Book Review: Nora Stel, *Hybrid Political Order and the Politics of Uncertainty: Refugee Governance in Lebanon* **(2020). London: Routledge. 251 pp.**

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International scholars have often defined spaces characterized by political instability and lacking a clear-cut legal framework to manage crisis as ungovernable, determined by chaos, dominated by informality, and exceptional. Nevertheless, the modalities of governance utilized and developed in these contexts have been left under-explored. In this landscape, Nora Stel's book *Hybrid Political Order and the Politics of Uncertainty: Refugee Governance in Lebanon* undertakes a challenging endeavor. While concepts such as "state fragility" and "state failure" have long prevented a needed unpacking of unorthodox manifestations of power, Stel's book compellingly shows us how institutional ambiguity is a conscious strategy and how it can imply deliberate abandonment, deprivation of refugee rights, and violence. This book, composed of an introduction, six chapters, and a final conclusion, offers a theoretical and empirical incisive account of how ambiguity is reproduced at a macropolitical and a microsocial level. The author conceives of ambiguity as threefold, drawing on the concepts of informality, liminality and exceptionalism to explain refugee governance in Palestinian gatherings and in Syrian refugee settlements.

In the introduction, Stel clearly locates her work in its scientific landscape, providing a detailed overview of studies on institutional ambiguity, ignorance-based governance, and the politics of uncertainty. The book is primarily based on her fieldwork in two Palestinian refugee settlements in South Lebanon - conducted between 2012 and 2014 - and in Central Beqaa during 2018 through a locally based researcher.

Chapter One reviews the key factors which limited sovereignty in Lebanon's history. However, in line with recent scholarly work, Stel emphasizes that such a limited sovereignty does not imply a weak and absent state (p. 35-6), but instead opportunistic political elites and parties who thrive on mediation and brokerage to govern everyday life. Indeed, according to the author, Lebanon's elites benefit from a politics of systemic liminality; from informality, which does not emerge as an alternative to the state, but it rather derives from it; and from exceptionalism, which entitles power holders to adopt exceptional measures over spaces located out of normality. In this first section, Stel, however, seems to use "exceptionalism" interchangeably with "exceptionality", leaving readers with the question whether the two terms can work as synonyms.

Chapter Two summarizes the (no)policy history of Lebanon's response to displacement from Syria, highlighting the vague nature of the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan in establishing refugee status and in defining state obligations. Stel illustrates in great detail how the politics of hyping and reducing official refugee numbers mirrors institutional ambiguity. The Minister of State for Displaced Affairs, for example, was created to assuage critiques regarding Lebanon's lack of policy on Syrian displacement rather than to address such critiques, in an effort to formalize inaction (p. 79).

Chapter Three discusses the role of brokers in this muddled politics of uncertainty, who connect refugee populations and their representatives with the vernacular forms of the state. Stel here explains the intermediary role of Syrian superintendents (*shawishes*) in refugee settlements, the confusing registration process of refugees, and how this overarching politics of uncertainty produces repressive but vaguely defined measures against Syrian nationals, such as curfews, raids and evictions.

Chapter Four discusses the history of Palestinian refugee governance and, similar to the Syrian case, the ways in which institutional ambiguity benefits political elites. In the case of the Palestinians, the author speaks of "extreme exceptionalism" (p. 126) to illustrate the political practices that are put in place in order to marginalize this old date refugee group, and to keep it in an existential and material state of permanent temporariness. Nonetheless, institutional ambiguity is not a measure that goes uncontested: local struggles happen continuously but yet with no success.

Chapter Five builds on the example of two Palestinians gatherings in South Lebanon. It deals with the uncertain politics of housing in the gatherings, focusing on the role of Popular Committees and other power structures. Here, Stel shows how dwellers need to depend on Lebanese authorities to access basic services and infrastructure, such as water and electricity. For instance, when Palestinian entities need to deal with Lebanese municipalities, they use local politicians, non-governmental organizations, or the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) as brokers. From a Lebanese governmental perspective, depriving Palestinians of service provision is meant to make their presence temporary for the sake of the "right to return" (UN Resolution No. 194). The chapter also shows how the Popular Committees often clash with the Family Committees, and how these internal cleavages feed into the power of Lebanese parties. By offering the example of evictions in a Palestinian gathering, Stel powerfully chronicles how, with no citizenship and no land ownership rights, camp dwellers are forced to rely on informal and heavily politicized tactics of survival.

In Chapter Six, Stel builds a knowledge economy of refugee governance and refugee-inhabited spaces. In this section, Stel draws on her work on professed ignorance as a modality of governance, showing how ignorance is strategic in order for power holders to reassert their sovereignty, and how ignorance is also imposed on refugees. However, Stel contends, refugees can also strategically appropriate the public attitude of not-knowing in a bid to develop coping mechanisms, but repression still prevails: she shows the politics that underpins refugee expulsions and that "inflicts" liminality, a status of uncertainty that, at times, even encourages refugees to return to Syria (p. 202).

In the concluding Chapter, Stel recalls the practical potential of academia and of her own research in improving refugee lives and in challenging such violent and neglectful politics of uncertainty. She also discards the idea that institutional ambiguity is an exclusive feature of states classified as "fragile". Indeed, she shows that the European migration regime equally relies on violent strategies based on inaction and uncertainty, despite the general bias that western states are rational entities that only act on the basis of law.

It would have been interesting to have more details on the ways in which ambiguity is deemed as only "partially strategic", and more nuance on the role of contingency and intentionality, as the introduction seemed to preannounce (p. 4). In addition, scholars and practitioners who are particularly interested to learn the role of humanitarian agencies, might

desire to have more information about the role of NGOs and UN agencies as contextual brokers, since the author only hints at their contribution to this "Kafkaesque" (p. 114) politics of uncertainty.

Overall, this book has the merit to synthesize the Palestinian and the Syrian refugee regimes and their lived experiences. The author's accurate politics of citation is remarkable: Stel interestingly puts her personal work in fruitful conversation with the work of a community of scholars who have endeavored to study the state, displacement, and multiple modes of governing. Based on an interdisciplinary ground which merges the importance of spatial politics, lived experience, and governance, Stel's book not only offers an insightful analysis of "refugee crisis" management, which can serve as material of reflection in other geographic areas. It also brings refugee experience in conversation with governance, while interrogating the psychology of such governance (cfr. Kelsey Norman's "strategic indifference" and "reluctant reception" in Egypt, Morocco and Turkey).[1] This book is highly recommended to those who are committed to understanding how, after years of international research on the hybrid character of Lebanon's political order, the epistemological politics of power can finally be pinned down.

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[1] Norman, K. (2020) *Reluctant Reception: Refugees, Migration, and Governance in the Middle East and North Africa.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.