

**Ali Bhagat.** *Governing the Displaced: Race and Ambivalence in Global Capitalism.*  
Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2024. ix + 174 pp. \$27.95, paper, ISBN  
978-1-5017-7361-7.



**Reviewed by** Christopher W. Blair (Princeton University)

**Published on** H-Diplo (December, 2024)

**Commissioned by** Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

Forty-four million people are forcibly displaced across international borders—more than ever before in human history.[1] Displacement on this massive scale is typically framed in terms of a “crisis.” Politicians across the ideological spectrum decry the Mediterranean migrant *crisis*, the asylum *crisis* on the US southern border, the humanitarian *crisis* in Afghanistan, and the global climate *crisis*, among others. At the same time, policymakers in major refugee and internally displaced person (IDP)-hosting countries like Uganda, Germany, Colombia, and Azerbaijan are actively pursuing a new model of refugee integration anchored around facially liberal de jure displacement policies.[2] This model emphasizes the importance of integrating displaced people into host countries’ labor and housing markets and educational institutions to leverage refugee human capital. By affording refugees rights to work, attend school, cultivate plots of land, and accumulate resources, integrative policies can help reduce the

material costs of hosting displaced people.[3] This logic finds direct expression in optimistic and hopeful pronouncements of the world’s top officials working on forced displacement. For instance, in June 2024 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Filippo Grandi urged: “Let’s not leave refugees in limbo; instead, let’s give them the chance to use their skills and talents and contribute to the communities that have welcomed them.”[4]

Ali Bhagat’s rich, thought-proving new book, *Governing the Displaced: Race and Ambivalence in Global Capitalism*, offers an important, critical corrective that forces us to reconsider the dual developments outlined above. First, Bhagat convincingly argues that the “crisis” framing often applied to issues of global displacement is misguided at best and deliberately misleading at worst. While the term “crisis” implies that the nature of the challenge is short-term, unexpected, and exceptional, Bhagat contends that displacement is an

endemic facet of the racial capitalism that structures the modern world. It is illusory to refer to a displacement “crisis” when displacement is daily and quotidian—an inherent product of the material social realities of the dominant system. Moreover, as Bhagat astutely highlights, the so-called crisis of displacement is not one challenge, but the product of many: “the refugee crisis is a housing crisis; it is also a crisis of work and, fundamentally, a crisis of belonging and racial violence” (p. 136). Ignoring the overlapping and pervasive nature of these threats to refugee survival risks misunderstanding the essential nature of displacement.

On the second point discussed above, Bhagat offers a forceful reply to a growing strand of the empirical political economy literature on forced displacement. Emerging work in economics, political science, and sociology touts developmental benefits of refugee “self-reliance”—often effected through seemingly liberal and integrative policies. In *Governing the Displaced*, Bhagat suggests that this understanding is flawed. For one, the self-reliance model is rooted in a neoliberal logic that fundamentally reproduces coercive, extractive, and paternalistic patterns of refugee governance, while keeping displaced people themselves in marginalized and “liminal” positions (pp. 58, 68, and 78). Bhagat also thoughtfully examines another problem attendant in the “self-reliance” model—it reduces refugees’ value to their capacity for production, and enforces a strictly material understanding of belongingness in host societies. If only employed refugees matter, what does that imply for those who cannot engage in wage labor because of functional (e.g., lack of access to credit, lack of language skills, lack of a permanent fixed address) or social (e.g., gender norms, family care obligations, disabilities) barriers? Recent work by Luke Glanville extends these points, suggesting that demands for refugee “self-reliance” and “resilience” work to normalize exclusion of and legitimate state violence against displaced people.[5]

The puzzle at the heart of *Governing the Displaced* is what Bhagat calls the inherent “fantasy” of the global regime for refugee governance. This concept is interesting and new, and in developing the idea, the author aptly highlights a number of important contradictions incumbent in the modern displacement architecture. Crucially, these contradictions are inherent in the racial capitalist structure that governs international political economy, and they bridge the ideological spectrum. Left-wing parties promote facially liberal, paternalistic visions of humanitarian support for refugees but fail to deliver meaningful welfare support, and in fact reify damaging societal inequalities. Right-wing parties animate xenophobic, racist, and violent fantasies to justify anti-refugee discrimination while implicitly relying on and profiting from unseen and unappreciated refugee labor, which Bhagat calls “workfare,” “debtfare,” and “prisonfare” (pp. 34-36). As we have learned from recent xenophobic rumors and lies propagated by right-wing pundits in the US, these anti-refugee fantasies bear serious practical consequences for the welfare of migrants and society more broadly.[6] Another interesting fantasy Bhagat highlights concerns the tension between host-country politicians and citizens, who often decry labor market competition between natives and migrants, while also telling refugees that they must work in order to be productive members of society. This latter tension renders displaced people “disposable” in the modern system of refugee governance (p. 47).

In the empirical chapters of the book, Bhagat offers a wealth of qualitative detail from a comparison of two important and unique cases: Paris and Nairobi. The turn to focus on refugee life in urban centers is particularly important because the prevailing international paradigm for refugee governance has deemphasized the “encampment” model of refugee hosting and now touts free movement, allowing refugees to self-settle in cities. Bhagat makes two critical points relevant for understanding the consequences of this paradigm

shift in refugee management. On one hand, he convincingly shows that it was always wrong to understand refugee camps as rural and un-complex. Refugee camps are cities (pp. 110-111). Second, city life creates unique challenges for displaced people seeking shelter, work, and political belonging, the basic pillars of survival in Bhagat's formulation. Interviews in the book illuminate specific challenges and threats refugees face in cities, like homelessness, job loss, political exclusion, lack of access to aid, and risks of xenophobic, homophobic, or gender-based violence.

Overall, the text makes a compelling case that "fantasy" and "disposability" are integral facets of the global refugee regime under racial capitalism. The theory and evidence challenge dominant paradigms and shed new light on inherent flaws of facially liberal policies promoted by UNHCR, humanitarian agencies, global North donor countries, and global South refugee-hosting states. Bhagat could have done more to head off criticism of his argument from proponents of dignity-based accounts. These explanations highlight the empowering rather than exploitative dimensions of refugee labor market integration.[7] Yet this does not detract from the overall quality of the book.

*Governing the Displaced* also raises key questions for future research. One particularly interesting thread running throughout the book concerns the experiences of LGBTQ+ displaced people. While tracing the lives of queer refugees in a safe house in Nairobi, Bhagat makes a broader move to "queer" the experience of displacement more generally (p. 58). Critical scholars of race, gender, and migration should explore the implications of this analytic frame in future work. Empirical scholars should also devote greater attention to unique protection needs of LGBTQ+ displaced people. Another interesting question raised for future scholarship surrounds the role of experimentation in refugee livelihood interventions. Bhagat suggests that technocratic schemes to expand refugees' integration into host community markets through

mobile money and other new technologies may simply perpetuate refugee marginalization. Finally, the book raises an interesting question about how racial hierarchy shaped the origin and design of the refugee governance system. Much as Adom Getachew examines racial hierarchy in the making of the League of Nations, scholars building on Bhagat's work could examine how ideas about race and capitalism influenced policymakers working on the design of international conventions on displacement in the twentieth century.[8]

This book should be of interest to a diverse audience, including policy practitioners and lawyers working on refugee rights, scholars of migration, gender, race, or political economy, and students studying migration from a critical international relations perspective. In graduate-level courses, the text could be paired with news articles to chart whether and how the theoretical framework explains current debates about governing displacement in Ukraine, Ethiopia, Syria, the US, and elsewhere. And of course for those who have themselves been displaced, the manuscript may illuminate important aspects of their lived experience.

#### Notes

[1]. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2023* (Copenhagen: UNHCR Global Data Service, 2024).

[2]. Christopher W. Blair, Guy Grossman, and Jeremy M. Weinstein, "Forced Displacement and Asylum Policy in the Developing World," *International Organization* 76, no. 2 (2022): 337–78, and "Liberal Displacement Policies Attract Forced Migrants in the Global South," *American Political Science Review* 116, no. 1 (2022): 351–58.

[3]. J. Edward Taylor, Mateusz J. Filipski, Mohamad Alloush, Anubhab Gupta, Ruben Irvin Rojas Valdes, and Ernesto Gonzalez-Estrada, "Economic Impact of Refugees." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 113, no. 27 (2016): 7449–53; Yang-Yang Zhou and Andrew Shaver,

“Reexamining the Effect of Refugees on Civil Conflict: A Global Subnational Analysis,” *American Political Science Review* 115, no. 4 (2021): 1175–96.

[4]. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “UNHCR’s Grandi: Let’s Make Refugee Inclusion the Norm,” June 19, 2024, UNHCR Speeches and Statements, <https://www.unhcrclustern.org/us/news/speeches-and-statements/unhcr-s-grandi-let-s-make-refugee-inclusion-norm>.

[5]. Luke Glanville, “Resilience and Domination: Resonances of Racial Slavery in Refugee Exclusion,” *International Studies Quarterly* 68, no. 3 (2024): 1–12.

[6]. For one recent example, consider J. D. Vance’s recent lie that migrants in Springfield, Ohio, were stealing and eating pets. This anti-migrant lie fueled widespread rumors, anti-migrant harassment, and a series of disruptive bomb threats.

[7]. Alisha Holland, Margaret Peters, and Thania Sa’nchez, “The Dignity of Humanitarian Migrants: Explaining Migrants’ Destination Preferences,” unpublished manuscript, 2019, Harvard University.

[8]. Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo>

**Citation:** Christopher W. Blair. Review of Bhagat, Ali, *Governing the Displaced: Race and Ambivalence in Global Capitalism*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. December, 2024.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=61118>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.