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Where next? Climate change, migration, and the (bio)politics of adaptation

Introduction

The adverse impacts of climate change – as well as the measures implemented to mitigate and adapt to them – will contribute to many ongoing and future transformations of human settlement and mobility. Debates on climate change and migration have been haunted by the spectre of hordes of climate destitute jeopardizing international security – an alarmist as much as inaccurate account of the nexus. A more realistic and pressing concern relates to the fact that climate change will hit hardest on least powerful and most exposed groups (IPCC, 2014) – which often include migrants, as well as those too poor to move. Climate and environmental change adds to and amplifies the processes of marginalization that are redrawing and sharpening the contours of inequality in today's planetary capitalism (Chaturvedi and Doyle, 2015; Ciptet et al., 2015). One of the tolls climate change may take on many in the 'majority world' is a reduction of their freedom to determine whether and how to move, contributing to displacement, but also reducing mobility (Black et al., 2011a; Foresight, 2011). Climate change thus poses a number of questions in relation to human migration. How to address them is far from straightforward.

In search for answers, we often look into the future – the starting sentence of this article is a case in point. Climate migration is predominantly narrated in the future-conditional (cfr. Baldwin et al., 2014). However, the current 'migration crisis' has a lot to tell us. Not because the tragic events in Syria were caused by climate change – as some hasty and inaccurate accounts would suggest –, but because contemporary politics of migration offer valuable insights, relevant in particular if we are interested in discussing (policy) interventions to address climate change and migration. Let us begin by presenting some of these insights. First, the ongoing series of hecatombs in the Mediterranean – a

tragedy of historical magnitude¹ – is a reminder of how ‘even’ liberal democracies ignore suffering and death unravelling in front of their eyes and/or because of their (in)action. It is not given that such capacity to administer or accept death would disappear in the face of severe climate change. What guarantees that international policy and legislation will actually avoid the suffering and death climate change might cause, when something as catastrophic as the carnage in the Mediterranean is not being averted by the same institutions? Can we really rely on the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) to design a ‘solution’ to climate migration, whatever that might mean? Moreover, the thousands of migrants drowning in the Mediterranean are not dying by accident: The responsibility resides in the complex regimes that govern migration in and around Europe. While border enforcement – barbed wires, walls and military vessels patrolling the seas – is obviously a key component of those regimes, they also comprise of a broader set of practices, effects and actors. One point that critical scholarship on the Mediterranean crisis has highlighted is the convergence of humanitarian, military and security interventions and operations (Pallister-Wilkins in this issue, De Genova, 2013; Tazzioli, 2015, 2016). Not merely because the rescue of migrants in the sea is operated by the same military that are also deployed to screen movements, ‘fight’ smugglers and deter further departures. But also because the humanitarian and military responses are part of the same framing of migration and migrants, one in which the scenes of death, rescue and capture all feature in the ‘spectacle’ taking place at the border (De Genova, 2013), in which migrants are either victims to rescue or illegals to capture – rather than for instance persons with a right to move (Tazzioli, 2016, also Pallister-Wilkins in this issue). Even when examining competing discourses on climate and migration, it is worth looking for their contiguities and synergies, and not only their apparent differences. For instance, are there ways in which calls to save ‘climate refugees’ (inscribed in a humanitarian frame), securitised narratives on the threat they pose, and narratives on (governed) migration as an adaptation strategy can be seen as converging discourses, and/or have common effects?

In turn, this convergence suggests that the surge of nationalist, isolationist and often explicitly racist fears of migration we are witnessing emerge from the same discursive landscape as mainstream discourses. If mobility and displacement are to be signified in progressive ways that escape the field of attraction of xenophobic discourses, it is becoming clear that framings and glances alternative to those currently dominant – in their interconnected humanitarian, (neo)liberal and nationalist articulations – should be sought for. Is this the case also for the climate and migration question?

With those points and questions in mind, this article offers a critical outlook over recent debates on the climate change-migration nexus, highlighting how the currently dominant framings

¹ Estimates of the total number of casualties in the Mediterranean vary – according to IOM, the number of recorded deaths in the Mediterranean in 2016 is 4655 (see <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/mediterranean>).

can all be inscribed in the same (bio)political discourses on climate change, resilience and migration governance. Trying to think about what is next, this article criticizes the idea that ‘climate migration’ is a problem to be solved – for instance, by the UNFCCC. Rather, it is argued that the nexus should be seen as an open question about alternative futures, as well as a symptom of the irreducibly political tensions inherent in every form of mobility as much as in every attempt to discipline/govern it.

Climate barbarians at the gate?

Resonating with the recurring waves of alarmism surrounding migration and asylum, climate change has been presented as a potential source of mass international displacement with serious security implications, in the media but also in international political arenas (for an overview, Boas, 2015; Rothe, 2015). The basic idea has proven as sticky as it is simplistic: The impacts of climate change (such as desertification, sea level rise and coastal erosion, droughts, and extreme weather events) will render large areas of the planet uninhabitable – which will lead to mass waves of ‘climate refugees’ in turn menacing to ignite violent conflicts. This framing has been very influential and at times dominant in academic (Myers, 2002; Reuveny, 2007; Stern, 2007; Westra, 2009), advocacy (Christian Aid, 2007; Environmental Justice Foundation, 2009) and policy (Council of the European Union, 2008; WBGU, 2008) arenas. Time after time, again and again², the figure of climate refugees has been mobilized by the media to provide a human face to dangerous climate change – most often alluding to its security implications. Humanitarian versions of such narratives have advocated the idea of ‘protecting climate refugees’ along two main policy routes: Some have proposed to extend the Geneva Refugee Convention to include persons displaced by climate change (Conisbee and Simms, 2003; Williams, 2008), while others have suggested an ad-hoc legal instrument recognizing the status and rights of ‘climate refugees’ (Docherty and Giannini, 2009; Biermann and Boas, 2010).

Debunked ‘myths’

Although alarmist narratives on climate refugees and their security implications have proven resilient, they are at odds with most contemporary research on how climate change will interact with migration. A first problem highlighted by critics is that the numbers do not add up: The predictions of hundreds of millions of climate refugees in the coming decades have been widely echoed (among the many examples, see Christian Aid, 2007; Environmental Justice Foundation, 2009; Bawden, 2014), but the numbers are controversial (IPCC, 2014), if not outright scientifically wrong (Jakobeit and Methmann, 2012). The problem with numbers is that they are constructed on a crude, deterministic and mono-causal understanding of mobility – ‘intense ecological stress leads to mass outmigration’.

² For some recent examples, see articles in *The Independent* (Bawden, 2014), *The Guardian* (2015), *The National Observer* (Dinshaw, 2015), *Time* (Baker, 2015).

Contemporary understandings of migration suggest otherwise: While environmental changes influence and interact with other drivers of mobility, in most cases it is impossible to single out environmental degradation as the single cause of displacement. Most climate-related movements can be expected to take place within countries, and to be temporary (Castles, 2002; Hulme, 2008; Massey et al., 2010; Foresight, 2011; Jakobeit and Methmann, 2012). The influence of ecological conditions on mobility can be expected to be region- or place-specific (Gray and Wise, 2016).

Environmental determinism is also a key ingredient of the association of climate change, population and security in the Global South (on this, see e.g. Hartmann, 2010; Chaturvedi and Doyle, 2015). There have been lively debates on the links between climate change, migration and violent conflict (cfr. Buhaug et al., 2014; Hsiang and Burke, 2014; Hsiang et al., 2014). A bottom line is that no simple and univocal linkage can be drawn between the impacts of climate change and conflict – a position mirrored also in IPCC’s latest report (see ch. 12, 2014). Environmental stress can exacerbate tensions, but also increase cooperation (Scheffran et al., 2012), and there is a solid basis of studies undermining any simplistic causal link between environmental conditions and conflict (Peluso and Watts, 2001).

Another effect of the environmental determinism is that it pathologizes human migration, reducing it to the symptom of a problem. Relatedly, discourses on climate refugees silence those ‘expected’ to move (McNamara and Gibson, 2009; Farbotko and Lazrus, 2012), have a clear racialized connotation (Baldwin, 2013, 2016a), and risk facilitating a securitization of migration in destination countries (Smith, 2007; White, 2011; Bettini, 2013). In relation to policy, various critiques have shown the conceptual and legal incompatibility of the idea of climate refugees with existing legal regimes (IOM, 2007; UNHCR, 2009; Zetter, 2010; Kälin and Schrepfer, 2012).

Environmental determinism’s analytical flaws and political toxicity become evident in the outrageous claim that those displaced by the Syrian conflict should be seen as ‘climate refugees’. Drawing on studies (Kelley et al., 2015; Cook et al., 2016) that assess with statistical methods the links between climate variability and the drought that hit Syria (for a more accurate account, see Fröhlich, 2016), a number of interventions, including by Prince Charles (SkyNews, 2015), have propagated the simplistic view that climate change – rather than an intricate tangle of economic, political and geopolitical processes – caused the conflict and the related displacement.

Summing up, the concept of ‘climate refugees’ and its association with security is evocative and sticky, but misleading and potentially noxious.

Multi-dimensional Climate Mobilities

To be sure, most organizations engaging with climate and migration – such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the UN High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR), and UNFCCC,

today frame it in a more holistic register. The simplistic understanding of mobility described above has been marginalised, and, at least since the publication of the Foresight Report on ‘Migration and Global Environmental Change’ (Foresight, 2011), the majority of policy and academic interventions embrace the multi-causal and complex nature of migration. In this more nuanced register, displacement, planned relocation, immobility, and migration as adaptation are all counted as mobility responses to the impacts of climate change. While these different ‘mobilities’ are understood in a continuum, each of them speaks to specific audiences and agendas. The issue is moved away from the alarmist and politically tricky terrain of refugee politics and security (Warner, 2012), with explicit bridges built instead towards other fora concerned with disaster risk reduction, resilience and development (cfr. Bettini and Gioli, 2016).

The question of forced displacement is nevertheless still topical, especially in this specific period. In the UNFCCC context, displacement and mobility are nested within the Warsaw Mechanism on Loss and Damage. While the Paris Conference of the Parties (COP) only³ established a ‘task force’ to ‘develop recommendations’ on displacement (UNFCCC, 2016: 8), the recent Marrakesh COP hosted numerous initiatives advocating for a more substantial engagement with displacement in the UNFCCC context. The Disaster Displacement Platform (DDP) is a high-level, state-led initiative targeting international displacement in the context of disasters and climate change. Its members include countries such as France, Norway, Germany, Switzerland, Bangladesh, Maldives and Morocco, while IOM and UNHCR are involved as standing invitees to DDP’s Steering Group. DDP is the follow-up to the Nansen Initiative, jointly launched in 2011 by the Swiss and Norwegian governments, whose outcome was the Nansen Initiative Protection Agenda, endorsed by 109 governmental delegations in October 2015.⁴

In parallel, planned relocation has also been discussed as a last-resort option to avoid displacement and/or losses when adaptation proves unsuccessful or unfeasible (e.g. de Sherbinin et al., 2011; Bronen and Chapin, 2013; Warner et al., 2013). Relocation was mentioned in the text of the Cancun Adaptation Framework (UNFCCC, 2010) and has been discussed in a number of high-level initiatives such as the UNHCR-led Sanremo Consultation (UNHCR, 2014). Several aspects of the idea of relocating communities in response to climate change are, however, highly problematic (McDowell, 2013), and the wealth of negative experiences with (development-related) relocations and resettlement experiments urges to be cautious (Wilmsen and Webber, 2015). Moreover, determining when the balance of costs and benefits tips in favour of relocation (rather than other less intrusive

³ Some hoped for stronger wording – earlier drafts (including the Draft Decision circulated 3 days before the end of the summit UNFCCC, 2015) included the creation of a ‘coordination facility’, presumably with more powers. This was only removed in the last days of the summit.

⁴ See DDP’s webpage, disasterdisplacement.org

measures) is a highly political decision – one that risks being bypassed by top-down technocratic protocols and policies of questionable democratic legitimacy.

The earlier focus on environmentally-induced displacement had generated a blind spot in academia and policy – namely, the prospect that the environmental stress can lead to reduced, rather than increased, mobility. This is changing: the Foresight report (2011) brought the concept of ‘trapped population’ into the limelight, and there is now a whole subfield of research on reduced mobility and immobility as result of climate impacts (Black et al., 2013; Afe et al., 2015; Adams, 2016; Gray and Wise, 2016).

Another key dimension of the mainstream register is that it contemplates the idea that (governed) migration can represent a positive, potentially successful strategy of risk-management and adaptation (Black et al., 2011b; ADB, 2012; Warner et al., 2012; Warner and Afifi, 2014). The idea is basically to mobilize human capital at the individual or household level and to facilitate orderly labour migration. The remittance flows this will produce are expected to offer a buffer during environmental stress and to become a form of self-financing mechanism for resilience and adaptation. This idea is apparently at the antipodes of narratives on climate refugees: Migration is signified as a positive response to climate stress, and the vulnerable are not represented (only) as passive victims in need of international protection, but also as ‘agents of adaptation’.

Adaptation and the Biopolitics of Climate Migration

At a closer look, the ‘new’ idea of migration as adaptation also raises concerns (e.g. Felli and Castree, 2012; Felli, 2013; Bettini, 2014; Methmann and Oels, 2015; Turhan et al., 2015; Baldwin, 2016b; Bettini et al., 2016). To begin with, largely reproducing the optimistic position in the debates on ‘migration and development’ (Bettini and Gioli, 2016), the idea of migration as adaptation has nothing to do with a ‘no borders’ agenda. Rather, it aims at disciplining labour mobility, with circular and temporary migration presented as the most virtuous forms. The goal is to produce remittance flows financing self-adaptation, offering surrogate insurance to the non-insurable. The idea of migration as adaptation comes from the mould of the discourse of resilience (Bettini, 2014; Methmann and Oels, 2015) and reproduces the latter’s economized and neoliberal character. It envisions a transformative agenda whereby ecologically vulnerable populations – incidentally, the same at the margins of the globalised economy – are to become active adaptive agents. What that means is that they should live up to the challenge and, in our specific case, embark in circular and/or temporary labour migration, presented as a mechanism of self-adaptation to the impacts of climate change. The migrant (from the Global South, and moving within the Global South) is depicted as an industrious individual working to increase her own resilience. A good entrepreneur of herself. This is the debased, individualized, and

adaptive subject of resilience described by Julian Reid in various recent works on resilience (Reid, 2012; Evans and Reid, 2014; Chandler and Reid, 2016).

While signalling a drive towards an individualization of climate policy (Felli, 2013; Bettini et al., 2016), the idea of migration as adaptation entails a fierce selection: What happens to those unable to live up to the challenge to become resilient? While the discourse promises to combat vulnerability, it risks leaving behind the vulnerable, who most often are not in the position of mobilizing the human capital necessary to enter the virtuous flows of skilled labour migration. As any biopolitical discourse, the idea of 'migration as adaptation' implicates the triage of the fit from the unfit, the developed from the 'underdeveloped' etc., not without the exercise of violence (Duffield, 2007; drawing on Dillon and Reid, 2009; Bettini, 2014).

Zooming out, one trait in common to all the various discourses we have encountered (on climate refugees and displacement, on planned relocation, on migration as adaptation) is that they render accessible to governments those vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, attempting to mould the populations at the margins of the postcolonial present into subjectivities docile to the neoliberal rule (Bettini, 2014; Baldwin, 2016a). The figure of 'Climate refugees' identifies the dangerous, undisciplined sources of 'bad circulation', those not resilient and not adapted, i.e. those pathologically unfit – as different from (or for protecting) those whom we should mobilize. The mantra of migration as adaptation aims at facilitating 'good circulation'. While at the antipodes in certain superficial traits, the two discourses emerge from and operate within the same landscape – mainstream neoliberal discourses on climate change, resilience and migration governance, and share the same horizon: The 'production' of governable populations out of the vulnerable.

Political, all too political

While its take-home message is not to disengage from the question of climate and migration, the vista offered by this article raises serious questions about the horizon of the policy proposals and initiatives currently on the table.

First, a clear policy recommendation: there should be no space for the concept of 'climate refugees'. For all the reasons mentioned above, it is a flawed and noxious concept that, regardless of all the headlines it can gain, can hardly provide any contribution to progressive agendas on climate and migration and in support of those vulnerable to climate impacts.

As we have seen (in particular in the section 'Multi-dimensional Climate Mobilities'), there are numerous initiatives bringing the question of climate and migration (in its various forms) into the policy spotlight. Is extending existing legal frameworks to encompass the effects of environmental changes on international and, perhaps more importantly, internal displacement a viable option? Or should the stakes be put on earmarking funding – in some sort of future Loss & Damage fund – to

protect and support migrants? While each proposal deserves careful assessment, there are reasons to be sceptic about the prospects of any decisive action in support of migrants being taken within UNFCCC. It has proven difficult enough to create political momentum around any substantial emission reductions and financial commitments; hoping UNFCCC could be able to 'rule' on issues as ticklish as migration and displacement seems unrealistic – and here the so-called international community's inaction in the face of migrants' hecatombs in the Mediterranean comes to mind. The risk of façade measures not tackling the inequalities and losses linked to climate change is high.

From a different angle, the quest for solutions builds on the implicit assumption that climate migration is a problem that should be 'solved', which is dangerous in two respects. First, this assumption is rooted in an understanding of migration as pathological, as the result of a failure to develop, to adapt to climate change, or to be more resilient. But in reality, migration is an ordinary social, economic, and political process. It is neither inherently good nor bad. Of course, it would be naive to overlook the divisive questions that migration brings to the surface. And we should always remember that people on the move (or stuck where they don't want to be) can suffer and are often exposed to many wrongs. However, relying on the UN's climate governance machinery to sort these matters out only obfuscates their inherently political character. To make a provocative comparison: Would we ever expect the UN to 'solve poverty'?

This leads us to the second point: Seeing climate migration as a problem to be solved is a form of reductionism that takes the definition of the matter for granted and as objective, so that the 'only' thing left to do is the identification of appropriate policies. This is a clear conflation of *policy* and *politics*. The reduction of politics to policy is a standard mechanism of de-politicization conducive to the reproduction of hegemonic relations (Rancière, 1995; Swyngedouw, 2009). This is particularly important in consideration of the fact that, as we have seen, most discourses on climate and migration, in spite of their apparent differences, are emanations of dominant biopolitical neoliberal discourses and move towards the same horizon.

Here, the reflections by critical scholars on the collusion of humanitarian, military and police interventions on migration come to mind (Pallister-Wilkins in this issue, De Genova, 2013; Tazzioli, 2015, 2016). In the case of the 'refugee crisis' in the Mediterranean as much as for climate migration, choosing one of the alternatives on the table is a false (de-politicized) choice, as all the alternatives are fundamentally convergent. Here, critical scholarship (and antagonist movements) have an important role, opening up space so that alternative discourses can break a deadlock situation in which we are supposed to choose between alternatives we cannot accept – not doing anything vs. reinforcing various articulations of the same neoliberal mode of migration government.

In conclusion, we should talk more about the relation of climate change and migration. But

more as a matter of climate justice than as humanitarian or security crises. And not as a contingent problem to be solved (or that can be solved) by some technocratic protocol, but rather as one dimension of contestation of the highly political question which kind of climate, mobility and society we want for the decades to come.

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