Abstract

The concept of ‘refugeeness’ can help us better understand the impact of persecution and displacement on people. In its more positive manifestation, what I refer to as a seismic outlook, refugeeness allows individuals to detach themselves from the status quo and thereby devise radically inventive ways to think and operate in the world. The less positive phobic side of refugeeness relates to the profound pessimism and misanthropy that can result from being, as Koestler put it, the exposed nerves of humanity. The life and work of Albert Einstein and Primo Levi exemplify the seismic outlook; while there is a distinctive phobic perspective in Leo Strauss’ political philosophy and Roman Polanski’s films. This article examines links between the insights, accomplishments and limitations of these famous men and those of my less famous Vietnamese-Australian parents with a view to discerning the scope and nature of their refugeeness.

Introduction: refugeeness at home

I am in exile and I am happy to be here ... I love everything that suffers for freedom, for the fatherland and for justice; and I have peace of mind, even though it is always painful to tread on foreign soil.¹

Victor Hugo

There is a great deal of debate over ‘Who is a refugee?’ and ‘How should they be treated?’ Often refugees and asylum seekers are demonised as queue jumpers and criminals who should be deterred or punished, while their supporters tend to present them as inherently decent people who have been valorised by suffering. This article aims to displace and defuse such debates by examining ‘What it’s like to be a refugee?’ Or a little more specifically, ‘How do refugee experiences shape one’s approach to work, life and others?’
This approach eschews strict legal definitions and contentious academic categories. The point being that persecution and displacement can deeply influence the perspective and endeavours of Convention refugees, internally displaced persons, forced or irregular migrants, exiles and deportees alike. I refer to this ontological impact as ‘refugeeness’.

While the notion of refugeeness is very broad, it was conceived close to home; that is, from observing my mother and father and finding out about our family history as Vietnamese refugees. My parents’ earliest memories are of being harassed and uprooted during the First Indochinese War. As a small child in Central Vietnam, my father and his family were forced to flee their village whenever conflict bore down upon them. His oldest brother died of starvation and disease during one such flight. Their house was destroyed not longer afterwards. These experiences compelled my father at the age of thirteen to leave his village in order to become a Viet Minh guerrilla. My mother grew up in the South of Vietnam in a family governed by patriarchy and a society ruled by the French. After her father’s taxis business was sabotaged by the Viet Minh, my mother’s family had to sell their home and move to the city in search of a living.

As distressing as these experiences were for my parents, they managed to fashion from their dislocation a new perspective on the world that their parents and grandparents could not easily fathom. Both of them came to believe that French colonialism was neither acceptable nor inevitable yet, at the same time, the West offered ideas and technologies that could be fruitfully adopted in Vietnam. From their displacement my mother and father developed a stridently forward-looking idea of justice for themselves, their community and indeed the world. My father in particular would hold on to a modern sense of can-do-ism and an irreverence for tradition for many years to come.

In 1975 my parents were living in Saigon and were avid anticommunists yet they tried to make the most of peace and help reunify the nation. By 1978, however, it was clear that they, and most importantly their sons, had no future in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. They constantly lived in fear of the authorities, who exercised power in the most arbitrary and brutal ways. The new regime was also eager to indoctrinate their sons with its twisted ideals. It was this political persecution which compelled them to leave, rather than the economic conditions which were stifling but not unfamiliar. Their deprived and disrupted childhoods had made my parents highly resourceful, an attribute which was key to our survival after our family belongings were acquisitioned by the state. My parents had to also get by on almost nothing after we escaped from our homeland by boat. During the seven months that we spent in a Malaysian refugee camp they assembled lamps out of loose threads and cans, sieved rice flour using mosquito nets and practically built and maintained our hut with a knife and spoon (both of which are still in the cutlery draw).
Yet my parents’ victories were by no means absolute. The stress of secretly organising our escape, of being unable to trust associates, friends and family, of risking everything for a new life and knowing that one wrong move or twist of fate could lead to our demise also had a lasting impact. To this day, they have an instinctive distrust of the state that transcends ideology. During those months preceding our departure, my parents contracted insomnia such that I have never known them to sleep for more than five hours at a time. Even when he is at rest, my father’s fists are clenched as if preparing to fight or flee. The sound of waves or the sight of an empty suitcase evokes in my mother unsteady dismay. Despite their contentedness in Australia and the fact that they return to Vietnam regularly, my parents are burdened by the loss of their homeland. For literary scholar and public intellectual Edward Said this is an unavoidable consequence of being Out of Place.4

It is true that there are stories portraying exile as a condition that produces heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in a person’s life. But these are no more than stories, efforts to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. The achievements of any exile are permanently undermined by his or her sense of loss.5

Clearly, then, my parents’ persecution and displacement has had its pluses and minuses. I refer to the more positive side of their refugeeess as a ‘seismic outlook’. Refugees6 are attuned to the fragility of the social structures upon which they stand. They know that whatever is fixed today can be torn away tomorrow. With their ears close to the ground and eyes fixed on the horizon, they are highly sensitive to imminent threats and possibilities. This perceptiveness is borne out of the uncertainty, arbitrariness and persecution that they have faced. It generates four interrelated advantages. Firstly, for some people, banishment and isolation offers the prospect of personal liberation and growth. By this account, fixation on the familiar carries with it the risk of spiritual and intellectual stagnation—a home too easily becomes a prison.7 The medieval monk Hugo of St. Victor proposed three stages of ontological development that encourage us to let go of transitory objects, places and relationships.

The man who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is native, is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is foreign. The tender soul has fixed his love on one spot in the world; the strong man has extended his love to all places; the perfect man has extinguished his.8

Secondly, because refugees cannot take anything for granted, they tend to be highly resourceful and adaptive. Thirdly, the need for refugees to distance themselves from old regimes means that they are often sceptical about received wisdom and able to envisage the world afresh. Finally, the fact that many refugees have been given a second chance in life makes them determined to convert their visions into realities. This single-mindedness is evident in many political dissidents living in Australia who Stuart Rees...
sees as ‘emotionally uncluttered’ ‘rebels with a cause’. ‘People can spend their whole lives searching for some sort of meaning’, he points out, ‘and these people have found their purpose, their reason for living, and with that comes a weird sort of freedom that says nothing else matters’.  

The more negative dimension of refugeeness can be regarded as a ‘phobic outlook’. This entails a deep distrust towards others and a stark pessimism about the prospects of human progress. The phobic outlook grows out of the same conditions as its seismic twin. But in this case, profound dislocation and alienation fosters a misanthropic dread—a conviction that people are born bad and tend to stay that way. The most we can strive for, attests the phobic refugee, is to protect ourselves and those like us from a threatening world and indifferent cosmos. By way of clarification, refugees do not have a ‘phobia’ in the sense that some people have a largely irrational fear of spiders, flying or open spaces. Phobic refugeeness in many ways reflects a reasoned response to terror and dislocation. Moreover, the two dimensions of refugeeness are not mutually exclusive. A phobic outlook can go hand-in-hand with a healthy scepticism and generate extraordinarily fruitful outcomes. However, the conservative and pessimistic side of refugeeness favours keeping people in their place and fixates upon the darker aspects of the human condition. Hannah Arendt, for instance, straddles the seismic/phobic fence (although she leans to the latter). As a groundbreaking moral and political philosopher, she was most well-known for perceiving a fundamental banality in the greatest evil. Arendt was convinced that the injustices of the modern world were becoming ever more normalised and perfected.

This article explores how refugeeness extends from the local to the global; that is, from my parents to some of the most accomplished figures of the twentieth century. In terms of the seismic outlook it illustrates how the disjointed lives of Albert Einstein and Primo Levi positively influenced their physics and writing respectively. On the other hand, philosopher Leo Strauss and Oscar winning director Roman Polanski exemplify phobic refugeeness in both their life and work. Of course observations about a couple of Vietnamese-Australian retirees and a handful of Jewish men do not necessarily apply to all of the 43.3 million forcibly displaced people in the world. Thus, I do not provide a conclusive answer to the question of ‘What it’s like to be a refugee?’ but rather, a conceptual framework that can help others assess their own understanding of persecution and displacement.

**What’s good about being persecuted and displaced?**

*Albert Einstein’s relativity*

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) website features a long list of ‘Prominent Refugees’ who have ‘made a difference’. Accompanying biographical sketches describe refugee experiences and
achievements of immense breadth and diversity, covering the triumphs of everyone from Madeleine Albright, to Young Australian of the Year Tan Le, to the von Trapp family. The humanitarian message behind all these life stories is summed up in a slogan on a UNHCR t-shirt, ‘What if the world had turned its back on Einstein?’

Like the other celebrities examined in this article, Albert Einstein (1879–1955) was a secular Jew. Throughout his life he avoided orthodox religion and had a distaste for unquestioning forms of commitment; yet as he grew older, Einstein sought to connect to his Jewish heritage. He especially came to appreciate the Jewish culture of intellectual inquiry and the life of the mind which he sensed was intrinsically linked to a history of oppression and marginalisation. From the thirteenth century, Jews across Europe were denied the privileges of citizenship and widely regarded as threatening and subhuman. Banned from owning land and from positions of public responsibility, they did odd jobs and were forced into usury (which only exacerbated the animosity towards them). At night, they were corralled into ghettos and locked up like animals.

Invigorated by a revolutionary fervour, Napoleon tore down ghetto gates as he moved across Europe allowing Jews, for a time, to remove the yellow stars and patches from their coats and openly express their identity. Within a matter of decades, Jewish communities had not only integrated into broader European society but had also produced a remarkable stream of iconoclastic thinkers and artists. Looking back at the pre-Emancipation era Isaac D’Israeli noted that, ‘The previous ten centuries have not produced ten great men’. His son Benjamin would become an accomplished author and twice serve as British Prime Minister. Other figures in this renaissance include Gustav Mahler, Arnold Schoenberg, Marcel Proust and Franz Kafka. Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud revolutionised our understanding of historical development and human behaviour. All of them were imbued with a legacy of discrimination and dislocation that was made up of what Freud referred to as a ‘creative scepticism’ about the status quo and an intense desire to make up for lost time. This helped them to stand apart from the orthodoxy, and provided them with the inspiration to fashion masterpieces and transform paradigms. In this spirit of seismic refugeeness, the German poet Heinrich Heine asked, ‘What is the great task of our own age?’ His answer was that Jews should no longer look inwards and fixate upon why God had forsaken them; instead, they should use the resilience and wisdom that they had crafted in darkness to bring new light to humanity.

As a pacifist, philosopher and physicist, Albert Einstein was a direct descendent of this reawakening. He was born into a family that prized learning, and had a first class education. However, Einstein did not hold his early schooling in high regard. The German system that emphasised rigid laws and rote learning over ingenuity conflicted with the headstrong autodidact. ‘A foolish faith in authority is the worst enemy of truth’ he
It was only outside of school hours and beyond the set curriculum that the young Einstein could gorge upon the latest research in physics and contemplate philosophy. He did better at school in Switzerland where he finished his secondary studies before enrolling in physics and mathematics at the Zurich polytechnic. Demonstrating increasing levels of intellectual flair, sixteen-year-old Einstein posed a question that would puzzle him and many scientific thinkers for years to come: ‘What would it be like to ride alongside a light beam?’

After completing his undergraduate studies and struggling to find an academic position, Einstein took a job at a patent office evaluating applications for electromagnetic devices. While the work was rarely stimulating, it gave him the opportunity to think deeply and differently. He looked back upon that time with some affection because he was free from academic squabbling and the pressure to ‘produce scientific writing in great amounts’ that could only lead to ‘intellectual superficiality’. Most importantly, at the patent office Einstein was isolated and unregulated. Friends and associates observed that his most unique thoughts and connections to the cosmos came when he was on his own. According to Philipp Frank, ‘He always has a certain feeling of being a stranger, and even a desire to be isolated’ from which he garnered an ‘artistic pleasure from everything that is strange and even unpleasant’. Similarly, Abraham Pais observed that Einstein’s ‘detachment enabled him to walk through life immersed in thought’ and drove him to pursue his theories in a ‘single-minded and single-handed’ manner.

In 1905, Einstein’s miracle year, the young patent office clerk published four papers that presented a groundbreaking quantum theory of light, helped to confirm the existence of atoms, explained the motion of molecules and revolutionised our understanding of space and time. Einstein’s theory of relativity, which he introduced that year and generalised over the following decade, embodies his seismic outlook. The orthodox understanding of physics bequeathed by Newton was based on cast-iron laws that could map everything from falling apples to the voyages of rockets. Einstein did not so much seek to undermine these laws, but rather highlight their limitations. He posited that space and time do not merely contain objects and occurrences; they are instead woven into a fabric that constantly warps and is warped by those objects and occurrences. This interaction is imperceptible in our everyday lives, but can be measured when matter is immense or moving incredibly fast. And so, light beams are bent by the gravitational pull of the sun and an identical twin who takes off on a speeding spaceship will return to find that she is younger than her sibling who remained on earth. Relativity opened up our understanding of the cosmos and our place within it by asserting that we cannot privilege one pathway or frame of reference as being truer than another. Einstein later succinctly conveyed the originality and magnitude of his insights in response to his son who asked him why he was famous. ‘When a blind beetle crawls over the surface of a
Einstein’s scientific and social perspectives were tightly intertwined. His sensitivity to group think, along with the influence of friends and a desire to avoid the draft, inspired the seventeen-year-old Einstein to renounce his German citizenship. He remained stateless for five years before acquiring Swiss citizenship. In 1914, with considerable reservations, Einstein took up German citizenship again in order to secure a prestigious position at the University of Berlin. However, his Jewish heritage, socialist leanings and intellectual independence clearly did not belong in the Third Reich. A ‘German physics movement’ decried relativity theory as ‘Jewish physics’ that deeply offended Hitler’s blood and soil certainties. In 1933, while Einstein was visiting the United States, Jews were legally banned from holding official positions and he was thus stripped of his professorship. Gangs of Nazi youth torched Einstein’s books and he was marked for assassination. Einstein once again renounced his German citizenship, vowing never to return to his country of birth.

Such were Einstein’s concerns about the rise of Hitler that he urged President F.D. Roosevelt to initiate a nuclear weapons program in the belief that the greatest evil could not be defeated by good alone. Notwithstanding this deviation from his pacifist principles, he remained committed to the idea of a human community. In 1934 Einstein published *The World as I See It*, which opened with a reply to the profoundest of questions: ‘What is the meaning of human life?’

> We exist for our fellow-men—in the first place for those on whose smiles and welfare all our happiness depends, and next for all those unknown to us personally with whose destinies we are bound up by the tie of sympathy.

This understanding of humanity’s interconnectedness was not based on a sense of personal belonging, but rather Einstein’s standing as an outsider.

> My passionate sense of social justice and social responsibility has always contrasted oddly with my pronounced freedom from the need for direct contact with other human beings and human communities. I have gone my own way and have never belonged to my country, my home, my friends, or even my immediate family, with my whole heart; in the face of all these ties I have never lost an obstinate sense of detachment.

The peculiar relationship between Einstein’s ‘apartness’ and his humanist values was apparent to many around him. ‘I do not know anyone as lonely and detached as Einstein’, said one collaborator. ‘His extreme kindness and decency are thoroughly impersonal and seem to come from another planet.’ Einstein’s friend and colleague Max Born pointed out that, ‘For all his kindness, sociability and love of humanity, he was nevertheless totally detached from his environment and the human beings in it’.

curved branch, it doesn’t notice that the track it has covered is indeed curved … I was lucky enough to notice what the beetle didn’t notice.’
It is no surprise, then, that the increasing attachment that Einstein felt to people and places in his later years impacted upon his creative scepticism and seismic refugeeness. While at Berlin and Princeton, Einstein sought greater comfort in his private life. This stands in contrast to the young Einstein who had been bohemian and carefree. His relationship with his first wife, Mileva Maric, was passionate and intellectually fertile, but often difficult (at first because of distance and parental disapproval and then because of Einstein’s infidelity and cold-heartedness). After a drawn out separation, Einstein married his cousin Elsa, a ‘doting hausfrau’ with whom he settled into a ‘richly wallpapered home filled with heavy Biedermeier furniture’. Politically, Einstein’s growing desire for security was apparent in his support for Zionism. Although he was never a fully-fledged member of the Zionist movement, Einstein approved of the idea of Jewish settlements and helped raise funds for the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Relinquishing his objection to nationalism in all its forms, he revealed to a friend that ‘The Zionist cause is very close to my heart … I am glad that there should be a little patch of earth on which our kindred brethren are not considered aliens.’ Einstein thus hoped that ‘One can be an internationalist without being indifferent to members of one’s tribe’. 

While as a scientist he was forever brimming with energy and insight, the older Einstein who had already established his place in history had less to rebel against. His intellectual tenacity was thus often directed towards resisting some of the major developments in physics that he himself had set in motion. He was especially critical of quantum mechanics as espoused by successors like Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg. Einstein abhorred the notion that at the quantum level we can only ever calculate how particles will act in terms of *probability*. Einstein’s theories were never meant to lead to cultural relativism (as the Nazis had proclaimed), uncertainty or chance. It was in this specific context (and not in a theological sense) that he famously asserted, God ‘does not play dice’. Instead, Einstein was convinced that the ultimate purpose of relativity and indeed of all proper scientific inquiry was to affirm the strict relationship between cause and effect and devise a more assured and elegant conception of the universe. Fixated on causality and certainty, Einstein was increasingly left behind. He either opposed or stubbornly accepted new findings about the subatomic world and was a resistant latecomer to black holes and cosmic expansion.

Yet it would be inaccurate and unwise to suggest that Einstein was misguided. In both his scientific and social endeavours he always strove for greater harmony. Einstein wanted to resolve the inconsistencies that he saw in quantum physics and at the same time unify the fundamental forces of electromagnetism and gravity. He was still scribbling in his notebooks, searching for this ‘theory for everything’ when he died in 1955. At Einstein’s bedside there was also a draft of yet another letter calling for more understanding and empathy between Palestinians and Israelis. He ultimately failed to devise a unified field theory and bring peace to the
Middle East. But his imaginative leaps and seismic refugeeness continue to frame and challenge our understanding of everything from the smallest particle to the largest galaxy, so that it is fair to say that ‘we are still living in Einstein’s universe.’

Primo Levi’s resourcefulness

If Albert Einstein was a remarkable scientist who had a knack for clear and pressing prose, then Primo Levi (1919–1987) was a skilled scientist who, because of his experiences as a deportee, became a remarkable writer. Levi’s memoirs recounting his eleven months in the Auschwitz death camps (*If This is a Man*) and his journey back to Italy via Central and Eastern Europe (*The Truce*) are required reading for Italian students. His testimony has inspired scholarship across a range of academic disciplines, proving especially valuable for those interested in the survival instinct, judgment and disempowerment. He describes and reflects upon his ordeals with precision, elegance and force. According to Massimo Mila, one will never find ‘anything gratuitous or sterile in what Primo Levi writes’. Along similar lines Saul Bellow praised his writing for containing ‘nothing superfluous’, everything is essential. Levi believed that the decay of communication and that of society are tightly interwoven. He thereby saw it as his grave responsibility to depict the moral calamity and horrors that he had lived through in the most lucid and vivid terms.

And his target was nothing less than the entire community of humans. The epigraph and title of his first book evokes the prayer, *Shema Israel*, traditionally recited by Jews just before sleep and death. Levi secularises the prayer, urging all of us to meditate upon the terror that we condone and inflict upon others, to ensure that the generations of tomorrow are wiser than today’s, and thus consider ‘if this is a man’.

Primo Levi’s great-grandfather, Giuseppe Levi, was born in a Piedmont ghetto in 1819 and, with limited options available to him, became a banker. The Jews of northern Italy had been liberated by Napoleon in 1796 only to be forced back into the ghettos twenty years later. Full emancipation did not come until the unification of Italy in 1861. Giuseppe’s son, Michele (Primo’s grandfather), was among the first generation of Jews to take advantage of their equality and freedoms. He turned away from the money lending business to study civil engineering at Turin. Michele’s oldest son, Cesare (Primo’s father), later obtained exactly the same degree. They were part of a movement to integrate into Italian society that was nudged along by high literacy rates and a sense that if Jews were the same as everyone else then they would be safer and better off. According to Levi, their Judaism was ‘conditioned by dispersal’: it had maintained a few vestiges of the
past but was otherwise ‘intertwined with the culture of the host country’. This Judaism favoured enlightenment and was romantic, ‘liberal, socialist, bourgeois, nationalist’. But, despite their best efforts, the Jews of northern Italy were, argued Levi, never comfortable. Western Jews were in a state of ‘perennial identity crisis’: caught between loyalty to the old and assimilation with the new. This was the source of their equally perennial ‘neurosis, adaptability and sharpness’. By the early twentieth century, distinctively seismic Italian Jews had risen to ‘prominent positions in politics, the armed forces, law, business and, above all, cultural life’. In fact, a number of them held leading roles in the Fascist governments of the 1920s and 1930s and over 10,000 were Fascist Party members.

The young Primo Levi was the only Jew in his high school class, but that was not primarily why he was teased and bullied. He was also the shortest and smallest (having skipped a year) as well as the cleverest. When his mind was left to wonder in class Primo Levi watched ‘the buds swell in spring, the mica glint in the granite’ and thought to himself, ‘I will understand everything, but not the way they want me to’. At the age of sixteen, Levi decided to deviate from his father’s and grandfather’s profession and become a chemist, a choice he made for grander reasons than gainful employment.

For me chemistry represented an indefinite cloud of future potentialities which enveloped my life to come in black volutes torn by fiery flashes, like those which had hidden Mount Sinai. Like Moses, from that cloud I expected my law, the principle of order in me, around me, and in the world.

By modifying this religious reference, Levi reveals his faith that only science and reason could save his society from plummeting into oppression and conflict. By 1935 fascism was gaining popular support in Italy as Mussolini set about arresting and exiling his anti-fascist opponents, many of whom were Jews. Because of their prominence and integration, official persecution of Italian Jews was not fully implemented until 1938 when Mussolini commissioned a group of ‘racial experts’ who formulated ‘The Manifesto of Racial Scientists’ which proclaimed that true Italians were of Aryan stock. Jews were contaminants ‘akin to the Nazis’ Fremdkörper, an alien within a state’. Levi was fortunate to complete his chemistry degree (his sister was banned from enrolling in university), although his parchment stated that he was a member of the Jewish race.

The manipulation of scientific principles to propagate hate and validate oppression only intensified his commitment to humanist values. Similarly, Levi’s Jewish pride was triggered by the discrimination against him: ‘I adapted to the position of Jew only as an effect of the racial laws passed in Italy’. Emboldened by his status as an ‘impurity’, Primo Levi joined the partisan resistance. He later described a band of partisans in one of his novels as ‘light-hearted and fierce, like animals whose cage has been opened,
like slaves who have risen up in vengeance’. Levi’s unit was captured in October 1943 and, after admitting that he was Jewish, he was taken to a transit camp. It was here that he encountered the calculated cruelty of the Nazis for the first time. As the Jews in the transit camp were shoved and beaten into train carriages an SS officer asked his corporal ‘Wieviel Stück?’ ‘How many pieces?’ The response was ‘650’. Only twenty would return.

One of the most pressing questions arising from Levi’s journey relates to how exactly he survived. Levi himself always emphasised the role of luck, along with the assistance of a few individuals who provided him with sustenance and camaraderie. This acknowledgement is not so much born out of humility, but rather the need to realise that in the lager—regardless of one’s resilience, courage and aptitude—liquidation was nigh inescapable. Nonetheless, Primo Levi also recognised certain factors that bolstered his good fortune, including his skill with languages, conditioning as a mountaineer and qualifications as a chemist.

Significant also was his seismic refugeeness, which was in large part comprised of what biographer Ian Thomson referred to as a ‘detached curiosity’. Levi tried to stand apart from and make sense of the brutal logic of the camp so that someday he might bear witness. This persistent questioning was a source of both resistance and resilience. In his first days at Auschwitz, Levi, now 17, procured an icicle which he eagerly sucked before it was knocked out of his hand. When he asked the guard why he did this, Levi was brusquely informed that ‘That there is no “why” here’. His seismic outlook also helped him to devise a complex set of survival tactics. He learnt to queue for food in the right position so as to secure the most nutritious morsels at the bottom of the cauldron, when to work and when to be idle, to sleep on top of his meagre but valuable possessions and to avoid beatings by being inconspicuous. Moreover, Levi saw the importance of maintaining his identity and connection with others. In a rare moment of reprieve, he tells of how translating lines from Dante’s ‘Canto of Ulysses’ for a French prisoner assisted him to ‘avoid the total humiliation and demoralisation which led so many to spiritual shipwreck’.

Amazingly, Primo Levi would eventually look back upon his displacement and imprisonment without hatred or ‘any violent or dolorous emotions’. This was in part due to his assessment that the sum total of his experiences as a deportee had made him ‘richer and surer’, ‘taught him many things about man and the world’ and was thus ‘clearly positive’. While Levi’s tertiary education had enabled him to specialise in chemistry, the death camps had served as his university in life. He honed his skill as a bricoleur, a jack of all trades, who could make something out of nothing. In a letter to his family on the eve of his homecoming, Primo Levi revealed that he was malnourished and still wearing the Russian Red Army uniform donated to him by his liberators; yet he was far from dispirited or undignified.
Maybe I’ll come home shoeless, but in compensation for my ragged state I’ve learned German and a bit of Russian and Polish, I also know how to get out of many situations without losing my nerve, and how to withstand moral and physical suffering. To economise on the barber I’m sporting a beard. I know how to make a cauliflower or turnip soup, cook potatoes in a hundred different ways (all without seasoning). I know, too, how to assemble, light and clean stoves. And I’ve been through an incredible variety of careers: assistant bricklayer, navvy, sweep, porter, grave-digger, interpreter, cyclist, tailor, thief, nurse, fencer, stone-breaker. I’ve even been a chemist!46

Primo Levi’s ability to do many things and speak to many people was attributable to his sense of detachedness, his refugeeeness. In the preface to a collection of short stories, Other People’s Trades, he reflects upon how he often set foot on bridges that spanned crevasses between different cultures, between science and literature and Jewish and Gentile—divides that he regarded as nonsensical. However, he could only do so because he was on the margins and could therefore leave whenever he wanted to ‘get a better view of the landscape’.47

The concentration camp and the protracted journey home also motivated Levi, who had been a mediocre Italian student with poor grades in history, to record his memoirs.48 And after publishing two books he gradually ‘adapted to the position of a writer’.49 His unique adaptive qualities are most evident in his masterpiece, The Periodic Table. This collection of poignant tales from Levi’s life before and after the deportation is strung together by encounters with, amongst other chemicals, argon, chromium, hydrogen, tin and zinc. The concluding story, ‘Carbon’ is the product of his first ever literary inspiration, ‘insistently dreamed’ in the concentration camp. In it he asserts that the book is ‘not a chemical treatise ... nor is it a biography’ when, in fact, it is both.50 Levi’s portrayal of the characteristics and voyage of a single carbon atom parallels his own character and voyage as well as those of many other displaced people. Carbon, he asserts, is exceptional in its non-specificity and capacity to say ‘everything to everyone’.51 As the only element that can ‘bind itself in long stable chains without a great expense of energy’ it joins with oxygen and calcium to become essential molecules of life.52 Its bonds are stable but never permanent. Carbon atoms can take the form of fragile and slippery shale or the toughened brilliance of diamond. They can comprise the colours and perfumes in flowers only to ‘return as carbon dioxide to the waters of the sea in a perpetual, frightening round-dance of life and death, in which every devourer is immediately devoured’.53 The particular atom to which Primo Levi turns his attention exists for hundreds of millions of years on a limestone shelf before it is broken off with a pickaxe and incinerated. It is caught by the wind, inhaled by a falcon and constitutes all manner of molecules, plants and animals before it ‘guides this hand of mine to impress on the paper this dot, here, this one’.54
On 11 April 1987 Primo Levi fell from the inside landing of the apartment complex in which he had lived for all but two years of his life. The coroner reported that he committed suicide and, amongst much speculation, another eminent Holocaust survivor asserted that the lethal blow had been dealt more than forty years earlier. However, two recent biographies indicate that Primo Levi was suffering from a severe bout of depression that had dogged him since he was young. His wife reportedly revealed at the time, ‘I feared it, everybody feared it. Primo was tired of life ... We did our best never to leave him alone, ever. Just one moment was enough’. Thomson’s study uncovers a family secret that suggests he was genetically disposed to this malaise. Primo’s grandfather, Michele, had thrown himself out of a window 99 years earlier, with the cause of death recorded in the exact same terms as Primo’s, ‘fall from a high place’. Others focus on how the retired chemist had complained of dizziness, had several ongoing writing projects at the time and thus most probably slipped. This puzzle is unlikely to be solved if only because, as Levi recognised, ‘every human action contains a kernel of incomprehensibility’. Nonetheless, it seems clear and imperative to recognise that Auschwitz did not defeat him.

**What’s not so good about being persecuted and displaced?**

To highlight Albert Einstein’s relativity and Primo Levi’s resourcefulness is not to suggest that people are always better off for their persecution and displacement. When Levi returned to work as a chemist, for instance, his colleagues noticed his distinctive anxiety. He would cup his hands under his chin when eating lunch, as if each crumb was critical to his survival. And as he walked along the corridors he scanned the floors looking for items to snatch or a way out. Holocaust survivor, surgeon and scholar Mark Spiegelman exhibited similar habits that took him decades to diagnose and from which he could never be cured:

> Whenever I enter a strange room, the first thing I look for is another way to get out ... I recall that I was a keynote speaker at an international conference and, as I walked in to give my talk, the delegates were clapping, and I realised I was anxious about checking all the doors and windows of the hall in case the Germans burst in. That night, I finally realised that I had been doing this all my life and had not been conscious of it.

I turn now to explore this complex sense of angst in the life and work of philosopher Leo Strauss and director Roman Polanski. Both men exemplify a phobic outlook that is the other constituent of refugeeness.

*The recherché Leo Strauss*

As a young academic, Leo Strauss (1899–1973) fled the Third Reich to eventually find refuge in New York and work at the New School for Social Research, which was regarded as the ‘University in Exile’ because of the number of German Jews it had employed. In 1949 he took up a professorship
at the University of Chicago where his reputation was made. Strauss
philosophy embraced contradiction, mixed messages and double standards.
While Albert Einstein and Primo Levi were convinced that science
could speak to everyone, Strauss associated scientific and technological
advancement with the dangerous quest for human perfectibility that was
demonstrated in, amongst other places, Nazi Germany. He turned to old
books for reason and moral guidance. And from them he learnt that the best,
safest and most honest way to live is to accept that people are fundamentally
flawed, and that only a very few will ever be wise.

Strauss’ ideas have attracted a great deal of interest because of their
influence on neo-conservatism. Figures in George W. Bush’s administration,
most notably Paul Wolfowitz, Abram Shulsky and Richard Perle, are often
thought to have drawn upon his philosophy to promote the 2003 Iraq
War. Opposition to this war amplified critical analysis of Strauss’ work. In
academia this criticism was led by Shadia Drury and Anne Norton who
argued that his profound elitism and gloomy outlook translated into politics
defined by paranoia, manipulation and belligerence. Drury asserts that
de despite any exoteric claims to the contrary, Strauss and his followers are no
friends of liberal democracy.

In more recent years, a burst of scholarship has emerged that is more
sympathetic to Strauss and his thinking. What is striking is that his most
committed detractors and supporters tend to agree that Strauss was an
enduring thinker ‘who conveyed concealed truths to the chosen few’. The
vigorous debate and sheer weight of material that has been written about
him has been productive to the extent that judicious readers can now form
a nuanced picture of the man and his legacy. It is clear now that there are
many types of Straussian. His intellectual disciples split into East Coast
and West Coast varieties: the former are more consumed with classical
philosophy and education, while the latter seek engagement with politics
and foreign affairs. Straussians can be Democrats, but most favour the
Republicans. Many are pious, although they are traditionally profane. In
distilling what they might all have in common we must turn back to Leo
Strauss and consider his key concerns. In this regard, Sheppard points to
two continuous threads in Strauss’ philosophy: firstly, the centrality of the
problem of exile (in Hebrew galut) and, secondly, a radical-conservative
critique of liberalism. The two themes are in fact highly inter-related so that
an examination of the former reveals a great deal about the latter.

A few biographical details are useful in introducing the notion galut,
through which we can understand Strauss’ phobic outlook. Leo Strauss was
born into a middle-class family in the rural town of Kirchhain in Central
Germany. Like Primo Levi’s ancestors, the Jews in the area had been subject
to ‘sporadic periods of reform, reaction, and restriction’ until 1869 when
they were afforded equal rights as citizens. Nonetheless, anti-Semitism
remained a prominent political force for decades to come, which meant the
Jewish population tended to stay in the countryside, confined to trading cattle, peddling and lending money. Strauss himself claimed to have been largely unscathed by anti-Semitism in his youth. Nonetheless, he was well aware of its presence in his immediate vicinity and throughout Europe. One of his first memories was of how his father sheltered Jews fleeing pogroms in Russia heading to Australia. The stories of their persecution and flight became an ‘unforgettable moment’ for the young boy. It destabilised his sense of security and ‘for the first time he countenanced the possibility of such an event occurring in his native Germany’.  

As this possibility turned into reality, Strauss’s galut was refined and engrained. He became convinced that for Jews in particular, but also for people in general, betrayal and discrimination were unavoidable. While he condemned anti-Semitism in the strongest terms, Strauss claimed to grasp its logic and to find such reasoning ‘instructive for Zionists’. His famous critique of the Nazi legal scholar Carl Schmitt was based on the view that Schmitt was unwittingly still wedded to liberal principles. The point being that Strauss agreed with Schmitt’s primary assertion that politics is not about good governance, harmony or justice; it is, at its core, defined by dire emergencies and fatal struggles between enemy and friend. It follows that ‘any clear-sighted view of Jewish politics must then account for exclusion, intolerance, and coercive persecution as an ever-present’. The gravest mistake that can be made in a brutal and unfair world is to expect goodness.

Strauss’ view of galut as the inescapable human condition represents the linchpin of his philosophy. Three additional points must be made by way of elaboration. Firstly, Strauss saw attempts to overcome galut as dangerously utopian. He was particularly scathing of minorities who sought to assimilate into the majority in pursuit of comfort and security. Inspired by such a vision, German poet Heinrich Heine had converted to Christianity and condemned Judaism as a ‘misfortune’ that had to be surpassed. Strauss, on the other hand, regarded Judaism as a ‘heroic delusion’ that had to be bolstered and invigorated even if he was not himself religious. From studying medieval Spanish history Strauss knew that Jews who had been forced to convert would only be ‘forced to remain Jews’ when it became expedient. He pointed out that German Jews had full political rights and were highly integrated into the Weimar Republic’s bourgeois culture. And yet ‘the Weimar Republic was succeeded by the only German regime—the only regime ever anywhere—which had no other clear principle than murderous hatred of the Jews’. Just as critically, Jews would simply cease to be Jewish if they were somehow redeemed of their galut. Exile was, paradoxically, the source of their belonging. Like Job in the Old Testament the Jews had been chosen not to flourish per se, but rather to be tested and ultimately prove ‘the absence of redemption’.  

Secondly, Strauss advocated substituting ‘the helotry of assimilation with the Spartan spirit of Zionism’. He regarded himself as a Zionist, ‘pure and
simple’, but in truth nothing about Strauss could be described this way. In contrast to Einstein who supported the creation of Israel but hoped to restrain its nationalistic and religious fervour, Strauss thought that Israelis could not be nationalistic or religious enough. For him the establishment of the state of Israel was the profoundest enunciation and modification of galut, ‘but it is not the end of galut’. By this he meant that the creation of a homeland for Jews did not alter the fact that exile and enmity was a fundamental feature of their existence. Nor would it eradicate or even diminish the prospect of persecution and conflict that they had historically faced. Whereas the seismic Einstein pursued unity in his philosophy and politics, Strauss accepted division, animosity and hypocrisy as given. He was convinced that ‘absolute problems cannot be solved’ and that ‘human beings will never create a society which is free of contradictions’. An overview of Israeli–Arab relations since 1948 suggests that, in this regard, Strauss was arguably more prescient than Einstein.

Thirdly, Strauss recast the precarious phobic outlook of the diasporic Jew as the natural and even desirable model for the true philosopher. The philosopher is a heterodox thinker who lives in constant fear of hounding from the bulk of humanity who are simple and steadfast. Strauss’ most significant and controversial contribution to philosophy is the revelation that, to avoid retribution and protect the core tenets of their beliefs, great philosophers like Plato and Spinoza wrote in an esoteric fashion. This kind of writing has been forgotten by modern readers who blindly believe, like Primo Levi, in the singularity and liberating potential of truth. For them esotericism is shocking because it involves conveying different messages for different readers.

In Persecution and the Art of Writing, Strauss explained the need for philosophers to convey ‘double truths’ by evoking the example of a gallant writer living under a totalitarian regime who is committed to principle yet also aware of her or his hazardous surrounds. It is important to note that Strauss neither described nor prescribed outright deception. Rather, he compared the exoteric/outer truth to Alcibiades, who was one of the most beautiful men in Ancient Athens. Esoteric truths, on the other hand, can be likened to Socrates (for whom Alcibiades had great affection), who was ugly on the outside, but whose wisdom afforded him an inner splendour. Exoteric messages can be garnered by a simple and honest reading of a text. To excavate the esoteric truth, however, the reader must navigate around ambiguities, contradictions, errors and repetitions that a masterful thinker deploys to divert less adept minds. The superficially exoteric truth is for the many; the eternal esoteric truth is for the few. It is the comprehension of this esoteric truth and the need to protect it from others that makes the philosopher so phobic, so galut.
The repulsive Roman Polanski

The negative manifestations of persecution and displacement are also evident in the repulsive deeds and alluring work of Roman Polanski (1933–). In commenting on Franz Kafka’s novel *The Trial*, Primo Levi could have just as easily been referring to Polanski’s films, which are also ‘full of unhappiness and poetry’ and which ‘leave us changed: sadder and more aware’. Whereas Levi’s stories and essays move ‘from darkness to light’, Kafka and Polanski drag their readers and audiences into the muddy depths of the human condition, masking none of its goriness or absurdity. Polanski’s phobic outlook is very much linked to the cruelty and alienation that he confronted from an early age. Acknowledging this link by no means excuses his crimes, nor does it wholly explain his art; it does however, assist us in judging them.

The Warsaw Jews from which Polanski descends had lived in harmony with Catholics for half a millennium, playing a key role in the city’s development as a centre for commerce, culture and study. During Polanski’s childhood this era of co-existence came to a sudden and violent end. Shortly after he started school, Polanski and all of the other Jewish children in Poland were expelled. In 1940 the municipal authorities directed his family into the Warsaw ghetto. Shortly afterwards, a wall topped with barb wire was erected around the ghetto and more and more people were crowded into it. Like many children, Polanski escaped through holes in the perimeter to bring back supplies. He watched the open-air propaganda newsreels that the Nazis played outside in Padgorze Square. One of the information breaks informed Krakow’s residences that ‘JEWS! = LICE! = TYPHUS!’ Tens of thousands of people died of starvation and disease even before the Nazis began the deportations. Polanski’s mother was one of the first to be taken; his father was to follow. Polanski chased after his father as he was herded off to the Lager. Fearful that his son would also be captured, Polanski’s father could only tell him to ‘Shove off’!

His parents had used their savings to pay people on the outside to look after him in the event that they could not. After escaping the ghetto for good, Polanski was passed from one family to another, each taking a cut of his parents’ money. No matter where he went, the young boy had to stay hidden so as not to be identified by the authorities, neighbours or passersby. Reflecting upon this period and others, Polanski likened himself to ‘a mouse, sport for an abominable cat’. He spent much of the war with an impoverished family in the countryside, where he learnt how to do and endure all manner of work. The young Polanski was desperately lonely and suffered from bed-wetting. He found some respite in reciting Catholic prayers that he had memorised as a form of camouflage. He also hunted for scraps of tin to construct rudimentary little projectors with which he manipulated light and shadow to give life to his fantasies.
Polanski’s father managed to survive the death camps but returned to Krakow deeply scarred. For a time Roman stayed with relatives who were shocked by the boy’s ignorance and backwardness. As Polanski started school it became clear that he was very bright, but was only ever interested in performing. As if making up for years of fear and inhibition, he became the most outlandish child in class. He graduated from the Lodz film school, attracting acclaim for his acting and then for his short films. By that time, Poland had joined the Eastern Bloc and the stultifying effects of socialist realism could be felt throughout the creative arts. Upon migrating to London, Polanski could rightly claim that both the Nazis and communists had failed to repress him.

After making a series of successful feature films in England, Polanski was drawn to Hollywood where he could truly take his ‘fantasy world and turn it into a real one’. Hollywood suited the charismatic young director and his wife, the glamorous English actress Sharon Tate. Nobody said ‘no’ to Polanski, and he never denied himself the spoils of fame. Polanski’s father often reproached him for his profligacy and recklessness. But as he would later reflect, ‘it is as absurd to regret the past as it is to plan for the future ... life—and money—are there to be enjoyed’. Leo Strauss would also surely condemn Polanski’s permissive lifestyle. Such openness and liberality were the essential features of the Weimar Republic. By the Straussian account, the moral relativity promoted in Hollywood and the offbeat counterculture had hamstrung America’s will to defeat its foes and thus threatened nothing less than downfall of Western civilisation.

On a personal scale, tragedy struck Polanski in 1969 when his pregnant wife was murdered by members of the Manson family. He would later assert that his real problems started with this horrific event. Her murder shattered any morsel of faith that he had in God and ‘reinforced his faith in the absurd’. But while the impact of this loss is undeniable, Polanski himself suggests that it did not so much provoke a radical change in his outlook, but rather unlocked a phobic presence that had been established long before.

I not only developed a closer physical resemblance to my father after Sharon’s death but began to take on some of his traits; his ingrained pessimism, his eternal dissatisfaction with life, his profoundly Judaic sense of guilt, and his conviction that every joyous experience has its price.

It is difficult not to draw parallels between Polanski’s life and work—‘to view one through the prism of the other’. His lead characters are almost always angst-filled loners who have been pitted against the world’s defects and evils. As if that is not enough, sometimes they must also confront the supernatural. Polanski’s protagonists often succumb to mounting paranoia. ‘Paranoia can be a symptom of madness (Repulsion) or the only proof of sanity in a crazy world (Rosemary’s Baby).’ Sometimes it is both. In The Tenant Polanski plays Trelkowski, an immigrant who becomes detached
from his sense of place, sexuality and entire self. Convinced that everyone around him is coercing him to change, Trelkowski invariably chooses suicide over assimilation. We often see in Polanski’s films an image of himself as a renegade. In The Ninth Gate Johnny Depp as Corso (Italian for ‘ran’) is unwittingly enlisted to unlock a door to the nether world. He has no real friends, questionable sexual mores and is driven by a dangerous desire for money and truth. The same could be said of Ewan McGregor’s character in The Ghost Writer who is pursued by the CIA after becoming trapped in a morass of lies and conspiracies. Despite the courage and nous of Polanski’s heroes, justice either flatly loses out or is left severely wanting (Chinatown). Sex is never inspired by love and is more often a consequence of manipulation (Rosemary’s Baby) or unhinged desperation (The Ghost Writer). In Bitter Moon we are invited to explore the logic of perversion, lust and greed, and then witness how the abused morphs into the abuser.

In 1977 Roman Polanski had intercourse with and sodomised a thirteen-year-old girl after giving her champagne and, by her account, a sedative. The girl maintained that she had repeatedly protested; both parties agree that she was not feeling well. The following year, Polanski fled to Europe on the eve of his sentencing. In his view the sex was consensual; moreover, the girl was a de facto woman on account of her mature appearance, self-professed sexual experience, the fact that in other American states the crime of ‘unlawful sexual intercourse’ applied only to girls twelve years or younger, and allegations that the thirteen-year-old was romantically involved with her stepfather. Wholly absent in Polanski’s account is any sense of remorse or contrition. Instead, Polanski is once again the renegade victim of a corrupt and unjust world. He is immune to any prospect that his power might distort and deform reality, or that the strong might be responsible for the weak.

Polanski once said, ‘I have been a fugitive all of my life.’ This seems unlikely to change. In November 2009 the seventy-six-year-old Polanski was arrested in Switzerland on his way to receiving a lifetime achievement award. After a brief period in jail, he was placed under house arrest and, following another legal battle, was released in July 2010. He is now free to travel between France, Poland, Switzerland and any country that does not have an extradition agreement with the United States. As with many of his films, this ending is neither happy, fair nor complete.

What can we conclude about refugeeness?

In conclusion, refugees and irregular migrants, just like other people, are not all good or bad. Some react to disruption in their lives in more positive and inspirational ways than others. But this article is not so much about conclusions, but rather how we arrive at them. Contemplating the refugeeness of Albert Einstein, Primo Levi, Leo Strauss and Roman Polanski (along with my parents) assists us to recognise both the overarching humanity and specific circumstances and characteristics of displaced people.
The more empathy and understanding we can muster for such figures, famous or otherwise, the less likely we are to dehumanise them. This in turn places us in a better position to consider weighty issues relating to ‘Who is a refugee?’ and ‘How should irregular migrants be treated?’

On a personal note, there remains the question of whether my parents’ refugeeness has shaped the outcomes of their devotion, my brother and me, in the same way that persecution and dislocation informed Einstein’s relativity, Levi’s resourcefulness, the recherché Strauss and the repulsive Polanski. If so, it would make sense to nurture the seismic side of my refugeeness while curtailing its phobic dimension. However, such simple conclusions should be met with caution. It may not be desirable or even possible to vanquish some elements of refugeeness in order to favour others. Similarly, decisions about who deserves asylum should not turn on whether there are more positives than negatives in saving someone’s life. The seismic and phobic qualities of refugeeness can thus be imagined as two sides of the same ever-spinning coin. Our challenge is not to bet on heads or tails, but rather to recognise the history and symbolism of the inscriptions and the inherent value of the metal.

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Endnotes

2. This is of course a neologism that has been adopted by several scholars. Most recently, Szczepanikova used it to refer to ‘a social construction of what is considered to be typical for people labelled as refugees’. Alice Szczepanikova, ‘Performing refugeeness in the Czech Republic: gendered depoliticisation through NGO–assistance’, Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography, vol. 17, no. 4, 2010, p. 461.
6. ‘Refugee’ is used in an ontological rather than a legal sense to encompass a broad array of humanitarian migrants.
7. ibid., p. 54.
8. ibid., p. 55.
13. See Goldfarb, Emancipation, epigraph.
15. ibid., p. 88.
20. ibid., pp. 2–3.
32. ibid.
33. ibid.
34. ibid.
37. ibid., p. 23
38. ibid., pp. 122–3.
39. ibid., p. 80.
42. Thomson, *Primo Levi*, p. 175.
45. ibid.
46. ibid., p. 222.
51. ibid.
52. ibid.
53. ibid.
54. ibid., pp. 232–3.
64. ibid., p. 7.
65. ibid., p. 9.
68. ibid., p. 43.
69. ibid., p. 122.
70. ibid., p. 128.
71. ibid., p. 122.
72. ibid., p. 123.
74. ibid.
76. ibid., p. 127.
77. ibid., p. 7.
79. ibid., p. 37.
81. ibid.
83. ibid., p. 25.
86. ibid.
88. ibid.
89. ibid., p. 283.
91. ibid.