

Climate Change and Migration: Scientific Fact or Leap of (Bad) Faith?

Invitation to a debate &
Radix collection of materials elucidating debate
& the assumptions & politics in the back ground

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The public is aware of corpses washed up among holiday makers on Spanish beaches and the tragedy of lives lost by people in fragile boats fleeing Haiti for the US or West Africa for Europe. These are stunning and heart breaking images. [1] However, the compassion one feels for displaced persons and migrants of all kinds who face danger, abuse, or hardship should not dilute the rigor of the scientific question: what is the relationship between climate change and migration?

RADIX and its sister site, Disaster Diplomacy, are pleased and honored to be able to offer its readers a draft assessment and critique of the notion of “climate migrants” by Professor Betsy Hartmann. We hope this will stimulate discussion. Those who both disagree and agree with Professor Hartmann should let their opinions and arguments be known – see the RADIX list server at www.radixonline.org and use it!

The text by Prof. Hartmann will appear in final form in a forthcoming book edited by Prof. Mohamed Salih of the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague [2].

Professor Hartmann is director of the Population and Development Program at Hampshire College (<http://www.betsyhartmann.org/bio.htm>) and author of *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs: The Global Politics of Population Control* [3] and co-editor of *Making Threats: Biofears and Environmental Anxieties* [4].

Human migration is timeless. Our mobility is an important characteristic of homo sapiens sapiens, while not its unique differentia specifica. We are political animals, as Aristotle pointed out, and it is in the realm of the power relations among people that many fail to look who are currently using the discourse of “climate migrants.”

Many questions arise. Are contemporary or possible future movements of humans different in quantity or quality from past movements? In answering this question, one must distinguish among commonly confused terms: “migrant”, “refugee”, and “the displaced”. Above all, a key question is whether and how any privileged position in analysis of causal processes should be given to natural environmental conditions generally or to climate change in particular.

Intellectual positions that blame nature for complex human events – violent conflict, migration, famine – are forms of environmental determinism. In the academy such views mostly died out after the 1920s. However, a vocal and influential minority have continued to provide this easy explanation for policy failures. Why would governments or development agencies blame

themselves if they can “explain” such pathology as hunger and conflict on over-population or environmental change? Paul Ehrlich, Lester Brown, Norman Myers, and Thomas Homer-Dixon are among the best known environmental determinists writing today. In the 1960s and 1970s such authors used the language of the “population bomb” and wrote books with titles such as *Famine, 1975!* The decades of the 1980s and 1990s saw the emergence of a variation on this theme: environmentally driven conflict and the popularity of the term “environmental refugee”. Today the buzz words are climate-driven migration and “climate migrant”.

Climate may well be one of many interacting influences on the decision to stay or move from a location. However, the use and interpretation of scientific study of this question tends to be oversimplified by the media, by lobbyists and specialized NGOs and foundations, and by economic and political elites. Words matter, and terms such as “environmental refugee” and “climate migrant” have been used in contexts that could accidentally give fuel to xenophobia and racism. NATO and EU officials have warned that climate migrants could overrun Europe and constitute a security threat. Where did these terms come from? How have they been used? What safeguards should researchers take to minimize the chances of their work being over-simplified, distorted, or misused? Indeed, do researchers have an ethical responsibility to consider possible misuse of their work and to take steps to avoid misuse?

These are some of the questions we hope contributors to RADIX’s web page and email list server will address.

Another set of questions concern the pro’s and con’s of recognizing formally kinds of international migrants currently not covered by existing treaty arrangements. If economic migrants or – if indeed they can be proven to exist in all but a small number of extreme cases such rising sea level in some small islands – climate migrants were to be covered by international treaties, would this actually benefit such displaced persons? What would be the effect on the suite of treaties that protect human rights?

Since its beginning in 2001, Radix has been dedicated to exploring the root causes of disaster risk vulnerability. “Radix” means “root”. So in the case of the nexus linking climate change and migration, we invite and challenge readers to probe for the root causes.

Human decisions and acts surrounding birth, livelihood, community, death, and migration are always complex. Many processes are at work – those involving power (politics), the means of existence (economics), perception and meaning (culture, religion, psychology). In the context of such complexity, it may well not even make sense to seek “scientific fact” or “truth” in the first place. Planets, apples and grains of sand are not free, and their movements are predictable, once initial conditions are defined, by applying a gravity model at different scales. Rabbits and pond scum are also not free, and their growth and movement is predictable.

People, however, are free no matter how poor or constrained they seem. Amartya Sen chose freedom as a major element of his definition of development. James Scott described some very poor people who nevertheless reacted to colonial authorities in surprising ways in his classic book, *Weapons of the Weak*. So, a final question for RADIX readers and contributors is what kind of research is required to understand migration in a world that contains many forms of risk, change, and uncertainty (natural hazards, conflict, environmental and climate change, market fluctuations, etc.)?

If the link between climate change and migration cannot ever be established as scientific fact, why do policy makers and opinion leaders still assert its facticity? My own suspicion is that they are making a leap of faith because the language suits them. It takes blame away from failed policies

and corrupt governments. But by assuming that people can simply be pushed around by climate – as grains of sand or butterflies are pushed and pulled by elemental forces – is more than a leap of faith. It is to fall – consciously or unconsciously -- into bad faith. Jean Paul Sartre defines “bad faith” as a radical rejection of human freedom that treats others, and ultimately oneself, as nothing but inert bodies. That – whether those tempted by simple environmental deterministic explanation know it or not – is the logical end point of indulging in the climate migrant discourse.

[1] For further background on the Spanish beach corpse, see <http://www.icar.org.uk/?lid=7711>; and, in parallel, see <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/the-picture-that-shames-italy-873743.html> and http://www.metro.co.uk/news/world/article.html?in_article_id=226110&in_page_id=64.

[2] Mohamed Salih, ed., *Climate Change and Sustainable Development: New Challenge for Poverty Reduction*, Forthcoming, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, Gloucester, UK, May, 2009.

[3] *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs: The Global Politics of Population Control* (updated and revised edition). South End Publishers, Boston, 1995.

[4] *Making Threats: Biofears and Environmental Anxieties*, eds. Betsy Hartmann, Banu Subramaniam and Charles Zerner, Rowman and Littlefield, Boston, 2005.