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# Securitizing 'climate refugees': The futurology of climate-induced migration

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**Abstract:** This paper serves as the introduction to this special issue in *Critical Studies on Security*. It begins with a brief overview of the academic debate and policy context concerning climate change and human migration. The principal claim is that critical evaluation of the security dimensions of climate change and migration must begin with the epistemological challenge that knowledge about climate change and human migration is speculative and future-conditional. This introductory piece then provides short synopses of each paper included in the special issue.

**Keywords:** climate change, migration, security, future

Climate change and climate-induced migration are futurologies. Climate change had long been discovered scientifically prior to it becoming fully materialised or even be experienced. Throughout the 19th century, the early heroes of climate science, Svante Arrhenius, John Tyndall and the like, discovered the theoretical possibility of atmospheric warming through the release of carbon-dioxide into the atmosphere. Yet these early pioneers of climate science lacked the means to actually corroborate their hypothesis. It was not until the 1950s that this became possible as measurements on Mauna Loa in Hawaii confirmed that CO<sub>2</sub> emissions had indeed significantly increased, which in turn led scientists to connect the fact of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions to global temperature rise (Lövbrand and Stripple 2011). Yet even today, most of our knowledge about climate change are predictions based on a vast scientific machine (Edwards 2010). As the 2°C target demonstrates, climate policy is predicated on future scenarios, and the same holds true for the debate about climate-induced migration. The origins of climate-change induced migration discourse go back to the 1980s, when concerned scientists and environmental activists argued that unchecked environmental and climate change could lead to mass displacement (Mathews 1989; Myers 1989). However, at that time, hardly any actual climate or environmental refugee could be detected. Even today, almost three decades later, the term as such remains merely a theoretical possibility but not an actually-existing, clearly-defined group of people. Stories of both climate change and climate-induced migration are almost entirely written in the future-conditional tense (Baldwin 2012).

Thus far the debate about climate-induced migration has been dominated by its futurology. It has led to the question of whether or not predictions about climate-induced migration are true, how many climate-induced migrants will have to be expected, and how the consequences of climate change will interact with other drivers of flight and migration. Answers to these questions have piled up as a remarkable body of literature, divided by a stark line. This line is drawn between the

so-called “maximalists” – those who cast sometimes alarming numbers about future climate refugees – and “minimalists” – those who dispute quantitative reasoning by highlighting the complexity of the issue (Suhrke 1994). Today, it seems that at least in academia the minimalist argument has largely won the day. For example, in what is by far the most authoritative scientific account of the relationship between climate change and human migration – *The Foresight report on Migration and Global Environmental Change*, it is argued that

the range and complexity of the interactions between these drivers [of migration] means that it will rarely be possible to distinguish individuals for whom environmental factors are the sole driver’ (Foresight 2011:9)

Yet even while the maximalist-minimalist debate has been settled, at least for now, another set of arguably more pressing epistemological questions has largely been ignored. These questions also result from the futurology of climate-induced migration and the fact that our knowledge and practices about climate-induced migration are mostly speculative. How has this knowledge come into existence? What are the techniques, assumptions, values etc. that underpin it? And what are the politics of this knowledge? How does the way we think about climate-induced migration influence the way we propose to govern it? The articles gathered together in this special issue ask precisely these intersecting questions.

And these questions are all the more important given the fact that the phenomenon of climate-induced migration has now entered the arena of high politics, where it is regularly framed in the language of security. On the one hand, climate-induced migration is a recurrent theme in climate negotiations, deployed by developing and small-island countries as well as NGOs and activists to highlight the costs of inaction. A case in point represents the underwater cabinet meeting of the Maldivian government, initiated by the NGO 350.org in the runup to the Copenhagen climate summit 2009.<sup>1</sup> In 2010, the UNFCCC COP 16 agreed the Cancun Adaptation framework, calling for ‘measures to enhance understanding, co-ordination and co-operation with regard to climate-change induced displacement, migration and planned relocation, where appropriate’. Migration is also a dominant theme in the recently published Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC 2015), which suggests that migration can be an effective means for adapting to climate change. On the other hand, however, migration continues to play a crucial role in the securitization of climate change. Since the early 2000s, climate change has been framed as a security issue. It has been discussed in both the UN Security Council (UN Security Council 2007b) and the UN General Assembly (UN Secretary General 2009). It features in many national security strategies (Brzoska 2012), and even the Pentagon has commissioned a study on the

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1 The Guardian, October 7, 2009, available online at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/oct/07/maldives-underwater-cabinet-meeting>, last accessed 2014-01-17.

issue (Schwartz and Randall 2003). So too many security-related NGOs and think tanks have sought to highlight the security implications of global warming (for example CNA Corporation 2007; WBGU 2007), a point of view which also finds widespread resonance in popular culture as evidenced for example by Al Gore's huge cinematic success, *An Inconvenient Truth*, and is his subsequent receipt of the Nobel Peace Prize. And within this debate, climate-induced migration has become a sort of shorthand for describing the security implications of a warming climate. Migration is often used to underpin the plausibility of claims that climate change leads to instability, and is thereby reified into an actually-existing phenomenon. For example, in a speech in Berlin in 2013, US President, Barak Obama warned of "new waves of refugees" by climate change. So too Al Gore referenced climate-induced migration in his Nobel lecture, stating that "climate refugees have migrated into areas already inhabited by people with different cultures, religions, and traditions, increasing the potential for conflict."<sup>2</sup> Climate refugees and migrants are also frequently referred to in the two debates on climate security in the UN Security Council (UN Security Council 2007a; UN Security Council 2011).

Given the importance of climate-induced migration in climate security discourses, we thus approach the futurology of climate-induced migration from the angle of securitization theory, broadly understood. Scholars from International Relations and beyond use this approach to understand how dangers, threats and risks are constructed and influence politics. In this volume, we feature both the Copenhagen School (Buzan, Wæver and De Wilde 1998) and the Paris School (Balzaq 2010) of securitization (for this distinction see *Trombetta* in this volume) as well as Foucault-inspired approaches that seek to understand security biopolitically (e.g. Aradau and van Munster 2007; Dillon and Reid 2009). While these approaches differ considerably, they are united by the insight that the various ways in which threats and risks can be constructed are relevant for the politics that are designed to cope with the problem (Campbell 1992). This common interest in the security implications of different types of discourse and knowledge about climate-induced migration are at the centre of this special issue. The remainder of this introduction contextualises the special issue by providing historical background to the debate on climate change and migration and situating the contributions within this ever-expanding debate.

## The historical background of climate-induced migration

As Etienne Piguet recently argued, the story of environment and migration is one of 'a strange disappearance and sudden reappearance' (Piguet 2012). The original founders of migration research considered environmental change to be a significant driver of human mobility. But as the field matured, and the complexities of migration became evermore apparent, the environment faded into the background. However,

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/peace/laureates/2007/gore-lecture\\_en.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2007/gore-lecture_en.html)

when global environmental change became more widely popularised in the 1980s, environmentally-induced migration suddenly reappeared on the agenda. And yet what is so striking is that this emerging debate was almost entirely disconnected from existing migration research.

This was mostly due to the fact that the debate was driven primarily by concerned scientists and environmental activists who wanted the issue of environmental change to be tackled more seriously and with more political ambition. Throughout the 1980s, about a context in which security was undergoing significant redefinition (Ullman 1983), the Oxford biologist Norman Myers (1986) and Jessica Tuchman Mathews (1989), then president of the World Resources Institute (WRI), argued for acknowledging the security dimensions of environmental change. A United Nations Environment Programme study on environmental migration tried to put more flesh on these argumentative bones, for the first time substantiating such claims in what is now one of the founding texts in the contemporary policy debate on environmental change and migration (El-Hinnawi 1985). In 1988, Jodi Jacobson (1988) published what later became a widely read study on environmental refugees for the Worldwatch Institute., arguing that

[t]he vision of tens of millions of persons permanently displaced from their homes is a frightening prospect, one that could rival war in its effect on humanity. The growing number of environmental refugees is perhaps the best single measure of global environmental decline. (Ibid.:2)

This early discourse coalition, which revolved mainly around US-based environmental NGOs, argued that environmental change was to become a major driver of migration, which in turn could result in conflict. This argument was echoed in some academic circles notably the Toronto group and the work of Thomas Homer-Dixon, who sought to prove a relationship between environmental change, conflict and migration and warned, among others, of 'waves of environmental refugees' (Homer-Dixon 1991:77). Robert Kaplan's infamous essay *The Coming Anarchy* would later popularize these ideas. Even US President Bill Clinton confessed to be 'gripped' by this discourse (Hartmann 2006). And finally, in 1995, Norman Myers and Jennifer Kent (1995) published their seminal study entitled *Environmental Exodus*, which argued that by 2050, there could be almost 200 million environmental refugees. In the ensuing years, this number was referenced in a range of publications on the issue, and even today it is regularly cited as an unquestioned fact (for an overview see Jakobeit and Methmann 2012). In contrast to previous decades, the environmental migration agenda had returned in full force, although this time it was no longer dominated by migration research but by environmentalists.

It should come as no surprise that the bluntness of these early claims and predictions provoked disagreement. Richard Bilborrow (1992) wrote a background report on environmental migration for the *World Development Report*, arguing that the debate was for more complex than suggested by those dominating the agenda with alarmist

claims. Astri Suhrke (1994) later critiqued the maximalist position but without ever denying the possibility of displacement through climate change. This view was echoed years later by Richard Black (2001) who claimed

that although environmental degradation and catastrophe may be important factors in the decision to migrate, and issues of concern in their own right, their conceptualisation as a primary cause of forced displacement is unhelpful and unsound intellectually, and unnecessary in practical terms. (Black 2001:1)

Although the maximalist and minimalist positions are regularly used to frame the debate about environmental change and migration, the minimalist position seems to be gaining prominence in international policy circles. This is partly because the minimalist critique resonated with the human security discourse which also began to emerge in the mid-1990s. In 1994, the United Nations Development Programme published a study on human security which sought to shift the object referent of security discourse away from the nation state towards the individual (UNDP 1994). This approach sought to marry security and development discourse and pointed to the complexities of insecurity, among them the interaction between social, political and environmental factors. Jon Barnett (2001) and Simon Dalby (2002) translated this approach to the field of environmental security. They argued that deterministic claims about the relationship between environmental change, instability and migration were implausible as conflict and mobility were complex socio-ecological phenomena. This shift remains highly influential across large parts of today's research on climate change and migration.

With the turn of the millennium climate change received renewed attention in political and academic circles. As Mike Hulme (2012) has argued, climate change became the 'synecdoche' for environmental change. It began to represent environmental degradation in general. This was also reflected in the debate about environment and migration, where concern focused on the issue of climate-induced migration. Notably, Myers' and Kent's numbers from 1995 gained new attention and became popular among those debating the issue. NGOs and international organizations published studies concerned with the issue, and scholars initiated large-scale research projects. Michael Nash, an acclaimed film-maker, created a documentary called *Climate Refugees* that launched with huge success in 2007. NGOs and some governments from small island states such as the Maldives organized public events dramatizing the disappearance of their homelands. Climate-induced migration became a hot topic.

Within all the recent attention given to climate-induced migration, a number of things are quite striking. First, there is a strong disconnect between popular representations of the issue and the way in which it is viewed by policymakers and academics. Most academics have become very leery of quantitative predictions. This is not to say that they would deny the severity of climate change impacts. Rather, it seems that the minimalists have largely won the academic debate. The authoritative

Foresight Report concludes that environmental and climate change is only one factor among many that drives migration and that it is embedded into complex socio-economic and political contexts (Foresight 2011). As some of the contributions in this special issue attest, this new consensus seems to be closely associated and consistent with the notions of human security and resilience, which suggests that these ought to be key terms through which to assess the political consequences of climate change-induced migration discourse.

This contrasts, though, with large parts of the public and political debate. Documentaries such as *Climate Refugees* are still driven by an alarmist tone, and the high estimates that had long been criticized for being methodologically unsound remain still prominent in political assessments. For example, the 200 million climate refugees cast by Myers and Kent in 1995 are still widely cited, for example in the influential Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change (Stern 2007:77). President Obama's Berlin speech mentioning 'waves of climate refugees' cited above precisely echoes the words of Homer-Dixon, the influential alarmist, from two decades ago. And as was noted earlier, climate-induced migration has become a shorthand for climate security concerns in general, and it thus features prominently in the securitization of climate change.

It is this gap between the acknowledgement of uncertainty about climate-induced migration and its alarmist prominence in discourses about climate security that points to the starting point of this special issue. Climate-induced migration seems to be more present than ever before in policy circles and in popular media. What can we make of this contradiction? This question is inherently political inasmuch as demands we account for the way security threats and risks are politically constructed in the face of uncertainty.

## The contributions

In the first contribution, *Julia Trombetta* provides a brief overview of the different theoretical approaches to securitization relevant for climate-induced migration. In particular, she discusses the relationship between the Copenhagen and the Paris schools, or 'securitization' vs. 'insecuritization'. While the Copenhagen school focuses on authoritative speech acts that stage an issue as a security issue, scholars following the latter tradition highlight the everyday and mundane practices that create a sense of insecurity upon which certain political practices can then be mounted. Trombetta argues that both approaches are relevant for the study of climate-induced migration, at least in the case of the European Union. Climate-induced migration is securitized by authoritative speech acts which declare migrants a threat. However, one cannot analyze climate-induced migration without the securitization of migration in general, which seems to follow the logic of insecuritization described by the Paris school. And this combination points to an often overlooked problem in the securitization of

climate-induced migration. As Trombetta (2014) puts it, “even if some of the appeals to consider environmental migration as a security issue call for environmental measures and solidarity, these measures have to be implemented in a context in which migration is considered as a security issue and governed accordingly.” (p.?) Her conclusion highlights the fact that securitizing climate-induced migration with even the best intentions in mind can fuel a traditional security logic that is dominant in the field of migration in general. Based on this insight, she calls for a cautious deployment of the notion of human security so prominent in the study of climate-induced migration as ‘human security discourses hide different problems, not only because they tend to disempower people involved but also because human security is turning into a strategy to govern at distance keeping people in places’.

For her part, Ingrid Boas cautions against generalizing these insights to the rest of the World. She provides an example of how Western concern with climate-induced migration fails to resonate with actors in the South. Boas highlights that the discourse about climate-induced migration is mostly a Western discourse. In line with Trombetta’s argument that security discourses often follow a deeply ingrained logic, she argues “that precisely because of the predominant Western character of the discourse, many of its core ideas are rejected by the Indian societal elite” (p?). They simply don’t fit with the dominant environmental and security discourses in India. However, Boas does not stop there. She investigates the ideas that underpin the Indian state’s view on the climate-security nexus and shows that it partly intersects with Western discourses about climate-induced migration. She finds, first, that India’s discourses about climate security are driven by ‘softer concepts of security’. Second, ‘other issues (such as economic migration, energy security, or even internal climate migration) are given much higher priority. The role of possible climate migration from Bangladesh is far less prominent than often assumed in Western discourses. Boas thus points a nuanced picture of Southern views and experiences that is often lacking in Western accounts.

*Methmann and Rothe* is based on the Mediterranean, yet with a rather different focus than Boas and Trombetta. The aim of their article is to trace the visual construction of climate-induced migration in this area. They start from the insight that all knowledge about climate-induced migration is speculative. They argue that while it is almost impossible to verify that someone is a climate refugee, nowadays it is also impossible *not to see* climate refugees, given how frequently they appear in policy reports, documentaries, charity advertisements and in testimonials for political campaigns. Thus the authors go about analysing the political implications of this field of visibility of climate-induced migration. In particular, they show that mapping techniques picture the entire Middle East and North Africa (MENA) as a hot spot for climate-induced migration. This space is then populated with images of climate-induced migrants that are depicted as racialized and passive victims. Together with the image of climate change as potentially apocalyptic normality in this

region, MENA is produced as a dangerous 'smooth space' that threatens the 'striated space' imposed by the European Union. This distinction, drawing on Deleuze and Guattari, enables Methmann/Rothe to tease out the political implications of this field of visibility. They suggest mainly two implications: the necessity to kill with targeted military and humanitarian interventions, and the reliance on the resilience of the people in this smooth space. Their analysis resonates with the work of Gregory White (2011) who argues that North Africa functions as a security buffer for Europe, and provides some important insights about the way in which the space of North Africa is rendered governable in the wider context of climate change adaptation.

The next two contributions align well the conclusions that Methmann and Rothe draw. Giovanni Bettini focuses on the emergence of resilience in climate-induced migration, while Julian Reid investigates some of the biopolitical dimensions of climate change and migration discourse by accounting for notions of life and death. *Bettini's* starting point is the recent 'de-securitization' of the debate as expressed in the emergence of the notion of human security, and most recently, resilience. Bettini traces the way that climate-induced migration has been reframed from a problem into a solution, a means to adapt to a changing climate. Yet analysing recent publications on climate-induced migration by NGOs, governments and international organisations, Bettini highlights that this shift towards 'milder tones' does not necessarily result in a 'democratization' of the debate. Drawing on Foucault, he shows that especially the notion of resilience inserts potential climate-induced migration into a neoliberal scheme of governance. This 'new lexicon of security', as he argues, promotes good circulation by fostering the self-help capacities of affected populations. He concludes, though, that the bad circulation – those migrants unable to sustain themselves and posing potential threats to Western societies – still fall under the ban of biopolitics.

This ban of biopolitics is at the centre of *Julian Reid's* analysis. Reid investigates the biopolitical implications also pointed to by Methmann/Rothe and Bettini, comparing, in particular, human and non-human migration with regard to discourses about population, poverty, and sexual reproduction. Reid observes that 'while the problematization of climate-induced migration among non-human species is inspired often by a concern with how to defend and increase their reproductive potentials, in the human world it tends to be concerned with how to prevent those populations endangered by climate change from reproducing'. In order to elucidate this conundrum, he juxtaposes the polar bear, a highly iconic species affected by climate change, and the 'illiterate rural poor', who play a crucial role in Indian development discourse. While the latter are being subjected to sterilization projects, polar bears are feared to lose their pure reproductive potential, forcing them to mate with grizzly bears and thereby driving the polar bear species towards extinction. What unites these cases, the argument goes, is "a desire to conserve pre-existing spaces and populations from the potential transformations that the combination of life's movement and reproduction may produce". And this desire legitimates the violent

interventions into populations around the globe. As a conclusion, he draws on the work of the French postwar composer, Olivier Messiaen, whose music celebrates ‘the beauty that emerges through the monstrous mixing of life across the climatic boundaries that supposedly determine the security of species’. In this vein, Reid argues for reproductive freedom and embracing the change that is inherent to climate-induced migration.

The final contribution by Andrew Baldwin wraps up the issue from a rather novel perspective. Acknowledging the tension between liberal and alarmist discourse, the different strategies of securitization, the political nature of the climate-induced migration discourse, its specific Western design and the role of biopolitical and liberal technologies of power, he seeks to highlight the theological imaginaries at stake in recent discourses of climate-induced migration. He argues that ‘the figure of the climate change migrant comes to represent the otherworldliness or absolute that is so central to political theology.’ In line with the other contributions, he distinguishes between a sovereign and a liberal approach to climate-induced migration, broadly corresponding to the minimalist and maximalist positions. Within the sovereign camp, Baldwin detects a ‘prophetic’ imaginary, one which casts the climate refugee as a sign for the sins committed by humanity and which calls for the nation state to reinforce order to avert an apocalyptic future. For Baldwin, the prophetic imaginary carries “a moral injunction to openly and aggressively reorder the world and to usher in an alternate global order” (p.??). The liberal variant, by contrast, locates ‘the absolute quality of the climate change-induced migrant in the immanent, contingent unfolding of the world, rather than in an external time-space that characterises the apocalyptic imaginary.’ This political theology justifies a neoliberal ethics in which individuals are thought to strive for their own absolution through endless effort. Acknowledging these competing theological imaginaries, Baldwin contends, ‘opens up a host of questions that allow us to think our world differently, questions about what it might be human in the context of climate change and about forging new ways of living and new solidarities in the context of climatic uncertainty.’ Not only does this echo Reid’s call for embracing the change brought about by climate change. It also highlights what is at stake when the questions raised in this issue are neglected. The debate about climate-induced migration is not only an academic debate. It is also a highly political debate, one that is centrally focussed on how and with what effects we imagine a world radically altered by climate change and how we deal with the anxieties that derive from such imaginaries. This special issue is offered as a starting point for this urgently needed conversation.

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