Let me at the outset thank the organisers of the “Refugees in International Relations” Project at Oxford University for undertaking a very timely and worthwhile project, which addresses a major gap not only in the field of “refugee studies” or “forced migration studies (FMS)”, but also has a potential to address some critical gaps in international relations theory. I am not a scholar of forced migration/refugee studies. But as a student of international relations with a special interest in extending the concerns and frontiers of IR theory, I am really delighted to have this opportunity to reflect on the topic of forced migration and how it fits within our available frameworks of IR theory.

I have been asked to speak about “The Limitations of Mainstream International Relations Theories for Understanding the Politics of Forced Migration”. In a sense, I think that mainstream IR theories (MIRTs) are actually excellent tools for understanding the politics of forced migration. The working and the deficiencies of the current international governance regimes for refugees and forced migrants (I use the two terms interchangeably to refer to actors, institutions, principles and practices that are constitute the governance of refugees ad internally displaced persons) is a mirror image of the way MIRTs view the world, and their intellectual roots in the Western dominance of the international system. What the MIRTs do not tell us is how the international forced migration regime should work, not how it actually works. And since, as I will argue below, my understanding of the functions of theory has a normative element, it is here that some of the major deficiencies of MIRTs can be located and discussed. This is a central point of my analysis.

I should also point out at the outset that I do have some misgivings about building a bridge between (FMS) and IR theory in general. This is because IR theory can be highly limiting for an academic field that has been evolving in a very transdisciplinary or multidisciplinary manner. Compared to FMS, IR is far less accommodating of perspectives from multiple disciplines, although it has interacted well with economics (for neorealism and liberalism) and sociology (for constructivism). But the meaning, scope and function of theory in IR remain heavily contested and one would not want refugee studies to get infected with these endless and sometimes stifling debates by associating too closely with IR. And as I will argue latter, perhaps IR theory has much more to learn from students of forced migration than vice versa.

My presentation proceeds in four parts. First, I will outline what I consider to be the MIRTs, namely realism, liberalism and more controversially, constructivism. Aside from analysing their core assumptions, I will mention their individual deficiencies in dealing with the challenge of forced migration. Second, I will identify some common biases that run through all the MIRTs which greatly limit their ability to deal with the politics of forced migration. Third, I will identify two recent attempts to redefine and broaden MIRTs which have particular relevance for forced migration.
studies, because they have permeated and redefined the role of the UNHCR, the premier agency dealing with forced migration. These are firstly, human security, a concept which fits largely but not exclusively within the liberal theoretical paradigm in IR, and secondly, securitisation theory, which is mainly, and again not exclusively, a constructivist contribution. Finally, I will highlight a few areas in which IR theory in general and FMS can meaningfully interact with each other.

A word about the meaning of theory is necessary here. Considerable debate has taken place over what theory is and what its functions are. Without spending too much time discussing these debates, let me outline briefly four major functions in terms of which I understand theory of international relations. The first function of theory is description and in a related vein, understanding. Theory describes reality, or presents a mental picture of the world whether or not one accepts it as objective reality. Some people, such as European scholars of IR, would accept that theory is mainly a systematic way of organising our facts and marshalling evidence in support of our arguments about international relations. The second function of theory is explanation; in this sense, theory offers ways of making causal linkages between different sets of phenomena. This is very much an American preoccupation just as the first function of theory is more associated with European scholarship on IR. The third function of theory is prediction, although not everyone will agree that this is a legitimate or desirable function of theory. But most theories do carry a predictive element or at least predictions can be deduced from them. Finally, theory in international relations is often about transformation. This is the normative function of IR theory; it’s supposed to deal with the question not just of what is, but also what ought to be. Again, while not everyone agrees whether theory should be normative, there is a strong and longstanding tradition of thinking normatively in IR theory which cannot be simply wished away.

In this paper, I will evaluate wherever possible and appropriate, the three mainstream theories of IR in terms of their descriptive, explanatory, predictive and normative claims, although the emphasis will be on the first and the last of these. I would also assume and draw a strong link between theory and policy. Theory, mainstream of otherwise, cannot be divorced from the realm of policy and practice. The relationship can be conceptualised as a two-way process. The initial formulation of, and revisions to, IR theory by academics do follow developments in the real world, including major and transformational developments such as the beginning or the end of the Cold War. At the same time, policy-makers always carry a mental template of conceptual understanding and assumptions about how the world works, based on their own education, understanding and experience, which informs their policy judgements and decisions. These assumptions often correspond, although not neatly, to those of IR theories. In these cases, theory becomes policy by providing the dominant ideology of the ruling elite and shaping the thinking and approach of the major international institutions. This relationship calls for particular attention to the normative elements of theory, which especially carry policy relevance. In assessing the relevance of IR theories in understanding the politics of forced migration therefore, I assume that these theories not just inform policy, but are also made and remade by politics and policy. Hence to a considerable extent, while passing judgements on IR theories, I also pass judgements on their institutional and policy manifestations, including the role of international agencies like the UNHCR. It is in this sense that I make one of my central arguments: the close correspondence between the biases of mainstream IR theories and the deficiencies of the prevailing international forced migration regime.
Realism, Liberalism and Constructivism

Let me now turn to the mainstream theories of international relations, including a brief examination of their major assumptions and arguments. There is little disagreement in the field of IR that realism and liberalism are the two major mainstream theories of IR.

Realism: Realism is perhaps the oldest and still the dominant form of IR theory. Its main arguments are well known and need only brief mention here. First, states are the main actors in international relations. Second, international system is anarchic in the sense that there is no higher authority above the state. Third, national interest often defined as power, is the basis for state behaviour. Fourth, conflict sometimes leading to war is a natural and persistent feature of international relations. If war can be avoided, albeit temporarily, it is because of the tendency of states to balance each other. Fifth, international institutions are marginal to the game of international relations; they are wholly subservient to great power whim and manipulation and are effective only as far as great powers allow them to be.

There are also well-known variations within realism. The structural realism of Waltz holds that anarchy and the distribution of power are the major determinants of state behaviour, thereby challenging classical realism which takes human nature to be the main causal variable of international relations. There is also the broad disagreement between offensive and defensive realists. Offensive realists like John Mearsheimer argue that states are power-maximisers, who, especially when they happen to be rising and aspiring great powers, are apt to pursue a expansionist course and thereby invite clash with status quo powers in the international system. Defensive realists like Jack Snyder and Robert Jervis disagree with this view; for them states are likely to remain content with their security achieved through a balance of power system.

The causal and predictive elements of realism have centered on arguments, following a Waltizian logic, that the end of the Cold War would not lead to stable peace, but unleash new forms of inter-state conflict and great power competition that are characteristic of multipolar systems. Offensive realists have focused on the rise of China and its coming conflict with the US which they see as the pre-eminent global status quo power. The jury is still out on both questions, but in general, the realist description and understanding of the world retains considerable appeal, especially since the 9/11 attacks, which gave the theory a new lease of life which would have been further strengthened by the Russian invasion of Georgia in response to the American insistence on NATO expansion. As Stephen Walt puts it, realism has been “alive, well, and creatively reassessing how its root principles relate to the post-9/11 world. Despite changing configurations of power, realists remain steadfast in stressing that policy must be based on positions of real strength, not on either empty bravado or hopeful illusions about a world without conflict.” (Walt 1998)

The claim of theoretical innovation notwithstanding, realists remain largely disinterested in a whole range of transnational forces and issues which their rivals see as increasingly defining and shaping international relations. The realist view of security remains heavily state centric, focusing on rivalry among the great powers and the workings of the balance of power among them. Realists have in general argued against expanding the scope of security and security studies beyond the phenomena of military conflict, including arms race and nuclear weapon proliferation. While some realists have shown an interest in internal conflicts (Posen 1993), transnational issues
such as refugees and migration, environmental degradation, human rights abuses, etc have remained largely outside the purview of realist theory.

**Liberalism:** While realism is basically a theory of conflict, liberalism optimistically focuses on the causes of cooperation and the mechanisms of realising international order. Like realism, liberalism has several strands, including commercial liberalism (interdependence theory), republican liberalism (democratic peace theory) and liberal institutionalism, (including its 1980s offshoot neo-liberal institutionalism). But unlike realism, these strands are mutually reinforcing rather than internal contestations (like that between offensive versus defensive realists).

Just as realists despite their innate pessimism did not necessarily agree with Huntington’s “clash of civilisations” thesis, few liberal theorists of IR agree with the Fukuyama’s euphoria about the “end of history” as an ultimate triumph of market economics and democracy – two of the most liberal forces of world order. The predictive elements of the early post-Cold War liberal moment, which visualised the world as a community of nations, and whose most extreme form was the Fukuyama thesis, have proven to be overoptimistic. But liberals as a whole do see the contemporary world as being increasingly shaped by the conflict-mitigating role of economic interdependence, international institutions and democracy. The descriptive elements of liberal theory focus particularly on the growing weight of globalisation, and to a lesser extent, the role of international institutions. Liberals reject the realist view of international institutions as marginal factors in international relations. Neo-liberal institutionalism, pioneered by Robert Keohane in the 1980s, continues to underlie the liberal view of international institutions. While not all liberals endorse the Keohane’s agreement with neo-realism that the international system is anarchic, they generally agree with him that the prospects of war can be significantly reduced through cooperative institutions that reduce transaction costs, generate transparency through information flows, and prevent cheating through sanction mechanisms.

More importantly, liberals are more willing than realists to depart from the traditional conception of security as the protection of states from external military threats. The liberal view of security does account for new transnational threats, such as economic crises, human rights abuses and war crimes. Normatively, the most significant recent liberal contribution to international order is the doctrine of humanitarian intervention, to protect people imperilled either by the deliberate action or the sheer incapacity of their own governments. This doctrine and the role of international institutions more generally, are of particular importance for the studies of forced migration, because it bears directly on the role of international institutions such as the UNHCR in managing the issue.

Despite acknowledging forced migration as a threat to international order, liberalism has had great difficulties in translating its normative elements into policy responses of liberal democracies to this challenge. As a review of the asylum policies liberal democratic states by Matthew Gibney concludes:

> In the face of citizen anxiety about the economic, cultural and political costs of admitting strangers…many states have done little more than fulfil their international law duty not to return to a dangerous state or territory (refouler) the seekers of asylum who make it to their borders…Many states have simply avoided its full demands by using indiscriminate measures – such as visa denials and carrier sanctions – to prevent asylum seekers from arriving at frontiers where they can claim entry…Worse still, the principle does nothing to encourage states to
deal with the actual causes of forced migration, particularly those states that are not faced with large numbers of asylum applicants. (Gibney 1999:169-70)

Such criticisms also raise the question whether the liberal vision of international order is able to sustain an efficient and just refugee protection regime. Is there really much evidence to support its claim, whether explicit or implicit, that liberal democracies are better able to offer protection to forced migrants than non-democracies? Or are liberal democracies because of their inherent desire for unity and sharing of values more likely to turn into close their borders and turn into exclusionary alliances such as the EU?

Constructivism: Constructivism poses a particular challenge to my critique of mainstream theories because one cannot be sure whether constructivism is a mainstream theory or even a theory at all. To its critics as well as some of its proponents, constructivism is more of “a philosophical category, a meta-theory or a method of empirical research” (Zehfuss 2002:8) than a theory of international relations in the manner of realism and liberalism. But a more contentious question about constructivism is whether it is radical or mainstream. For Stephen Walt, constructivism has “largely replaced Marxism as the pre-eminent radical perspective on international affairs.” (Walt 1998: 41) For Jack Snyder, constructivism is “a new version of idealism”, or “idealism’s new clothing” (Snyder 2004). Both views are utterly misleading.

In reality, constructivism can be both and much more. It has a number of variants which are even more challenging of each other than those within realism. In 998, three of the principal gurus of IR, Krasner, Keohane and Katzenstein (or KKK) identified three types of constructivism: conventional, critical, and postmodern (Krasner, Keohane and Katzenstein, 1998:675). I would propose three slightly different categories of constructivist work: At one end is the structural constructivism of Wendt and his followers, which focuses primarily on social interactions leading to collective identity formation that ameliorates the security dilemma. On the other extreme is work intersecting with critical (including but not limited to post-modern and post-structuralist) approaches, the hallmark of which are discourse analysis, contestations about identity, and investigations into the dynamics of domination and resistance. Somewhere in between is the work of norm theorists, who are mainly concerned with the diffusion of ideas and norms and their regulatory and constitutive impact. Other variations that may be mentioned here are between European continental constructivism which focuses on communicative rationality, and mainstream American constructivism that takes a “social scientific” approach. Then there is the difference between the state-centric constructivism of Wendt and the constructivism of those (like Keck and Sikkink’s Activists Beyond Borders) who take non-state actors more seriously (Keck and Sikkink, 1998).

The variations within constructivism pose powerful difficulties when identifying what it is about. As Maja Zehfuss puts it, “Despite this remarkable surge of constructivism, it remains difficult to identify its key claims uncontroversially….The definitional problem of what constitutes constructivism is not just a matter of whether different scholars claiming the constructivist label are engaged in the same project, of how diverse the constructivist camp is. It is very much about who is in it in the first place”. (Zehfuss 2002: 3, 7).

In this paper, I will label, with some reluctance, constructivism to be a mainstream theory. My reasons for doing so are five-fold. First, constructivism has been presented as having seized the “middle ground” between rationalism and reflectivist approaches...
including post-modernism. (Adler 1997) It’s difficult to call something that occupies a middle ground as non-mainstream. Second, constructivism has made such rapid strides over the past two decades in shaping the research agendas of young scholars and winning converts from among older ones that it has become, in the eyes of its critics, the “new orthodoxy”. Third, there are more conventional constructivists than critical or post-modern ones, while scholars who identify themselves within these latter two groups also have alternative ways of self-identification, such as post-modernism, or simply critical IR theory, without wearing the constructivist label. Indeed, many of them would probably want to avoid the constructivist label. And the final act in the mainstreaming of constructivism is the recent surge of literature by some of the high priests of constructivism claiming rationalism and constructivism to be complimentary, and moving the debate towards the inevitable synthesis (Checkel 1997; Fearon and Wendt 2002).

This is not to say, of course, that constructivism simply replicates the assumptions and arguments of realism and liberalism. Three common threads of constructivism set it apart from realism and liberalism. First, constructivism holds that the structure of the international system is both material and ideational (although not ideas all the way down). Ideas and norms matter; once adopted, they can become sticky and transformational. They may exercise not just a regulative effect on the behaviour of actors, but also constitute their identities and thereby transform their previous identities. Second, constructivists reject the rationalist assumption of neo-realism and neo-liberalism that the interests and identities of actors including states are given. Instead, they are socially constructed (“anarchy is what states make of it”). They result from interactions (including interactions between agents and structures) and are therefore subject to change, including being capable of undergoing fundamental change. Third, unlike most realists and many liberals, constructivists believe in the possibility of fundamental transformation of the international system. Socialization can lead to the formation of collective identities that can overcome the security dilemma among states. Institutions and regimes are not merely regulative, but also have a constitutive effect; international institutions as agents of socialization can have a transformative impact on state behaviour.

By bringing ideational forces and identity to the centre stage, constructivism can make a major contribution to the understanding and explaining of the politics of forced migration. It helps to spotlight the key ideas that underpin the international refugee regime, such as human rights, humanitarian intervention and human security, and their diffusion and impact on policymakers, as they search for new approaches and solutions to the problem of forced migration. Second, the constructivist stress on the constitutive functions of international rules and institutions, which goes beyond the liberal focus on their regulative functions, allows us to take a deeper and transformative agenda for the UNHCR and related agencies for forced migration and specify criteria for judging their performance. Different but no less important is the question of identity which is central to constructivism. Identity is an indispensable factor in understanding not only the nature of the conflicts that produces refugees, but also how the refugees and internally displaced people relate to their new environment, whether inside temporary safe havens or permanent homes of asylum.

On the other hand, constructivists need to be careful when arguing for the transforming impact of norms on the international forced migration regime. A recent study of changes to the US asylum policy by Rosenblau and Salehyan shows how economic motives have trumped normative ones. As they point out, a key trend in the US asylum policy is the goals “of maintaining good relations with trade
partners...there is no evidence that the importance of norms relative to interests has increased over time, contrary to the prediction of some constructivists” (Rosenblau and Salehyan 2004: 677).

Three Biases

Despite important variations in their underlying worldviews and normative claims, a number of common biases run through the three mainstream theories. I would call them as: power bias, culture bias, and system bias.

*Power bias:* All three mainstream theories emphasize structural power or the role of powerful actors in world politics. Indeed, the realist-liberal divide breaks down when it comes to the role of hegemonic actors in shaping global order. This is true from the hegemonic stability theory, which itself is a classic realist-liberal synthesis (realist notion of structural power combines with the liberal notion of public good), as well as constructivism which views its two key dynamics: socialisation (Wendt) and norm diffusion (Florini 1996; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; dissent from Acharya 2004) as being subject to the logic of power.

*Culture bias:* This is my shorthand for ethnocentrism and Westerncentrism, a pervasive and persisting affliction of the discipline of international relations as a whole (Booth 1979, Acharya 2000). Ethnocentrism is the tendency to view one’s own cultural and political norms and practices as being superior to those of others, and to either disregard the beliefs and actions of others or to read and evaluate them in terms of one’s own. All three mainstream theories suffer from this - ironically, liberalism and constructivism more so than realism, simply because many non-Western scholars of IR tend to be realists. A few examples will suffice: the structural realism’s belief of the Cold War as “a long peace” which disregards the enormous deaths and destruction caused by superpower rivalry outside of the “central strategic balance”; liberalism’s tendency to view European regional integration as a universal model for other regions to follow or be damned as inefficient and inconsequential; and constructivism’s preferred narrative of norm diffusion in which good universal norms peddled by Western norm entrepreneurs drives out bad local beliefs and practices found mostly in the non-Western world.

*System bias:* This refers to the tendency to privilege systemic forces, actors/agents and outcomes at the expense of regional and local or sub-systemic ones. Again, Waltzian structural realism, liberal theory in general and the moral cosmopolitanism flavour in constructivist norm diffusion theory (Acharya 2004) are examples of this bias.

Moreover, these three biases are not mutually exclusive, but closely related and mutually reinforcing. Nations with most power, whether hard or soft, and the two are not unrelated, are often also the ones with a capacity to act at the systemic or global level. And to an overwhelming extent, they are Western. While ethnocentrism is not the exclusive preserve of the West, power often accentuates the elements of ethnocentrism, including the tendency to consider one’s beliefs and practices as being superior to that of the others and to disregard others’ experiences and perspectives. And powerful and historically privileged actors have a greater propensity to translate
their ethnocentrism into their policy responses without being mindful of their harmful consequences for the less powerful and privileged.

The UNHCR, Human Security and Securitization

Let me now discuss how these biases in the three mainstream theories correspond to the evolution and function of the international refugee regime centred around the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). This supports my claim that mainstream IR theory follows real world dynamics, and that policymaking by national elites and international institutions is often shaped by prevailing dominant theoretical assumptions.

It hardly requires repeating here that like most international institutions of the modern era, the origin of the UNHCR had to do with the concerns and interests of Western nations. As Adelman argues, the UNHCR’s basis template” was laid down in the Western effort to deal with people fleeing first Nazi and then communist persecution (Adelman 2001:11). This in turn shaped the definition of what is a refugee, enshrined in the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, which defined refugees as a group who for a variety of reasons are outside of their country of nationality and unable to return to it. (Gibney 1999:170). Thus definition instituted a cognitive prior that shaped the UNHCR’s initial policies and resisted recent attempts to adapt it to the new realities of the global refugee environment, especially the issue of internal displaced persons, which would more accurately describe conditions in the non-Western world. IDPs are a product of internal conflicts, which does not fit within the security framework of the state-centric mainstream IR theories, but which are the predominant form of conflict and insecurity in the Third World (Ayoob 1995). Yet another example of the Westerncentrism in the international forced refugee regime is the difficulties of reorienting UNHCR and Western countries to accept what Acharya and Dewitt have labelled as the “distributive-developmental approach” to burden-sharing, relative to the alliance and multilateral approaches. (Further elaboration in Acharya and Dewitt, 1995; Acharya and Dewitt 1997)

Let me now turn briefly to some recent attempts to develop concepts and approaches that may better equip mainstream IR theories to deal with transnational issues like forced migration. I will focus on examine two such attempts, both of which come from security studies: human security and securitization theory of the Copenhagen school.

Human Security: The meaning and policy implications of human security, introduced in the UNDP’s Human Development Report in 1994, remains contested, with one school favouring freedom from fear, and the other stressing freedom from want. Although some constructivist and critical approaches claim it as their own, human security falls squarely within the liberal theory of international relations order for three main reasons. The first is its claim that the individual, rather than the state, should be the main referent object of security. Human security acknowledges that there can be important tensions between state security and the security of the citizens. Second, there is a close link between human security the human rights. Third, human security at least in some formulations subsumes humanitarian intervention, an integral part of liberal internationalism.

The concept was introduced into the UNHCR by Sadako Ogata as the head of the organisation. It reflected Ogata’s background in Japanese officialdom, as Japan was one of the nations that had endorsed and promoted the concept of human security.
Later she was to become the co-chair of the Commission on Human Security set up by the UN to develop a common understanding of the concept and prescribe policy measures to implement it. The 1997 issue of The State of the World’s Refugees, an initiative of Mrs Ogata as High Commissioner, was subtitled A Humanitarian Agenda, and devoted an entire chapter to “Safeguarding Human Security”. It argued that

Refugee movements and other forms of displacement provide a useful (if imprecise) barometer of human security and insecurity. As a rule, people do not abandon their homes and flee from their own country or community unless they are confronted with serious threats to their life and liberty. Flight is the ultimate survival strategy… (UNHCR 1997)

In a speech at Bergen in May 1999, Ogata argued that while “‘Human security’ is not defined in international law…it does provide a useful complement to the legally based concept of refugee protection” (Ogata 1999:1). Observing that the concept of human security “today…commands the same respect and attention as the more traditional one of state security” (Ogata 1999: 2), she also argued that the concept accurately described the new challenges her office faced:

The importance of human security as a concept is clear if you consider that my Office deals on a daily basis with people who are, by definition, “insecure”. Refugees and internally displaced people are a symptom of human insecurity crises. Because homes, personal belongings and family ties are such as important part of everyday’s security, it takes considerable pressure to force people to abandon them, and become refugees. Refugees are doubly insecure: they flee because they are afraid; and in fleeing they start a precarious existence. (Ogata 1999:1-2)

Ogata went on to give a rather dramatic example of the refugees and human security:

To me, a powerful symbol of the tragic insecurity which pushes people to flee, and the fragile security they live as refugees, are the tractors on which so many ethnic Albanians flee Kosovo, and which you have certainly seen on TV screens. Refugees cling to their tractors. Tractors are often the only possession left to them; in many cases, they are their new home, on which they sleep and keep their children and travel; and surely they are the tangible sign of their hope to return home soon. (Ogata 1999:2)

The UNHCR’s embracing of the doctrine of human security did lead it to expand the scope of its mandate and operations, including involvement “in a range of activities which might have previously been considered beyond our mandate” (Ogata 1999:6). One such shift was of the concept of “safe havens”. As a UNHCR Working Group report put it in the context of the Bosnian crisis, “the overriding principle… should be to bring safety to the people, rather than to bring the people to safety.” (Cited in Stevens 2006) Howard Adelman argues that within the UNHCR, the human security approach led to “a shift in emphasis on the meaning of protection. Protection of refugees is now primarily defined as security of refugees and refugee operations rather than in terms of the legal asylum process.” (Adelman 2001:7) In the minds of
critics, this shift had grave negative consequences. In a critical review of Ogata’s 2005 book: *The Turbulent Decade*, Jacob Stevens writes:

“The new framework for dealing with large refugee crises involves containment in camps and ‘safe havens’, quickly followed by repatriation…Fleeing from genocide, imperial aggression and civil war, only to be herded into camps or sent back to the country they were escaping, these asylum-seekers and returnees are part of a seemingly endless human tragedy. If it was originally a guarantor of refugee rights, unhcr (sic) has since mutated into a patron of these prisons of the stateless: a network of huge camps that can never meet any plausible ‘humanitarian’ standard, and yet somehow justify international funding for the agency.” (Stevens 2006).

Similar criticisms have been levelled against the two other new dimensions of the UNHCR’s role, preventive protection and temporary protection. The experience of Iraq and the Balkans influenced the rationale for preventive protection which recognises “the right to be allowed to remain in one’s home”, rather than be given asylum abroad. In essence, this meant keeping refugees in an area of active conflict. Temporary protection was just that, a temporary form of asylum which was meant to encourage European states to take in at least some of the refugees. It was a form of limited protection without rights, including the right to remain.

The impact of human security on the international forced migration regime should not be exaggerated. As the *State of the World’s Refugees 2006* puts it, “Since the 11 September 2001 attacks in the United States, state security concerns have come to dominate the migration debate, at times overshadowing the legitimate protection needs of individuals.” (UNHCR 2006: Introduction). But what is striking from the above discussion is that a seemingly benign notion like human security, whose moral purpose is to empower the individual, including people fleeing conflict and persecution, could end up creating further misery for them. This also attests to the difficulties MIRTs face in rising above their limitations by broadening the meaning and scope of security.

We see similar problems with securitization theory. Developed by the so-called Copenhagen School”, this is a constructivist project, reflecting the orientation of its main exponent, Ole Waever. While there had been ongoing effort to redefine and broaden the traditional concept of security, securitisation theory dealt with questions such as how, and by whom, does security acquires a broader meaning. Securitization is a process under which a “security issue is posited (by a securitising actor) as a threat to the survival of some referent object (nation, state, the liberal international economic order, the rain forests), which is claimed to have a right to survive.” (Buzan and Waever 2005:71) Securitisation involves taking extraordinary measures, while desecuritization refers to the reverse process whereby issues already labelled as such are taken out of the emergency mode and put back into normal political sphere (Buzan, Waever and de Wilde 1998).

Although European in origin, securitisation does not lack applicability to other regions. And while it was not formulated specifically for investigating issues related to forced migration, it does lend itself to an analysis of the politics of forced migration, especially to the extent it has shaped the immigration and asylum policies of Western nations. To quote from *The State of the World’s Refugees, 2006*: 
The beginning of the twenty-first century has seen a number of new developments with regard to refugee security. For one, UNHCR has become much more involved in security issues, especially as they affect ongoing operations. For another, the emergence of new security concerns of states, such as terrorism, has led to the ‘securitization’ of practices related to asylum. Lastly, issues of migration, development and relief have become more closely linked to security. Indeed, there is an increasingly widespread view that the viability of the refugee protection regime hinges on its real and perceived impact on international security. (UNHCR 2006, Chapter 3)

The above quote offers a graphic statement of the securitization process operating not just in the UNHCR itself, but also in the immigration, asylum, development and relief policies of individual nations, especially the Western donors and asylum providers. And this has dramatic consequences. To critics, the securitization dynamic evident in the shift in the UNHCR’s role from finding asylum to creating safe havens can also be seen as the ‘militarisation’ of its mandate and role at the expense of some of the fundamental objectives of the international forced migration regime such as asylum and refugee rights protection.

Conclusion

I have been sceptical of the contribution that mainstream IR theories can make to enrich an essentially multidisciplinary transdisciplinary field like forced migration studies. While MIRTs are mainly state-centric, the concerns of FMS are overwhelmingly transnational. While MIRTs investigate the many different ways international order (the status quo in a state-centric world of more or less permanent borders) can be maintained, FMS is about finding ways to protect individuals and communities from the excesses of states and regimes and the associated tyranny of frontiers. These are significant incompatibilities between the MIRTs and FMS that are not easily reconciled.

This is not to say that MIRTs have nothing to offer to FMS. They can help FMS studies by sensitizing it more to the various ways international institutions work and contribute to international order (liberal), raising new and broader analytic questions that have remained outside the purview of forced migration studies, such as the link between democratic peace and protection of refugees (liberal) and investigating to regulative and constitutive impact of ideas and norms on the policies of national governments and international institutions (constructivist). But perhaps the main benefit is that by highlighting the deficiencies of MIRTs, in terms of the three biases discussed in this essay, one can get a good sense of what afflicts the international forced migration regime. A critical reading of the MIRTs suggests a remarkable correspondence between their major biases and the working of the contemporary forced migration regime.

There is much greater benefit for MIRTs from closer attention to some of the recent developments and perspectives in FMS. An infusion of insights from critical perspectives is essential if mainstream theories of IR, including realism, liberalism and constructivism are to advance a normative understanding of the politics of forced migration, including an appreciation of the apparent damage caused by the human security and securitization.

In addressing their biases, and in developing a more normative theoretical understanding and analysis of the politics of forced migration, of the one key
challenge for MIRTs theories is the need to bring the local into the centre-stage of their analysis. For example, some of the new work of forced migration, including work that would fit within the constructivist mould, challenges the essentialist conceptions of space and place for refugees. As Catherine Brun points out, such perspectives hold that spaces and places for refugees are “constructed from the multiplicity of social relations across all spatial scales”. But such approaches still manage to “neglect…the local perspective of refugees and displaced persons”. (Brun 2001: 15).

“Refugees' and displaced people's understandings of their places are not only determined by the past, but also by their present life at the location where they need to survive and make a livelihood. Hence, to analyse the situation, identity creation and the place making of displaced people, the local perspective of refugees is decisive.” (Brun 2001: 20)

For Brun, central to the local perspective is a consideration of host community attitudes, the policy environment which the refugees find themselves, and their livelihood opportunities. Such a perspective also underscores the need to stress the local understanding and impact of new and emerging global norms of forced migration, such as human security and humanitarian intervention. (Acharya, 2004)

The meaning and application of these doctrines may vary from place to place. Without understanding these variations, norm entrepreneurs and international institutions may do more harm than good, intended or not, to the security and well-being of forced migrants.

Finally and related to the above, I agree with Brun and others who argue for a new understanding of the process of reterritorialisation that lies at the heart of forced migration. Reterritorialization is “not only the process of moving from one location to another”, but should “be understood as the way displaced and local people establish new, or rather expand networks and cultural practices that define new spaces for daily life. (Brun 2001: 23). This also speaks to the need for a greater emphasis on the “distributive-developmental” approach to burden-sharing, relative to the “alliance” and “multilateral” approaches that currently dominate the international forced migration regime (Acharya and Dewitt, 1995 and 1997). This is all the more important because, no matter how deplorable, the decline of asylum vis-à-vis temporary protection in the international refugee regime seems irreversible. Unless the Indian moon project succeeds in finding livable space to provide for alternative homes to mankind in the event of a global war or natural catastrophe, (which by the way is one of its stated objectives), the vast majority of forced migrants are likely to remain in their neighbourhood safe havens or in temporary asylum awaiting eventual repatriation. Empirical insights and normative arguments from the FMS, including those concerning the shifting purpose of the UNHCR, the consequences of applying human security and securitization concepts, and the local context of forced migrants, can go a long way in addressing the deficiencies of mainstream IR theories and enrich them.

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