Prisoners of International Politics: Vietnamese Refugees Coping with Transit Life

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Since 1975, more than one million Vietnamese refugees have left their homeland in search of a safe haven. The most fortunate of the survivors have been granted political asylum in a third country. Before reaching this safe haven, they have spent a considerable time, ranging from a few months to several years, in one of the refugee camps in Southeast Asia. In order to cope with transit life, the refugees rely upon strategies which have already proven effective for individual and family survival in Vietnam. Focusing upon these strategies, this paper attempts to document some of the problems which emerge in transit life, both for the refugees themselves and for the professionals whose employment and therapeutic strategies are meant to alleviate at least some of the stress of transit life.

It must be emphasized that this account is an analysis based on the refugees' own perceptions of their situation, and not an analysis of the work of the relief agencies per se. The data upon which this paper has been based was gathered in five refugee camps in the Philippines, Hongkong and Japan, and has been supplemented by information later provided by Vietnamese refugees in Norway and the USA. The study tour to Southeast Asia occupied a period of one month in 1982. During these weeks, the author and a Vietnamese assistant, himself a refugee in Norway, carried out unstructured interviews with 100 refugees, the majority of whom were bound for Norway. Most of these refugees were males, between 18 and 35 years old, and in large part belonged to a family-unit. The argument in this paper was developed from these conversations with refugees who had already been granted political asylum in Norway. In spite of this fact, they still felt insecure about their future as well as the future of their less fortunate compatriots. The fieldwork in Norway was conducted in the period 1981–1986; in the USA, in the period 1986–1987.

The Argument

Transit life represents hopefully a temporary sojourn for refugees waiting
to be granted asylum in a third country. In order to leave the camp, each person has to qualify for acceptance in a country of asylum. Some refugees, including those rescued by a foreign ship, have been granted asylum even before arrival in the camp. The majority, however, have to wait for the decision of representatives of various countries' screening committees, in the hope that they will meet their criteria for selecting refugees.

For the refugees, the camp management is often perceived to be part of a system of sanctions, its primary function being to keep the individual under control. Yet, the camp is not meant to be merely a holding ground for refugees; at least some camps have as their main, and official, objective the preparation of refugees for life in the country which will be their final destination. In the camps serving as 'processing centres', the refugees are to be re-socialized, i.e. to be taught certain basic skills judged to be necessary for life in a 'Western' society. In order to achieve this goal, certain programs have been implemented under the guidance of various categories of relief workers, teachers, etc, in which the camp dwellers must participate. These programs are founded on a paradigm which reduces the refugees to automatons, to individuals with similar rights and duties based on a common ascribed identity as 'refugee/camp dweller'.

I shall argue that this identity is a fundamental violation of the individual refugee's feeling of self, a negation of the individual's self-ascribed identity as a person (Bettelheim, 1986; Levi, 1988; Knudsen, 1988). Furthermore, I shall argue that in order to cope with transit life, the camp dwellers have to learn to reduce not only the stress which results from discontinuities in their life courses, i.e. "the careers, or the series of stages through which an actor passes during his life" (Gronhaug, 1974:37), but also that which stems from the relief programs themselves. To survive, the refugees are forced to rely upon strategies learned in Vietnam. They have to distinguish between relatives and friends, and various categories of 'strangers', including 'relief workers'. Even if the relief workers are supposed to differ from the persons who interview and select refugees for immigration purposes, the distinction between these two parties is often blurred and misinterpreted. The camp dwellers have to be careful. They come to view therapeutic intervention as a threat since a diagnosis may be perceived by the staff as negatively correlated with the individual's capacity for future adaptation, thus decreasing their chances of being selected. Paradoxically, the relief workers' therapeutic strategies, while decreasing the professionals' own stress, may serve to increase that of the refugees.

Vietnam, the Flight, and Camp Existence

The refugees do not arrive at the camp as "tabula rasa". On the contrary, they bring experiences from Vietnam and from the flight, experiences which serve as points of reference for their choice of strategies. In most