and border-making are central to the reproduction of (the injustices of) contemporary global order and a key site of the exercise of state power and resistance to it.

But perhaps this response points to a wider lesson. I have suggested that the concept of displacement can encompass a wide range of phenomena from settler colonialism and the dispossession of indigenous peoples to gentrification in global cities. A multi-disciplinary field centred around the concept of displacement extends much more broadly than the phenomena that are the concern of, for example, Aleinikoff, Cole, and McAdam in taking up this concept. My point here is that FMS stands to the semi-imagined field of Displacement Studies in much the same way that it stands to the distinct field of Migration Studies – and that perhaps FMS's specificity lies in the fact that it occupies the intersection between these two larger domains and its autonomy exists in the assertion that while FMS can learn from engagement with both, it must not be reduced to, or subsumed by, either one.