

It is entirely reasonable to assume that as climate change intensifies, human migration and displacement will result. Images of Bangladeshi peasants seeking refuge from the latest cyclone, or Californians fleeing suburban wildfires, affirm a sense that climate change is driving the next great migration. And yet the great paradox of 'climate migration' is that there is no such as thing as a 'climate migrant' or 'climate refugee'.

These are socially constructed categories. They may appear to reflect the world as it is. But when we peel back their veneer, we find, instead, a world of power and vested interests. Diagnosing this power is matter of pressing urgency for anyone concerned with politics of climate change today.

The main issue is climate change itself. When the impacts of climate change, such as extreme weather events or wildfires, are used to explain socio-political phenomena like migration, they obscure the underlying historical conditions of those they affect. Take, for example, coastal Bangladesh. For decades, shrimp farming and, more recently, soft-shell crab farming have radically transformed the coast of Bangladesh. Promoted by institutions like the World Bank, these practices are forms of economic development that earn Bangladesh much needed foreign exchange. But they have also devastated the coastal environment, dramatically altered peasant land tenure, and forced generations of rural peasants into precarious forms of wage labour. We might decry the impacts of climate change, and we might demand our governments do more to ensure 'climate justice' in places like Bangladesh. But when we explain rural-to-urban migration in Bangladesh in terms of climate change, we diminish this important history.

This is why we should be extremely wary of categories like ‘climate migrant’ and ‘climate refugee’. These constructs are designed to draw our attention away from historical explanation. When, for example, the World Bank claims that 143 million people are expected to become ‘internal climate migrants’ by 2050, it leaves little room for more nuanced historical accounts of migration. The World Bank wants us believe to that climate change is the most pressing threat facing the world’s most precarious, that climate change will force millions of people from their homes. However, by fostering this belief, the World Bank masks how its own policies and history have rendered precarious the very people it now claims to be helping.

Or take a different example, that of suburban California. There is no denying that climate change can explain the increasing frequency of wildfires that routinely wreak their havoc on the Californian suburbs. Nor can it be denied that many Californian homeowners are now selling up and moving to Minnesota and elsewhere. But when we explain wildfire and the resulting migration in terms of climate change alone—when we label this ‘climate migration’—we tell only half the story. Just as important is the history of home ownership in California. The uncomfortable fact is that the suburban landscape in California, however normalised it now appears, is the culmination of settler colonial history, the history of white flight, and the culture of auto-mobility. It is also the result of an economic model in which homeowners are now expected to meet the costs of old age, education and health care by selling up the family home. No wonder people are liquidating their only asset and moving from harms way. And yet to explain this migration in terms of climate change obscures not only the fact the accrual of wealth in the family home is a function of America whiteness, but that such wealth accrues unevenly along lines of race.

Readers of the late literary scholar, Edward Said, will be familiar with his concept of the other. Said's reading of European literature and art has tremendous import because it explains how the consolidation of nineteenth-century European humanism was made possible by this other. Central to Said's thesis is that Europe denied this other its own history. He sought to show how generations of European writers, artists, statesmen and conquerors imagined Europe's other living in a realm *outside* history. Orientalism was, for Said, not a form of knowledge that simply documented the reality of life in the Orient. It was an extension of European imperial power in which the other would be defined in terms of nature. It allowed Europe to believe it had a moral duty to intervene in the lives of the other, to modernise the other by bringing it into the folds of history.

We might say the same today about the figure of the climate migrant/refugee—'the other of climate change'. The circumstances we face today with climate change are, of course, dramatically different than those that prevailed during the nineteenth century. Still, constructs like 'climate migrant' and 'climate refugee' are analogous to the power that was the focus of Said's criticism. These categories are used to define vast numbers of people, including millions of the world's poorest, in terms of climate, as opposed to history. They render the history of places secondary to climate change, and in doing so, undermine the right people have to represent themselves on their own terms.

The power I am describing is not universal in form. Nor does it serve a singular set of interests. Bangladesh and California are not remotely equivalent. Yet in both cases, when climate change is used to explain socio-political phenomena like migration, social inequality is naturalised.

When we see categories like ‘climate migrant’ and ‘climate refugee’ in use today, we should treat them not as innocent descriptors of reality. Instead, they should alert us to the presence of an insidious power whose origins are European. Rather than accept these terms at face value, we might instead ask ourselves: for whom is the ‘climate migrant/refugee’?

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