

Concluding remarks: on the politics of climate change, migration and human rights

From 2011 to 2015 I had the good fortune of chairing a major European research initiative called *Climate change and migration: knowledge, law and policy, and theory*. Funded by COST, the project drew together a broad mix of social scientists and humanists from across Europe and around the world to map out the next generation of research in the rapidly expanding debate on climate change and migration. I must admit that when this project first took shape in 2010, my reading on the topic had been relatively limited, confined to just a few key texts and the odd media piece. Up until then the main focus of my research concerned the interrelationships between race, nature, power and space,¹ without any real attention paid to migration. But once the COST project got underway, the intellectual universe opened up to me in ways I never fully anticipated. Suddenly, I found myself in dialogue with legal scholars, environmental historians, political scientists, economists and international relations specialists, all of whom were speaking from their own disciplinary perspectives, and many of whom had been active participants in the climate change and migration debate for some time. This was a humbling experience to say the least. Not only did it force me to pay much closer attention to how I communicate my research to non-disciplinary audiences. So, too, it made me far more sensitive to the inherent challenges of interdisciplinary research. We were all taking about 'climate change and migration', but were we in fact talking about the same thing? Needless to say we did not agree on much (some might dispute this). But over the course of the project, I came realise that this is precisely the value of interdisciplinarity: to debate, to challenge, to contest, and to keep alive the democratic spirit of disagreement. On their own, climate change and migration are two of the most pressing political issues of our times. How we think about them *together* is of profound importance and worthy of our utmost scrutiny.

The essays gathered together in this volume represent a small but important slice of the wider COST dialogue on climate change and migration. The authors themselves were all active contributors to the COST project and share in common a commitment to thinking about climate change and migration through the lens of human rights. From a humanitarian perspective, this seems a pressing and obvious task. If current speculations about climate change bear out, then people the world over will find themselves in increasingly precarious conditions which may or may not necessitate physical relocation. Ensuring that the human rights of those who relocate or may need to relocate because of climate change are protected seems not only responsible but urgent. This collection of essays is a modest contribution towards that end. But if there is one overarching lesson I learned from chairing the COST project on climate change and migration, it has to be that however you slice it the relation between climate change and migration is deeply political. What I mean by this is that like all forms of knowledge those that link climate change and migration, including texts like this one, are never neutral and universal but are instead always partial and situated. This observation has been a standard truism in feminist philosophy and interpretive social science for well over three decades (Haraway, 1988, Haraway, 1991, Harding, 1991).

Acknowledging that knowledge is situated has implications for how we comprehend the relationship between climate change, migration and human rights. Doing so can help clarify how knowledge relates to wider questions of power and inequality. It can also bring us closer to clarifying what might be called 'the politics of climate change and migration'. That is, it can help us better understand how specific actors with differential access to power and with specific interests can mobilise knowledge claims about climate change and migration for very specific purposes. This is especially so when such knowledge claims concern the human rights of those who are said to migrate because of climate change. In their universalism human rights are often presumed to be above or apart from politics. Thus the act of assuming responsibility for those who migrate because of climate change on the grounds that such a migration violates their human rights adopts a universal ethical responsibility in

¹ Although now largely forgotten in Geography, these debates trace their origins to a set of now largely discredited discussions about migration, place and the environment popular in the nineteenth century right up until the 1950s.

relation to the migrant. Such a universal act of responsibility appears indisputable. But the universality of such a claim to responsibility does not make it any less political. If anything such universal claims merely veil their Eurocentric origins and thus their inherent political substance (Hobson, 2012, Bhabra et al., 2014, Buck-Morss, 2009). Or more theoretically, such universalism presupposes the *a priori* nature of the universal itself. It neglects to recognise that whatever counts as 'universal' is not naturally occurring but contingent upon articulations of the *particular* (Butler et al., 2000). More specifically, it fails to recognise that the particular is not just excluded from the universal, but, paraphrasing the feminist philosopher Judith Butler (1993) that the particular is already "inside" the universal as its own "founding repudiation" (p.3) As such, the universal is only called into being through the subordination of that which comes to be designated as particular. In this sense, it is important to recognise that even while the universal is heralded as a transcendent position, imagined to stand above and thus at a remove from and untainted by politics, the universal is itself always situated, forged from a knowledge located in European experience, history, philosophy and law. The non-European in turn comes to designate the particular, the situated, and the emplaced.

Some readers might interpret this critique of the universal as excessively theoretical. After all, climate change stands to violate the human rights of actual people. People will be forced to relocate because of climate change even while they themselves are not responsible for climate change. The immediate injustice of this situation demands not excessively complicated theorisations but responsible action to ensure their rights are not jeopardised. But to discount the way in which the universalism of human rights discourse is shaped by issues of power and exclusion is to displace power from the frame of human rights altogether, a move symptomatic of the wider depoliticisation of climate change (Bettini, 2013, Brown, forthcoming). And this has important implications for how we conceive of responsible action in relation to the migration effects of climate change, whether such effects are real or imagined. Displacing considerations of power from the terrain of human rights delimits the very terms of responsible action. For example, it limits responsible action to ensuring the human rights of those forced to relocate from climate change, rather than including within the scope of responsible action efforts to expose how power functions in relation to knowledge claims about human rights, climate change and migration. Writing from a postcolonial perspective which broadly acknowledges the way colonial and imperial power continues to shape all manner of development contexts, Patricia Noxolo, Parvati Ragurham and Clare Madge (2012) argue that "responsible action is never free of its locational imperatives and its identifications so that the responsible agent is always tainted: there is no pure space within and from which responsibility can be enacted" (p.422). This insight should give us pause to consider how power is implicated in constructions of knowledge of climate change and migration in terms of human rights, efforts that include, for example, anthologies such as the present volume. Indeed, when we take account of such power we are led to ask a different set of questions: For whom is the discourse on climate change, migration and human rights? Whose knowledge is used in efforts to link climate change and migration to human rights? Whose interests does this knowledge serve? Where does this knowledge come from? And what are its effects?

Silja Klepp and Johannes Herbeck (this volume) rehearse elements of this argument when making their case for investigating the politics of climate change and migration in both the European Union and Oceania using the "legal anthropology of emergence." Implied in their argument is that the "top-down" (p.X) nature of the debate on climate change and migration in the European Union presupposes its universality. Klepp and Herbeck then provide a counternarrative, one in which actors in Oceania refuse their implied particularity in favour of a more situated approach to the articulation of legal rights, and one which decentres Eurocentrism. But such questions of power and knowledge construction come into sharper relief when we compare Robin Bronen's chapter (this volume) on the very real, material struggles of the Newtok in Alaska with Anja Mihr's (this volume) more abstract account of the relationship between migration, climate change and the concept of climate justice. The story Bronen tells concerns the structural impediments that the Newtok have faced in their attempt to resettle to a place free of coastal erosion and saline inundation. Bronen then uses the Newtok story to

specify how human rights should be made a fundamental dimension of planned relocation due to climate change. There is much about this story that merits attention, but what makes it so important is that it is a *situated* form of knowledge, situated, that is, in a geographically located political struggle for indigenous self-determination. The meaning of human rights in this context derives from the fact that the Newtok are actively engaged in a struggle over land, a struggle that is only partly to do with climate change and much more to do with self-determination and overturning the structural conditions of settler colonialism. When the Newtok mobilise human rights in this context they are making a territorial claim to the land to which they have historically been denied. What Bronen provides, then, is a very situated form of knowledge about the human rights dimensions of climate change and resettlement.

Now compare this with Anja Mihr's contribution. Writing from a universal subject position, Mihr carves out for herself an elevated, transcendent view that constructs a universal knowledge of climate change, migration and human rights. For her part, Mihr articulates a role for human rights in ensuring something called 'climate justice', assumed throughout her essay as an abstract, universal concept. In formulating her argument, Mihr coins the concept of 'climate victims', a term she uses to describe "marginalised or vulnerable groups that do not have legal status neither [sic] domestically nor internationally" (p.X) due to the fact they have had to migrate because of climate change. What Mihr seems to be arguing for is a human rights regime for those she claims are 'climate victims'. There are a number of problems with this account not least the very causal use of climatic reductionism that runs throughout much of her argument, the assumption that climate causes mobility (Hulme, 2011). So, too, it is underpinned by a very ambiguous, even Eurocentric, geography which assumes that 'climate victims' will appear predominantly "in poor or/and less democratic countries in Asia and Africa" (pX), even while acknowledging that such victims exist in "peaceful and democratic countries". But aside from these problems, what sets Mihr's analysis apart from Bronen's is that whereas Bronen builds her human rights account from an actual, historically situated struggle over land, Mihr develops a universal form of knowledge abstracted from any specific historical circumstance and in which the category of 'climate victim' can be applied in a top-down manner. Or in slightly different terms we can say that Mihr's 'climate victim' is precisely the founding repudiation of the universal position from which she writes. In other words, Mihr must fabricate the concept of 'climate victim' in order for her universal position to appear as such. Mihr is not wrong to worry over 'climate justice' and clearly she offers her account with the best of intentions. But in deriving her account from a set of abstract universal principles, she inadvertently masks the imperial assumptions that organise her intervention, such as the assumed right to label groups as vulnerable in ways that may well run counter to their own self-representation and political ambitions.

Two important observations can be drawn from the foregoing comparison between Bronen and Mihr. The first concerns the value of postcolonial theory in coming to terms with the politics of constructing climate change, migration and human rights as a universal site of knowledge formation. A postcolonial account of responsibility, such as that offered by Noxolo et al. (2012), is important then because it can help us appreciate how such claims of responsibility may in fact mobilise a kind of knowledge that is at cross-purposes with the political aims of those it is intended to assist (see also Kothari, 2014). If anything, the Newtok are not 'climate victims', but victims of colonial dispossession and, as such, their invocation of human rights is not based on their vulnerability to climate change, but on their historical knowledge of the land from which they have been forcibly displaced. In this sense, it is important to understand that when the Newtok invoke human rights in their effort to resettle away from the detrimental effects of climate change, they do so in a manner consistent with their aims of indigenous self-determination. Not unlike Klepp and Herbeck, various commentators have also identified a similar dynamic in which various actors in Pacific island contexts have actively refused attempts by Western media and development authorities to label the inhabitants of the Pacific islands 'climate refugees' (Farbotko, 2010, Farbotko and Lazrus, 2012, McNamara and Gibson, 2009), a term not too dissimilar from Mihr's 'climate victims.'

But if postcolonial theory can help expose the gap between, on the one hand, the way that universalist knowledge particularises certain groups in the language of vulnerability, victimhood, remoteness, indigeneity and so forth, and, on the other, the self-representation of those very groups, then a postcolonial perspective offers additional value to the debate about climate justice by directing attention to the question of scale. Following arguments now beginning to surface in my disciplinary home of Geography (Fisher, 2015), it would seem that achieving something called 'climate justice' requires more than simply an appeal to human rights in the abstract, but so, too, it requires studious attention to the specific historical geographic contexts within which and about which such claims to climate justice are made. In this respect, it is important to remember that scale matters in how we approach our understanding of climate justice. For example, claims to climate justice that are made in relation to REDD+ must be understood to be substantively different than those formulated in urban contexts (Bulkeley et al., 2013, Bulkeley et al., 2014). Both are separated by radically different political and economic contexts thereby complicating any simple attempt to establish a set of solid foundations upon which universal legal principles like climate justice might be forged.

The second important observation is that at stake in the discussion about climate change, migration and human rights is that it contains a full-fledged politics of place. As might already be clear, this is partly a politics to do with struggles over the power to represent place. The claim that some places by virtue of the migration effects of climate change are in need of human rights, or that climate change will exacerbate existing or result in novel human rights violations, stands in contrast to the place-less quality that attaches to the universality of human rights. Places, whether Bangladesh (Ackerly, this volume) or Alaska (Bronen, this volume), become marked by their absence of human rights or by the threat that climate change poses to those rights. Such places are subsequently made available to various forms of exogenous intervention on the promise of the installation or restoration of rights for those who move as a result of climate change. In this sense, the movements of otherwise emplaced people come to be understood in relation to human rights which may or may not accord with their own styles of self-representation. Also at stake in this politics of place, however, concerns the power to dissimulate the emplaced nature of claims to universality. Whereas places designated as in need of human rights are said to be *particular* and thus emplaced, the Eurocentric origins of the universal concept that underpins human rights are masked. That is, the place (Europe) from which the universal is derived is fully negated. As such, human rights are said to be universal even while they originate from the very particular history of Europe.

In this short conclusion, I have argued that the knowledge of climate change, migration and human rights is not universal but situated. My point, however, is not to negate the importance of this knowledge but merely to call attention to its contingent nature, to remind us that even while climate change is a matter of pressing concern, to manage its migration effects through human rights law is a very particular and thus political undertaking. Acknowledging the contingent nature of this knowledge is, in turn, important because it allows us to widen the terms of responsible action. It allows us to pose questions about whether this form of knowledge is indeed best suited for managing the migration effects of climate change or whether other forms of knowledge, such as indigenous knowledge, might equally be up to the task. Indeed, if climate change demands that we ask fundamental questions about what it means to live in the world today or about what kind of life is possible as we stand on the threshold of profound global environmental change, then perhaps answers to these questions can be found in the experiences of human life and living that are not synonymous with what today we understand to be modernity.

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