

Climate change, migration and the crisis of humanism

Abstract

Climate change is more and more said to be a problem of migration. The common refrain is that climate change will bear in some way on patterns of human mobility, resulting in either insecurity, humanitarian crises or all manner of inventive adaptive responses. The inherent challenge in such claims is, however, that of causality: the degree to which climate change influences migration alongside the myriad social, political and economic reasons people migrate. This challenge is far from being settled. Importantly, the unsettled question of causality exposes how the crisis of humanism is central to the construction of the climate migrant or climate refugee. Coming to terms with this crisis means having to confront how issues of power and knowledge shape how we understand the relationship between climate change and migration. But even more importantly it means having to ask probing questions about what it means to be human today. The paper develops these arguments through an engagement with the concept of the monster and with Timothy Morton's concept of the hyperobject.

Keywords: climate change, migration, humanism, power, knowledge

Human migration is often said to be one of the many social consequences of climate change. This refrain reappears endlessly in media and political rhetorics exhorting us to mitigate climate change or else risk mass migration. It figures within academic statements that reassert the 'climate refugee' as a legitimate category in the politics and policy of climate change ¹. And it enjoys mounting visibility in climate change policy where human migration, displacement and settlement are increasingly said to be emergent phenomena that demand technical and expert solutions.

This brief intervention interprets the discourse on climate change and migration rather differently. It argues that, however well-intentioned, mounting concern for human migration in the context of climate change is less about governing 'the other' of climate change (i.e., 'climate refugees' or 'climate migrants') than it is about resuscitating humanism at the very conjuncture that climate change calls humanism into question. This claim rests on the idea that the 'climate migrant' or 'climate refugee' does not name an actually existing person or phenomenon but is instead a very powerful fiction that serves to stabilise or fix the ideology of humanism at a particular moment in planetary history when humanity's presumed power over biophysical and geophysical processes is no longer the surety it once might have been. My point is not, however, that the climate migrant or climate refugee is simply the 'other' of climate change and thus subject to the exclusionary logics of modernism. It is, rather, that

the figurative presence of the migrant or refugee in the discourse on climate change gives meaning to humanism amidst the ontologically destabilising presence of climate change. In this way, I propose that the widely popular discourse of climate change and migration is symptomatic of what some in the interpretive social sciences call the crisis of humanism ², a condition of anxiety that results when the foundational tenets of humanism seem no longer tenable.

The crisis of humanism in brief

Among the foundational tenets of modern thought is the belief that Man possessed the capacity to control Nature. This belief figures centrally within genres of humanist thought in which the human is said to be unique amongst all other living and non-living entities. Reason, it was said, is what set the human apart from the non-human, and reason, properly deployed through science and art, would allow the human total mastery of space (Nature) and time (History). Indeed, one of the core ideas of humanist thought is the notion that humans are the agents of world history. Modern European philosophers like John Stuart Mill, Karl Marx, Immanuel Kant all located human subjectivity and reason at the centre of their worldviews, even while such views were all radically different. The idea that humans are the agents of history reached its apogee in the experience of European colonialism when European states sought mastery over the colonised world. And in respect of Europe's colonial history and aftermath it is important to remember that not all humans have been admitted equally into the category of the human ³⁻⁵.

But with climate change, belief in human mastery of Nature is called into question. For climate change exemplifies the recurring modern trope of Nature's *return*. This is the inconvenient idea that nature is not simply available to human manipulation without consequence, but contains the ever-present capacity to overwhelm humans. This is the idea that in spite of our efforts to limit greenhouse gas emissions, climate change is an accelerating geophysical phenomenon that exceeds human control, even while humans are its cause. It is what William Cronon (1996) long ago called '*nature as the demonic other, nature as the avenging angel, nature as the return of the repressed*'.⁶ In this sense, we might say that climate change is a particular instance of the crisis of humanism. It embodies the dawning realisation that Nature is an uncontainable force, the realisation that human distinctiveness from Nature was only ever a provisional belief, and even then a provisional belief confined only to European thought. Climate change forces us to confront our faith in reason. There is, of course, nothing exceptional about climate change in this regard. Whether in the form of an earthquake, tsunami or disease, Nature's return has always been an ever present feature of modern human society and therefore philosophy ⁷.

Contemporary debates in philosophy, the humanities and interpretive social sciences have been grappling with these issues for quite some time. Under the broad heading of 'posthumanism,' much of this philosophical enquiry has entailed charting the various ways that human distinctiveness from Nature, and indeed human control over Nature, is an artefact of the ideology of humanism^{8,9}. Bruno Latour¹⁰ has been at the forefront of this philosophical exercise, arguing against the 'modern constitution' that divides human society from the natural world. So too the geographer Sarah Whatmore¹¹, for example, has been instrumental in arguing that human societies are always 'more-than-human'. What these philosophies amount to is the idea that what we understand to be 'the human' – a self-contained, bounded entity, internal to itself, governed by internal reason, and possessed of the capacity to shape the world to suit his/her needs – is a fiction. According to posthumanist philosophy, the human is best understood as relational, or that being human is in equal measure a function of human agency and the agency of 'things'¹², everything from microbes and Big Data all the way up to the global climate system. It is in this sense that we can say that humanism is in crisis. Its apparent foundations appear to have been washed away.

Timothy Morton's¹³⁻¹⁵ concept of the 'hyperobject' offers a unique take on this sense of crisis. Morton describes hyperobjects as real, nonlocal "entities whose primordial reality is withdrawn from humans." These are phenomena that transcend and saturate human experience without ever being singular. They stretch our experience beyond the time scales of immediate daily life but, in doing so, hyperobjects are unfathomable and induce in us a sense of the uncanny. Styrofoam is a good example of a hyperobject. All the Styrofoam ever manufactured persists in the geophysical environment well beyond the immediacy of a single Styrofoam cup. Its totality accumulates as a form of waste that vastly exceeds the timescale of a single human life, which is kind of freaky when you really stop and think about it. The "sum of all the whirring machinery of capitalism" (p.1) is another good example of a hyperobject, a vast incomprehensible matrix operating simultaneously at the scale of the nanosecond (i.e., high frequency trading) and the generational scale (i.e., the time required to negotiate and implement a trade agreement). The 'atmosphere' in the City of London, for example, is thick with the uncanny, ungraspable hyperobjectivity of capitalism.

Climate change is also a hyperobject (although Morton prefers the term 'global warming'). Climate change is real, but its realness is largely withdrawn from human view. Instead, we observe the realness of climate change through various proxies, like modelling or the image of thousands of icebergs afloat in the Arctic Ocean. We can never come into direct contact with climate change, like we can a rock, for example, and yet we know its realness through simulation. Its realness from the vantage of the present is not so much actual as it is virtual, which is another way of saying that its realness evades our immediate cognition. Moreover, we might be able to pinpoint the causes of climate change,

but its effects will long outlive all current human life by centuries. Most importantly, though, given their inescapable yet withdrawn presence, hyperobjects, for Morton, “cause us to reflect on our very place on Earth and the cosmos”, “they force something on us, something affects some core ideas of what it means to exist, what Earth is, what society is.” (p.15) Hyperobjects are a reminder that the world is not a plastic surface that can be reformed in our likeness, but that nonlocal phenomena, like climate change, shift what it means to be human by inducing within us a sense of the uncanny. Our experience in the world becomes unfathomable when we begin to think about hyperobjects. My contention is that the figure of the climate change migrant or climate refugee is a construct whose purpose is to stabilise the human at a world-historical moment when the hyperobjectivity of our world calls into question the very tenets of humanism.

Climate change and migration

Migration is by now a dominant narrative within the wider political discourse of climate change ¹⁶⁻¹⁹. Figuring across a full range of policy discussions, migration in the context of climate change has been linked to security ²⁰, humanitarianism ²¹, adaptation ²², risk management ²³, and trapped populations ²⁴, ²⁵. Here is not the place to review the full scope of the discourse. Suffice to say, however, that migration figures increasingly within the broad domain of international climate change governance in both the IPCC ²⁶ and in recently adopted Paris Agreement ²⁷. Climate change and migration is also an area of work in numerous other United Nations agencies, including the International Organization for Migration ²⁸ and the UN High Commission for Refugees ²⁹.

Several features of the discourse on climate change and migration do, however, warrant mention as they are central to the argument that the discourse is less concerned with governing the other of climate change than with resuscitating waning humanism. The first and most important feature of the discourse is that the phenomenon it purports to name is not directly observable. Migration decisions are irreducible to climate change, and are as much to do with unequal access to land and capital, gender inequality, colonial history, structural political economy and war as they are with environmental considerations. This insight is hardly controversial. It is foundational to the discourse and figures centrally in all manner of academic and policy research, including the IPCC. This is not to deny that climatic variation exists or that the impacts of climate change bear on migration decisions, now or in the future. Nor is it to deny any plausible correlation between migrant flows and models of climate change. It is simply to acknowledge that climate change cannot be isolated as any more or less significant than these others factors in explaining migration. As such, ‘climate change-induced migration’ does not correspond to any actually existing phenomenon in the world. To be more precise,

one cannot point to any particular migrant or refugee and claim that he or she is a climate refugee. Doing so would immediately run into the counter claim which is that migration is irreducible to climate change. So when we talk about 'climate migrants' or 'climate refugees' we are in effect inventing a category that corresponds with how we imagine the world to be, not one that describes the world as it really is. In this sense, we can say that the figures of the climate migrant or climate refugee are socially constructed phenomenon. The political underpinnings of this disjuncture between image and reality are legion ¹⁸. Most notably, the actual everyday experiences of those deemed to be climate migrants and refugees become masked, in turn, obscuring the real political contexts that mark daily life in those places.

This leads to the second important point which is to do with power and knowledge. More specifically, it concerns the power to represent migration as a function of climate change and the concomitant power to label someone a climate refugee or a climate change migrant. Often when these categories are invoked, those who invoke them do so with the very best of intentions: to reveal the real human face of climate change. Climate change is for many a vast injustice. The categories of the 'climate refugee' and the 'climate migrant' are a means of rendering climate change less an abstract hyperobject and more one that bears directly on human experience. Giving face to those supposedly displaced by climate change becomes a very powerful means of appealing to wider publics concerned with climate change. This is a humanitarian appeal. And yet in many of the places where we would expect these categories to find their greatest traction, for example in low lying island states, instead we find citizens of these states either actively refusing such labelling or prioritizing a range of other factors that might influence their decision to migrate with climate change a very low priority. In Kiribati, for example, the i-Kiribati have adopted a policy of 'migration with dignity', which attempts to resettle the i-Kiribati through actively negotiating with neighbouring states the terms of entry and settlement ³⁰. This is a policy partially informed by the post-colonial thinker Epeli Hau'ofa ³¹, who re-imagines Oceania through the collective solidarity of the Pacific islands. It is also one that refuses the trope of the helpless victim which is synonymous with notions like 'climate refugee' and 'climate migrant' as well as with the ideology of colonial intervention. Or take another example, the Maldives, which is often said to be on the frontline of climate change; its inhabitants will have no choice but to relocate. Recent research, however, suggests that climate change is not a prime reason for migrating from the Maldives ^{32, 33}. Maldivians are far more likely to cite improvements to their socio-economic condition as the reason they might migrate. Much has been said about these two examples. But for the purpose of the present argument, both are important because they expose the power asymmetries that shape the discourse on climate change and migration. A similar observation can be made in relation to security. All too often the so-called 'climate refugee' or 'climate migrant' is said to threaten various forms of security. In such

accounts, often promulgated by militaries and national security agencies, the climate migrant or climate refugee is said to catalyse political violence. Nowadays the Syrian civil war is held up as evidence of this quite dubious relation. In the recent past, the conflict in Darfur was often tainted by a similar claim. We know, however, that the claim that climate-induced migrations catalyses war rests on quite spurious evidence and is far from conclusive ^{34, 35}.

At issue in these two observations – the social constructedness of climate migrants and climate refugees and the power to represent people using these constructs – is the relationship between power and knowledge. For the purpose of this argument, the nature of this relationship is not, however, the idea that knowledge *is* power, or that if one possesses knowledge then one also possesses power. It is, rather, the idea that power is exercised through the very construction of knowledge ³⁶. In this sense, when one makes the claim that ‘climate change is a problem of migration’ one is already privileging specific forms of knowledge, such as climate modelling and population distributions and dynamics ³⁷, over and above, say, knowledge about the role that the socio-psychological and affective dimensions of place attachment play in migration decision making ²⁵. That is, specific kinds of knowledge produce an account of climate-migration dynamics that mask or subjugate other forms of knowledge. The abstract knowledges of climate modelling and demographics attain greater significance and therefore diminish the validity of other forms of knowledge, such as place attachment. And as Helen Adams ²⁵ argues, this matters greatly, especially where it concerns the types of knowledge that governments use when deciding on the liveability of a place and whether to encourage its inhabitants to migrate. The risk, of course, is that local knowledges become secondary to governmental imperatives, a risk with far-reaching consequences for often the most marginalised people.

Climate change, migration and the restoration of humanism

If those for whom the categories of ‘climate refugee’ and ‘climate migrant’ were invented refuse such labelling or downplay climate change as a reason to migrate, then one must ask: for whom is the discourse on climate change and migration? Why do the categories ‘climate migrant’ or ‘climate refugee’ persist even while refused by those they are apparently designed to assist? It could be that these categories reveal more about those who use them than about the people they are meant to describe. To help us think this through, let us turn to a very unlikely category: monsters. Monsters are figures that exceed the normal, gruesome disfigurements of the human form, figures that Jane and Lewis Gordon ³⁸ tell us are the survivors of disaster. And more than simply survivors, monsters are made to signify the symptoms of disaster. That is, monsters signify the crisis of values that led to the disaster. But, as Jane and Lewis Gordon also remind us, all too often we fail to heed the warnings

that monsters signify, displacing instead onto monsters our inability or refusal to respond collectively to the crisis of values from which monsters are said to emerge. We feel compelled to control and manage the monster, rather than use the monster as an opportunity to reflect on the crisis of values to which it gives rise, or rather to reflect on our values.

My wager is that something similar is at stake in the discourse of climate change and human mobility. I would argue that the figure of the climate migrant or climate refugee is a kind of monstrous figure, that such a figure exceeds our comprehension. Not unlike Morton's hyperobject, which can never *actually* be seen, we can never know what a climate migrant *actually* is. It cannot be neatly captured by any form of objective understanding. Much like the figure of abnormality in mediaeval Europe which was said to be monstrous and thus outside the law ³⁹, so too the figure of the 'climate refugee' and 'climate migrant' occupies a legal non-space inasmuch as neither are proper legal terms ⁴⁰. And yet this has not stopped us from mobilising the figure of the climate migrant or refugees across a range of epistemic domains from security to humanitarianism, from law to cinema. All the time, we hear claims like 'people will need to move as a result of climate change, so we need to devise policies that are aimed at ensuring *their* movements are orderly, humane and not chaotic.' And I would argue here that when we express the desire to manage human mobility in the context of climate change we are in effect displacing onto climate change migrants our inability to come to terms with the existential crisis brought about by the hyperobjectivity of climate change. In other words, in our inability to cope with our internal crisis of values – that our lives, worlds, political concepts, and desires are shaped by fossil fuels, the very thing that is our undoing – we displace this anxiety onto the other of climate change – the climate migrant – who we then seek to manage and control.

Ultimately, then, my claim is that the discourse on climate change and migration is less about managing the other of climate change than it is about shoring up a waning European or Western humanism. At a moment in our collective planetary history, one marked by profound environmental, economic and geopolitical uncertainty, the figure of the climate migrant or climate refugee offers a point of reference, one that ameliorates what Derek Gregory ⁴¹ calls 'cartographic anxiety', the feeling of waywardness that underpins the impulse to map. This is a discourse conjured by and for a range of epistemic communities and institutions, whether well-intentioned academics, humanitarians, and activists, military elites tasked with identifying new and emerging threats, or novelists and filmmakers who use the figure to tell us stories about ourselves. Even though ungraspable, much like an optical illusion that disappears the moment you look directly at it, the figure of the 'climate migrant' or 'climate refugee' emerges as a figure to cling to, a figure we might save, a figure from which to defend ourselves, a figure onto whom we project our greatest ambitions as well as our deepest anxieties. It offers the (false) promise of a restored humanity. As Zygmunt Baumann ⁴² put it recently, writing on the

current refugee situation in the Eastern Mediterranean: “The influx of a great number of refugees, and their sudden high visibility, draws to the surface fears that we are trying hard to stifle and hide: those fears that are gestated by the premonition of our own fragilities in society, and by the continuously reaffirmed suspicion that our fate is in the hands of forces far beyond our comprehension — let alone our control.”

Conclusion

What then is to be done? If the hyperobject of climate change forces us to confront our fragility, and, as I have argued, if the climate migrant or climate refugee is a merely prop for shoring up this fragility, how then might we respond to the not-unreasonable-claim that climate change will have some bearing on patterns of human mobility even if this bearing will always elude us? Perhaps what is needed is less a confrontation with the hyperobject of climate change, less a rushing out to save the ‘Other’ of climate change. Mitigating climate change ought to remain a public policy priority. But perhaps, so, too, we need to confront the crisis of values that the ‘Other’ of climate change signifies. Not only that our reliance on fossil fuels is also our undoing, but that in our rush to control the biophysical world, humanism never fully grasped that fossil fuels are themselves a manifestation of Nature’s return, the sediment of Earth’s ever-present physical volatility. Climate change is the price humanism is now forced to pay for neglecting this aspect of our planetary history. Consequently, perhaps, we need then is a more heightened ontological awareness about what it means to be human at a planetary moment when science has revealed to us that we inhabit a world saturated by hyperobjects. Climate science plays an important role in making the world available to us. But as Morton also intimates through their dispersal in time and space hyperobjects like climate change disclose to us ‘an abyss whose reality becomes increasingly uncanny, not less, the more scientific instruments are able to probe it’ (Ref. 15, p.233). ‘Knowledge,’ for Morton, thus ‘ceases to be demystification, if it ever was’ (Ref. 15, p.233). This in turn suggests that the task of rethinking human ontology ought to entail confronting the abyss rather than stifling it through illusions such as the climate refugee.

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