

Give Me Shelter from the Storm: Framing the Climate Refugee Crisis in the Context of Neoliberal Capitalism

[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 effects on humanity. The growing number of environmental refugees is perhaps the best single measure of global environmental decline.

Jodi L. Jacobson (1988), Worldwatch Institute

The climate justice perspective sees the weight of the climate change impacts borne by a community (or country) as dependent upon the balance of political-economic power. The less political power a nation-state possesses; the fewer resources a community has to defend itself within a nation-state; the lower the level of international awareness and mobilization against potential climate threats; the more likely the world is to experience arduous climate change related problems at the hands of the world's largest carbon emitting corporations and countries. Hence, climate-related injustices are manifest as: (1) *socio-economic injustices* disproportionately displaced by capital and the state onto the least powerful segments of society; (2) *international injustices* disproportionately displaced by richer capitalist countries in the North onto the global South; and (3) *intergenerational injustices* disproportionately displaced by current populations onto voiceless future generations (Page 2006; Vanderheiden 2008). Under global capitalism it is the most marginalized segments of society that are suffering the greatest impacts of climate change, especially in the global South. As *subaltern* peoples experiencing multiple forms of political domination, cultural oppression, economic exploitation, and environmental degradation, their consciousness of the climate crisis is often situated in the context of intersecting class relations, environmental racism, neo-colonialism, caste and ethnic structures, patriarchy, and/or other forms of oppression (Faber 2008).

One of the most profound manifestations of climate injustice is the environmental and climate-induced displacement of millions of people all over the world from their traditional homelands (Essam El-Hinnawi 1985). However, such uprooting is not solely the result of climate change and a harsher environment. Climate refugees are also victimized by political-economic structures that serve to reduce resiliency and recovery from climate-related stresses. More specifically, it is the dynamics of neoliberal capitalism that renders the popular classes of the global South in general, and the subaltern in particular, the most vulnerable to climate change, degrading the viability of their social and natural assets. When faced with the collapse of these assets, and compelled to move, we could just as easily speak of these migrants as being "neoliberal refugees" as "climate refugees."

In this article we will outline the various mechanisms by which neoliberal capitalism is creating the climate refugee crisis. We will also examine the manner in which institutions of global political and economic governance are shifting their focus away from a discourse of “climate refugees” as a potential national security threat to a neoliberal variation that presents “climate migration” as an individual adaptive strategy and entrepreneurial opportunity to achieve human security and economic advancement (Bettini 2014, 180). This turn toward climate migration management occurs within the governing institutional framework of neoliberal capitalism and is designed to control the insecurities and potential instabilities associated with climate change (Felli 2013). The Left must unmask the mechanisms by which neoliberal capitalism is creating the climate refugee crisis and provide an eco-socialist vision of a truly democratic, egalitarian, and sustainable society capable of addressing the climate crisis.

Global Capitalism, Climate Change, and the Climate Refugee Crisis

At this point in history policy efforts to contain global warming have failed. Carbon pollution has driven up the global average temperature about 2 degrees Fahrenheit (1.1 degrees Celsius) since the end of the 19th Century. Most of the warming has occurred in the past 35 years, with 16 of the 17 warmest years on record occurring since 2001. The hottest year on record is 2016. It smashed the record set in 2015, which itself broke the record setting global temperatures in 2014 (NASA 2017). In parts of Iran the temperature this past July rose to 129 degrees Fahrenheit (about 54 degrees Celsius)—the hottest ever measured in the Eastern Hemisphere. In Iraq, the heat extremes of 2016 were estimated to have shrunk the country’s annual Gross Domestic Product by 10 to 20 percent as offices shut down and mandatory holidays were declared (Naylor 2016). This comes on the heels of the previous summer, where suffocating heat index readings (combination of temperature and humidity) in the 150s and 160s degrees Fahrenheit (60s to 70s degrees Celsius) plagued Iraq and Iran, including a heat index of 165.2 degrees Fahrenheit (74 degrees Celsius) in the city of Bandar Mahshahr in southwestern Iran (Samenow 2015). This is just a sign of things to come. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has predicted global average temperature by 2100 to be between 2.7 to 8.1 degrees Fahrenheit (1.5 to 4.5 degrees Celsius) higher than today (IPCC 2014).

The impacts of climate change stretch far beyond global average temperature increases to affect the oceans, melt the polar ice sheets, cause more extreme weather and storm occurrences, reduce biodiversity, and ultimately endanger human health. The oceans currently act as an enormous planetary temperature mitigator, absorbing approximately 90 percent of greenhouse gases (the rest warm the land and atmosphere). The upper oceans are now warming at a rate four times faster than 1960-1990, the deep ocean absorbing a growing percentage of that heat (Cheng et al. 2017, 1). On average the oceans have also become more acidic. MIT researchers estimate that future ocean acidification will dramatically affect phytoplankton, the tiny organisms which form the basis of the marine food chain. Many species

will die out, and others will migrate significant distances due to acidification. A 2015 study asserted that the current rate of species loss on land and in the ocean to be 100 times more than the background rate of extinction, and that we have entered the beginning phase of the sixth greatest mass extinction (Ceballos et al. 2015). In addition, climate scientists are sounding the alarm bells that the increase of two degrees Celsius or more in global temperatures projected to occur if we continue to pollute as usual will result in a catastrophic rise in sea levels (Holthaus 2015). Renowned climatologist James Hansen and his colleagues have newly modeled potential sea level rise on the order of six to fifteen feet (1.8 to 4.6 meters) by 2100, between five and 10 times faster than previous predictions (Holthaus 2016; Hansen et al. 2016).

Just as natural systems are affected by climate change, there are negative socioeconomic thresholds that will be crossed in an ever-warming planet. Reputable scientists are warning humanity that historically robust natural ecosystems could collapse due to climate change, thereby threatening the viability of human civilization as we know it (European Commission 2016; Hunziker 2015; Jamail 2015; McKee, 2011; Collectif Argos, 2010). According to the Global Humanitarian Forum (2009), anthropogenic climate change is implicated in the annual deaths of over 300,000 people worldwide and seriously affects another 325 million people.

There is also a growing body of evidence that environmental degradation and climate change are inducing significant human migration and relocation (Hugo 2008 and 2010). The Norwegian Refugee Council's International Displacement Monitoring Center and the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OHCA-IDMC 2009) found that in 2008 alone more than 20 million people were displaced by climate-related sudden-onset natural disasters such as floods and storms, including the 800,000 people displaced and 78,000 killed in the Irrawaddy Delta region of Myanmar (or Burma) by Cyclone Nargis.

Climate research, migration and humanitarian organizations alike have also sought to quantify the vast number of people being displaced either directly or indirectly by environmental stresses and/or climate change. Current estimates range from around 10 million to 26 million people (Laczko and Aghazarm 2009, 262; Global Humanitarian Forum 2008, 6). Climate change and weather-related natural disasters are very likely a larger cause of migration and displacement than war and persecution combined (Perez 2006). The World Health Organization estimates that one out of every 25 people in the world—some 225 million people—is impacted each year on average by natural disasters (Guha-Sapir et al. 2004, 13; Laczko and Aghazarm 2009, 293).

Climate refugee projections for the future are even more disturbing. Estimates range from an Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) prediction of 150 million climate refugees to the displacement of up to 1 billion people by 2050 (Myers and Kenty 1995; Warner et al. 2008, 16-17; and Laczko and Aghazarm 2009, 43). A new Cornell University study goes even further, postulating that by the year 2100 some two billion people—about one fifth of the

world's projected population—could become climate refugees solely due to rising ocean levels and increased storm surges that will push sea water inland (Geisler and Currens 2017). It should be emphasized here that these estimates vary greatly because quantifying displaced populations is itself mired with difficulties, including the use of flawed methods and conceptual models. Climate migration is not necessarily unidirectional, as many people move back into their homes once a one-time disaster has passed (Laczko and Aghazarm 2009, 21-33). But even more fundamentally, viewing refugees solely through the lens of climate change is itself highly problematic. As stated by Ethemcan Turhan and Marco Armiero (2017, 2), "... it must be clear that migration is often an externality of military interventions, proxy wars, imposition of structural economic reforms, multi-causal destruction of livelihoods both by rapid and slow violence through environmental change, establishment of enclosures, and corporate imperialism that have dispossessed and continue to dispossess people in different corners of the world." All of these factors are often deeply intertwined. As such, the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation on potential refugees cannot be separated from the social, political, and economic structures of neoliberal capitalism in which people's daily lives are embedded.

What are the primary processes by which neoliberal capitalism is creating the climate refugee crisis? We outline four mechanisms below.

First of all, *global capitalism is rendering climate-related stresses and "natural" disasters more frequent and severe in nature*. The inability of the global capitalist system to significantly reduce the emission of greenhouse gases is causing a planetary crisis. According to the National Climate Assessment, global warming is triggering ever more extreme weather and climate events. Over the last 50 years much of the U.S. has seen increases in prolonged periods of excessively high temperatures, heavy downpours and, in some regions, severe floods and droughts (US Global Change Research Program 2014). Likewise, the Center for Climate and Energy Solutions has found thousands of record-breaking weather events worldwide, bolstering long-term patterns of increasing heat waves, heavy precipitation, droughts and wildfires. A combination of observed trends, theoretical understanding of the climate system, and numerical modeling demonstrates that global warming is increasing the risk of these devastating types of events (Huber and Gullede 2011).

Today the vast majority of people affected by natural disasters suffer from climate-related disasters. For instance, between 1980 and 2007, there were 6,500 climate-related natural disasters (an average of 343 events per year). During this time some 98 percent of all those affected by natural disasters—243 million people annually—were linked to climate change. This represents a 70-percent increase over the previous decade (1984-1994), which saw an average of 174 million people affected by natural disasters each year (Ganeshan and Diamond 2009). Since 2008 natural disasters have displaced an average of 25.4 million people

each year—the equivalent of one person per second. In 2015 the number of natural disasters rose to 574 and killed over 32,550 people (Sanderson and Sharma 2016).

Even more insidious than the spectacular kinds of headline natural disasters typically associated with climate change are the often-invisible forms of “slow” or “attritional violence” against nature that is scattered across time and space (Parenti 2012; Nixon 2010, 2). The everyday forms of environmental degradation installed by unjust and unsustainable systems of capitalist production are especially vulnerable to the more mundane (but just as consequential manifestations) of climate change. In Syria, where a five-year drought drove 1.5 million rural people and farmers off the parched landscape and into the cities, only to have their needs largely ignored by the Assad regime, climate change may be one factor in the larger civil war that has caused nearly five million refugees to flee the war-torn country (Sanderson and Sharma 2016).

Secondly, *neoliberal capitalist development is resulting in the increased social and ecological impoverishment of the world’s popular classes and subaltern populations, rendering them more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.* The age of globalization has witnessed the triumph of a distinctly hard-nosed brand of neoliberal capitalism. Facilitated by the free trade agreements (market liberalization), an end to most governmental regulatory “interference” with business practices (deregulation), the takeover of former public services and state agencies by domestic and/or international capital (privatization), the growth in foreign direct investment (FDI) and finance capital provided by bilateral and multilateral lending agencies, and reductions in social welfare and environmental protection measures in both the global North and South (fiscal conservatism), neoliberal capitalism is increasingly facilitating the capitalization of nature and confiscation of environmental space in the global South. In addition to the appropriation of natural resource wealth, globalization is also facilitating the increased displacement of pollution and other negative externalities—the export of ecological hazard in all circuits of capital—to historically marginalized communities in the global North and South alike (Faber 1998). World labor forces, natural resources and energy, technology and machinery, biosystems, and other “productive inputs” are becoming more integrated into the circuits of global capital (economically) and the structures of transnational corporations and banks (organizationally).

Laboring in service of this new global order, but receiving few of its benefits, are the popular classes and subaltern populations of the global South—the poor peasants, workers, ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples. Lacking access to adequate technical and financial assistance from the state, secure land rights, fair price mechanisms for locally produced commodities, and favorable loan packages, their social and ecological impoverishment is the legacy of neo-colonial dependent development, and increases vulnerability to climate change. The acquisition of land and natural resources by transnational capital, as well as large landowners, corrupt government officials, security forces, and various domestic economic elites

allied with multinational corporations and international banks, restricts access to the means of livelihood such as rivers and oceans, agricultural and grazing lands, forests, fisheries, and drinking water. Utilizing financial assistance provided by multilateral lending agencies, large-scale development projects typically transfer access and control over natural sources from popular classes at the local level to the state, elite land speculators, or private companies and multinational corporations (Shiva 1998).

The displacement and ecological impoverishment of popular classes around the world by global capitalist development is resulting in the relocation of these populations into increasingly precarious and dangerous areas in which to live and work. Such areas include the edges of rivers and waterways that can be prone to flash flooding, or steep hillsides subject to landslides, or perhaps arid regions plagued by drought and heat-related stresses. Lacking protections afforded by the state, as well as the forms of capital required for true resiliency, these are among the global populations most vulnerable to climate change stresses. Over 2.8 billion people live in areas of the world that are prone to more than one of the physical manifestations of climate change: severe storms, floods, droughts, or sea level rise (Global Humanitarian Forum 2009).

Climate change burdens households, communities, and societies that are the most ecologically vulnerable and also lack the political-economic capacity to cope and adapt to ecological disruption (Adger et al. 2006). Climate change weakens the livelihoods of poor people the most by eroding their scarce assets in the form of physical capital (damage to shelter and infrastructure); human capital (increased malnutrition and disease); social capital (displacement and disruption of beneficial social networks); natural capital (loss of ecosystem productivity, such as in agriculture and fisheries), and financial capital (loss of income and property). The point here is not to reduce all processes of climate-related displacement to the logic of capital but rather to recognize the importance of the larger political-economic and social context. Because marginalized peoples lack sufficient conditions of resilience and recovery (such as flood insurance) and receive little support from the state under neoliberal capitalism, their capacity to withstand and recover from shocks and restore these assets is minimal, whether created by conflict, collapse of market prices, land degradation, political oppression, or climate change itself (Smith 2006, 27). When faced with the collapse of these assets and compelled to move, we could just as easily speak of these migrants as being “neoliberal refugees” as much as “climate refugees.”

Poverty, as manifested in resource scarcity, poor living conditions such as overcrowding or lack of sanitation, and insufficient disaster response mechanisms, arguably has the greatest magnifying effect on disaster risk. This is especially true for poorer women (IPCC 2012, 313-314). The poor and the powerless often have no alternative but to settle in disaster-prone zones and areas more susceptible to climate-related stresses where land is cheaper and more plentiful. Lacking the adaptive and financial capabilities of richer communities, the poorest

populations and nations in the global South are shouldering the greatest stress: 95 percent of all lives lost from weather-related disasters are in developing nations (IPCC 2012).

A community's coping ability may yet be the most important determinant of climate-induced migration. Limitations on coping ability manifest in a variety of ways, from the socioeconomic, political, and cultural fabric of the affected community to national financial limitations, potentially weak or ineffective government, uneven development, heavy dependence on trade, exploitive economic arrangements, remoteness, and even regional social capital and established migration networks. This is most apparent in the case of the Small Island Developing States (SIDS), where off-island aid after a natural disaster is essential and commonplace due to their small size and limited resources. Whether these measures exist hinges on the economics and politics at play at the local, regional, national and international levels (Hartmann 2010, 237-238). Some of the greatest humanitarian emergencies emerge where people lack the means to migrate from zones in ecological crisis, as was evidenced in past climate emergencies in the South Pacific and across Southeast Asia.

Thirdly, *corporate-led globalization is creating increasingly degraded and denuded landscapes, reducing the resiliency of existing ecosystems and therefore magnifying the impacts of climate change*. The full integration of the global South into the world economy as a supplier of cheap raw materials and consumer goods has led and is leading to the colonization and ecological devastation of lands and natural resources on which hundreds of millions of people depend. Those peoples in the South which draw their livelihood directly from communal access to land, water, forests, coastal mangroves, and other ecosystems are being hit the hardest by the construction of large dams, mining and oil industry operations, and the capitalization of agriculture and fisheries (Guha 2000; Martinez 2002).

Forcibly removed off their land by government policies, economic acquisition or military force, the displaced masses of the global South migrate to ecologically fragile areas, including rugged hillsides prone to erosion, barren desert regions lacking in water, and pristine tropical rainforests (Peet and Watts 2004). Once resettled, they try to eke out an existence by exploiting the limited resource base to which they have access. After a few years of abuse, the resource base eventually collapses, as in much of Central America. In the fragile highlands of El Salvador, for instance, hundreds of thousands of desperately poor family farmers displaced by the expansion of export coffee estates are attempting to survive in a landscape already irreversibly destroyed by erosion, gully formation, and deforestation. Coupled with the overexploitation of land by capitalist export agriculture and the mining sector (just recently banned), more than 77 percent of the country suffers serious soil erosion (Faber 1993). Denuded watersheds and degraded landscapes of this sort typically magnify the impacts of climate change, converting what would have been a heavy but harmless rainstorm into a devastating flood. All around the world, neoliberal capitalist development is resulting in the severe degradation of ecosystems

and social structures that would normally offer greater protections against the manifestations of climate change and extreme weather events, especially for the most vulnerable.

Fourthly, *climate change is serving as a tool of social control and displacement by policy makers, especially those in the service of global capital and the national security state.* In the current neoliberal era, climate change itself is becoming a means of social control and appropriation of ecological space by capital. For those unable to support themselves on the land due to environmental degradation and climate change, many migrate to the cities to live in the vast ghettos surrounding the major cities, hoping to find work as cheap wage laborers in the burgeoning factories producing cheap consumer goods for capital to export on the world market. In this sense social and ecological impoverishment of the popular classes, exacerbated by climate change, is advantageous for both domestic and transnational capital, as it functions to create a vast supply of cheap labor for the agricultural plantations, mining and logging operations and manufacturing facilities producing shoes, electronics, toys, clothing, and countless other commodities for the world export.

The exercise of social control via climate change comes in many forms. The displacement of low-income African-Americans from New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, for instance, served to promote gentrification and urban redevelopment by various real estate interests. Some 175,000 black residents left New Orleans in the year after the storm; more than 75,000 never returned (Casselmann 2015). While Katrina was certainly a trigger event in this relocation, the real causes of displacement were grounded in “a long-term, sedimented pattern of radicalized infrastructural neglect by the Bush administration and its predecessors at urban, state and federal levels” (McKee 2011, 321).

In the blistering heat wave that hit the Southwestern United States in June of 2017, the U.S. government utilized the Sonoran Desert as a weapon against thousands of migrants fleeing poverty, violence, and environmental degradation in Mexico and Central America. Adopting a technique called “prevention by deterrence,” the Border Patrol intentionally set up checkpoints in such a way as to funnel migrants into the most desolate areas of the desert, greatly increasing their chances of death. According to No More Deaths, a volunteer-based ministry of the United Universalist Church of Tucson, a body was found on average every three days during that summer. In total, some 6,000 migrants have died crossing the desert since 2000 (Wasserman 2017, A11).

Framing Climate Change Refugees as Victims, National Security Threat, Neoliberal Actors, or Agents for Social and Climate Justice

The Alarmist Maximalist Position

Whether or not environmental migration is defined as a social problem is related to how social events are framed (Shibley and Prosterman 1998). Frames, according to Erving Goffman (1974,

21), are schemata of interpretation that allow people to locate, perceive, identify, and label events taking place around them. Climate refugees may exist in an objective reality, but until they are recognized as such, social action to address the causes and/or symptoms of their plight is not possible. The framing of “environmental refugees” and then “climate refugees” as a social problem goes back to the 1980s, when concerned scientists and environmental activists first argued that environmental degradation and climate change could lead to mass displacement and social upheaval (Matthews 1989; Myers 1986). Speculative and highly future-conditional, the perspectives on climate refugees ranged from the so-called “maximalist” position (climate change as the primary cause of refugee creation) to the “minimalist” position (climate change is just one of many migration factors) (Baldwin et al. 2014, 122).

The maximalist position takes on a largely alarmist tone, viewing the growing waves of climate refugees as perhaps the most powerful manifestation of the global ecological crisis (Jacobson 1988; Schmelz et al. 2011). There are two political tendencies in the maximalist camp. On the one hand, there are scholars, non-governmental organizations, policy-making bodies, and international institutions that express sympathy for the plight of climate refugees and offer many policies and programs to aid in their formal recognition and assistance (Biermann and Boas 2008). The United Nations, for one, has portrayed “environmental refugees” as helpless victims of climate change in urgent need of foreign assistance (McNamara 2007). On the Left, the plight of climate refugees is often framed a consequence of ecological imperialism and the massive carbon debt owed by the advanced capitalist countries to the global South (Roberts and Parks 2009). The enormous hardships confronting climate refugees require the transfer of resources to developing countries to help them cope with climate change (Biermann and Boas 2010, 79-82; Klein 2009). On the Right, the terms “environmental refugee” and “climate refugee” are frequently used in public discourse to frame the displaced as a potential national security threat (Saunders 2000; Shade and Faist 2010). Thomas Homer-Dixon (1991, 19) encapsulates the fear when he writes that ecological degradation will produce “waves of environmental refugees that spill across borders with destabilizing effects on both national and international order.” Likewise, Pentagon-sponsored research warns of the threat posed to U.S. national security by climate refugees (Schwartz and Randall 2003), with the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency predicting that three percent of the world’s population will be displaced or affected by climate change before 2050 (Warner et al. 2008, 16-17).

This discourse of climate-induced migration as a national security threat has now entered the arena of high politics. It has been discussed before the UN Security Council and UN General Assembly. In a 2013 speech in Berlin, Germany, then U.S. President Barack Obama even warned the world of “new waves of refugees” caused by climate change. Although denying the realities of climate change, President Donald Trump has repeatedly scapegoated immigrants of color into the United States as undermining the safety and wellbeing of American citizens. For Betsy Hartmann (2010, 234), the portrayal of climate refugees as a security threat is alarming

and could “pose a threat to the kind of peaceful international cooperation and development initiatives needed to respond equitably and effectively to climate change.” It can also serve to militarize the provision of development assistance and distort climate and human rights policy. Australia’s “offshore detention centers” for refugees from the Pacific island Nauru and elsewhere, for instance, are located on remote islands and run by private contractors. Established in 2001 to secure Australia’s borders and labeled—horribly—as “The Pacific Solution,” these militarized encampments are known for their brutal treatment of the refugees (Hamilton 2017). In fact, human rights advocates have concluded that the Australian government’s policy has been explicitly designed to deter future refugees by inflicting incalculable damage on the hundreds of women, men and children in the camps (Amnesty International 2016).

The maximalist position is often criticized for being overly deterministic, neglecting to fully consider the complex interrelated causes that push migration (Felli 2013; Oliver-Smith 2009, 3). For some political ecologists, the concept of environmental or climate refugee is problematic in that it naturalizes the political-economic triggers of environmental decline, and also

... masks the role of institutional responses to it...In the case of extreme natural events such as droughts, storms and floods, whether or not people are forced to migrate permanently from their homes usually depends on pre-existing social relations (who is most vulnerable) and post-disaster responses (what kind of aid/relief is provided and who receives it). (Blaikie et al. 2004, 8)

Calum Nicholson (2011, 8) questions whether or not there is a determinable relationship between a given environmental “driver” and some typology of human migration. Instead, he claims that “it is analytically meaningless to talk of the ‘environment’ as an independent variable, as any configuration of ‘environmental’ factors in terms of their societal implications are fundamentally structured and inflected by social, political and economic conditions.” Therefore, use of the term poses the danger of strategic essentialism, where an ill-defined empty signifier may be appropriated by various social actors for purposes other than the protection of the forced migrants and offering assistance to them (Kolmannskog 2008, 10), especially by the national security state and anti-asylum lobbies (Saunders 2000; Nicholson 2011). As stated by Betsy Hartmann (2010, 234-235), the extent of displacement by climate change is

... dependent on the existence and effectiveness of adaptation measures that help individuals and communities cope with environmental stresses. Whether or not such measures are in place in turn depends on political economies at the local, regional,

national and international levels that are often conveniently left out of the discussion of so-called “climate refugees.”

Absent a discussion of the larger political economic context, “climate refugee” as a concept has the potential to help “depoliticize the causes of displacement,” and mask the role of class exploitation and social injustices perpetuated under capitalism. In such an instance, the term could even relieve wealthier countries of their obligation to offer asylum and assistance (Kibreab 1997, 21). Hartmann (2010, 234-37) further states that this

is not to deny that environmental changes due to global warming could in some instances exacerbate already existing economic and political divisions. However, whether or not violent conflict and mass migrations result depends on so many other factors that it is far too simplistic to see climate change as a major cause or trigger.

She argues that the goal of the Left should be to assist communities in their efforts to adapt to climate change by strengthening institutions that democratically and equitably manage resources.

The Neoliberal Minimalist Position

Over the last two decades, the “maximalist” position that climate change can be a sole determinant of migration has been increasingly challenged by the “minimalist” position, which argues for a multi-causal and multi-dimensional understanding of climate-related migration strategies (Black 2001). Within the minimalist camp a neoliberal variation is becoming hegemonic in global policy circles. Whereas the maximalist discourse frames climate-induced migration as representative of the failure of nation-states to adequately address climate change and protect both refugees and national security, the neoliberal minimalist discourse presents internationally governed forms of “climate migration” as an individual opportunity to achieve human security (Bettini 2014, 180). In the neoliberal frame climate-induced migration is seen as a voluntary adaptation strategy that can better one’s life. In consequence, the significance of the climate change threat to actually displaced persons is often minimized as well. For instance, in 2015 Ioane Teitiota was deported from New Zealand (along with his wife and three New Zealand-born children). He had argued for four years that he was a climate refugee and that being deported back to the low-lying Pacific island of Kiribati would put him and his family in danger because of the rising seas. He had overstayed his visa by four years and had taken his appeal all the way to New Zealand’s Supreme Court. The Court acknowledged Kiribati’s climate woes but ruled that Teitiota did not meet the international definition of a refugee and would not face persecution if returned home. New Zealand’s Prime Minister weighed in on the case.

“Im sure people feel for the guy... [but] in my eyes, he’s not a refugee, he’s an overstayer” (Moir 2015).

In contrast to a maximalist discourse of “climate refugees” engaged in pathological forms of circulation around the world, the neoliberal minimalist discourse emphasizes the view of “climate migrants” with an entrepreneurial ethos engaged in beneficial forms of circulation about the globe (Felli 2013, 339; Bettini 2014, 180). The form of adaptation taken by “climate migrants” is itself of a neoliberal nature (Felli 350).

As brilliantly stated by Romain Felli (2013, 350),

Whereas climate refugees were depicted as (potential) helpless victims of climate change-induced *forced* migration, the language of climate migration as adaptation radically transforms the location of social agency and, consequently, the responsibility for climate change consequences. Rather than understanding “climate refugees” as victims of climate change produced by industrialized countries, and thus as in need of justice (which could take the form of funding for adaptation), these individuals are turned, through a “positive story,” into entrepreneurial migrants who not only can lift themselves out of poverty but may also contribute to the “resilience” of their “vulnerable” communities.

The view of climate migrants as fully “adaptable subjects” capable of spurring economic development is now dominant in many international bodies, including the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Global Commission on International Migration, and the High Commissioner for Refugees (McNamara 2007). The IOM (2011) has especially promoted adaptation strategies to be managed by institutions of global governance to the benefit of neoliberal capitalism. At the insistence of the United States, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) substituted the term “climate refugees” with the phrase “climate change induced displacement, migration and planned relocation” at the Cancun Conferences of the Parties (COP) in 2010 (Warner 2011, 9). Likewise, the World Bank (2010) and Asian Development Bank (ADB 2012, 47) have endorsed the potential economic benefits of “climate migration,” as long as it is carefully planned and assisted by these institutions of global governance.

Neoliberal regimes of global migration management and control are attempting to imprint biopolitical subjectivities onto climate-impacted populations all over the world (Bettini 2014, 180). In this context, adaptation no longer refers to a collective social transformation of the political-economic conditions shaping the climate crisis but rather to a transformation of the “individuals themselves to become more suitable to adaptation” (Felli 2013, 351). Australia has provided migration assistance through programs such as the Kiribati-Australia Nursing Initiative, which ran from 2006 to 2014. It was a scholarship program funded through the Australian Agency for International Development (AUAID) for climate endangered I-Kiribati to

come to Australia and participate in a nursing program at Griffith University in Brisbane and was funded through the Australian Agency for International Development (AUSAID). Though not a migration program per se, it provided a way for younger I-Kiribati to earn a degree, which in turn made them more eligible for permanent migration (Faber and Schlegel 2012).

This post-political public discourse around climate change impacts naturalizes perceptions of capitalism and negates an examination of the role capitalist social relations perform in the forced migration of climate refugees (Berglez and Olausson 2014, 54). The Foresight report, for example, argues that “with future migration influenced by environmental change, development policies must recognize the benefits of migration to economic development and individual welfare” and the potential to secure better paying, climate appropriate jobs (Foresight 2011, 181). Such regimes reflect a broader role of climate, trade, and development policies in favor of neoliberal capitalism, especially with respect to the capitalization of nature and the proletarianization of human nature on a global scale (Faber 2008). The neoliberal vision of a docile, highly mobile and adaptable worker, malleable to capitalist control, and resilient to climate change, is pervasive (Bettini 2011, 191). The promotion of “migration as adaptation” strategies could actually signal a broader trend toward the widespread adoption of neoliberal approaches to all forms of ecological crisis (Felli 2013, 350).

In the final analysis, the neoliberal minimalist position ignores the contradictions and structural inequalities that (re)produce socio-ecological vulnerabilities, impeding the mobility of some while forcing others into displacement (Hugo 2010, 29). The Left must step into this political vacuum and make the connections between the imposition of neoliberal policies in the global South which fuel the creation of climate (and other kinds of) refugees, and the connections these same policies have in deepening inequality and social/environmental injustices in the global North. In the Trump era many of the advanced capitalist countries are witnessing the scapegoating of immigrants by the Right for the broader failures of neoliberal capitalism, making this task all the more urgent. Fortunately, as seen in the World People’s Conference in Cochabamba, Bolivia in 2010, and the more recent People’s Climate Marches in New York and Washington, DC, we are witnessing the birth of what may become a powerful global mass movement for climate justice. For the global struggle for climate justice and efforts to craft international accords that truly protect and empower climate refugees are serving as “beacons of hope for what is arguably the defining struggle of our age—the battle to stave off the destruction of the planetary support systems upon which life on Earth depends” (Dawson 2013, 34).

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