

THE POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE AND MIGRATION: A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON "CLIMATE MIGRATION"

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Climate migration has emerged in recent years as a relatively new concept. It brings important new dimensions to migration and to climate change.¹ However, it is a contested concept and, in many ways, is inadequately understood. This short intervention is an attempt to bring a sociological perspective to a notion that is also in need of critique: rather than being a product of natural determinism and reduced to numbers, it is a human-made problem and for which political solutions need to be found.

The figure of the climate migrant captures the defining problem of our time, namely climate change and the need for radical eco-politics. Climate migration also expresses a strong sense of a loss of home. There is the spectre of disappearing states, notably the Marshall Islands and in the Federated States of Micronesia. It is possible to imagine the disappearance of Miami by end of the century, according to Jeff Goodwell.²

Such catastrophic scenarios represent a major shift beyond modernity, which in many ways was about the conquest of land and the mastery of the sea (as in Carl Schmitt's *Nomos der Erde*) while today the seas, which cover around 70% of the surface of the earth, are conquering the land in a reversal of the logic of modernity.

Up to 410 million people will soon be living in areas less than 2 metres above sea level, and at risk from sea level rises, unless global emissions are reduced, according to a recent study.³ The figures vary but are in the range of around 200 million by mid-century. A recent report published in *Nature* predicts a likely rise of sea level by one metre by 2100.⁴ This is all in the wider context of world population increase to more than 9 billion by 2050 and 10.9 by end of the century – now at the 8 billion mark – with much of the increase in low to middle income countries. Many of the populations at risk, for example Bangladesh and Mozambique,

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¹ Piquet, E., et al. (eds.) (2011). *Migration and Climate Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

² Goodell, J. (2017). *The Water Will Come: Rising Seas, Sinking Cities, and the Remaking of the Civilized World*. New York: Little, Brown and Co.

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/jun/29/risk-from-sea-level-rises-unless-emissions-reduced>

⁴ Estimating global mean sea level rise and its uncertainties by 2100 and 2300 from an expert survey | npj Climate and Atmospheric Science (nature.com)

are in coastal areas, where there is also uncontrolled development taking place. It seems to be the case that there are more people displaced by climate change than by civil war – one estimate is as many as three times.⁵ A major question for political philosophy and international law is what happens to the sovereignty of a state that disappears or loses territory to the sea. Does it still exist?⁶

We now have notions of “eco-refugees”, “ecological” or “climate migrants”, so a discursive shift has occurred along with these developments. But, with this much uncertainty, there are many terms (migrant/refugee) here indicating that they do not have fixed referents. Are they products of a particular discourse? There is also a problem in using the term refugee in this context, since refugee is a legal term to refer to people escaping political oppression/persecution. The 1951 Refugee Convention does not recognise environmental factors as criteria to define a refugee, a term that remains political in the sense of fleeing from persecution.

Much of the debate is dominated by predictive scenarios, often influenced by security concerns, and visions of catastrophe. We need to recognise the significance of climate change for migration (and everything else) but if it is dominated by alarmist discourses no useful purpose will be served. How can natural determinism – that is, a mechanistic view of the relation between climate change and migration – be avoided in the complex field of population movement?

At least three things come together when we talk about climate change and migration: climate change as a major casual force, migration and change more generally. Of course, politics too, which pervades everything and is therefore not separate.

How can we talk about something when something else is also part of it? This is the sociological and conceptual problem with climate migration. It is a construction. This is a feature not just of climate migration, but concerns the notion of migration itself. It is also a problem in all of the sociological analysis – when one thing is part of another and nothing is self-contained. Part of the solution is in the great sociological tradition of Weber to see all social phenomena through the lens of concepts and not as external or fixed referents; as such they require interpretation and (going beyond Weber) critique.

Now, to say that climate migration is a construction is perhaps not in itself controversial. All social phenomena need to be conceptually or theoretically constructed. The question is: what does it mean to say something is a construction?

The melting of the giant Thwaite glacier in Antarctica is a recent striking example.⁷ It is the size of Britain and contains enough water to raise sea levels by more than half a metre. It is

⁵ <https://www.internal-displacement.org/global-report/grid2019/>

⁶ The World Bank has produced a new report, *Legal Dimensions of Sea Level Rise: Pacific Perspectives*, in which some these issues are discussed.

⁷ <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-59644494>

now melting rapidly and will speed up the melting already underway. This is a fact and an objective force, but its significance also resides in the meaning that is attributed to it.

Climate migration as a new mass phenomenon may be an imaginary not a “real” objective fact: images of massive numbers of people coming from the global south and fuel xenophobia. It feeds on the apocalyptic imagination, fuelled by visions of the end of the world, as in the film *Don’t Look Up*. This can be a spur to political action, but it can also be a foil for emergency governance and bio-political securitisation driven by the vision of the ungovernable poor challenging the authority of global elites. It feeds into neo-liberal depoliticised views of the global south, its dangers, and its resources for global labour supply.⁸ Thus, national security is often the context in which climate migration is approached, as in a recent US report.⁹ Much of it is a continuation of neo-liberal politics that seeks to restrict democracy, as in, for example, an advocacy of resilience in the face of supposedly deterministic forces.

There is also the assumption of stability as the normal state of affairs. The environment and the movement of populations have always been seen as central to human societies in historical and geographical research. That it might not be a factor makes no sense. It is not possible to conceive of societies separate from the natural world, which provides them with their resources, shelter and energy. Looking at the problem in this way also points towards a critical view of “climate migration”, or at least a questioning of the assumptions underlying it. Contrary to the popular image of mass migration from the south to the north, climate change is more likely to impact on local and national rather than international contexts. Yet, the dominant image is of global population movements.

The discursive analysis of the construction of discourses is one avenue for critical research on climate migration. However, a sociological approach would go beyond discourse analysis. It would stress non-deterministic factors and social context and, above all, agency and power. Migrants are agents, not passive subjects on which external forces act and force them. It would also entail analysis that is not based only on econometric models of numbers. Estimates hugely vary and there are maximalists and minimalists (with the latter as more critical). That the minimalists, on the whole, appear to have won the debate is a conclusion that can be drawn from the literature.

Missing from the mainstream accounts is some sense of mediation: climate change, like all natural environmental factors, is mediated in human societies through a range of social, cultural, economic and political processes. It is therefore multi-dimensional and multi-linear. It may be an influence or a precondition rather than a direct cause.

⁸ See also Baldwin, A. et al. Securitizing “Climate Refugees”: the futurology of climate-induced migration. *Critical Studies on Security*, 2(2): 121-30; Jakobeit, C., & Methmann, C. (2012). Climate Refugees” as Dawning Catastrophe? In: Scheffran, J. et al. (eds.) (2013). *Climate Change, Human Security and Violent Conflicts*. Berlin: Springer; Bettini, G. (2013). Climate Barbarians at the Gate?, *Geoforum*, 45: 63-72

⁹ <https://www.lirs.org/biden-report-climate-change-migration-10-2021>

To be clear, climate change is real and incontrovertible: sea level increase, drought and land degradation are happening as a result of climate change (global warming). The second step that leads to population movement – migration – is more difficult to establish, except in certain limited cases. A very basic issue is that migration is entangled in many processes (social, economic, political, environmental, etc.) such that it cannot be separated from the social context. It follows then that there is not a clearly defined category as climate migrants. The relation between climate change and migration in most cases is graduated and only evident in a longer timeframe. This also makes measurement more difficult.

The point is that when an event occurs – such as an ecological disaster – there are many different human responses, which are conditioned by the specific context. People may stay – they may have no choice – and adapt or suffer great pain; they may move to a nearby place (short distance migration), or they may embark on long-distance or international migration, which may be successful or not. Overall, internal national migration accounts for most migration. The World Bank has recently estimated that by 2030 the vast majority of climate migrants, around 216 m, will be internal migrants. Most are caused by storms damaging housing and multiple seasons of crop failure, often due to sea water infiltrating fresh water.¹⁰

Responses are also mediated by the political context of the state and its capacity to intervene. Some states have a capacity to counteract rising sea levels, as in some parts of southern California. Others may be de-capacitated as a result of civil war.

As has been widely recognised, for example by sociologists such as Thomas Faist,¹¹ population displacement is related to inequality. The poor do not generally move far. In general, those who have something to gain move. This is also the case with environmentally-induced migration – it is entangled in social and economic and political factors.

Catastrophe thinking needs to be connected to the political imagination. The longer view is necessary. In view of the objective reality of climate change and rising sea levels, many parts of the world will have to live with it. Even if global warming is reduced or brought under control, which should be the primary objective, the seas will continue to rise in the meantime. This raises some serious challenges, but since rising sea levels is mostly gradual rather than sudden-onset, solutions can be found. There is the dilemma of sustainable development in coastal areas at risk (as opposed to uncontrolled development) versus facing the consequences, which if no action is taken will include migration from those areas (including the developed world).

Migration, as a de-politicised condition, is not necessarily a solution. Other solutions need to be found that empower people in those areas at risk. Since rising sea levels is not going to

¹⁰ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2021/09/13/millions-on-the-move-in-their-own-countries-the-human-face-of-climate-change>

¹¹ Faist, T., & Schade, J. (eds.) (2013). *Disentangling Migration and Climate Change: Methodologies, Political Discourses and Human Rights*. Berlin: Springer

stop, it is imperative that solutions other than migration be found. In the past, major experiments were conducted on rising sea levels (which were not caused by human-induced climate change); for example, Venice and the Netherlands, which have been working with land reclamation for centuries. More recently, China and other countries in Asia have embarked on such ventures.¹²

Perhaps more thinking in this direction is needed rather than simply accepting the inevitability of global climate migration.

¹² <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2018/may/02/cities-from-the-sea-the-true-cost-of-reclaimed-land-asia-malaysia-penang-dubai>