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# Commentary: Getting out of the climate migration ghetto: Understanding climate degradation and migration as processes of social inequalities

Thomas Faist\*

It is unproductive to speak of climate migrants or climate refugees because climate change – or climate degradation, as it is called here – is rarely the sole or exclusive mover of migration. As a rule, there are usually multiple causes – economic, political, ecological and cultural (Black *et al.*, 2013). The obvious exceptions to this empirical finding are rapid-onset disaster situations, such as earthquakes, nuclear meltdowns or volcano eruptions. It is also true that mainstream migration research often disregards ecological factors, and most research on migration and climate degradation does not sufficiently contextualize ecological factors interacting with the social world (Terry, 2009; cf. Piguet, 2013). A further step has to be taken to arrive at a plausible perspective.

Here, the argument is that it is productive to situate migration in the context of climate destruction within the broader hierarchy of social inequalities. As we know, responding to climate destruction depends on the position of agents within a structured hierarchy of power. Simultaneously, the social and the natural world are tightly linked (Faist & Schade, 2013). Current climate degradation is to a large extent anthropogenic and thus an endogenous process. In other words, human and thus social behaviour is the ultimate cause of contemporary climate degradation. This is also what is meant when we use the term *Anthropocene* (Rosa *et al.*, 2015). In other words, Anthropocene refers to a change of climate which is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity that alters the composition of the global atmosphere and which is in addition to natural climate variability observed over comparable time periods' (UNFCCC, 1992, 3).

It is hard to gauge the effects of the socio-ecological nexus on migration. The results of empirical research so far do not allow for clear and generalizable conclusions on the impact of climate degradation on migration decisions (Kniveton *et al.*, 2008). This is partly due to different conceptual and methodological approaches underpinning these empirical studies and variations across disciplines. Globally valid prognoses seem to be difficult if not impossible to come by.

What we do know with certainty, however, is that cross-border *viz.* international migration is only one of several responses to climate and environmental degradation. Many of those who are affected by adverse climate change either stay and adjust (e.g. farmers), or are stalled in the regions where they live, constituting trapped populations (e.g. many peasants). Of those who leave, most move to larger urban conglomerates in the same country or adjacent countries and are thus internal but not international migrants. In this way, they contribute to accelerating urbanization, increasing the burden on cities in the global South (Lustgarten, 2020). These movements or trappings increase

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the social inequalities already existing within and between countries: as is well known from migration research more generally, it is not the poorest and the richest in countries of origin who move across borders but those in the ‘middle’ (McLeman *et al.*, 2016). Also, the poorest inhabitants are usually trapped or move only short distances to urban agglomerations. In short, climate degradation, and migration associated with it, mostly affects countries in the global South, although some countries in the global North already experience the beginnings of climate induced migration (e.g. the USA).

### **Beyond human exceptionalism: The nexus of society and ecology**

A decisive step has to be taken to overcome the dominant idea, which pervades the social sciences, of human exceptionalism in nature. It is false to assume that humans stand outside and above nature. With respect to changing perceptions of climate degradation, migration needs to be placed in the context of the nexus between social and ecological factors. This means considering ecological factors as integral parts of general social transformations and concomitant social inequalities. One crucial transformation in this case is the change in the modes of organizing economic life in (late) capitalism. Some analysts speak of a ‘metabolic rift’ (Foster, 1999), a phrase that refers to ecological crisis tendencies under capitalism. In his discussion of surplus value in the first volume of *Das Kapital*, Marx concludes that capitalist production can accumulate capital only by undermining the two sources of societal wealth, that is the earth and the worker (Marx, 1962[1867], 528–30). In short, both workers and the earth are exploited and subjugated. By contrast, towards the end of the third volume of *Das Kapital* Marx imagines the future of humanity as one in which exchange with nature is regulated by rational criteria instead of being mastered by blind fate (Marx, 1964[1894], 828; see also Marx (1962[1867], 192). Marx held this rift in the interdependent processes of social metabolism to be irreconcilable with any kind of sustainability and the exploitation of humans paralleling that of the soil. One may plausibly object that Karl Marx was one of the most fervent adherents of economic modernization which has led to large-scale environmental destruction. Nonetheless, his ideas offer a starting point to see the interacting tendencies of exploiting workers and of subjugating nature.

In a similar vein, another founding figure of sociology, Max Weber, declared that industrial society would work ‘until the last ton of fossil fuel has burnt to ashes’ (cited in van der Pot, 1985, 846). However, Marx and Weber still speak of society and ecology as two separate spheres. Instead, it is more useful to consider them as a nexus. Without ecological foundations, social life would simply be impossible, and the organization of social life has an impact on ecological systems.

In a nutshell, it is necessary to liberate the relationship between climate degradation and migration from the climate ghetto and place it squarely in the context of social transformation brought about by the exploitation of workers and the subjugation of nature, that is to emphasize the nexus between society and ecology. In other words, climate degradation and its consequences, such as migration, need to be seen in the context of the social question. The social question – the public politicization of social inequalities in the ongoing transformation of our economic and cultural life – is based on the exploitation of humans in an unjust economic system. The ecological question rests on the exploitation of what we call nature by humans. Both phenomena tend to coincide at the present moment and have to be considered together (Faist, 2019: chapter 10).

Against this background, the main question is as follows: how do politics affect social inequalities in the context of climate degradation? Here, the discussion is restricted to processes found in immigration countries in the global North (see also İçduygu & Göker, 2015). Such an analytical sketch helps to bring migration in the context of climate degradation back into broader concerns of inequalities and the social transformation of society.

**The politics of migration and inequalities in immigration states of the global north**

Regarding access to the territory, membership and concomitant inequalities, the politics of immigration states in the global North revolve around two main axes (Table 1): first, with respect to the vertical axis, one can differentiate as to whether migrants are economically wanted or not (yes/no) and whether they are culturally welcome (yes/no). Second, as to the horizontal axis, an affirmative answer in the economic and cultural realm (yes) means that immigration policies are relatively liberal; a negative answer (no), however, implies that such policies are more restrictive. Both the economic and cultural dimensions are relevant here. First, economic demand for migrants and the legal status of migrants affect opportunities for migrants to participate in the immigration society and transnationally. Second, socio-cultural recognition is relevant for answering the question which immigrant groups are accepted by the majority society.

The tensions along the economic dimension culminate in the welfare paradox; those along the cultural dimension lead to the liberal paradox. The welfare paradox results from the demands for market liberalization in the competition state (Cerny, 1997), and – on the other end of the spectrum – the partial de-coupling of social protection from the labour market (de-commodification; Polanyi, 2001 [1944]) and the tight regulation of working conditions in the welfare state, for example by unionization and collective bargaining. The paradox arises because opening with respect to the transfer of capital – financial, human (migration) and other economic capital – is in strong tension with the political closure against migrants in the welfare state. The welfare state is more restrictive to migration than the competition state because open borders and thus high numbers and shares of migrants in the workforce would destabilize collective bargaining between employer associations and labour unions, and ultimately create more competition among native and migrant workers. Given a high enough proportion of cheap and docile migrant labour, employers would no longer have any incentive to bargain with workers’ representatives.

From the point of view of the competition state, sometimes also called the neo-liberal state, migration in the context of climate degradation is usually associated with a fashionable term, resilience. It is the resilient migrant who has emerged in policy discourse as the ideal-typical figure fitting the person who adapts to worsening ecological conditions. In the terminology used by the Foresight Report (2011, the resilient migrant who is mobile and preferably entrepreneurial in forging her or his fate in adverse conditions is engaged in ‘transformative adaptation’, the opposite

TABLE 1  
IMMIGRATION PARADOX

Immigration Policies Migrants are ...	Expansive YES	Restrictive NO
<b>Economically wanted</b> <i>Welfare Paradox</i> <b>Culturally welcome</b> <i>Liberal Paradox</i>	Market liberalization: Migrants as human capital; nature as an exploitable resource <i>Competition State</i> Rights Revolution: Human rights and cultural rights for migrants; human rights to migrant protection in context of climate degradation <i>Rule of Law</i>	De-commodification: Citizens and migrants as bearers of social rights; ecologically ambivalent <i>Welfare State</i> Culturalization and securitization: Migration as a threat to allegedly homogeneous cultures; migrants threaten ecological balance <i>National State</i>

being mere 'incremental adaptation'. In terms of bio-politics and as a concept of practice, one may interpret the figure of the resilient migrant as the market-liberal incarnation of the contemporary migrant (Bettini, 2014). Overall, while the idea of adaptation as proactive agency is useful in a practical sense and borne out by empirical evidence (IPCC, 2014), a neo-liberal understanding of the concept of resilience is deeply biased towards blaming the victims (e.g. migrants) and letting negligent governments off the hook for responsibility over bearable living conditions. Nonetheless, from this point of view, resilient migrants in the immigration states contribute to economic development in countries of origin by sending financial remittances (Bettini & Gioli, 2016).

While the competition state provides orientation from a market-liberal point of view with respect to allegedly resilient migrants, no such clear-cut advice can be deduced from the principles of the welfare state. There are at least two orientations. The first is to perceive liberal immigration policies as a threat to the domestic working class for the reasons mentioned above. This position borders on restrictionism. The second perspective would recognize many migrants as forced migrants who are compelled to leave their places of origin in proactive response to civil war, droughts, etc. In this latter view, forced migrants warrant at least humanitarian protection, in the country of origin or nearby (Betts & Collier, 2018), or being received as refugees also in the global North. Whereas the former view borders on the rule of law perspective, the latter approaches the view of the national state (Table 1).

The cultural dimension matters as much as the economic sphere. The liberal paradox illustrates the tensions between the rights revolution since the 1960s and the growing cultural heterogeneity of society on the one hand, and the myth of national homogeneity on the other hand. While the former is an expression of the rule of law, the latter constitutes an expression of the national state. Rule of law in liberal democracies nowadays implies that migrants have a right to settle after a certain period of legal stay in the country of immigration (Triadafilopoulos, 2012, 122). The extension of human rights also applies to a growing number of factors which legitimize application for asylum: in addition to persecution on grounds of social, religious and political membership, as defined in the 1951 Geneva Convention, these may include, for example sexual orientation (implemented by many states), or – directly relating to our topic – climate degradation (Bierman & Boas, 2008). More recently, there are more sophisticated discussions on the relationship on the responsibilities of the international community (see Aleinikoff, this issue). Yet while sexual orientation has entered the list of grounds for asylum in many liberal democracies, climate degradation has not.

From the opposite view, from the national state, the extension of human rights to migrants counteracts the desire to keep a (albeit alleged) high degree of cultural homogeneity of the respective national community. Migration is therefore to be tightly restricted because specific cultural lifestyles and even democracy as such could be endangered (e.g. through the import of authoritarian views). Beyond this culturalization, migration is often regarded as a (security) threat to the national community, as evidenced in political debates on 'imported' or 'home-grown terrorism'; hence, we can speak of a process of securitization.

Interestingly, both the proponents of principles of the rule of law and those of the national state could speculate that there will be troves of climate refugees in the decades to come. In this way, they sound a similar alarm. Yet the reasoning behind the dire predictions is quite different. Those actors advancing human rights, among them many NGOs, emphasize that it is a fundamental right for each person to live in a secure environment. Their motto could be summarized as: 'We have to protect those adversely affected by climate change'. This discourse appeals to governments in both the global South and the global North to seize measures against climate degradation, the declared goal being to protect people in the regions most affected by the negative impacts of droughts, floods, sea-level rise, etc. (e.g. Amnesty International, 2019). Quite another discourse can be found among those warning that hordes of climate refugees will seek protection in the rich countries of the global North. Their motto can be summarized in this way: 'We have to protect our countries from excessive immigration'. In this latter view, migration is not only considered a threat to

cultural homogeneity but a burden upon the ecological carrying capacity of immigration states. This perspective is thus concerned with migration altering the demography and thus the ecology of a society (cf. Wöhlcke, 1999). This argument is closely connected to the fears that overpopulation is a threat to the future of humanity.

In general, the logics of the competition state and the rule of law favour a tolerant immigration policy towards (forced) migrants, including those who move in the context of climate degradation. It should be noted, however, that explicit political coalitions between the two camps are rare. Although there are compatibilities – for example, identity politics favoured under the rule of law and a politics of resilience in the competition state – they are otherwise too far removed from each other ideologically. To start with, there is usually a right–left divide. In contrast to these first two positions, the functional logics of the welfare state and the national state favour more restrictive immigration policies. From a welfare state view, it is social rights that reign supreme; from the national state perspective, it is the principle of cultural homogeneity. Again, despite similar policy outcomes, political coalitions are unlikely between the rule of law and the national state perspectives.

Coalitions are possible, in principle. One example of coalition is between the proponents of the welfare state and those of the rule of law. Yet, although both perspectives are on the left-liberal spectrum, the foregoing discussion suggests that such a comprehensive left-liberal coalition would be hard to put into practice.

Let alone ideological divides, understanding the relationship between climate degradation and migration requires moving beyond unproductive concepts such as climate migrants or climate refugees. What needs to be determined in future research is the combination of responses to degradation which encompasses both exit (migration and mobility) and voice (participation of mobile and immobile people in social and political life). The bias of climate migration research and the concomitant neglect of immobility need to be urgently addressed in order to arrive at a more sober evaluation of the causes, effects and overall dynamics of social transformation, of which climate degradation is a part. In sum, migration in the context of climate degradation needs to be placed in the general framework of migration politics more generally.

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## PEER REVIEW

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