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Exile Socialization

When, Why and How Are Refugees Receptive to Militant Messaging?

For rebel groups operating from exile, the opportunity to build support and recruit fighters through socialization is attractive. Refugees may be particularly vulnerable to such attempts, living with insecurity and uncertainty, often with a degree of seclusion which weakens competing narratives. While influence over the institutions of education is highly prized, socialization takes place in a number of different arenas, ranging from informal personal encounters to the media. The experience of being driven from one's homeland is good material for cultivating intolerant narratives, at times with violent return to form the ideal state as the ultimate ambition. Hence, the impact of exile socialization may go well beyond the refugee period, to inform inter-group relations, even violence, upon return to the country of origin. A little studied dimension of the so-called 'refugee warrior'-phenomenon, the inherent risks of militant socialization calls for serious attention.

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Refugee populations can provide fertile ground for rebel entrepreneurs who seek to expand their membership with a view to pursue military campaigns against powerholders in the country of origin. The phenomenon is well known through the so-called 'refugee warrior' literature, which emphasizes access to resources through humanitarian channels, as well as from the host and other states. Despite an interest, in the same literature, in collective consciousness and ideological frames, this is an issue that has received rather little attention, and the mechanisms of socialization are poorly studied. An exception is the field of refugee education, where UNHCR have taken a lead in a campaign to rethink, and better resource, schooling for children in exile. While education in exile is important, we here take a broader perspective, to look at socialization by rebel groups in general, and to draw some implications also for the return and reintegration in the country of origin.

Taking a lead from what we know about socialization in general, we must presume that refugee populations are more receptive to new and radical ideological narratives than the average citizen. There are two primary reasons that socialization is potentially more effective in exile settings: 1) people find themselves in a novel or uncertain environment; 2) the setting may be secluded, with few competing narratives. The difficult balance for anyone seeking to rally support around an ideologically motivated project is to strike a balance between that which resonates with firmly held beliefs and convictions and that which feels new and different. That balance, in refugee settings, may be less challenging to strike, as the newness of the situation, and the sense of being unrightfully driven from one's home breeds receptivity. Often, the ideological narrative takes exactly this as its point of departure, extending it to justifying a return to rectify past injustice by violent means. Furthermore, the cultivation of ideological narratives is much more effective when it goes hand in hand with developing new skills of militant action. In militant socialization, the two aspects are fundamentally intertwined, as learning to fight is inextricably linked to changing perceptions of self as well as to justifying the exertion of violence.

The 'Refugee Warriors' Debate

In the latter half of the 1980s, Zolberg, Suhrke and Aguayo launched the concept of 'refugee warrior communities'. The concept stirred massive controversy, as it was challenging the broadly shared narrative of victimization, and implicitly suggesting that refugees possess agency of their own. Engaging mainly with the very structures that create refugee flows, and the refugee regime that responds, Zolberg and associates defined refugee warrior communities as:

> highly conscious refugee communities with a political leadership structure and armed sections engaged in warfare for a political objective, be it to recapture the homeland, change the regime, or secure a separate state. (Zolberg, Suhrke and Aguayo 1989: 275)

While acknowledging the increasingly crucial role played by non-state actors, the insistence on a clear distinction between refugees and militants continues to inform most work that addresses refugee mobilization. The way in which the very consciousness implied by the definition is created, maintained or transformed is dealt with only marginally in the 'refugee warriors' literature.

The work by Zolberg and associates was followed by several books in the first years after the turn of the millennium.[1] These contributed insightful case studies, and added considerable depth to the understanding of the phenomenon, yet largely retained a focus on the role of structural factors, not the least the support of states and from humanitarian actors. Only in recent years have studies emerged that take the agency of the actors concerned – whether they are rebels, refugees, or at the interface between the two – seriously.[2] With that, the processes by which potential recruits within the refugee population are socialized to identify with the rebels' objectives become a main topic of study.

Multilateral actors, and NGOs, with UNHCR at the lead, are addressing the issue, focusing on education. In Dryden-Peterson's 2011 report for UNHCR, on education for refugees, one of the seven challenges reads:

> The inherently political nature of the content and structures of refugee education can exacerbate societal conflict, alienate individual children, and lead to education that is neither of high quality nor protective.[3]

This challenge manifests itself directly in the Education Strategy that the UNHCR launched the following year.[4] These are significant developments, and clearly education for refugees is subject to more attention and more resources than before. Undoubtedly, there are also significant shortcomings, such as continued privileging of quantity (pupils enrolled) at the cost of quality (including political content), as well as the scarcity of possibilities beyond basic education (both education- and employment-wise).[5] Recognizing the importance of education, this policy brief is rooted in the conviction that an even broader perspective on rebel's socialization is needed, one that seeks to go beyond education as the only means of socialization, that takes seriously the particularities of refugee contexts, and which starts from an understanding of the underlying attraction for rebels in this domain.[6]

The Refugee Setting

Rebel groups that operate in refugee contexts are special, in that they both operate outside the remit of the government that they oppose, and they operate within a potential constituency that may be able to fully take part in the struggle. Within a well-functioning state, the institutions of socialization would be under the control of the state. In civil wars where rebel groups operate exclusively within the boundaries of their own state, they will find it difficult to set up schools and other training institutions, except in those cases where they are able to establish lasting control over parts of the territory and its residents. When rebels seek exile, however, they also move out of the territory that is under the control of the state they oppose. This limits the state's ability to control its contenders, and its ability to prevent it from setting up alternative institutions. A prerequisite, of course, is that the hosting state allows the rebels to build such institutions – or at least does not prevent them from doing so – and to attract members of the refugee population.

Fundamentally, socialization involves transformative learning, in the form of acquiring new skills, and also new ways of thinking about the world. It is fairly well established that people, when finding themselves in novel or uncertain environments, are highly susceptible to socialization.[7] Uncertainty may characterize refugee environments in at least two distinct ways. One is the novelty dimension, the uncertainty that is related to upheaval and relocation, often with little time for preparation and little knowledge of the destination, which in itself leaves refugees vulnerable, and therefore potentially receptive to more or less subtle political messaging. A second type of uncertainty is the more enduring one, which has to do with both the possible physical insecurity that may characterize refugee life and an inability to know what to expect of the future. Both types of uncertainty prepare the ground for a rebel group that is capable of offering belonging, be that through regular schooling, or more informally through daily interaction and local gatherings.

We also know that socialization is particularly effective in secluded settings, such as refugee camps, where individuals interact only with a finite – often homogenous – set of individuals, rather than shifting between various social environments.[8] Whereas in a more regulated context, there is normally a clear distinction between interpersonal (family, friends) and institutional (schools, work places) forms of socialization, this distinction is fundamentally blurred in refugee contexts. With few alternative sources of influence, the two tend to go hand in hand; the correctives normally offered by competing loci of socialization weaken or evaporate entirely. These are ideal conditions for cultivating adherence to radical worldviews, even a commitment to militancy.

Ideological Narratives

The trajectories of rebel groups differ widely, and so do the ways by which they get to be actors in refugee contexts. The default is that an ongoing armed conflict, between a government and a rebel group (or several), leads to an outflux of refugees, eventually followed by the rebels, who would seek to exert their influence in exile, which they also use as a base for continuing cross-border fighting. A different trajectory is when opposition groups build a political consciousness in their home country which clashes with domestic politics, then seek exile to uphold their political project, possibly already equipped with overarching ideological frames, educational templates and curricula, perhaps also with trained teachers, well placed to monopolize socialization in exile. A third variety is when a rebel organization emerges from within an exile context, with no clear predecessor, in which case institutions of socialization may very well be key to their emergence, and if not, soon become desired instruments for furthering their agenda.

The content – the concrete messages conveyed and attitudes fostered – matters. The conscious socialization that rebel groups pursue in exile is reflective of their ideological frames, their justifications for the struggle that they engage in, and a more or less coherent narrative that provides a sense of shared purpose and an ultimate vision. In the words of one of the world's sharpest students of contentious political action, Sidney Tarrow, ideology serves both to 'justify, dignify and animate collective action'.[9] Ideology reinforces identities, helping respond to the question of whose side you are on, permitting diverse groups to focus on common aims. Importantly, neither identities nor ideologies are fixed, but stand in a dynamic relationship to the narratives of, and interactions with, other actors, such as media and international organizations. As emphasized in the refugee warrior literature, however, the international refugee regime in itself – constructed to safeguard the rights of refugees, thereby inevitably underpinning a narrative of victims worthy of external sympathy and support – can serve to justify armed resistance to the larger world.

No visitor to the Middle East can avoid noticing the yawning gap between the educational, entrepreneurial and occupational aspirations of the region's young people and the harsh reality that deprives so many of them of a positive future. Indeed, in the Middle East, half of those aged 18-25 are either unemployed or underemployed. Aggravating this situation is the global refugee crisis, which has displaced some 30 million children, six million from Syria alone, very few of whom are likely to return home during their school-age years. It should come as no surprise that the Islamic State group believes that it can find fertile ground for recruitment in this vast population of dispossessed and disaffected young people.

Gordon Brown, UN Special Envoy for Global Education[14]

Political messaging needs in some way to resonate with what is familiar to the population that it targets. As Charles Tilly and others have pointed out, to maintain a coherent ideological program, while presenting it in a vernacular that resonates with local culture, is a delicate balancing act.[10] To Tilly, it became increasingly clear that culture – which he referred to as 'shared understandings and their representations' – is key. Cambodia's Khmer Rouge, during their period (1979–88) in exile, engaged in a systematic socialization campaign, did well in maintaining support from its cadre, but had limited success in attracting new members from among the refugee population. Their broad message as the ultimate liberators from Vietnamese aggression was undermined by the Vietnam's force withdrawal, as well as the Khmer Rouge's own record of violent repression while in power.

Identity formation in exile is the main issue in Lisa Malkki's celebrated *Purity and Exile*, based on fieldwork among (Burundian) Hutu refugees in Tanzania, where she compares refugees settled in camps with those living dispersed in towns.[11] In Malkki's account, focus is on the construction of 'national consciousness' in exile. The camp refugees work to refine ethnic boundaries in a continuous process of constructing the history as a people unjustly exiled, which brings them to resist intermarriages or any form of local integration. For the camp refugees, the exile project is to become a nation, and international opinion is perceived as the ultimate arbitrator in the struggle for justice. Exile is seen as a period of purification and political empowerment; the centre of political change is the home country. Return is the unquestionable objective, violence the legitimate means to rectify past injustice and gain power in the country of origin.

The effects of militant socialization in exile endure. When a large number of refugees sharing a radical vision return together, as often occurs following major political and military changes at home, continued violence is a real possibility. Thus, in many conflict settlements, rapid and voluntary return carries with it a risk for destabilization.

Militant Skillsets

The acquirement of new skills and the transformation of consciousness can be seen as two interrelated aspects of socialization. In military socialization, the acquisition of new skills and the transformation of consciousness intertwine, as learning to fight and kill is inextricably linked to changing perceptions of self as well as to justifications for exerting violence. Elisabeth Jean Wood suggests that military recruits "have to be socialized in the use of violence for group, not private, purposes."[12] She continues by noting that "[t]raining and socialization to the armed group take place both formally, through the immersion experience of 'boot camp'... and informally, through initiation rituals and hazing". Ultimately, building coherent organizations, whose members are willing to risk their lives for the larger group, is unthinkable in the absence of durable, systematic socialization.[13]

In exile refugees may change their political outlook, whether as a result of interacting closely with others that share their traumatic experiences, or through institutionalized efforts, whether those be run by militants among the refugees, transnational entities, or by states. In some cases, efforts seek to build a political consciousness, focusing on a return project, with the ambition of taking political power in the country of origin. Socialization is reinforced by engaging in violence, as when fighters from the refugee setting circulate back and forth across the border. The likelihood of post-return violence will depend on whether militant socialization continues, takes on new forms, or comes to a halt, as a consequence of return. At its most effective, however, socialization fosters attitudes that will

persist over time, even in the absence of organizational regularity or other forms of maintenance. For our purposes, where the main interest is in post-return militancy, we still expect exile socialization to be essential.

Conclusions

Refugee contexts lend themselves easily to militant socialization. The challenges to policy and practice are many, and they are profound. In exile, the most evident implication is to ensure that education systems for refugees do not fall under the influence of rebel groups. Moreover, socialization concerns also give further weight to the need to delimit the influence of rebels on refugee populations, not only when it comes to control over resources and provision of security, but also the ability to shape the political narrative and the everyday climate of interpersonal encounters.

Refugeehood is good material for irreconciliatory narratives. The shared fate of being unjustly driven from one's homeland is a basis for cultivating a sense of duty to contribute to a return in which justice will be reestablished, not rarely with reference to an idealized past. Such narratives may be fundamentally intolerant, and may justify violence. The cultivation of alternative narratives is therefore of paramount importance.

Education is essential (but it is not all there is). Rebel groups seeking influence within refugee populations will look to education systems. Particularly when others pay, the ability to influence the curriculum and the pedagogy provides rebels with extreme value for money. Ultimately, it is conceivable for education to do more harm than good. Hence, the focus on the number of students needs to be matched by a similar emphasis on quality of education, and basic education needs to be matched by further opportunities.

Militant socialization has long-term effects. Exile socialization may materialize in inspiring intolerance or violence upon return to country of origin. Worldviews shaped in settings that are fairly insulated from the situation in the state of origin, not being molded in the everyday interaction with political opponents, may prove particularly inflexible. At the extreme, such worldviews may prevent reconciliation and promote further violent conflict. Ideological narratives that emphasize the duty to return in order to bring about an ideal state are particularly worrisome. ■

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