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Climate Change, Security Risks, and Violent Conflicts

Essays from Integrated Climate Research in Hamburg

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Impressum

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Questioning established categories

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Abstract

Established categories used to describe different kinds of human mobility, based on a distinction between forced and more-or-less voluntary forms of movement, dominate the discourse on human mobility in the context of climate change. In particular, the phrase "displacement, migration and planned relocation" anchored in the Cancun Adaptation Framework of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) has become prominent. Despite being portrayed as objective representations of the world, these categories are not neutral, with terminology being value-laden and taking on different connotations in different contexts. The categories used to describe human mobility in the context of climate change therefore do not necessarily impart knowledge about the realities of human mobilities, but rather say more about the speakers using these categories. This essay provides an impulse to look beyond established categories from policymaking, to strengthen critique of these categories in academic work, and to move beyond policy-relevant research.

KEYWORDS: *Climate change, human mobility, migration, displacement, discourse.*

Introduction: The politics of human mobility in the context of climate change

The interface between climate change and human mobility has become a commonplace concern for politics, research, policy, and civil society alike. It has become an accepted area of discussion at climate change negotiations (Warner 2012, Nash 2018a), is considered in the high-profile reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC 2014), and has been the subject of large-scale academic research projects (Melde, Laczko et al. 2017). The basic concept is simple: climate change will have (and indeed already is having) an impact on human mobilities. This has provoked a number of different discourses, with the label "climate refugees" having been used to point to either a securitized concern over increased movements of displaced persons, or a humanitarian concern for those who may be displaced (Bettini 2013). In a discursive shift, a discourse has built up around the idea of migration as a form of adaptation to the effects of climate change, which counters some of the concerns of environmental determinism (Gemenne 2011) and securitization (Martin 2010, White 2011) related to the "climate refugees" discourse (Bettini 2014). However, at the same time, concerns have been raised about the concept of migration as adaptation. This discourse has been critiqued for being entrenched in a neoliberal resilience mindset (Felli 2013, Methmann and Oels 2015), having links to "migration management" (Nash 2016), stressing individualized responsibility for adaptation (Baldwin 2016), and losing any kernel of climate justice that the humanitarian iteration of the "climate refugees" discourse displayed (Bettini et al. 2017).

Climate change is also being increasingly understood through the lens of movements of people that are occurring in the wake of disasters. The Nansen Initiative, a state-led initiative whose history is closely linked to the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR) (Kälin 2012), launched their work on cross-border displacement in the context of disasters (including climate change) in 2012 and since then "disaster displacement" has emerged as an ordering concept (The Nansen Initiative 2015).

These different discourses and continuing developments in various arenas of policymaking have led to a burgeoning (critical) scholarship on the politics and policy of human mobility and climate change (Baldwin and Bettini 2017). However, even though the laundering of categories to describe people on the move has been identified and critiqued as a weakness of scholarship and policy on human mobility and climate change (Nicholson 2014), there has not yet been a systematic analysis of the systems of categorization that are being used to talk about people on the move, i. e. where they come from, and how the boundaries between categories are being constructed. This is therefore the problematic to which this essay turns.

In analyzing systems of classification, a central premise of this essay is that categories and the boundaries between them do not naturally exist, but are socially constructed. Furthermore, categories not only represent the world, but "simultaneously create it and limit it" (Jones 2009: 185). This premise is the first step towards a critique of categories, as it rules out the presumption that systems of categorization can be a neutral ordering process. At the same time, this article recognizes that categories are both pervasive and inevitable (Moncrieffe 2007, Jones 2009), with identifying and differentiating people and phenomena by categorization providing a system through which to understand the world. As a result, simply challenging certain categories is most likely simply to lead to the creation of new categories, or the tweaking of boundaries of established ones.

A second premise of this article is that categorization is imbued with power relations. For Michel Foucault, classification isolates objects of knowledge and as such both creates and limits discourse. Categorization is a dividing practice that works to both include and exclude people, having different productive effects on different categories of people (Foucault 2000). In the context of international development practice, Moncrieffe argues that the process of attaching labels to particular categories allows powerful actors to "influence how particular issues and categories of people are regarded and treated" (Moncrieffe 2007: 2), an argument which holds many parallels for the case of human mobility in the context of climate change. As a result of the (often skewed) power relations present in the politics of bounding, categories often tell us more about those who make them than about people on the move who are being categorized. This is not to say that the motivations for categorization are repressive, indeed the categorization of people may also follow from humanitarian motivations (for example, the allocation to the category of "refugee" brings with it certain international protection standards). However, categorization may also have unintended consequences, and noble motivations do not necessarily lead to a positive outcome.

In the discourses surrounding human mobility in the context of climate change, categories to describe people on the move draw almost exclusively on established categories from human mobility politics. However, the majority of policy work at the international level has taken place within the realm of climate change politics, in particular the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) (Nash 2019). This is not necessarily surprising, given that the UNFCCC did not have an existing established vocabulary with which to talk about human mobilities. Consequently, language and categories were drawn from elsewhere. In particular, the involvement of expertise from organizations such as UNHCR and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) in the UNFCCC process has built bridges between human mobility politics and climate change (Nash 2018b).

This essay is therefore concerned with the use of established categories from human mobility politics and their effects on the politics of human mobility in the context of climate change. This analysis necessitates a series of decisions regarding vocabulary, in order to distance this analysis from the categories it is critiquing. Different terms that are used to refer to people on the move and to categorize their movements are avoided. However, in order to write a text that is in some way readable, a term has to be used to describe the phenomenon of the movement of people. In this instance, the term "human mobility" is employed throughout. This selection has been made as human mobility is frequently used (including in the discourse on human mobility and climate change) as an umbrella term that refers to movements of people without making explicit statements about the type of movement. Of course, although portrayed as such on many an occasion, this term is not neutral, with the very emphasis of mobility making a conceptual differentiation from immobility. It is with awareness of these limitations that the term is employed here.

The next section of this essay provides a brief overview of the two central established categories of mobilities: displacement and migration. The section then interrogates the preoccupation with compulsion that pervades human mobility politics and is the basis for differentiation between categories. The third section then moves on to analyze how these categories are transported into discourses on human mobility in the context of climate change, in particular interrogating the set-phrase "displacement, migration, and planned relocation" (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change 2010: 14(f)) that structures many of the discussions surrounding human mobility in the context of climate change. The penultimate section is then concerned with critiques of this system of categorization and relates the discussion to the knowledge-power politics of human mobility and climate change. Finally, this essay concludes that work on human mobility is likely to stay closely tied to these categories but at the same time highlights the importance of scholars questioning them. The questioning of established categories is an exercise that could lead to empirical work that moves beyond these categories and therefore to work that moves in new analytical directions.

Categorization and a preoccupation with compulsion

Displacement, displaced persons, internally displaced persons (IDPs), refugees, migration, migrants, economic migrants, illegal migrants – this vocabulary is all run of the mill in discourses about human mobilities, to either refer to a sub-set of the phenomenon of human mobility or to people who are on the move. This cacophony of synonyms has two distinct clusters: terminology that refers to forced mobilities

on the one hand, and terminology referring to more-or-less voluntary mobilities on the other. The central defining characteristic of these established categories of human mobility is therefore the degree of compulsion involved in the movement.

This fascination with delineating forced mobilities from voluntary mobilities is a thread running through the heart of global human mobility policies, key international agreements, and institutional arrangements. It is not only the vocabulary that exists to talk about mobilities (and the meanings that are most frequently attached to the various terms) that separates out displacement from migration, displaced persons from migrants. The UN has two agencies that focus on human mobilities, UNHCR and IOM[1]. Separate international agreements exist to protect refugees (UN General Assembly 1951), internally displaced persons (UN Economic and Social Council 1998), and labor migrants (UN General Assembly 1990). The 2016 New York Declaration that focusses on human mobilities is titled the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants and the two global compacts that are mandated in the declaration are separated out along similar lines, focusing on refugees; and safe, orderly and regular migration respectively (UN General Assembly 2016).

This split according to forced and more-or-less voluntary movement is not restricted to the world of the UN, but also pervades media and popular discourse, with lively discussions taking place as to which category people should be classified as belonging to. For example, during the peak of the so-called refugee/migration crisis in 2015, a debate emerged surrounding which of the two labels was more accurate to describe the situation playing out at Europe's borders. Two diametrically opposing views were visible in the terminology used by the BBC and Al Jazeera, with the BBC opting for the migration crisis term, with the BBC including a note on terminology in all reporting on the so-called crisis justifying their choice:

> A note on terminology: The BBC uses the term migrant to refer to all people on the move who have yet to complete the legal process of claiming asylum. This group includes people fleeing war-torn countries such as Syria, who are likely to be granted refugee status, as well as people who are seeking jobs and better lives, who governments are likely to rule are economic migrants (BBC 2016).

In contrast, Al Jazeera, which has consistently referred to refugees as opposed to migrants in this context, includes an understanding of the malleability of terminology, with words able to evolve and take on different meanings, in their explanation of their choice of terminology. In a statement made in 2015, the network explained that: "the umbrella term migrant is no longer fit for purpose when it comes to describing

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[1]   The IOM was formerly not a UN agency; however, a new agreement on the relationship between the UN and the IOM was made on 25 July 2016, bringing the IOM into the UN (UN General Assembly 2016).

the horror unfolding in the Mediterranean. It has evolved from its dictionary definitions into a tool that dehumanizes and distances, a blunt pejorative" (Malone 2015).

This difference of opinion between the two news networks highlights two things that are important for the discussion in this article. Firstly, words are made up of both semiotic and ideational components (Saussure 1960), which are not necessarily stable. The meaning of terms can therefore shift over time, according to context, or depending on who is using them. Secondly, what terminology is used tells us less about the people who are moving than about those who are using the terms to describe people on the move. In the examples of language from the BBC and Al Jazeera quoted above, both "refugees" and "migrants" are being used to describe the same movements of people, however the connotations attached to these terms by the respective news outlets has led to different choices in terminology. These examples therefore highlight that particular terms are usually imposed upon people who are on the move and are not used neutrally; they denote how people on the move are being perceived, whether mobilities are seen as virtuous or potentially dangerous, and what political responses might be considered valid. What these terms, corresponding to categories of mobility placed at either end of the forced-voluntary continuum, do not provide is context-specific information about the mobilities of people, what assistance or protection they may require, or what political and policy responses may be useful.

Established categories in the discourse on human mobility in the context of climate change

One particular set of categories to describe the "phenomenon" of human mobility in the context of climate change has emerged as the dominant way to conceptualize the area, with this categorization being expressed in the set phrase "displacement, migration and planned relocation" (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change 2010: 14(f)). This phrase is anchored in the Cancun Adaptation Framework of the UNFCCC[2], but has also been adopted and widely replicated by academics and policymakers who praise it for representing a nuanced view of human mobility that recognizes both forced and more-or-less voluntary mobility.

Two aspects of this formulation are of particular interest for this essay. Firstly, when used in this formulation, the meanings allocated to the terms are stable, with displacement referring to forced forms of mobility and migration being used to refer to more-or-less voluntary mobilities. The disparity in meaning as between the BBC

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[2]   Interestingly, language changed in agreed UNFCCC documents that came after Cancun, with agreed-upon UNFCCC texts since 2013 instead including the language "displacement, migration, and human mobility" (UNFCCC 2013, 3/CP.18: 7(a)(vi); 2016, 1/CP.21: 49; 2017, 3/CP.22: 9). However, the Cancun terminology continues to dominate in both academic and advocacy contributions.

and Al Jazeera uses of migration is therefore not present. Planned relocation refers to movements that involve moving entire communities with some degree of coordination from the state. It is not surprising that the meanings of these otherwise heavily contested terms remain stable within the tripartite Cancun formulation, as in order for the system of categorization to have some meaning, the individual components need to be distinct from each other. However, when used in isolation these terms once again have malleable meanings, with IOM's usage of "migration" in particular being used in line with the organization's definition of migration as all forms of mobility, of which forced migration is a sub-category (IOM 2014: 23). Secondly, the differentiating factor (at least between displacement and migration) is still the degree of compulsion that is involved in movement, in line with established systems of categorization in human mobility politics more generally.

The terminology that is used to denote categories of mobility in the context of climate change is therefore stable both linguistically and ideationally, and these categories are also highly political. This categorization is furthermore drawn on and reproduced unproblematically, contributing to naturalizing these terms and system of categorization as depicting a true, objective representation of human mobility dynamics (Nash 2018b). For example, the Advisory Group on Climate Change and Human Mobility states that "'human mobility' is an umbrella term that encompasses displacement of populations, migration and planned relocation" (Advisory Group on Climate Change and Human Mobility 2015: 2, emphasis added). This disregards other interpretations of human mobility, other constellations of terminology, and naturalizes the formulation of "displacement, migration and planned relocation".

However, a close reading of policy documents suggests that fitting the empirical realities of human mobilities in the context of climate change into this categorization is not an easy endeavor, since the core feature of human mobilities in the context of climate change emphasized by the empirical research is the complexity of such movements. As the IOM has argued that "environmental migration may take many complex forms; forced and voluntary, temporary and permanent, internal and international" (IOM 2014: 5) or, in the words of UNHCR, "some of these movements could be considered voluntary and regarded as part of natural adaptation or coping strategies; but climate-related events could also entail threats to life, health, property and livelihoods and therefore lead to forced displacement" (UNHCR 2011: 2).

These examples provide little information about human mobilities in the context of climate change other than their complexity and, by listing every possible form of mobility, are paramount to tautologies (Nicholson 2014). The shoehorning of knowledge on climate change and human mobilities into these categories based on forced or voluntary movements adds very little coherence to the debate. It therefore

seems that the adoption of established categories of mobility, in particular displacement and migration, does not serve analytical purposes, leading to the question of what purpose terminology is intended to serve. As a result, a better understanding of the debates on human mobility in the context of climate change entails not only the form that language takes, but also the purposes that it serves.

Questioning established categories to disrupt the knowledge-power politics of human mobility in the context of climate change

In line with the theoretical premises of this article, both the "phenomenon" of human mobility in the context of climate change and categories used to talk about the people at its center are socially constructed. By referring to particular categories of people in this sense "we are in effect inventing a category that corresponds with how we imagine the world to be, not one that describes the world as it really is" (Baldwin 2017: 3). These categories are therefore neither naturally existing in the world, nor should they be immune from critique. Understanding the complex genealogies of the categories that are being used to structure debates on human mobility in the context of climate change can also give insights into what world imaginaries are shaping the debate. Furthermore, an important purpose of critique is to move beyond the boundaries of the thinkable (Death 2014), and as such critically engaging with the use of established categories can help to move the discourse forward in new directions.

In the case of human mobility in the context of climate change, policy and academic worlds are largely indistinguishable, with a complex self-perpetuating circle of research, knowledge production, and policymaking sustaining the debate (Nash 2018b). Policy relevance has thus become a mandatory feature of research, with the dominance of established categories being one clear indication of how deeply intertwined these worlds are. Therefore, the use of established categories of mobility based around a distinction between forced and more-or-less voluntary mobilities cannot be attributed to a dearth of imagination alone. Instead, the high level of interaction between the policy and academic worlds in relation to climate change and human mobility and a clear drive towards policy relevant research makes it difficult to escape these pre-drawn classifications. The resulting debate, prevalent in much of the research on climate change and human mobilities, between "climate refugees" and "climate migrants" is perhaps unsurprising but also analytically limiting.

Policy relevant research, in the sense of research that takes existing policy as its baseline by adopting established policy categories into its conceptual framework, is often deemed to be a necessity. Whilst an approach that moves away from this assumption would be a bold move that could be criticized for lacking in relevance, the necessity

to be policy relevant should be interrogated. As Oliver Bakewell has argued, "research which is designed without regard to policy relevance may offer a more powerful critique and ironically help to bring about more profound changes than many studies that focus on policy issues from the outset" (Bakewell 2008: 433). However, a move towards policy irrelevant research would entail rethinking the very motivations of many research projects on human mobility in the context of climate change. One reason for the pursuit of policy relevance lies perhaps at the normative drive behind much of the research on human mobility in the context of climate change. Such aspiration can overwhelmingly be termed "humanitarian scholarship"; scholarship that is somehow motivated by a (perceived) societal problem and intends to contribute knowledge that can improve the lives of those impacted by the problem in question. This is a tendency that has also been identified in the discipline of refugee research, with what Myron Weiner identifies as "advocacy research", "where a research already knows what she wants to see and say, and comes away from the research having proved it" (Jacobsen and Landau 2003: 188). Advocacy research also shows a concerning prevalence in research on climate change and human mobility. Policy contributions on human mobility in the context of climate change have a similar normative basis anchored in the premise of a problem existing and go further by assuming that policy solutions (in whatever form) are required in order to do this. As Andrew Baldwin and Giovanni Bettini have argued, the very existence of the area of research and policy is therefore a value judgement, which constructs human mobility in the context of climate change as a problem complex to which responses are required (Baldwin and Bettini 2017).

It is not just the simple existence of the area of research and policy that is a value judgement. Different types of mobilities are also laden with complex layers of value judgements as to what types of mobilities are to be prevented, what types of mobilities are to be tolerated, and what types are perhaps even desirable. In their analysis of categories and bounding in relation to the European "migration crisis", Heaven Crawley and Dimitris Skleparis argue against "the trap of suggesting, either explicitly or through the ways in which we organise and structure our scholarship, that those places in one category rather than another are somehow more 'deserving'" and that "the move to foreground or privilege the term 'refugee' over 'migrant' does nothing to contest the faulty foundations of the binary distinction between the two categories, it simply perpetuates its logic" (Crawley and Skleparis 2018: 13). However, in the discourse on human mobility in the context of climate change, value judgements are regularly attached to different categories of mobility.

The established categories from human mobility politics of displacement and migration contained in the Cancun formulation of "displacement, migration and planned relocation" are regularly loaded with value judgements, often contradictory to those that can be observed in human mobility politics more broadly. Whilst both discourses

share a negative view of displacement as chaotic and damaging (both in humanitarian and security iterations, as either a humanitarian problem for those displaced or a security problem facing states), migration, which is often vilified and used as a political punching bag in the human mobility discourse more broadly, has become a beacon of hope in the discourse on human mobility in the context of climate change. Migration has been identified as a potential adaptation strategy; one that can be implemented by resilient individuals in order to prevent (more chaotic, damaging) mobilities in the form of displacement (Bettini and Gioli 2016). Immobility in the context of climate change also has different, contradictory, value judgements attached to it. For example, immobility can either take the form of populations who simply do not want to move (McNamara and Gibson 2009), or so-called "trapped populations", a category used to describe people who are involuntarily immobile. The latter has been described as "a potentially dangerous policy tool" in that there is a risk "the concept may be misused to seemingly 'protect, save or move vulnerable populations from risk places' while ensuring political or economic gain" (Ayeb-Karlsson, Smith et al. 2018:14).

Conclusion

Human mobility and climate change is an area of work that is coming of age in both policy and research. Analyses are becoming more sophisticated, and the policy world is increasingly looking towards implementation rather than simply discussion of the links between human mobility and climate change. It is therefore all the more important that conceptual inconsistencies that have been identified, continue to be objects of attention and critique (Mayer 2013). One such area is the categories used to describe human mobilities and people on the move. Given that the policy and research communities are often indistinguishable, it is unlikely that the two will analytically part ways. Indeed, a counter-tendency can arguably be observed, with academic work becoming ever more entwined with policy language through striving for policy relevance. Therefore, realistically, it is unlikely that mainstream work is going to move away from using established categories of mobility to talk about human mobility and climate change.

However, this essay argues that it is important for scholars to do so. Scholars conducting empirical work on human mobility and climate change can benefit from a refreshed perspective by moving beyond established categories. This does not call for a complete disengagement with reality but, following Heaven Crawley and Dimitris Skleparis, the call is "not for an end to the use of categories as a way of making sense of our social and political worlds, but for explicit recognition and engagement with the idea that categories do not simply represent or reflect the world but simultaneously create and limit it" (Crawley and Skleparis 2018:13).

Most naturally, casting a critical glance on established categories is a job that falls to scholars with a critical inclination who can continue to question the categories that are being used to structure knowledge on human mobility in the context of climate change. There are two main arguments behind this need for this particular continued critical attention. Firstly, the reliance on established categories can serve to restrict the ways in which human mobility in the context of climate change can possible be viewed. By moving beyond these categories, it is possible that the boundaries of the thinkable can be expanded. Secondly, the examination of the use of systems of categorization can provide insights into the politics of human mobility in the context of climate change. As argued above, categories can give insights into imaginaries of the world and into the actors (organizations and individuals) who are using them. In a contemporary context where human mobility is frequently used as a political bargaining chip, understanding how people on the move are being understood, constructed, and categorized has never been so important.

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