Interview – David FitzGerald

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Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

This is a vibrant period in the study of international migration. There is a growing cadre of researchers who are analyzing to what extent theories developed in a handful of countries in the contemporary Global North apply to other cases. For example, "liberal paradox" argues that liberal states accept more immigrants than their publics prefer because of policymakers' interest in promoting the economic growth fuelled by immigration, and because of the constraints of the judiciary that prevent other branches of government from applying the harshest exclusions. Yet expanding the cases considered shows that liberal states like South Korea and Japan are perfectly capable of accepting only small numbers of immigrants. The constraints that were identified in the Western European context in the 1990s don't universally apply.

Within Europe, many theories about migration and citizenship in European countries only applied to the metropoles. Extending the field of inquiry to their colonies and overseas territories complicates many assumptions. For example, "France" famously does not collect census data on race, and the very term is seen as illegitimate in the classic Republican model, but when Algeria was under French control, the census explicitly used racial categories to define the population and assign rights by groups. Studies of metropolitan-colonial interactions are establishing the shifting use of race and colonial categories in migration and citizenship policy with far more nuance.

In the United States, the dominant paradigm in the study of international migration has been assimilation and integration. This research program generally assumes that immigrants permanently settle, with most social change taking place across generations between immigrants and their children and grandchildren born in the country of settlement. Yet many countries have migration systems that strongly discourage permanent settlement, such as the broad pattern in the Gulf Cooperation Council. For the working class, family reunification is all but impossible. Naturalization is denied to all but a tiny minority The basic political drivers behind U.S. assimilation don't apply. In countries that host large numbers of refugees from neighbouring countries, such as Jordan, there are extensive linguistic, religious, and cultural similarities between most refugees and their hosts, but refugees are excluded from full participation in labour markets and other social spaces. The standard U.S. model in which social mobility and cultural boundary changes are intertwined does not apply. In all these cases, attention to the conditions that restrain

integration can then be used to assess processes in the U.S. with new lenses and to recognize populations for which the standard models have difficulty accounting.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

In *Culling the Masses: The Democratic Origins of Racist Immigration Policy in the Americas* , my co-author David Cook-Martín and I set out to show the empirical relationship between liberal-democracy and the use of ethnoracial categories in immigration and citizenship policy in the Western Hemisphere from the colonial period to the twenty-first century. We conceived of democracy as a form of government and liberalism as its underlying ideology. Since that time, I've become increasingly convinced of the need to distinguish further between liberalism and democracy. The catalyst for that shift has been the growing number of states that are democratic, in the sense that they follow the principle of majoritarianism based on elections, but which are illiberal, in the sense that they strip minorities of rights and dismantle institutions that provide checks on the executive. The work of Cas Mudde has been especially useful in clarifying these matters. He argues that policy around immigration in the EU was an instance of undemocratic liberalism (extensive rights and welcoming of migrants and other refugees driven by elites, at levels the majority did not want), which led to a backlash of illiberal democracy (populist majoritarian rule such as in Viktor Orbán's Hungary). To be clear, it's not a normative argument that liberalism or democracy are bad. It's an argument about how they operate in practice.

In *Refuge beyond Reach*, you trace how rich democracies have deliberately and systematically shut down most legal paths to safety for asylum-seekers. Do you think this trend could be reversed?

Since that book was published in 2019, the U.S. and EU member states have become even more restrictive. The Covid-19 pandemic provided a pretext for all sorts of mobility controls, including the use of Title-42 in the U.S., that eliminated the path to asylum for hundreds of thousands of people. In the short run, it's hard to imagine a rollback. One of the points of the book is that territorial asylum inherently creates an incentive for governments to prevent asylum seekers from reaching their territory. I'm afraid that some form of remote control is here to stay.

Under what conditions might these remote controls ease? In the short term, there is a renewed sense among many in Europe and North America that at least some refugees should be accepted for reasons other than complying with rights norms, or in addition to those norms, such as the rationales of welcoming those fleeing a common enemy and those who are perceived as being socially proximate to the majority of the host state. These refugees are granted paths to safety that are denied to other nationalities. The differential treatment of Ukrainians is one such example. The invidious contrast between the "good refugee" and the "unwanted refugee" may make matters worse for other nationalities, however.

On some longer-term basis, could there be an intensification of the human rights revolution that would guarantee more universal access to safety? Perhaps a fundamental transformation in the political economy might take place one day, such that there would be a widely shared sense of rising prosperity and security that should be more equitably shared. It's hard to imagine that in my lifetime. More likely would be a demographic deficit in host countries that makes migrants of various types, including refugees, more welcome. There might also be a backlash against a well-publicized genocide against civilians barred from sanctuary that yields reforms of the remote-control system. None of these hypotheticals would necessarily lead to a reversion of the trend toward increased controls and the convergence of techniques across countries, but they might partly roll back what is becoming the norm.

The 'architecture of repulsion' in these states is partly driven by the securitisation of asylum-seeking. How have asylum-seekers themselves responded to the securitisation of their situation?

Asylum-seekers trying to protect their own "human security" are doing what they have often done – circumvent state controls. Many of them use the people smuggling industry, which has been around as long as there has been migration control, but which has become more extensive. Not everyone is able to avail themselves equally of the use of illicit services. Depending on the context, it requires liquid financial capital, social networks of friends and family

who will front the costs, or credit from lenders. When smugglers are the lenders, asylum seekers who relocate irregularly must pay back the smuggling costs over time. They may fall into indentured servitude and trafficking. In general, able-bodied men are better positioned to travel irregularly. They usually pay lower smuggling costs and are more willing to take the physical risks of death or assault by criminals that harsh border controls predictably create.

The UK's asylum policies are becoming increasingly hostile to refugees and asylum-seekers. How do you see this trend playing out, and what impact could it have on the country's future more broadly?

The UK is one of several countries that are part of a race to the bottom of preventing protection for asylum seekers. Policymakers are keenly aware of models used in other countries, such as Denmark, Australia, and the U.S., and are attempting to adapt them for their local political purposes. The fate of some policies, such as the Rwanda deal to send asylum seekers in the UK to a country in East Africa they never transited, will be decided by the European Court of Human Rights. In the past, supranational and national judiciaries have often constrained particular government policies. It is more difficult to roll back policies that have been institutionalized once they withstand immediate legal challenges. They tend to stay in place regardless of the party in power. While it's impossible to predict the fate of any specific policy, we can be sure that governments will continue to seek ways to limit the entrance of people whose numbers and rate of arrival they cannot carefully control.

In your most recent book *The Refugee System: A Sociological Approach* co-authored with Rawan Arar, you use the story of one Syrian family to illustrate refugees' individual and group agency as a household. Could you speak to how this family's experience reflects broader patterns of agency among refugees?

The book, and especially chapter four titled "Should I stay or go?", revolves around a longitudinal case study of one extended Syrian family caught up in the civil war. It describes how over a decade, some members stayed in their hometown in Syria, one died, others were internally displaced, others fled to a refugee camp in Jordan, two become resettled refugees in Canada, and others are contemplating seeking asylum in Europe. These stories show how refugees are victims of violence and persecution, but they are not *only* victims. They make decisions and take action within tough constraints created by policies in countries of origin like Syria, neighbouring countries that can become mass hosts like Jordan, countries of resettlement like Canada, and countries of potential asylum which throw up barriers such as the member states of the EU. Decisions around migration are rarely final, and do not necessarily include any effort to reach the most prosperous sanctuaries. Pathways often double back. The decision whether to return is never entirely off the table.

Another critical point about agency is that many of these major decisions are made at the household level. Resources and opportunities are limited, so families often must choose who will go first, who will stay behind to attend to property or businesses, and how they will collectively stay afloat economically using a mix of remittances, local employment and entrepreneurship, savings, relief, and so forth. None of this is to say that all members of a household have an equal say in these decisions. These processes are shot through with inequalities around age, gender, and generation.

What do you hope policymakers will take away from your latest book?

On July 11, 2023, Assistant High Commissioner for Protection Gillian Triggs tweeted a position that is common in the UNHCR and to many other refugee advocates, "Refugees are not migrants. Migrants are not refugees. All have rights that must be respected, but we should not conflate the two. Refugees have the right to seek asylum and to international protection from persecution and violence." On the opposite side of the political spectrum, restrictionists call for the repulsion and expulsion of people they slur as "fake refugees" whom they claim are only economic migrants.

Yet this book shows that refugees are a type of migrant. They often share many similarities with other types of migrants, including mixed motivations to move. Economic needs and the search for a life of dignity do not disappear when a person is persecuted or facing violence in the home country. Neither are "mixed flows" combining economic

and political motivations new. During the Cold War, defectors from Eastern bloc countries often had multiple motivations, including a bid for economic gain, that went far beyond escaping political persecution.

The rationale for the refugee category is to create rights that are not available to other migrants, particularly the right of non-refoulement (the right not to be returned into the arms of persecutors). Refugee law will always be exclusionary. Its logic is derived from a world in which there are pervasive systems of migration control and selection. If borders were open, there would be no need to provide additional protection to people who can credibly show their fear of persecution on specific grounds. There is something distinctive about refugees in that important sense.

By looking at refugees within a larger set of migration drivers and processes, however, policymakers acting in good faith would not exclude refugees just because their motivations to move might include economic factors. The question would be whether their need for international protection is based on a credible fear. That standard is already built into international refugee law in theory, but in legal practice, and at a political level, the false dichotomy between "genuine refugees" and "economic migrants" continues.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of migration and refugee studies?

The first stage of training as a scholar is to read works and critique them. All of us who have gone through this process have read a foundational text and thought, "This doesn't make sense. The argument might apply to the author's case, but it doesn't apply to other cases I know." Or, "The argument might apply then, but it doesn't apply now." It's easy to dismiss the text. My advice is to turn that destructive impulse into new construction. If you think an author got it wrong, your next research project is staring back at you. Do the research, and then put it out there through your publications and presentations. If all goes well, other readers will have their own frustrations with your work, and that will generate the next cycle in an ongoing conversation. These topics are too socially important to be a cavalier reader. Go and do better.