



Migration Studies at Oxford: Beginnings

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¹ The current authors have collaborated before, for example in Nicholas Van Hear and Robin Cohen (2017) 'Diasporas and conflict: distance, contiguity and spheres of engagement', *Oxford Development Studies*, 45 (2) 2017, 171–84 and Robin Cohen and Nicholas Van Hear *Refugia: Radical Solutions to Mass Displacement* (2020).

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Abstract

This paper is the first part of a longer project, titled “Migration Studies at Oxford: Beginnings, Institutional Development and Proliferation”. At least two more papers are planned. Here, we identify the development of migration studies at the university from the 1960s to the 1990s and discuss the contributions of five early individual scholars involved in the field. Institutional support for the field was then absent, so embryonic initiatives stemmed from below. They came, notably, from a cohort of students and visiting researchers from the Middle East and Africa who were pressing for more systematic academic recognition of their interest in refugees, a call that was answered by an early pioneer in refugee studies, Barbara Harrell-Bond. Promoting the wider study of migration was, at first, undertaken in a loosely organized dining group, the Odyssey Club, which was convened by the present authors. These initiatives were not to bear fruit until after the late 1990s, a period that will be addressed in subsequent papers.

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Introduction

Over the last two decades, studies of migration, including the study of refugees, have become an increasing part of the academic offering in social science faculties in many parts of the world. In the UK, in Europe more widely and globally, the University of Oxford has been recognized as one of the leading centres of this field.⁴ Recognition depends as much on reputation and impact as on numbers but, as a rough indication of collective strength, we start with the last. In 2023, the website [Migration Oxford](#) listed 170 academics and researchers at the University of Oxford, though there are some inaccuracies in both directions, with retirees and doctoral students boosting the number, and a considerable number of omissions lowering it.⁵ It would be realistic to assume that some 120 scholars can be identified as working in migration studies as their principal, or important secondary, field. A digital bulletin, at first provided by the Migration and Mobility Network at Oxford (2017-2010), subsequently developed into a regular newsletter hosted by Migration Oxford and circulated to over 200 people, including many current students. Migration Oxford has become a portal for organizing events and posting job and funding opportunities. Students at the University of Oxford are also organized in a Migration Studies Society and have convened several successful international conferences.

How did Oxford reach this large critical mass? As we tell the story of Oxford's engagement with the field, we will also document the major preoccupations of the scholars and (in later papers) the research centres involved. Such an exercise can easily turn into a sentimental reminiscence or banal celebration, so from time to time we also provide some pointed reflections while subsequent papers will provide a more critical assessment of how the academic leadership of the University of Oxford offered little support and limited institutional engagement with the field.

Both authors have been teachers and researchers at Oxford for many years, but we have sought to verify our memories and assess our opinions with other colleagues, who are listed in the acknowledgements at the end of the article.

⁴ For example, in a website titled 'Human Rights Careers', Oxford's MSc in Migration Studies is ranked first in the [top ten masters programmes in migration studies](#) worldwide. Again, the Refugee Research Network [states](#) that 'the Refugee Studies Centre (University of Oxford) has an international reputation as a leading multidisciplinary centre for research and teaching on the causes and consequences of forced migration'.

⁵ We should add that Migration Oxford only gathers information on staff and students at the University of Oxford and does not include those working at Oxford Brookes University, where several major scholars were active. We will discuss migration studies at Brookes in later papers.

Early individual scholars

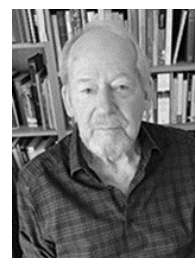
Prior to 1982, there were no organized research clusters on migration at Oxford. However, before this date, there were a number of important individual scholars in the field, who either made distinctive intellectual interventions or influenced students who were later to make major contributions to later developments. Here, we focus on five scholars – Ceri Peach, Colin Clarke, Clyde Mitchell, Renée Hirschon and David Coleman.



Ceri Peach
(1939-2018)

A social geographer, **Ceri Peach** was probably the most significant progenitor of migration studies at Oxford. His *West Indian Migrations to Britain: A Social Geography* (Peach 1968) demonstrated the unintended and even perverse effect of the 1961/2 UK immigration restrictions, when West Indian migration spiked as immigrants ‘rushed to beat the ban’. He was continuously influential in discussions of ethnic segregation in cities, which became his principal field. He was involved in editorial collaborations on Muslim communities in Europe (Peach and Vertovec 1997), on Japanese communities abroad (Goodman et al. 1997), and on ethnic pluralism (Clarke et al. 1984). Peach also supervised Michael Keith’s DPhil on urban cultural geography (Keith was later to become a director of one of Oxford’s migration centres) and several other research students in the field. He was helpful in supporting institutional development in migration studies, although he remained firmly embedded in the geography department and in St Catherine’s College.

A colleague of Ceri Peach in geography, **Colin Clarke** is principally known for his work on urbanization in the Caribbean. However, he was also a crucial hinge in deploying theories of plural societies developed in the Caribbean by scholars like M. G. Smith in wider settings, including the UK (Clarke et al. 1984).⁶ He supervised Patricia Daley’s (1989) DPhil on refugees and underdevelopment in Africa. Daley subsequently made important contributions to the study of forced migration and issues of identity, violence and feminist thought, mainly with reference to Africa. Another co-supervisee was Steven Vertovec, who became one of the key figures in building research institutions on migration at Oxford. (We discuss Vertovec’s role in our next paper.) With Ceri Peach and Steven Vertovec, Clarke edited a comprehensive and widely-cited account of



Colin Clarke

⁶ This was a festschrift to Ernest Paget, an inspiring lecturer in geography at Oxford, who did much to encourage the study of plural societies (see Lee 1986).

South Asian diasporic communities (Clarke et al. 1990). Clarke is now engaged in a study of 'racist regimes', comparing slavery in the Caribbean with the holocaust in Germany.



Clyde Mitchell
(1918-1995)

Our next identified scholar is **Clyde Mitchell**, a social anthropologist turned sociologist at Nuffield College who studied networks in cross-national 'social fields'. Strictly, this was a preoccupation of a number of scholars based at the Rhodes–Livingstone Institute (in present-day Zambia) who tracked movements of workers to and from the Copperbelt and how they adapted their social attitudes to each setting (see Schumaker 2001).⁷ This core idea could easily be adapted to the notion of 'transnationalism', the elaboration of which was undertaken by one of Clyde Mitchell's co-supervisees, Steven Vertovec, in parallel to cognate work in the USA. Mitchell's work on social networks (Mitchell 1969) influenced his students – notably Vertovec and Alisdair Rogers, both of whom (with Robin Cohen) founded the well-reputed *Global Networks: A Journal of Transnational Affairs* in 2000, which carries many articles on migration.

Although she worked mainly at the University of the Aegean (Lesbos) and at Oxford Brookes University, **Renée Hirschon** completed her DPhil on 'The Social Institutions of an Urban Locality of Refugee Origin in Piraeus' at Oxford (Hirschon 1976) and has held long-standing affiliations to Oxford colleges and departments, including affiliations to the Refugee Studies Centre and St Peter's College. She is a notable pioneer in the study of the Asia Minor refugees who settled in Greece following the 1923 population exchange between Greece and



Renée Hirschon

Turkey, so her work also informed issues of displacement and 'bordering' (Hirschon 1989). Barbara Harrell-Bond, who is widely credited with the founding of Refugee Studies at Oxford (see later) repeatedly said to Hirschon 'You were doing "refugee studies" before they existed!' The book on displacement (1976) was innovative in another way. In the preface to her reissued edition (2023) Hirschon points out that it was recognized as one of the earliest full-length urban ethnographies.

⁷ We note in passing that the US scholar Elizabeth Colson was also a member of the Rhodes–Livingstone Institute and had considerable influence on Oxford refugee studies. Her analysis (Colson 1971) of the displacement of the Tonga people consequent on the building of the Kariba Dam was especially influential. She spent sabbaticals at Oxford and the continuing Elizabeth Colson annual lecture in Oxford testifies to her prominent role.



David Coleman

The demographer **David Coleman** was appointed in 1980 but, without a demography department, found himself attached to the Department of Social Policy. He has argued that fertility decline in the West has been exaggerated and is, in any case, less significant than often assumed (Coleman and Basten 2015). So far as the UK is concerned, Coleman has expressed his anxieties that, without integration or assimilation, the high level of immigration will lead to the majority becoming a minority in some places and this would ‘underline a changed

national identity: cultural, political, economic, and religious’ (Coleman 2010: 473). Coleman’s work has been based on careful statistical estimations and projections, but he goes beyond academic analysis in his role as a co-founder and adviser to the group MigrationWatch UK, which advocates effective controls on immigration. This association is well-known and has occasionally led to friction with other Oxford migration scholars, who often express liberal views on immigration, where their preferences are stated. Overall, as is only appropriate in academic life, civility, mutual tolerance and open debate has generally prevailed.

Intimations of organization

The patterning of migration studies at Oxford has been characterized by a fissure between migration studies in general and refugee/forced migration studies in particular. From time to time, individuals have bridged this divide, but it has remained remarkably enduring, despite the rather etiolated justifications sustaining the idea that these are separate intellectual endeavours.

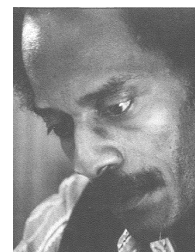
Refugee studies: a prolegomena

There has been some casual over-claiming to the effect that Oxford initiated the study of refugees. This is, of course, erroneous. We need only mention Arnold Toynbee’s report on the Armenian massacres (Toynbee 1915) and the many accounts of Jewish refugees from the Nazis, an early bibliography being provided by Francis Brown (1939). Again, long before the creation of Oxford’s *Journal of Refugee Studies* (founded in 1988), established journals in migration studies had carried articles on refugees. We refer here to *International Migration* (founded in 1951), the *International Migration Digest*, later the *International Migration Review* (founded in 1964) and *New Community*, later the *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* (founded in 1971). Jeff Crisp⁸ has also drawn attention to the important survey by John Hope Simpson (1939), the intellectual precursor to the annual *State of the World’s Refugees* he started many years later during his long

⁸ Correspondence with Jeff Crisp, December 2022.

tenure in the research department at the UN High Commission for Refugees. With respect to teaching in the field, Jeff Crisp has again noted the pioneering roles of Barry Stein at Michigan State University (who has taught a course on 'Refugees, Displaced Persons, Exiles' since 1975, the oldest such course in the world) and Art Hansen, an anthropologist at the University of Florida, Gainesville.

What was different about Oxford was that there was a cohort of students and visiting researchers from the Middle East and Africa who were pressing for more systematic academic recognition of their concerns and experiences. One such was **Ahmed Karadawi**. He had degrees from Khartoum and Reading and was later to become, in 1970, Commissioner for Refugees in his home country, Sudan. While at Oxford, he completed a thesis titled *Refugee Policy in the Sudan, 1967–1984* (Karadawi 1988), published posthumously by Berghahn publishers. Described by a reviewer as 'a masterful bureaucratic history', its author was praised as 'a man of keen analytical perspective and humane wisdom' (Spaulding 1999: 217). He collaborated closely with Barbara Harrell-Bond both in writing – they published several articles together – and in the creation of the Refugee Studies Programme, which he helped found with her in 1982.



**Ahmed
Karadawi
(1945–95)**



**Barbara
Harrell-Bond
(1932–2018)**

While recognizing the important role of Karadawi and other African and Asian students, it is undoubtedly the case that without **Barbara Harrell-Bond** the institutional embedding of refugee studies at Oxford would not have happened. We will discuss her intellectual contribution in later papers. Here we are more intent on describing how the Refugee Studies Programme (RSP) (1982–96) emerged from humble beginnings. From the start, Harrell-Bond was explicitly intent on creating a field of 'refugee studies' (some have suggested the expression was coined by Karadawi). She engaged in intense lobbying and built an alliance of interested students and humanitarian organizations, while remaining openly critical of these organizations and agencies. Harrell-Bond had no established position at the university and had to stitch together support from volunteers and researchers, including herself, sustained by short-term research grants.

Attached loosely to Queen Elizabeth House, now known as the Oxford Department of International Development, the Refugee Studies Programme was assigned cramped accommodation in an office building in Little Clarendon Street, where a jumble of closely-packed desks and confused volunteers greeted the casual visitor. One senior administrator at Queen

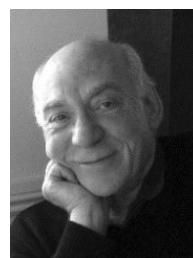
Elizabeth House, who shall remain anonymous, wryly referred to the RSP as the 'anarchist commune down the road'. Harrell-Bond's own comment was 'the best way to describe the Oxford RSP is as an expanding network of individuals around the world who have collaborated in developing this new multi-disciplinary field of academic pursuit'. She (Harrell-Bond 1998: 2) continued:

Part of the dynamic [of the RSP] was the response and commitment of Oxford students, mainly undergraduates. They packed our Wednesday seminars; they photocopied, they stuffed envelopes, they debated refugee issues in my home. Our 1984 Conference, Assistance to Refugees: Alternative Viewpoints, brought refugees from all over the continent to Oxford. I remember in December 1983 we had no money and no advance registrations, yet nearly 200 people attended the next March. It was organised with only a part-time secretary and the students who volunteered their time. No one who attended that conference will ever forget the experience. For the first time humanitarian organisations heard themselves being appraised by their beneficiaries.

The Odyssey Club

Another early attempt at organizing migration scholars in Oxford was a supper club, the Odyssey Club, founded by **Robin Cohen** and **Nick Van Hear** in 1992.

Cohen was professor of sociology at the University of Warwick and had completed a period (1985–89) as the director of the nationally-designated Centre for Research in Ethnic Relations there but, by this time, was resident in Oxford. He had worked in Nigeria and the Caribbean on labour relations and had also published an account of the international migration of 'unprotected workers', *The New Helots: Migrants in the International Division of Labour* (Cohen 1987).



Robin Cohen



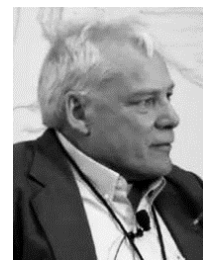
Nicholas Van Hear

Like Cohen, **Van Hear** had completed his PhD on West Africa, specifically on agricultural labour in Northern Ghana (Van Hear 1982; see also Van Hear 1984). Shortly after completing his doctorate, he observed the mass expulsions of Ghanaians and other West African migrants from Nigeria and switched his interests to studies of expellees and refugees. He worked as a consultant for several international agencies before joining the Refugee Studies Programme in 1990.

Aware of other migration scholars at Oxford, Van Hear and Cohen initiated informal gatherings, which evolved into the Odyssey club, where between ten and twenty people would meet to share

food, gossip and exchange ideas. The Odyssey Club had a quaint ritual – reading a passage of Homer’s classic at each meeting – and was committed to opening its doors to all migration scholars at Oxford Brookes and Oxford University, indeed to anyone who could travel to Oxford for the occasion. The club helped to cement collegial relations across institutional divides. Its members were committed to an informal and wide-ranging discussion of all aspects of migration, with some of the key themes that marked the emerging Oxford ‘school’ being debated there – new understandings of diaspora, European refugee policies, seeing the issues from what is now called ‘the Global South’, the uses of social geography, the need for a global context, and the need to confront popular myths about migration.

One notable member of the Odyssey club was **Jeff Crisp**, who became a key player in the research department at UNHCR in Geneva and, subsequently, at the Global Commission on International Migration (established by Kofi Annan). Like Cohen and Van Hear, he had completed his doctorate at the Centre of West African Studies at the University of Birmingham, his research being on Ghanaian miners (Crisp 1984). Crisp was an expert on international refugee policies and



Jeff Crisp

sought to ensure that such policies were informed by research, reflection and argument. After his exposure to the Oxford grouping, he established a branch of the Odyssey Club in Geneva. On leaving his UN position in 2015, he moved to Oxford and has an affiliation to the Refugee Studies Centre, from where he impresses many with his ‘Crispy tweets’ and pointed blogs.

Others who attended meetings of the Odyssey club included Nadim Shehadi, then director of the Centre for Lebanese Studies and co-editor of a major book on Lebanese emigration (Hourani and Shehadi 1992), and Mary Chamberlain, professor of social history at Oxford Brookes and author or co-author of several major works on Caribbean migration (Chamberlain 1997, 1998, 2001).

Short conclusion

Studies of migration had diverse origins in Oxford and, apart from Clarke and Peach, who were close colleagues, early migration scholars worked in their own fields with limited interaction with each other. This reflects both the fragmented character of Oxford (dividing teaching fellows from researchers, and colleges from departments), as well as the fact that the field of refugee and migration studies had not yet crystallized.⁹ The influence of these early scholars was considerable, but it was rarely collective. They made notable contributions to the field, while also supervising a crucial cohort of DPhil students. Of the latter, we have mentioned, in alphabetical order, Patricia Daley, Michael Keith, Alisdair Rogers and Steven Vertovec – who were later to join others in building research institutes, journals and centres in migration studies at Oxford. Gradually, collective efforts and some convergence of interests emerged around two groupings, the Refugee Studies Programme and the Odyssey Club – although these clusters were not integrated into the mainstream of departmental or college life until the late 1990s and then had no formal role in teaching. We will turn to the slow process of institutional building in our next paper and will provide a more ambitious conclusion in our final paper.

Acknowledgements

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⁹ We add here that Judith Brown, a fellow at Balliol College, is another notable individual scholar, whose influence on Oxford's wider scholarship in migration studies is less clear. Her *Global South Asians: Introducing the Modern Diaspora* (Brown 2006) was the culmination of long-standing work on South Asian history, and she has made clear in correspondence that she defines herself as an historian, not an area studies or migration specialist. Also not discussed here is Roger Goodman, who coedited a book on Japanese migration issues (Goodman et al. 1997) but who is better understood as a wide-ranging scholar of Japanese society, covering such themes as child protection, social welfare, social policy and education.

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