

Book Review

Refugees From Revolution: U.S. Policy and Third-World Migration

Peter H. Koehn

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Reviewed by John Sorenson

This is an ambitious and useful book. Peter Koehn's goal in *Refugees From Revolution* is to link social-structural and individual levels of analysis in understanding large-scale population movements from the Third World. The book provides a comparative study of those refugees who have fled to the United States from revolutionary situations in Cuba, Ethiopia, Iran and Vietnam, and discusses the links between U.S. foreign and immigration policies. It is well researched and argued, and will be a valuable addition to the library on refugee issues.

Working in the broad context of class and dependency theories, Koehn's framework for analysis links national politics, external intervention and individual motivation. He provides background information on each of the revolutionary situations that have created these refugee movements and argues that American intervention and support for authoritarian regimes have been significant in all cases. He suggests that these large-scale refugee movements are the unplanned consequence of international relations in the context of the Cold War and the United States' obsession with crushing leftist movements around the world.

This framework supports his concluding arguments on the inadequacies of refugee policies that treat only symptoms while overlooking the fundamental causes of refugee movements. Koehn sensibly urges that the United States should avoid involvement with brutal and coercive regimes that create refugees, and adopt policies to prevent mass movements of people and exert its influence for peace. He further suggests that effective refugee policies should entail a greater

commitment to protecting human rights and advocates a more proactive approach to refugee problems, one that would not merely provide assistance to refugees after they flee, but which would deal more directly with the factors that forced them to flee in the first place. This would require an upgrading of UNHCR's role to include assistance to internally-displaced people who are not recognized as refugees. While the humanitarian rationale for such recommendations is clear, Koehn also points out that concerns for effective refugee policies have a basis in self-interest as well, since large-scale migration from the Third World will become a growing threat to the status quo.

Koehn also provides sketches of the various refugee communities in the United States. The focus is on refugees from Iran and Ethiopia, with less detail on the Cuban and Vietnamese cases. Readers of the special issue of *Refugee* (April 1991) on refugees from Ethiopia will be familiar with Koehn's work in this area and impressed by the studies he has undertaken concerning Ethiopian refugees who have migrated to Washington, D.C. and Los Angeles. The issue of identity was central in the three decades of warfare between Eritrea and Ethiopia and has played a significant role among these refugees as well. Adopting the self-identification used by his respondents, Koehn discusses Eritreans as distinct from Ethiopians and notes some interesting differences in responses from the two groups.

For all of the groups concerned, however, Koehn notes that mixed motives underlie the decision to become a refugee—ideological commitments seem to be very important, while pull factors (such as economic benefits) seem to be secondary and, for some groups, virtually nonexistent. However, this fact raises some interesting questions in relation to Koehn's other findings. For example, despite the importance of ideological commitment and a strong association with the country of origin, he finds that less than a quarter of the immigrants in his sample supported an exile political organization.

The book addresses strategies of migration and patterns of movement and Koehn considers the notions of vintages, steps and waves with regard to these refugee groups. *Refugees From Revolution* also contains some very interesting and useful material on economic and social adjustment and adaptation to life in the United States. Not surprisingly, higher levels of integration are correlated to longer periods of residence in the U.S. and higher education levels. Nevertheless, downward occupational mobility seems to be one of the dominant trends among refugees; professionals often find it difficult to obtain satisfying and materially rewarding work in their own fields. There may be differences by nationality as well, and Koehn touches upon the importance of status and roles for Ethiopian refugees. He further suggests that African refugees in particular suffer from racism as well as the absence of kin groups and sizeable communities in the U.S.

Many of the refugees lack commitment to living permanently in the U.S. and have strong dissatisfaction with life in exile. As Koehn points out, repatriation may remain a goal for many of these refugees, but it entails difficulties. Not only does the experience of exile affect the refugees themselves, but their reception by compatriots who did not flee may vary widely from one situation to another. Many of Koehn's most interesting comments refer to the experiences of Eritreans and Ethiopians concerning shifts in community attitudes towards the return of refugees to their homeland.

Refugees From Revolution went to press just as momentous changes were happening in the Horn of Africa, with the defeat of the Mengistu regime and Eritrea poised for independence. Hopefully, Koehn will follow this excellent book with a further investigation of how these changes will affect repatriation to the region. ■

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