

Book Review: Refuge: Transforming a Broken Refugee System by Alexander Betts and Paul Collier

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In Refuge: Transforming a Broken Refugee System, Alexander Betts and Paul Collier set out to offer solutions to the flawed system of refugee management that has gained increasing attention through the emergence of the crisis discourse surrounding migration. While this ambitious book sets out to challenge this through restoring a narrative of hope, Gayle Munro questions whether its underlying optimism sufficiently grapples with the nature of the current political and legislative environment.

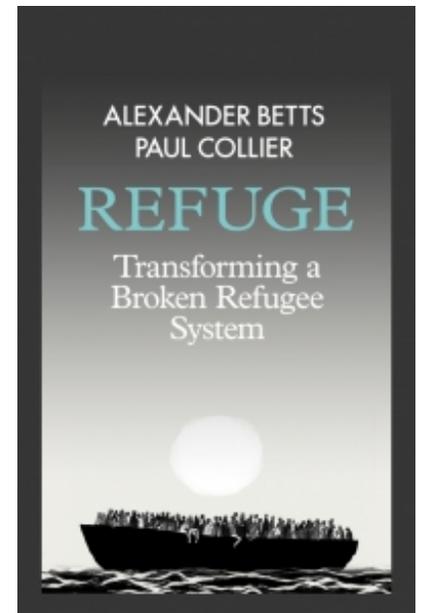
If you are interested in this book review, you may also like to listen to [a podcast and video recording](#) of Alexander Betts and Paul Collier's LSE lecture, 'Refuge: Transforming a Broken Refugee System', recorded 29 March 2017.

Refuge: Transforming a Broken Refugee System. Alexander Betts and Paul Collier. Penguin Random House. 2017.

Find this book: 

The 'refugee crisis'; the 'migration crisis'; a 'humanitarian crisis'; a 'crisis of politics'; the 'European migrant crisis'. Whether you acknowledge the validity of these terms or not, or support or deny the 'crisis narrative' in migration discourse, the circumstances surrounding the Europe-bound migration of those escaping the consequences of conflict and/or poverty during 2015-16 have resulted in an intensified public gaze on both the movement of refugees and migrants and political responses to this.

The plight of those seeking refuge, conversely, presents an opportunity to some. Academics are under increasing pressure in today's higher educational climate to evidence the 'impact' of their work. Politicians need to respond to what has been articulated (especially within a European context) as a crisis narrative around migration, whilst managing the expectations of media-fuelled public fears of immigration-related security threats, couched within broader misgivings over immigration in general. Policymakers are expected to react quickly and cheaply, to provide win-win answers whilst minimising risk. Such a perfect storm of migration-related demands has resulted in (amongst other things) *Refuge: Transforming a Broken Refugee System*, in which political scientist Alexander Betts and economist Paul Collier set out an ambitious stall: solutions to a flawed system of refugee management through the presentation of four 'big new ideas relating to the duty of rescue, safe havens, autonomy in exile and post-conflict incubation' (11).



Few would deny that the response to the increasing numbers of those seeking refuge across Europe in 2015-16 has been disastrous. Betts and Collier present their take on the impact of the 'refugee crisis' across Europe in Chapter Three, a very engaging summary, weaving together as it does a number of different strands. Throughout the book, Germany and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) are the main protagonists, with Schengen as a supporting character in a narrative of blame. UNHCR comes under attack for its role in (mis)managing the 'misery of protracted refugee situations' (220). Instead of highlighting the relative inaction of many European states, Germany, and Chancellor Merkel in particular, is criticised for a 'headless heart' which, according to the authors, resulted in chaos across the Schengen area, an exodus of educated and skilled Syrians at

a loss to the future of Syria and increasing numbers of deaths of refugees attempting the dangerous journey.



Image Credit: (Nicolas Vigier CCO)

The authors seem to assume that refugees themselves are not going to be reading the book, and they certainly have not engaged many refugees in their preparation, whilst leaning heavily on an abandonment narrative of refugees 'deserting' their country of origin in its hour of need (for example, page 198). This is combined with criticism of those who seek out the 'honeypots' of western democracies, labelling those who engage with people smugglers as 'irresponsible' (212).

At several points the description of the ossification of the skills of refugees during what could be a protracted period of displacement lends itself well to the authors' compelling argument regarding the need to equip refugees with meaningful education, training and employment opportunities. However, despite highlighting the damage that can be caused by a life in limbo, the authors seem to be suggesting that refugees should be made to wait up to ten years for an offer on resettlement (235).

Sometimes the reader gets the impression that the two authors don't always share a position on some issues, with subtle differences between some chapters. Often the language used raises an eyebrow. The choice of wording around the use of the term 'safe haven' has unfortunate connotations given [the problematic history of UN so-called safe havens](#) (as anything but in some cases). Of all the possible indicators of integration to focus on, the choice of 'rambling' and a lament of refugees' lack of participation in 'countryside activities' seems an odd one (123). The reader is also invited to reflect on the different questions posed through a series of 'thought experiments' peppered throughout the chapters, experiments which, whilst attempting to explain and contextualise the migration focus for a more general reader, fall a little short through their polarisation of examples and lack of nuance. The presentation of the counterfactual in the conclusion to the book is an interesting concept, but a little disappointing without evidence that what they are proposing would have 'fixed' the crisis.

The authors' aim to present solutions which work 'for the many, not just the few' is to be welcomed (204). However, the repeated characterisation of the offer made by many European states as 'boutique' doesn't ring true given the destitution faced by many refugees and asylum seekers in the UK. Other optimistic assumptions form the basis for some of the arguments, including the assertion that the risk of abuse in their proposed Special Economic Zones

(SEZs) is 'remote'; that the (unspecified) 'special skills' acquired by refugees in western democracies will be easily translated into post-conflict reconstruction following return to the country of origin; and that rising unemployment levels in Jordan are not going to have a negative impact on the Jordanian public's reception of an increase in SEZs.

Indeed, the main flaw I found in the book lies, somewhat perversely, in its underlying optimism. The persistent critique of humanitarian actors neglects an acknowledgement that humanitarians are more often than not acting *in spite of* a wider political and legislative environment on immigration that is largely designed to discourage (im)migration entirely. The Pope is another example of a figure who comes under the critical gaze of the authors for offering a refuge to educated and skilled Syrians. But this would be consistent with the policies of those host states that emphasise their 'preference' for skilled migrants. The authors state towards the conclusion, in reference to these policies, that 'few people want to feel they are a mean bastard', whilst neglecting to mention that acting like a 'mean bastard' is implicit in the British government's hostile environment around immigration. Indeed, the current British administration is likely to welcome the recommendations of the book, emphasising as they do solutions not much further beyond the borders of the country of origin.

In *Refuge*, Betts and Collier have presented their proposed solutions by way of restoring a narrative of hope to refugees (205). More hopeful still would be the rejection of the presentation of refugees and indeed any 'type' of migrant as a 'problem' to be 'fixed' by adopting a truer narrative of refuge and welcome to those who are in need of it – not out of misplaced, liberal humanitarian naivety or what the authors term 'moral grandstanding' (11), but to dispel myths and unjustified fears rather than reinforce them. The current political climate is so far from this that maintaining the level of optimism will be a challenge.

Gayle Munro holds a PhD on the experiences of migrants from the former Yugoslavia to Britain from University College London (Geography, 2015); an MA in Politics, Security and Integration from the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, UCL (2002); and a BA Honours in French and Music from Royal Holloway, University of London (1998). Gayle is currently Research Manager at The Salvation Army. Gayle is writing in a personal capacity and the review does not represent the views of The Salvation Army as an organisation. [Read more reviews by Gayle Munro.](#)

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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