Getting Through Suffering: Indochinese Refugees in Limbo 15 Years Later

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As social scientists concerned about the refugee experience in general, we often ask ourselves, currently, what seem to be the most crucial questions regarding the Indochinese refugees, fifteen years later. I suppose it depends partly on a person’s training, discipline and theoretical stance; the other part is often a function of his or her own perception and interpretation of the condition of the Indochinese refugees. Or, more succinctly, at a particular time, in a particular place, what is it about the everyday life of a Indochinese refugee that strikes the eyes of a social scientist most emphatically and attracts so much of his or her attention that a decision is made to write about the experience? While the decision-making process is eventually a personal one, in the sense that the social scientist ultimately chooses to perceive an event or an experience in his or her own way, the forces and events impinging on the process are not.

Asking the Questions Right

So, at the moment, as far as the Indochinese refugees are concerned, several crucial questions demand to be posed and answered. They include, for example, why did the Indochinese leave their own countries of origin in the first place? How have they, while seeking protection, been viewed and treated by countries of first asylum and countries of resettlement, and why? The first question of refugees’ motives and reasons to leave Indochina was posed as early as 1975, and continues to be posed since, though answers given by the international community have taken a dramatic turn in the recent past five years as captured in the dichotomous distinction between genuine refugees on the one hand and economic migrants allegedly intent on seeking a better life on the other. The ‘bogus refugee’ argument, as it stands, has found its way into the core of the rationale of public policies as well as measures of countries of first asylum and resettlement toward the Indochinese refugees.
Refugees are thus imputed motives and intentions, labelled and classified, by the international community depending on the result of the complicated interplay of various political, economic, ethnic and social forces in the international and domestic arena. This in turn brings up the second set of questions of how the Indochinese refugees have been actually treated over time (as manifested in policy responses of various countries of first asylum in Asia). Such questions about policy responses thus require the social scientists to confront themselves with one all-important query: why have some states at one point of time chosen to treat the refugees in a positive, favourable, and humanitarian way and later changed their minds, while other states have decided upon an alternative course of action? A large majority of the papers in this Special Issue (as case studies of various ASEAN and Asian nations) attempt in their own ways to unravel this query. Among others, three clear conclusions emerge from these analyses of policy responses: First, any particular refugee policy response is often grounded in a particular way of viewing, seeing, and defining the refugees along with a corresponding system of justifications and rationalizations of such official perceptions; Second, these ways of seeing and justifying are often most readily discernible in the kind of language and vocabulary invented to communicate about the persons to be affected. One thus witnesses, within a short span of the past five or seven years, the emergence of a rather rich vocabulary to designate Indochinese persons outside Indochina: aliens, asylum seekers, illegal immigrants, displaced persons, bogus refugees, economic refugees etc. Each word denotes an externally imputed (and thus possibly distorted and negated) motive, an attitude, an emotive stand, and, most importantly, a particular form of treatment. Third, comparative analysis of policy responses of various states inevitably leads one to the hypothesis that such ways of seeing and treating the Indochinese refugees are by no means an isolated exercise; rather, it seems that the policy responses have been collectivized into an international consensus made possible by an insidious process of ‘transnational infection’, a concept coined by a Thai legal scholar in a recent international meeting on refugees at Oxford in January, 1990. I attempted a further extension of the concept in an essay of mine in this Special Issue on Hong Kong’s response to the Vietnamese refugees. Similar sentiments have led Richmond (1989:2) to formulate his ‘global apartheid’ argument:

The “assault on freedom of movement” and closing of borders, by the more advanced countries of the world, has been described as a “new selfdom” (Dowty, 1987:55–94). It could equally well be called a form of “global apartheid”, designed to preserve the wealth and power of western societies and to segregate their people from the crises in the Third World.

One form of such practice of ‘global apartheid’ is that the developed worlds, through grand conspiracy, pay the developing worlds to keep refugee populations, allegedly on a temporary basis, in their countries.