Book Review: Refuge Beyond Reach: How Rich Democracies Repel Asylum Seekers by David Scott FitzGerald

In **Refuge Beyond Reach: How Rich Democracies Repel Asylum Seekers***,* **David Scott FitzGerald** *argues that the rich democracies of the Global North have developed ways to evade the spirit of international humanitarian laws when it comes to migration, whilst simultaneously de jure adhering to them. With a rich empirical basis and a clear, accessible style, this compelling and topical book will appeal to a wide range of audiences, writes* **Denny Pencheva***.*

***Refuge Beyond Reach: How Rich Democracies Repel Asylum Seekers*. David Scott FitzGerald. Oxford University Press. 2019.**

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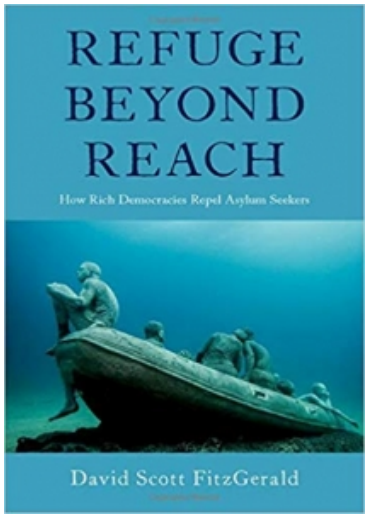

Halting immigration to the United States was Donald Trump's signature campaign promise. A promise he seems all too adamant to deliver: from introducing a travel ban for visitors and refugees from mainly Muslim countries, via making remarks about accepting migrants from 'shithole countries' (his description of El Salvador, Haiti and some African states), to his more recent suggestions for a complete shutdown of the US-Mexico border and shooting migrants in the legs to slow them down.

According to the European Commission's biannual Eurobarometer public opinion survey, migration is the top concern for Europeans with 34 per cent of respondents listing it as more important than climate change (22 per cent), the economy (18 per cent) and crime (9 per cent). Anti-immigration rhetoric played a crucial role in the 2016 EU Referendum, in which the UK voted in favour of leaving the European Union. EU citizens from Eastern European member states were blamed for stealing jobs and benefits scrounging despite robust evidence against such statements. Former Prime Minister Theresa May said that all EU citizens are 'jumping the queue', i.e. that they are unfairly taking advantage of their European origin in order to evade immigration control.

The prominence of migration means that it is an easy prey for populist rhetoric, with little if any attention to facts. It is precisely against the backdrop of such violent sensationalism that David Scott FitzGerald's book, *Refuge Beyond Reach*, is needed. Indeed, the strongest quality of the monograph is its wealth of empirical data, historical and political facts, which inform without overwhelming the reader. There are multiple sources of evidence – laws, policies, landmark court cases, academic research, government and NGO reports as well as official and non-official documents (WikiLeaks releases and declassified CIA documents) – all fantastically integrated into the analysis.

Based on all this evidence, as well as on FitzGerald's professional expertise in US-Mexico relations, sociology and comparative migration studies, the book makes the compelling, albeit somewhat cynical, argument that the rich democracies of the Global North have developed ways to evade the spirit of international humanitarian laws whilst simultaneously *de jure* adhering to them. By focusing on four cases – the EU, the US, Canada and Australia – the author suggests that international humanitarian laws are but mere tools which the rich liberal democracies in the Global North use to advance their own state and security interests.

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Image Credit: Border wall between the US and Tijuana (Daniel Arauz CC BY 2.0)

The first three chapters introduce the historical and political context, as well as the intricate dynamics of asylum policy. Chapter One establishes the five major types of remote border control that form the backbone of the book: cages; domes; moats; barbicans; and buffers. Each of these has distinct characteristics but on a more abstract level, they also function as organising metaphors for the book. Chapter Two explores the historical context of major international human rights laws, such as the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. The chapter suggests that the historic failure to protect European Jews from the Holocaust has had important implications for contemporary refugee regimes. Chapter Three challenges the conventional wisdom that the proliferation of restrictive border control regimes could only be traced back to the 1980s and 1990s, instead arguing that these were developed as early as the 1930s and 1940s (41). The chapter also highlights a link between *realpolitik* and race by pointing out that the end of the Cold War widened the definition of refugees, thus making it more difficult for governments to select (or not) refugees of certain ethnic backgrounds based on foreign policy objectives (44).

The connection between racism and migration policies is, indeed, of crucial importance; however, it remains rather marginal in the book. Whilst FitzGerald mentions cases where preference has been given to white asylum seekers (for example, Eastern Europeans during the Cold War), the entrenchment of racialisation in national and international policies and institutions has not been fully developed in the book. To an extent, the implicitness of this link is understandable – the book focuses more on 'how' questions than on 'why' questions. However, the monograph outlines a distinct trajectory, which saw the transformation of Eastern Europeans from political dissidents and asylum seekers to mobile EU nationals. This suggests that notions about Europeanness and/or whiteness play a significant role for migration policies as a determinant of the desirability (or not) of certain groups of people.

Chapters Four and Five explore the intricacies of US extra-territorialised border policies achieved via the interconnectedness between systems of remote control developed in Washington, Ottawa and Mexico City. The chapters are quite critical of the overly positive and humanist image that Canada has sought to project: the book argues that this image is made possible by its geographical specificities (surrounded by two oceans) and having a 'high-capacity U.S. buffer' (95). Chapter Six explores the complex relationship between the United States and Cuba. The chapter points out that whilst policies towards Haitians have been 'consistently restrictive', 'those towards Cubans have oscillated between periods of welcome and restriction, depending on political circumstances' (121).

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Chapter Seven looks at the role of Mexico as a buffer of the US. The chapter makes the point that since the 1980s, Central American governments have been actively 'caging their citizens at home and preventing transit through the region' (156), thus shedding light on the paradoxes of the relationship between Mexico and the US on migration issues. Indeed, despite the political significance of Mexican migrants in the US, Mexico appears to be an important buffer in containing migration flows within its territory. The most recent example was last year when the so-called caravan migrants were offered temporary protection in Mexico amidst US threats of cutting aid and sending 1,000 troops to the US-Mexico border.

Chapters Eight and Nine outline the main characteristics and hypocrisies of EU border control policies and look at the effects of shared sovereignty on migration policies, shedding light on the role of FRONTEX and the Dublin regulations. The chapter is critical of the agenda behind the Eastern EU Enlargement and the use of the Western Balkans as a buffer to contain migration flows. The analysis is helpful in making sense of recent developments following the 2015 migration crisis where thousands of asylum seekers found themselves stranded in Croatia and Bosnia on their way to Western Europe.

Chapter Nine explores the political and economic pressures that the EU places on neighbouring countries and regions (for example, Northern African countries) to prevent 'irregular migrants from disembarking and to readmit those intercepted at sea' (192). The chapter points out that between 2000 and 2016, nearly 27,000 migrants died at Europe's external borders, referring to these as 'crimes of peace' (205).

Chapter Ten looks at Australia's migration policies and its highly controversial approach to outsourcing the processing of asylum cases to Papua New Guinea and Nauru. The chapter also notes that compared to the US, Canada and the EU, Australian courts pose the least limitations to remote border control policies (219). Indeed, this is the only chapter dedicated to the Australian asylum system, which is notorious for its restrictive practices. The Kurdish Iranian journalist Behrouz Boochani has only recently arrived as a free man in New Zealand after spending more than six years incarcerated on Manus Island, Papua New Guinea. Relatedly, there is the obvious question about the absence of New Zealand from the monograph. Considering the interconnectedness and coordination between the countries in the Global North in their efforts to repel asylum seekers, it would have been useful to see how New Zealand fits in this nexus.

The topicality of *Refuge Beyond Reach*, its rich empirical basis and clear and accessible style will appeal to a wide range of audiences, including but not limited to students, academics, journalists, politicians, analysts, migration professionals and the general public.

- *This review originally appeared at the LSE Review of Books.*

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About the reviewer

Denny Pencheva – *University of Bristol*
Dr Denny Pencheva is a migration scholar whose work explores the nexus between politics, security, neoliberalism and media. Her research examines the politics and governance of international migration and the role of supranational institutions (EU) and intergovernmental organisations (UNHCR, IOM, etc.) in governing different aspects of global migration (regular and irregular). She is particularly interested in the Copenhagen School's work on securitisation and the ways in which the exceptional becomes entrenched and normalised in political, media and everyday discourses. Over the past years she has also explored the role of securitisation in making sense of Brexit and post-truth debates. In terms of regional expertise, her work has focused on the EU, UK, Scandinavia, Central and Eastern Europe, and the Balkans.

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