



“Is it Commerce?”: Dehumanization in the Framing of Refugees as Resources

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ABSTRACT

The idea that “refugees are resources” has been promoted as countering the dehumanization that frames refugees as burdens or security threats. But is framing people as resources truly humanizing? Resource theorists have highlighted how modern Western conceptions of what resources are depends on a distinction between the human and the non-human. This logic is similar to, and originates in the same epoch as, racialized hierarchies of humanity. State appraisal and management of human labour and mobility continue to be shaped by race and perceptions of productive value in economic terms, just as the value of resources varies, and has always been social and political. This intervention highlights the perspective of a Burundian refugee in Tanzania who traces continuities between animalizing experiences and being called a resource—in that a resource can be sold or traded across borders with no input into its future. Refugees can and do meaningfully contribute to the communities and countries in which they live, but the “resources” lens curtails a truly humanizing perspective on refugees’ lives.

KEYWORDS

dehumanization; animalization; refugees-as-resources; discourse analysis; race

RÉSUMÉ

L’idée selon laquelle les réfugiés constituent des «ressources» a été prônée afin de contrer le cadrage déshumanisant des réfugiés comme des fardeaux ou comme une menace sécuritaire. Mais le cadrage des personnes comme ressources n’est-il pas réellement humanisant? Les théoriciens des ressources ont souligné que les conceptions modernes occidentales de ce que constituent des ressources repose sur la distinction entre l’humain et le non-humain. Cette logique est similaire à la hiérarchisation racialisée de l’humanité et trouve son origine à la même époque. L’évaluation et la gestion du travail humain et de la mobilité par l’État continuent d’être façonnées par la «race» et par la perception de la valeur productive en termes économiques, tout comme la valeur accordée aux ressources varie et a toujours été sociale et politique. Cette intervention met en lumière la perspective d’un réfugié burundais en Tanzanie qui retrace la continuité entre des expériences d’animalisation et le fait d’être traité comme une ressource - en ce qu’une ressource peut être vendue ou échangée sans être consultée sur son avenir. Il est vrai que les réfugiés contribuent de manière significative aux communautés et aux pays où ils vivent, mais le prisme des «ressources» pose des limites à une perspective réellement humanisante sur la vie des réfugiés.

KEYWORDS

dehumanization; animalization; refugees-as-resources; discourse analysis; race

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INTRODUCTION

At a time when animalizing and other dehumanizing language has been prominent in media and political speech about refugees, often along with the framing of refugees as burdens and dangerous, the idea that "refugees are resources" has been promoted by some academics as a progressive and pragmatic response to the dehumanization of refugees and migrants. For example, in a presentation entitled "Refugees as a Resource," Betts states that his argument is simply "these people are human beings" (Skoll.org, 2016, 20:47). This discourse is not new, and it is strongly allied with theories that promote neoliberal economic development, self-reliance, and capitalist globalization orientations in refugee response.

While not refuting that refugees are often "resourceful and positively contributing" (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2020, p. 2), the concern of this intervention is to interrogate the specific claims of humanization in the "refugees-as-resources" framing. In doing so, this intervention is situated within broader critiques of "using" refugees within hegemonic, neoliberal development aims, in what Morris (2019) terms the "refugee industry" (Crawley, 2017; Daley, 1989; Hyndman and Reynolds, 2020; Kyriakides et al., 2019; Morris, 2019; Ramsay, 2020; Zamore, 2018; Turner, 2019). These critical approaches challenge the possibility of "harnessing globalization" as a humanitarian "solution" (Betts and Collier, 2017, p. 176), as well as the idea that framing people as resources is humanizing rather than objectifying and inherently hierarchical. As Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2020) has demonstrated, even so-called "'pro-refugee' narratives" shape ideas around who is "truly wor-

thy of protection," whether due to perceived vulnerability and victimhood or as outstanding entrepreneurs, "appropriately resourceful and positively contributing to the local and global neoliberal economy," in ways that are "permeated by hierarchical processes of inclusion and exclusion, including on the basis of gender, age, sexuality, ethnicity, religion and location" (pp. 2-3). I argue that modern conceptualizations of "resources" rely on human/non-human distinctions to define commodities for the extraction of value, and they are bound up with racialized hierarchies fundamental to capitalism. Resource language can thus be dehumanizing.

Following a brief introduction of the refugees-as-resources discourse, related policies, and critiques, this intervention centres on a critical perspective on the resources discourse shared by Onesphore,¹ a Burundian refugee in a camp in Tanzania. He relates being called a resource to being dehumanized and commoditized, within the context of extended encampment and recurrent displacement. My encounter with Onesphore, and analysis of his critique derives from ethnographic methods and life-history research with Burundian refugees in two camps in Tanzania in 2017–2018, centred on how recurrent displacement after prior returns shapes refugees' enduring experiences of encampment. Following the vignette, I draw on geographical scholarship to ask what resources actually are. Modern Western conceptions of resources rely on a distinction between the human and the non-human, in a similar way to, and emerging in the same epoch as, modern conceptions of "race." State appraisal and management of human labour and mobility continue to be shaped by racism and perceptions of produc-

¹A pseudonym.

tive value in economic terms—just as the value of and demand for resources varies and has always been social and political.

A "NEW (OLD) APPROACH" AND NEW (OLD) CRITIQUES: REFUGEES AS RESOURCES FOR DEVELOPMENT

Like many recurring humanitarian methodologies, the refugees-as-resources discourse is not new. Harrell-Bond (1995, p. 10) termed it a "new (old) approach" when highlighting the key terms promoted in state and humanitarian refugee policy and programmes in the early 1980s. At the Second International Conference on Refugees in Africa (ICARA II) in 1984, **refugees as resources for development** was one of the key phrases, as UNHCR emphasized the necessity to promote development for "refugee affected areas" in order for solutions to displacement to be durable (Harrell-Bond, 1995). Such approaches had already been at work in Africa and elsewhere (Daley, 1989). For example, Rwandans who sought refuge in neighbouring countries in 1963 were targeted with "integrated zonal development" programs (UNHCR, 1969, cited in Zamore 2018, p. 33). The language of using refugees as resources was already in play in development-oriented refugee assistance: "Encouraged by events in Burundi and elsewhere, UNHCR and its partners convened a conference in Addis Ababa in October 1967 to consider 'the role of refugees in economic and social development and their utilization as human resources'" (UNHCR, 1969, cited in Zamore, 2008, p. 33). Recently this discourse has re-emerged, advocated by some refugee studies scholars, as well as think tanks, non-governmental organizations, and governments, including the former Canadian minister for immigration, as a way to positively frame the politics of refugee reception

and hosting in the face of hostility (Skoll.org, 2016; Schmitt & World Economic Forum, 2017). It has been part of mainstream arguments to extend encamped refugees labour and mobility rights, such as through the Comprehensive Refugee Response Frameworks (CRRF), which are a cornerstone of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) framework.

While intended as a positive discourse on refugee contributions to the societies in which they live, such economic approaches, and the related framing of refugees as resources, are not without critique within progressive refugee studies. These critiques do not question the premise that refugees can and do contribute to host societies in diverse ways. Rather, many draw on critical political economy to question the underlying logics of the developmental approaches being advocated. Development strategies oriented towards refugees have, from their beginnings, differed little from dominant international development strategies, including, for example, structural adjustment programmes, which have been widely critiqued as deepening inequalities and poverty (Daley, 1989; Zamore, 2018). The promotion of refugee "self-sufficiency" was (and is) more oriented towards reducing aid budgets than increasing well-being (Zamore, 2018). Contemporary proposals for "harnessing globalization" include allowing refugees to work in **special economic zones**, a spatial technology of neoliberal accumulation by dispossession, which have been termed "special exploitation zones" in other contexts (Crawley, 2017, p. 27; Zamore, 2018), and echo the emphasis in past decades on incorporation in global markets through commodity production and deregulation (Daley, 1989). So far, such approaches, currently paradigmatically promoted through the CRRF of the GCR, seem likely to maintain

the status quo rather than meaningfully challenge the containment, exclusion, and even expulsion of "refugee-migrants" (Hyndman & Reynolds, 2020, p. 67).

This intervention complements these critical political economic analyses with a focus on the discursive claim that the framing of refugees as (potential) resources is humanizing. While the refugees-as-resources discourse promoted within refugee studies and policy frameworks is generally positioned as opposed to encampment, advocating for the right to work and mobility, perspectives from contexts of containment and encampment open a broader discussion of the idea of "resources" within capitalism, and how this discourse can be tied to dehumanization and racial hierarchies. In analyzing Australia's offshore detention of refugees, Morris (2019) applies a critical resource-extraction framework to the refugee industry in the post-phosphate, extraction-based economy of Nauru. Her framework situates refugees as resources in an extractive industry, which creates value not through the labour of refugees but through their containment; she does not aim "to re-objectify people as commodities, but to underline how they can be treated as such" (Morris, 2019, p. 1124). Morris draws on Ruth Wilson Gilmore's abolitionist theorization of the American prison industrial complex, which highlights how prisons allow for capitalist accumulation, not primarily because of prisoner labour but because they are "extractive, in that they enable money to move because of the enforced inactivity of people locked in them" (Gilmore, 2015, 10:04, cited in Morris, 2019, p. 1124; see also Gilmore, 2017, p. 228; and see Brankamp, 2021 for abolitionist perspectives on refugee camps). Morris extends this critique to the containment of refugees, which resonates with contexts of refugee encampment elsewhere in

the world where refugees are barred from employment but still framed as resources, as analyzed in the vignette below, which opens my discussion of dehumanization in the conceptualization of resources in capitalism more broadly.

"SOMETHING YOU CAN SELL ... LIKE A GOAT": ONESPHORE'S PERSPECTIVE ON BEING CALLED A RESOURCE

While there were dances and choirs, World Refugee Day 2018 did not end in a celebratory mood for most Burundian refugees who attended the official festivities in Nduta camp, Tanzania. Directly following refugee speeches emphasizing the need for ongoing refuge for many, a Tanzanian government representative reiterated calls for Burundian refugees to "go home." One might assume that in this context, refugees could favour being framed as resources or benefits to their host country in order to advocate extending their refuge and contesting return. On the contrary, it is in discussing these calls to return that Onesphore, a Burundian refugee, shared with me how he and others negatively interpreted the refugees-as-resources discourse, which was included in speeches during World Refugee Day the year before. Ultimately, Onesphore found the idea of being considered "resources," rather than a humanizing or pragmatic advocacy strategy in refugees' situation, dehumanizing—like being compared to goats, a non-human resource that can be bought, sold, and traded without a say in the matter.

This vignette follows the order in which Onesphore shared his ideas and wove together metaphor, experiences, and his perceptions of the politics of refugee hosting in the region. I include the longer conversational context of his comments on "resources" to draw their connection to

animalization and questions of voice and agency, as well as labour and profit. The conversation began with a discussion of how refugees were not given a genuine platform to dispute the claims by the Burundian and Tanzanian governments that they caused insecurity, that what they fled was over, and that they should return. Onesphore illustrated this observation with a poignant metaphor:

When you raise a goat in a stable, and the goat has two, three, or four kids, the owner has the right to do what he wants, and the goat can't do anything. It has no rights. To slaughter the goat, he might say that the goat is not listening well, or there is not much grass. Is the goat going to refuse? If there was someone who could [speak up], the goat would have the right to refuse. It's like here in Tanzania—we refugees are like goats, which is to say, there are no rights [translation note: or law (fr: droit)] that protects us.

He then associated the current call for Burundian refugees to return with the violent closure of Mtabila camp in 2012. He recounted how the commandant of the now defunct Mtabila camp told the refugees, "'even if you go [back to Burundi], in a short while we will see you again.'—And even now they say if you go back ...". Trailing off, he seemed to imply that after returning to Burundi (again) they may have to seek refuge again. Less than three years after the closure of Mtabila camp, he had been one of hundreds of thousands of Burundians to seek refuge again. While the refugees-as-resources rhetoric may be meant to counter forced return and encourage states to continue providing refuge, his own experiences contributed to a different interpretation,

which he signaled with a direct question: "Est-ce que c'est un commerce?"—Is it commerce (or trade)? Here, Onesphore made the connection between the back-and-forth movement of refugees, regardless of their wishes, to the trade of animals or other commodities.

For World Refugee Day in 2017, Onesphore remembered, one of the key slogans of the events in the camp had been "We are resources for their country." In the original Swahili the slogan was "Rasilimali za nchi." (This was not the official World Refugee Day slogan that year, but one that had been used in the speeches as Tanzania and UNHCR began to promote the later cancelled CRRF). One formal translation of rasilimali is "resources, assets, or capital of the nation" (*Taasisi ya Uchinguzi wa Kiswahili*, 2000, "Rasilimali"). An interpreter explained that he and others in the camp would use the term more specifically to mean "something you can sell, like a tree, a goat, etc. ... to get capital, money to start a business."

"If we return and come back again," Onesphore continued, "nous sommes des commerces. ... Ils nous prennent comme un resource." We are trade, commercial products. They treat us like a resource. "We continue to build their economy," he added.

The animalization metaphor that Onesphore first introduced is immediately recognizable as descriptive of an experience of dehumanization. Animalization metaphors were used by Burundian refugees in many interviews, in the context of broader life narratives, to explain experiences of dehumanization in the refugee camp context.² Comparing people with non-human things,

²Rather than highlighting animalizing discourse (of policy-makers, media, etc.), Burundian refugees used metaphors and analogies to discuss the ways in which the everyday practices of humanitarian aid and policing of the refugee camps were experienced as similar to the treatment of animals. Being enclosed in a limited space without the freedom to move elsewhere, receiving the same poor-quality and insufficient quantity of food month after month, and being beaten without recourse if caught outside the camp or if protesting within the camp were all common reasons for animal comparisons. These metaphors and analogies revealed strong resonance with the arguments about the inhumanity of humanitarianism made by Harrell-Bond (2002)

like animals, is not in and of itself necessarily dehumanizing but rather depends on contextual factors (Haslam et al., 2011). There is continuity between Onesphore's goat metaphor and his exclamation that Burundian refugees had been treated as commercial goods—traded back and forth across borders without much say about their situation.

Onesphore's observation of refugees "continuing to build their economy" and thus being "resources" can be interpreted in three registers, all of which Onesphore mentioned during this conversation and other refugees discussed in more extended interviews. First, economic benefit may refer to refugees' labour. Burundians are not technically allowed to work without difficult-to-access permits in Tanzania, but they fill thousands of necessary "incentive" positions as poorly compensated "volunteers" in the camp, building infrastructure and providing services that also benefit surrounding communities. They have long played important but clandestine roles in the agricultural economy of the region beyond the camps (Masabo et al., 2018; Whitaker, 1999). The restrictions on their labour, and **not** having the formal right to work, is what keeps their wages low and their working conditions poor, in some ways increasing the enrichment from their labour. This situation is perhaps in contradiction with the refugees-as-resources approach that frames expanding refugees access to formal labour markets and the right to work as increasing benefits to hosts.

Second, and less related to dominant understandings of the resources discourse, Onesphore and other Burundians suspected Tanzanians of stealing aid intended for refugees or otherwise being involved in humanitarian corruption. Such rumours were common. Corruption is one of the ways

refugees believe others benefit from their presence and dispossession. Despite humanitarian campaigns and illustrated signs in the camp encouraging refugees to report corruption, many feel there is little effective recourse in such cases because of the power imbalances in aid management and distribution. (As such cases have been reported at length in other countries, it is not unreasonable to believe that such illicit profit is made from refugees as resources in many contexts.)

Finally, and perhaps most directly relevant to the narrative as recounted above, in introducing how refugees build the economy, Onesphore referred to the back-and-forth refuge and return of Burundians, which he sees as being like trade, and the treatment of refugees like commercial goods. In part, this echoes rumours in the camp that Burundian refugees had been "sold"—a belief by many refugees that the Burundian government had paid money to the Tanzanian government to force the Burundians who had fled their regime to return (see Turner, 2004 on the prevalence and politics of rumours in prior refugee camps in Tanzania). Rumours aside, Onesphore and other refugees are aware that the arrival and presence of refugees in camps has brought economic benefits and jobs to the region, while return and resettlement programs also include benefits on the other side of the border. While the return program is currently framed as voluntary, many refugees experienced or had been aware of prior violent forced return and so felt they would not ultimately be able to refuse repatriation. Governments and humanitarian organizations make decisions about return, with little genuine consultation with refugees. Claiming there is peace, or that the refugees cause insecurity, just like the owner of the goat in Onesphore's metaphor can say "that the goat is not listening well, or that there is not much

grass" when justifying his decision to sell or slaughter the goat, with no one to refute the claims. No one listens to the goat, as a non-human commodity—a resource—just as One-sphore feels refugees' concerns about return are not considered.

RESOURCE POLITICS, RACIALIZED HIERARCHIES, AND THE MANAGEMENT OF HUMAN MOBILITY

What is a resource? A key disciplinary reference in geography suggests that **resource** is "a deceptively peaceable term that conceals the profoundly political relations through which humans attribute value to the non-human world" (Bridge, 2009, p. 648). The ways resources are understood and valued have always been social and relational, bound up with relations of power and the organization of society to create and satisfy "needs and wants" (Bridge, 2009, p. 649). The labelling of anything as a resource cannot be taken for granted. The differentiation of resources from the human is linked to the centrality of the term in the emergence of modernity and capitalism (Bridge, 2009). Distinctions between humans and nature were articulated to define resources. In the same period, **Man** (as white, European, and "civilized") was being created as distinct from other humans, considered closer to nature in emergent racialized hierarchical categorizations. Modern conceptions of both **resource** and **race** were developed to justify colonial and imperial exploitative expansion and right to resources globally and the treatment of human beings as other-than-human resources (Bridge, 2009; Johnston, 2009; Wynter, 2003).

The emergence of the definition of resources as other than human in conjunction with histories of people traded across borders because of their utility to capital-

ist production should make us wary of promoting the economic utility of people as resources as a primary justification for welcoming refugees. The value and mobility of human labour continues to be structured by race (Brankamp & Daley, 2020; Gilmore, 2017; Mullings, 2017), including in humanitarian settings (Turner, 2019; Daley, 2007; Hyndman, 2000). For example, Turner (2019) argues that the way that humanitarians' celebration of entrepreneurship of Syrian refugees in Jordan relies on implicit and explicit comparison with African refugees as less entrepreneurial and more aid-dependent is "inextricably intertwined with processes of racialisation, which serve to reproduce both white supremacy and anti-black racism" (p. 138). Brankamp & Daley (2020) trace the continuities between colonial categorization and attempts to manage the mobility of East Africans based on "differential valuation of human worth, economic benefits, and racialization" and anti-refugee rhetoric by host states in regions that have long depended on border-crossers as labour (p. 114). This genealogical approach highlights the connections between "colonial views on the need to make 'out-of-place' Africans productive" and "contemporary discourses about refugee economies and the utilization of refugee labor" (p. 116). Resource theorists point to the fact that resources are differently valued at different times in different societies, often based on their value to the productive capacities of the state (Bridge, 2009). If refugees are resources, for whom are they creating value? How does this value change? And which resources are constructed as having less value than others? Which groups of refugees and people on the move are valued as "resources" to host societies' remains shaped by racialized hierarchies of human value.

The possible dehumanization of the refugees-as-resource discourse and the insistence on refugees' humanity by those employing it is a productive contradiction. [Vaughan-Williams \(2015\)](#) draws on Derrida's idea of the "zoopolitical" to analyze the simultaneous animalizing management of migrants at the border-zones of Europe and insistence on human-rights-based and migrant-centred approaches by migration management agencies. Zoos were developed not only to contain animals, but also to produce knowledge about them: "Zoopolitical" governance, then, operates "to immobilise and render otherwise 'unknowable' populations 'knowable'" ([Vaughan-Williams, 2015, p. 9](#)). Resource theories point to similar governance. The very idea of a resource is a way of knowing and valuing that which is other than human. Resource politics overlaps with the zoopolitical in that resource governance seeks knowledge of resources and control over trade, and also because animals may also be framed as resources, like goats in Oneshore's metaphor.

Metaphorically calling a person a resource can have positive intentions and may not always be inherently dehumanizing, but there are contexts in which it can be interpreted and experienced that way, as highlighted in Oneshore's analysis of the slogan. In a situation where refugees have little freedom, and decisions about them are made without them, Oneshore feels that he has been traded across borders, like a commodity, while others profit from refugee movements. Oneshore's analysis of his context resonates with [Morris \(2019\)](#) critique of the extractive nature of the refugee industry, where value is created not necessarily from refugees' labour but from their containment (as resources). Strict encampment (like in Tanzania) may not be the intended context of the refugees-and-development dis-

course, which claims to promote refugees' rights to work and mobility. Nevertheless, the discourse relies on hierarchical assumptions of the value of humans when they must be framed as resources in order to be "worthy" of refuge, doing little to challenge containment ([Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2020](#); [Hyndman & Reynolds, 2020](#)). The value of labour has always been racialized in capitalism and, within the refugee industry, continues to be ([Turner, 2019](#)). Critical scholarship on resources points to how ways of knowing resources have been bound up with power and defined distinctions of humans from nature at a time in which racializing hierarchies sought to do the same.

The ways that refugees and people on the move are framed as "resources" to host societies remains shaped by racialized hierarchies of human value. Being "a resource" or a "benefit" should not be the basis of refuge, as it does not inherently challenge encampment, dispossession, exploitation, and exclusion. In questioning the refugee-resources rhetoric, I am not opposing the idea that refugees can and do meaningfully benefit the communities and countries in which they live, and the world more broadly, despite structural constraints that limit possibilities for refugees in many places. Rather, the richness of these contributions can be highlighted and better promoted without dehumanizing language that equates people with non-human goods or the framing of refugees' value to societies through a narrowly economic lens.

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