CONSTRUCTING HUMAN FREEDOM: THE REFUGEE CONVENTION AND NETWORKS OF POWER

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Abstract. *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948 sought to uphold the minimum conditions by which all people lead their lives. The instrument was based on the assumption that there was a certain level of freedom that was necessary for people everywhere to live - and UN viewed that the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees 1951 and its subsequent Protocol 1967 would enable people to protect this freedom if it was threatened. However, this has been affected with respect to refugee protection by the operation of inter-subjective power.*

It is argued that it is necessary to explicate such power networks in order to ensure that both policy makers and people appreciate its effects and thereby the need to give human rights norms their proper weight.

Keywords: *Refugee Convention 1951, Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948, Knowledge Paradigms, Intersubjective Power, Human Freedom.*

Socialinių mokslų studijos/Social Sciences Studies
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ISSN 2029–2236 (print), ISSN 2029–2244 (online)
http://www.mruni.eu/lt/mokslo_darbai/SMS/
http://www.mruni.eu/en/mokslo_darbai/SMS/

Introduction: the Refugee Convention 1951 and UN Human Rights

One of the principal aims of the United Nations' Convention relating to the Status of Refugees 1951 ("the Refugee Convention") is to protect life and fundamental freedoms. This is undoubtedly supported by the Convention and the documents that interpret it. For example, Article 1 provides that the protections contained in the Convention shall apply to those who can show the requisite 'well founded fear of persecution'[1] and the UN High Commission for Refugees ("UNHCR") Handbook interprets this to embrace "a threat to life or freedom."[2] The Convention also goes on to say in Article 33 that contracting states shall not remove such refugees to a place where "his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion."[3]

This reflects the general human rights approach adopted by the international community after 1945. States understood that during the two World Wars some nations had violated certain minimum conditions by which all people led their lives. Therefore, in the aftermath of the Second World War, they wanted to safeguard these minimum conditions and articulated them as rights. These in turn gave rise to obligations. States were now obliged to ensure that they protected and no longer violated these minimum rights.

One instrument through which this was articulated, of course, was the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948. The Preamble of the Declaration makes it clear that there are certain conditions that people everywhere need to survive, including dignity and equality, and enumerated these as rights. These include the right to life, liberty and security of person, and the right not to be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, and enshrined what the UN Commission of Human Rights considered was chief to enable all people to lead their lives. As Eleanor Roosevelt, the Chairwoman of the Commission put it on the evening that the Declaration was adopted:

"The central fact is that man is fundamentally a moral being: that the light we have is imperfect does not matter so long as we are always trying to improve it...we are equal in sharing the moral freedom that distinguishes us as men."[4]

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1   Note, the Convention actually limits this to people who have left their state "as a result of events occurring before 1 January 1951". However, the Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees 1967 removes the restrictions.

2   Para 51, *UNHCR Handbook on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status under the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees*, (Geneva, January 1992).

3   Note, Article 33(2), which says that the benefit of the prohibition against non-refoulement does not apply to certain people, including those *"whom there are reasonable grounds for regarding as a danger to the security of the country."* But this may be prohibited under customary international law. See, for example, *Paez v. Sweden*, Application No 29482/95, 30 October 1997.

4   Cited in Glendon, M. A. *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.* New York: Random House, 2001, p. 231.

Fundamentally, one of the rights contained in the Universal Declaration includes the right to seek asylum in Article 14(1). It provides that "everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution." This suggests the UN Commission was also aware that people should now have the guarantee to protect the minimum conditions by which they lived if they were ever threatened.

This was certainly important given what had happened before the Second World War. While there may be have been some measures taken to protect those who were fleeing persecution in Europe, such as the 1938 Convention on Refugees,[5] this was counteracted by the apathy shown by some states. One instance was the Evian Conference 1938, where states failed to adopt any meaningful provisions to deal with those who had been forced to flee mistreatment.[6] Indeed, as Annette Shaw, puts it:

"I wrote about the Evian Conference because I felt people should know the part the allies played in appeasing Hitler and giving him the green light to believe he could do whatever he wanted to the Jewish people as nobody wanted them and this resulted in genocide."[7]

As a result, the international community failed to help many of those who faced real dangers to their human rights in their states. This was one reason why it was recognised, in the aftermath of the War, that there should be provisions in place that would allow people to apply for protection if their important rights were threatened. This was consistent with the attitude after 1945 that it was fundamental to protect the minimum conditions by which all people lived and was later enshrined in the 1951 Convention, under which contracting states were bound to process the claims of those who feared persecution and afford protection to those recognised as refugees.[8] It follows that the 1951 Convention was a part of the general initiative to protect human rights in the aftermath of the Second World War and that the obligations that contracting states assumed under it can be interpreted in light of this.[9]

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5   See, for example, Hathaway, J. C. *The Rights of Refugees under International Law.* Cambridge: University Press, 2005, p. 90.

6   For the French policy at Evian, see Maga, T. P. Closing the Door: The French Government and Refugee Policy, 1933–1939. *French Historical Studies.* 1982, 12(3): 435−438; For an account of how Cuba refused to accept a ship of German refugees, see also Stern, N. S. Evian's Legacy: The Holocaust, the United Nations Refugee Convention, and Post-War Refugee Legislation in the United States. *Georgetown Immigration Law Jopurnal.* 2004-2005, 19: 318

7   Shaw, A. The Evian Conference - Hitler's Green Light for Genocide. *Christian Action for Israel* [interactive]. Oakville, 2001 [accessed 09-08-2010]. <www.christianactionforisrael.org/antiholo/evian/evian.html/2001>.

8   See, for instance, Gibney, M. J. A Thousand Little Guantanamos: Western States and the Measures to Prevent the Arrival of Refugees. In *Displacement, Asylum, Migration.* Tunstall, K. E. (ed.). Oxford: University Press, 2006, p.73−74: *"Shamed by the experience of the Jews who failed to find protection from Nazi persecution in the 1930s, and desiring to reckon from rising numbers of people attempting to flee the Soviet bloc in the aftermath of the World War II, Western nations drafted and signed the United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees in Geneva in 1951."*

9   This is also generally supported by the Preamble of the 1951 Convention, which says *"Considering that the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights approved on 10 December 1948 by the General Assembly have affirmed the principle that human beings shall enjoy fundamental rights and freedoms without discrimination."*

1. State Sovereignty and the Refugee Convention 1951

This, of course, did not necessarily imply that contracting states were bound to have open borders. Article 2 of the UN Charter expressly preserved state sovereignty, including the right of states to determine when aliens would be admitted in their territory.[10] This enabled them to protect their interests, including economic, cultural and social ones, and more importantly provides one reason for why contracting states did not include any rules on how they would assess refugee status in the Convention itself. As Dallal Stevens puts it,

"Post-war international refugee law laid down the ground rules for protection, but contracting states retained their sovereign right to decide whom to admit into their territory, as well as the freedom to implement their own refugee determination process."[11]

However, it is arguable that while contracting states may have retained their sovereign rights,[12] the circumstances under which the Convention was drafted after the War implied that they would be cognisant of the need to protect those minimum conditions by which all people lived.[13] Contracting states had affirmed through the Universal Declaration that two of these rights included life and freedom and they were required to ensure that they exercised their sovereignty, particularly their sovereign right to determine entry, in accordance with the need to protect these fundamental rights.[14]

However, as recent evidence shows, some contracting states have not done this and have developed policies that undermine these important rights. For example, as the UNHCR points out:

"Four types of measures were taken to tackle the mixed flows of irregular migrants and refugees with which European countries were confronted…first, countries sought to adopt non-arrival policies aimed at preventing improperly documented aliens, who included potential asylum seekers, from reaching Europe…second, for those asylum seekers who managed to arrive at the borders despite these efforts, diversion policies were designed, shifting to other countries the responsibility for assessing asylum seekers claims and providing protection…third, governments increasingly opted for a restrictive application of the 1951 Refugee Convention in an effort to exclude certain categories of claimants from the scope of the refugee definition. In some countries this continues to result in situations where people who have suffered persecution at the hands of non-state agents are not considered to be refugees, and are often offered a lesser form of

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10   With respect to sovereignty and deportation, see, for instance, Walters, W. Deportation, Expulsion, and the International Police of Aliens. *Citizenship Studies.* 2002, 6(3)*: 277.*

11   Stevens, D. *UK Asylum Law and Policy: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives.* London: Sweet and Maxwell, 2004, p. 163−164.

12   For instance, as Article 2 of the Declaration on Territorial Asylum Adopted by General Assembly resolution 2312 (XXII) of 14 December 1967 adds, the grant of asylum is: *"without prejudice to the sovereignty of States and the purposes and principles of the United Nations, of concern to the international community."*

13   See, generally, Smith, R. K. M. *Texts and Materials on International Human Rights.* London: Routledge and Cavendish, 2007, p. 461.

14   This is also consistent with UN High Commissioner for Refugees, *Note on Determination of Refugee Status under International Instruments*, 24 August 1977, EC/SCP/5.

protection with fewer rights and benefits….finally, various deterrent measures were in-troduced, including the increasingly widespread automatic detention of asylum seekers, the denial of social assistance, and restriction of access to employment …"[15]

2. Covert and Overt Knowledge Paradigms and Refugee Protection

One of the perspectives from which this can be considered is intersubjective power. Asylum policy, like any other immigration policy, is based on balancing competing interests. Contracting states have to consider how they can reconcile their legal duties to admit certain outsiders with their responsibility to protect the host state.[16] In the course of doing so, they will balance a number of considerations in coming to what should be a rational decision.[17] On this basis, the circumstances under which the 1951 Refugee Convention was adopted implied that one of these considerations would be the need to uphold certain fundamental rights, such as life and freedom. However, the issue is that asylum policy is affected by overt knowledge paradigms (OKPs) and covert knowledge paradigms (CKPs) and the way in which they interact with each other and this has sometimes undermined refugee protection.[18]

An example of a very broad OKP is that a contracting state may be expressly conscious of rising unemployment in its territory. It may gauge that this will have an adverse effect on its economy and the well being of its people. Thus, in deciding what asylum policy to adopt, it may actively choose to implement strict deterrent measures in the forms identified by the UNHCR above that affect some refugee rights. In this way, asylum policy will be based on the clear and discernible information or OKP that a contracting state has.

The effect of CKPs, or hidden knowledge paradigms, on the refugee determination process, on the other hand, is not always as clear cut. Such CKPs can operate at both the micro and macro level. An example of a micro CKP may be the way in which one policy maker perceives a situation based on their experiences. To them, a certain number of asylum seekers may constitute a threat that requires particularly harsh measures; whereas to another policy maker, it may not require such a drastic response.[19] It will be

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15 United Nations High Commission for Refugees, *The State of the World's Refugees: Fifty Years of Humanitarian Action.* Oxford: University Press, 2000, p. 161−162.

16 Hampton, J. Immigration, Identity and Justice. In *Justice in Immigration.* Schwartz, W. F. (ed.). Cambridge: University Press, 2007, p. 67; see also Gibney, M. *The Ethics and Politics of Asylum: Liberal Democracy and the Response to Refugees.* Cambridge: University Press, 2004, p. 2.

17 For one model, see McLean, I. *Public Choice: An Introduction.* Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987, p. 9: *"Public choice applies economist's methods to politics, and, in particular, to two central problems: the collective action problem and the problem of aggregate preferences."*

18 Which in turn is consistent with a Foucaldian view of power. See Foucault, M. *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984.* Faubion, J. D. (ed.). London: Penguin Books, 2002, p. 343−344.

19 See, for example, Hardy, C. Refugee Determination: Power and Resistance in Systems of Foucauldian Power. *Administration & Society*. 35(4): 473.

based on their individual temperaments. Another common micro CKP may be the way in which an asylum lawyer interprets and applies the law. They may do so in a particular way based on their experiences and education and this may affect the way in which they present their client's case. [20]

A macro CKP may be the broad underlying social, cultural and religious structures by which the people in a contracting state use their cognition. For instance, a liberal democracy that is more accepting of human rights may adopt different policies to a more restrictive regime.[21] Thus, CKPs operate on the subliminal level, while OKPs are more obvious– but they both shape the way in which asylum policy is devised.

OKPs and CKPs may also interlace with each other: This is particularly the case, for example, with the way in which the media operates. Their reports will constitute OKPs that people will read and apply subliminally. As Kenneth Thompson says with respect to the media and moral panics, for example:

"Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops and politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible."[22]

Thus, the way in which the Refugee Convention 1951 is applied in a contracting state will not just be based on what the Convention says. As with any decision that policy seekers make, particularly those involving law, the way in which such law is interpreted and applied will be largely based on knowledge paradigms and their way in which they affect each other and this will ultimately affect rationalisation and asylum policy.

3. Refugee Policy and the Influence of Networks of Power

What this also means is that asylum policy will depend on which networks of knowledge are most powerful at a given time. For example, a liberal society may be based on and wholly appreciate the need to protect human rights, but if a particular group is constantly represented as a threat, then this may induce policy makers to adopt restrictive policies that affect refugee rights. This was markedly highlighted in a study undertaken by the Institute of Public Policy Research in the UK, for example. As Miranda Lewis says in the report,

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20   See, for example, Phillips, N.; Hardy, C. Managing Multiple Identities: Discourse, Legitimacy and Resources in the UK Refugee System. *Organization.* 1997, 4(2): 159–185.

21   See generally Gibney, M. J. Liberal Democratic States and Responsibilities of Refugees. *American Political Science Review.* 1999, 93(1).

22   Thompson, K. *Moral Panics.* Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2005, p. 8–9.

"The more vulnerable someone feels to economic competition, the more likely they are to be concerned about asylum seekers and their apparent impacts on the economy."[23]

In these ways, asylum seekers will be subject to different power networks.[24] While the UN may, indeed, have recognised that it was necessary to protect those freedoms on which all people relied, this will be affected by the interactions between powerful knowledge paradigms.

This has been particularly adverse in the case of detention. As noted in the UNHCR source above, asylum seekers have been subject to harsh detention regimes in some states simply because large parts of the population have perceived them to be a threat.

Conclusion: Networks of Power and the Construction of Human Freedom

From one perspective, this suggests that asylum seekers are socially and legally constructed.[25] Their lives are not necessarily based on what the UN human rights instruments identify to be human, but only on what the host state considers their humanity to be. This comes across quite vividly in the following quote from an asylum seeker:

"We are so alike. Why are you here? We came here to give our child a better life. My husband said you'll love it here, the people are so nice and everything is so cheap and it'll be really exciting. And there'll be so much freedom and choice, but it just meant freedom for them to mock us. Five years have passed and you realise you never really fitted in."[26]

As such, some asylum seekers do not necessarily have *human* rights*, but *constructed* rights. What Hannah Arendt said more than 50 years ago still applies today. While people may recognise the desire to protect human rights on account that they belong to *all humans*, this often conflicts with self interest that affects the protection of rights:

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23   Lewis, M. *Asylum: Understanding Public Attitudes.* London: Institute for Public Policy Research, 2005, p. 12.

24   See Foucault considerations of intersubjective power: *"This form of power that applies itself to immediate everyday life categorize the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him that he must recognise and others have to recognise in him. It is the form of power that makes the individuals subject. There are two meanings of the word subject: subject to someone else by control and dependence, and ties to his own identity by a conscience or self knowledge."* Foucault, M., *supra* note 19, p. 326; See also Horkheimer, M.; Adorno, T. W. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments.* Trans. Jephcott, E. Shmid Noerr, G. Stanford: University Press, 2002, p. 98; Hind, D. *The Threat to Reason: How the Enlightenment was Hijacked and How We Can Reclaim it.* London: Verso Books, 2007, p. 2.

25   For one view, see Simone de Beauvoir's on the construction of women. As she puts it *"Woman can be defined by her consciousness of her own femininity no more satisfactorily that by saying that she is female, for she acquires this consciousness under circumstances dependent upon the society of which she is a member."* de Beauvoir, S. *The Second Sex.* Trans. Parshley, H. M. London: Vintage Books, 1997, p. 80; With respect to the construction of 'mental asylums' see also Foucault, M. *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason.* Trans. Howard, R. New York: Random House, 1965, p.70.

26   Khaou, H. Monologue. In *From Outside In: Refugees and British Society.* Arbabzadah, N. (ed.). London: Arcadia Books, 2007, p. 69.

"The conception of human rights, based upon the assumed existence of human beings as such, broke down at the very moment that those who professed to believe in it were for the first time confronted with people who indeed lost all other qualities and specific relationships – except that they were still human. The world found nothing sacred in the abstract nakedness of being human."[27]

However, by explicating knowledge paradigms and the way in which they relate and often affect each other, both policy makers and people in general can clearly understand the ways in which asylum policy is affected and thereby ensure that they give the human rights aims of the UN their proper weight. It is important that both policy makers and people appreciate all the factors that underlie asylum policy and acknowledge the proper place of human rights in this discourse, especially the need to protect those fundamental freedoms that the UN recognised are important.[28]

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27   Arendt, H. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Harcourt, 1976, p. 298−299; see also Haddad, E. *The Refugee in International Society: Between Sovereigns*. Cambridge: University Press, 2008, p. 2: *"...the existence of modern political borders will ensure the constant (re)creation of refugees."*

28   For on approach based on discourse ethics, see, for example, Benhabib, S. *The Rights of Others: Aliens, Residents and Citizens*. Cambridge: University Press, 2004, p. 12.

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ŽMOGAUS LAISVĖS APIBRĖŽTIS: PABĖGĖLIŲ KONVENCIJA IR ĮTAKOS TINKLAI

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Santrauka. *1948 m. Visuotinė žmogaus teisių deklaracija numatė minimalius stan-dartus, kuriais turėtų būti grindžiamas visų žmonių gyvenimas. Dokumento kūrėjai rėmėsi prielaida, kad egzistuoja tam tikro lygio laisvė, kuri būtina žmogui gyvenant bet kur – ir Jungtinės Tautos tikėjosi, kad 1951 m. Konvencija dėl pabėgėlių statuso bei jos 1967 m. Protokolas suteiks galimybę asmenims ginti šią laisvę, jei jai iškils grėsmė.*

Bet galima sakyti, kad prieglobsčio prašytojai yra „sukonstruoti“: jų gyvenimas nebūtinai yra grindžiamas standartais, kuriuos Jungtinių Tautų žmogaus teisių dokumentai įvardija žmogaus teisėmis, tačiau remiasi tuo, kas, priimančios valstybės manymu, laikoma žmogiška. Dalis prieglobsčio prašytojų turi ne žmogaus teises, bet „sukonstruotas“ teises. Nors žmonės gali pripažinti norą ginti žmogaus teises, atsižvelgdami, kad jos priklauso visiems žmonėms, tai dažnai konfrontuoja su valstybių interesais užtikrinant žmogaus teisių apsaugą.

__Reikšminiai žodžiai__: 1951 m. Konvencija dėl pabėgėlių statuso, 1948 m. Visuotinė žmogaus teisių deklaracija, žinojimo paradigmos, įtakos tinklai, žmogaus laisvė.

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