

SALLY WESLEY BONET, *Meaningless Citizenship: Iraqi Refugees and the Welfare State* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022). Pp. 250. \$108.00 cloth, \$27.00 paper. ISBN: 9781517911126.

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Meaningless Citizenship provides a study of the challenges facing refugees arriving in the United States by focusing on the experiences of Iraqi refugees in Philadelphia who had to flee Iraq following the US invasion in 2003. Bonet argues that Iraqi refugees are subjected to a double process of displacement. On the one hand, US imperial intervention in Iraq in 2003 ultimately led to the displacement of millions of Iraqis within Iraq and abroad. On the other hand, after settlement in the United States, Iraqis now find themselves in a precarious position since neoliberal policies resulted in cuts for welfare services for both refugees and citizens. Within this framework, US neoliberal imperialism abroad coupled with a neoliberal and capitalist system at home expose Iraqi refugees to the contradictions of the US empire. Rather than finding freedom and human rights, Iraqi refugees are realizing that the United States prioritizes the needs of capitalism over the wellbeing of its vulnerable and marginalized citizens (3), and that welfare services push them to become cogs in a capitalist society by accepting low-wage jobs in order to achieve self-sufficiency and avoid dependency on the state. This book zooms in on the ways different institutions – such as public schools, resettlement and welfare agencies, and free clinics and hospitals – reveal the limits of meaningful citizenship since their main objective is to turn refugees into laboring subjects in the service of capitalism (5).

In the first two chapters, Bonet examines two institutions that adult Iraqi refugees have to navigate – namely, the resettlement agency and welfare services. Chapter 1 discusses the disappointment Iraqi families feel upon arrival in Philadelphia. Iraqis who fled their country after 2003 due to horrific events hoped for a better life in the United States and dreamed of stability and security. After arriving in the US,

however, they are informed by their caseworker that government assistance is limited so they need to become self-sufficient immediately by finding a job. Chapter 2 continues with the same theme but explores another institution: the welfare office. Iraqi refugees hear the same refrain about the urgency of self-sufficiency from welfare agents. Moreover, they realize that once they get a job, their welfare benefits will be reduced. Bonet argues that this policy prevents Iraqi refugees from improving their financial situations since any increase in wages leads to benefit cuts; moreover, this policy exposes Iraqi refugees to poverty and food insecurity.

Chapters 3 and 4 shift the lens by exploring the experiences of Iraqi children and young adults with public education systems. Chapter 3 focuses on the lack of resources Iraqi refugee children encounter once they enroll in underfunded and underperforming public schools in Philadelphia. Given their inconsistent access to proper education, difficulties in mastering English, and struggle with mental health issues due to the violence they lived under prior to their arrival in the United States, Iraqi children see their dreams of attaining higher education crushed. Chapter 4 narrates the dashed hopes of Iraqi young adults who thought their resettlement in the United States would enable them to resume their education and to attend universities afterwards. Similar to Iraqi children, young adults face the same problem of succeeding in underfunded schools, which cannot provide language training and adequate education and pushes them out of the system when they turn twenty-one. Within this framework, these schools act as a pipeline to low-wage jobs for these refugee students.

Chapter 5 deals with another institution, the health-care system, which fails Iraqi refugees since they lose access to state-funded health care a few months after arriving in the United States. Given the fact that Iraqi refugees have to take low-wage jobs that do not provide health care, and that most of them suffer from physical ailments and mental health issues due to the wars and destruction they experienced, the lack of medical care adversely impacts their well-being. As such, Iraqi refugees find themselves caught up in a vicious cycle whereby language and cultural barriers, miscommunication, the brevity of access to health care, limited sources, and a private medical system trap them in a life defined by poverty and slow death. The conclusion reiterates that, rather than a good life, resettlement in the United States fails to provide adequate welfare support, educational opportunities, and proper medical care that Iraqi refugees urgently need.

Though this book aims to shed light on the challenges Iraqi refugees encounter in the United States, it fails to deliver theoretically,

ethnographically, and historically. The historical background in the introduction ignores major contemporary scholarship on Iraq's modern history.¹ As such, it reproduces Orientalist narratives which postulate that Iraqi national unity was difficult to achieve due to linguistic and religious divisions, and that sectarianism took root in Iraq as a result of the absence of public services (13). These arguments erase the political history of the modern state of Iraq when secular ideologies—specifically, communism and Arab nationalism—dominated the scene until the rise of Saddam Hussein to power in 1979 and reiterate the essentialist conviction that sectarianism is innate in Iraq rather than being the product of imperial and colonial policies and discourses under the British Mandate and the US invasion. Surprisingly, most of this historical background—especially the United States' intervention in Iraq prior to 2003—has no relevance to the chapters. The chapters mainly deal with the consequences of displacement after the US invasion in 2003 and resettlement policies, though the reader only hears about the impact of sanctions and environmental degradation in chapter 5.

Theoretically, the book does not engage with the literature on citizenship, asylum, migration, and institutions. The author fleetingly mentions that the inability of refugees to have access to social rights translates into exclusion from citizenship. Ethnographically, Iraqi refugees appear as clueless, unidimensional victims who have no idea about the system prior to settlement in the United States (the only agency they have in this book is associated with cheating a callous system). The tendency to make sweeping generalizations about Iraqi refugees, based on interviews with only four families (206), ignores the fact that refugees in general have different experiences with asylum and resettlement based on class, gender, and education differences among other factors. This book focuses on Iraqis who were settled in the United States through the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR); however, a good number of Iraqis received asylum because they worked with the US military in Iraq (there is a brief reference to them in the conclusion) or because they were minorities, in particular Christians. How did the experiences of these groups differ from the experiences of refugees resettled through the UNHCR? In addition, Iraqi refugees—and refugees in general—rely on existing networks of friends and families before and after resettlement. Only in the conclusion does the author mention that some Iraqi refugees in Philadelphia moved to other states to be close to families or friends who enabled them to navigate the system. Moreover, teachers and welfare agents are presented as difficult people who would not “budge” to accommodate the needs of refugees. Though the book is

supposed to deal with institutions, it is individuals who work at these institutions that emerge as the source of the problem and the author only briefly mentions in the conclusion that teachers have limited means given budget cuts and closure of schools.

In short, this book is a missed opportunity to provide a nuanced and complex view of the challenges facing Iraqi refugees. It could have been a timely addition to the literature on migration, imperialism, and citizenship as racial capitalism, neoliberal imperialism, and environmental degradation are driving people all over the world to make risky journeys and accept low-wage jobs in an attempt to survive and build a better life for their children.

NOTES

¹ See, for instance, Orit Bashkin, *The Other Iraq: Pluralism and Culture in Hashemite Iraq* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008); Toby Dodge, *Inventing Iraq: The Failure of Nation Building and a History Denied* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); Toby Craig Jones, "America, Oil and War in the Middle East," *The Journal of American History* 99, no. 1 (June 2012): 208–18.