

Critical Dialogue

Crossing: How We Label and React to People on the Move. By Rebecca Hamlin. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021. 224p. \$85.00 cloth, \$25.00 paper. doi:10.1017/S153759272300110X

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In December 2022, the U.S. Supreme Court issued a temporary order that allowed the Biden Administration to continue the use of Article 42, a clause of the 1942 Public Health Services Law that permits the government to restrict immigration during public health emergencies. News agencies speculated on the potential effects of the Court disallowing the use of the Order, with one lamenting that “many asylum seekers would qualify for a full review of their claims, even though most are migrating for economic reasons and don’t meet the criteria for refugee status” (William A. Galston, “Title 42 and Biden’s Moment of Truth,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 21, A12, [2022]). This fear epitomizes both how the public reacts to different categories of people on the move and the fuzziness of those categories. Rebecca Hamlin’s provocative new book, *Crossing: How We Label and React to People on the Move*, reveals the contentious politics that lurk beneath the labeling of migrants and refugees.

Crossing is an important and timely book because so-called migrant “crises” persist throughout both the Global North and South, and the political responses to these mass movements of people hinge on whether the border crossers are labeled “refugees” or “migrants.” Hamlin calls this distinction the “migrant/refugee binary,” and she convincingly argues not only that it is difficult to separate refugees from migrants in practice, but also that this distinction is a convenient legal fiction that depoliticizes the complex ethical decisions states must make regarding which border crossers to grant entry. The binary thrives as a popular ideology because most scholars and laypeople assume that 1) refugees and migrants have distinct motivations for crossing borders; 2) refugees are the neediest among the world’s border crossers; and 3) true refugees are rare (pp. 9-18). Taken together, Hamlin argues that these assumptions promote the ideology that one can neatly separate refugees from mere “economic” migrants, because the former are rare

exceptions to the natural separation of humans into specific nation-states.

After presenting the history of the refugee concept, the 1951 Refugee Convention definition, and its relationship to the institution of sovereignty, Hamlin reveals how the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)—the principal international organization (IO) responsible for refugee protection—perpetuates the migrant/refugee binary. This discussion contributes to the extant literature on how IOs consolidate power and influence in the post-1945 international system, as well as their normative role. For example, UNHCR uses social media to dispel popular fears that refugees do not integrate into their host societies and drain the public purse. These strategies are meant to create empathy for refugees, and they help UNHCR carve out a distinct institutional mandate (pp. 91-92). While Hamlin does not dispute the impact of these campaigns, she notes how UNHCR’s engagement strategies perpetuate the migrant/refugee binary, which emphasizes that refugees are uniquely deserving of protection at the expense of other people on the move.

The remaining chapters of the book outline how maintaining refugees as a distinct legal category intervenes in the politics of the Global South, masks colonialism’s role in creating the conditions that perpetuate mass movements, and precipitates contemporary anti-migrant discourse. The former two contributions are particularly notable. Migration scholars continue to prioritize investigating the effects of global mobility on Global North states in the Anglo-European world, but Hamlin rightly points out that most displaced persons reside in the Global South (p. 93). She thus shows how decolonization and the rise of refugee governance occurred simultaneously, and how the persistent Global North/South hierarchy affected the contours of the international response to refugees.

Decolonization often led to mass movements and provided the impetus for international agreements on the status of refugees. However, Global South states critiqued the new regime as furthering the interests of the Global North. They argued that that the postwar refugee regime was irrelevant for modern mass movements because the refugee definition in the 1951 Refugee Convention did not apply to people fleeing generalized violence and unrest (p. 98), and that it did not go far enough to address the

root causes of displacement that were caused by the Global North. *Crossing* then describes how Global South states developed and signed regional refugee agreements—the Organization of African Unity Convention of 1969 and the 1984 Cartagena Declaration on Refugees—to address their concerns with the global regime (pp. 99-107). While these regional agreements represent key fixtures of Global South resistance and solidarity, case studies of treatment of Syrians in the Middle East and Venezuelans in Latin America reveal how the migrant/refugee binary continues to structure political responses and public opinion toward mass displacement.

Hamlin also provides illustrative case studies of Europe and the United States to show how the labels affixed to people on the move structure political discourse in both the North and South. In both cases, the problem with maintaining the binary is that it obscures external causes of displacement and allows contemporary anti-migrant sentiment to fester. For example, recognizing that the United States' interventions in Central America sowed the seeds of contemporary mass movements breaks down the necessity of the migrant/refugee distinction, and it raises important questions about the rights of those affected by such coercive interventions.

Crossing's exploration of the origin and effect of the migrant/refugee binary puts it at the center of modern migration debates. However, this centrality, scope, and ambition also raise several further questions. First, what is the role of race in perpetuating the migrant/refugee binary? Hamlin selectively touches on issues of race, most notably in its discussions of colonialism (pp. 30, 34-36) and European responses to Mediterranean arrivals (p. 123). Yet, while these discussions reveal that racial discrimination and white supremacy likely shaped the emergence of restrictive migration policies and unequal sovereignty in the postwar era, there is little discussion of the role race played in the construction of the migrant/refugee binary itself. Hamlin discusses how the terms “migrant” and “refugee” are politically constructed to minimize the suffering and exploitation of the non-white Global South. But racial perceptions seem to lurk in that minimization, and they go undiscussed. For instance, we learn that the migrant/refugee binary allows Global North states to avoid acknowledging how colonialism caused mass migration and displacement. But how do racialized perceptions lead European publics to assume that migrants are undesirable economic actors?

A second question is how we should think about solutions to the migrant/refugee binary. This problem is thorny because the binary has become received wisdom in the scholarly, lay, and policy-making communities. This ideology is difficult to subvert because, as several chapters in *Crossing* reveal, politicians and citizens use it to warrant restrictive migration policies. But what should be done? Hamlin implores us to “move beyond binary” thinking,

which she associates with avoiding discussing the culpability of border crossers and referring to them as a singularity, as opposed to distinct types (p. 161). These calls are admirable, but they are expressed in the passive voice. I wondered who needs to change their behavior and the prospects for those changes to occur. For example, if this call refers to academics, then we must deal with the uncomfortable question of the role of academics in public life: how much does the scholarly voice matter? What is the best way to convince organizations like UNHCR to change their approach to refugee governance and activism, particularly given the role the binary plays in bolstering its organizational legitimacy?

If the call refers to policymakers or the public, then it raises a final question. Given, 1) the electoral incentives that politicians face, 2) the issues of race and racism discussed earlier, and 3) that the public typically responds to elite cues, is moving beyond the binary even a possibility? As Hamlin reminds us, politicians continue to trade on anti-border crosser rhetoric, and they likely do so because it works. This seemingly dire question, particularly in the Global North, provides an important path forward for future research, and the conclusion of *Undesirable Immigrants* points in the same direction. Hamlin's argument points out that breaking down the conditions that allow structural inequalities in international migration to fester requires deep engagement with how states make policy decisions, which in part depends on the migrant/refugee binary. Destabilizing that binary emphasizes that scholars must work at the intersection of political communication and migration studies to investigate both the power that leaders have over their constituents, as well as ways to educate the public to overcome the power of the bully pulpit.

To reiterate, *Crossing* is an important book that will generate significant debate. Unsurprisingly, the scope and importance of the book's argument raises more questions than it answers, but the looming threat of climate migration continues to reveal the importance of treating all border crossers with equal moral worth, irrespective of their presumed culpability or motive. Hamlin provides further confirmation of this task's difficulty as it intimates the very real extent that moral worth, deservingness, and race unfortunately will remain highly correlated.

Response to Andrew S. Rosenberg's Review of *Crossing: How We Label and React to People on the Move*

doi:10.1017/S1537592723001135

— Rebecca Hamlin 

I appreciate Rosenberg's careful explanation of my argument, its contributions, and his questions about how entrenched the dynamics I illuminate are. Ironically,