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'Climate Migration': what role for research in the age of post-truth?

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Abstract

The era of 'post-truth' is often described as one in which there has been an objective rise in the number of untruthful statements in the public sphere. This paper not only makes the case that the era can, perhaps, alternatively be described as one in which there has, conversely, been a decline in the faith people have in the very idea of objective truth, but further argues that this decline is entirely rational.

Through an examination of the emotive but contested theme of 'climate migration', the paper argues that technocratic institutions have long traded in epistemic equivocation, which is beginning to undermine public trust in 'expertise' and the process of public policy. To restore this trust, researchers must not only seek to be 'policy relevant', but also be vigilant against the pattern of equivocation which is evident in policy-oriented discourses such as that on 'climate migration'.

Keywords: climate change; migration; post-truth; climate mobility; policy

A few months before the COVID-19 pandemic began, in November 2019, perhaps the leading journal on climate change, *Nature Climate Change*, published a Special Issue on 'Climate Migration'. Perhaps the most prominent paper in this collection was a comment piece titled 'Climate Migration Myths', co-authored by thirty-one leading scholars on the topic.[1]

This paper was significant for a particular reason: its premise, rather than its conclusion, was that we cannot coherently talk about 'climate migration'. From the outset of the paper, they argue that we need to question, not confirm, the 'assumption that climate change causes mass human migration', because 'migration is not solely driven by climate change', but instead by a 'mix of climatic, socio-economic, cultural and political factors'.[2]

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[1] Boas, Farbotko, Adams, Sterly, Bush, van der Geest, Wiegel, Ashraf, Baldwin, Bettini, Blondi, de Bruijn, Durand-Delacre, Fröhlich, Gioli, Guaita, Hut, Jarawura, Lamers, Lietaer, Nash, Piguet, Rothe, Sakdapolrak, Smith, Furlong, Turhan, Warner, Zickgraf, Black, Hulme, 2019, pp. 898–903.

[2] Ibid. p. 902.

They went on to note that 'even when climate change does play a role, it remains difficult to determine the extent of its influence'. From this, they make clear that 'categorizing climate migrants as distinguishable from "non-climate migrants" is not empirically possible in most, if not all, circumstances. As a consequence, predictions of mass climate-induced migration are inherently flawed'.[3]

None of these startling statements would provoke much controversy among researchers who have worked on this topic for some time. If there is one pattern that holds true across literature on the topic, it is precisely that we do not know what 'climate migration' is supposed to be, as distinct from 'non-climate migration', nor – by extension – who 'climate migrants' are, relative to any other sort of migrant.

This absence of controversy among the initiated is at least in part attributable to the general findings and, indeed, the intellectual and moral tenor of migration studies. Among scholars, migration decisions are widely understood to be 'always mediated through complex political, social and economic structures'.[4] In making these decisions, migrants themselves are also conceived as conscious agents who respond to their environment with a plurality of subjective mores, motives and forms of meaning, rather than simply passive 'victims', driven blindly by environmental hazards.[5]

However, the absence of controversy is also partly attributable to the specific findings – or lack thereof – of research on 'climate migration' itself. Indeed, within this sub-field, it is broadly agreed that 'no accepted definition of "climate migration".... actually exists',[6] and that attempts to quantify 'climate migrants' are 'on shaky ground methodologically, and fail to recognise the multi-causality of migration and… climate change adaptation efforts'.[7] Such attempts are seen to give 'the illusion of a deeper understanding of [causal linkage]',[8] and that climate change should be at best 'understood as a threat or impact multiplier, rather than being a tangible risk that a person can be exposed and vulnerable to'.[9] 'CM' has therefore been argued to be an 'intrinsically equivocal concept',[10] perennially unmoored from any actual constituency. There are migrants, but there are no

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[3] Ibid. p. 902.
[4] Hulme 2014, p .509.
[5] Gemenne 2011, pp. 41–49.
[6] Nash 2019, p 8.
[7] Ibid., p. 6.
[8] Ibid., p. 6.
[9] Scott 2020, p. 10.
[10] Nicholson 2017, p. 49.

climate migrants – 'there is no solution to "climate migration" because "climate migration" is not an issue in and by itself'.[11]

As such, while the premise of the *Nature Climate Change* article is hardly controversial among experts, it was nevertheless unusual and significant to see such a clear and emphatic declaration that the concept is a non-starter, by such a large group of leading scholars, in such a prominent journal.

Their statement may nevertheless seem puzzling to those who have not worked directly on the topic. Because, at a general level, it seems intuitively self-evident that climate change will impact human migration. However, the question is not whether, at some *general* level – familiar to complexity theorists – everything affects everything else. Rather, the question is whether we can ever actually identify any *specific* person, or group, who we can say were driven exclusively, or overwhelmingly, by climate change. And what is gained, and what is lost, when climate change is privileged in our analysis of the so-called 'drivers' of migration?

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For example, sometimes we hear that Syrian refugees were fleeing drought caused by climate change,[12] or that drought caused internal migration that caused conflict.[13] However, these causal claims are defined by their exclusion of the all-important role of social and political context. What political-economic factors influenced the drought?[14] What political tensions led to conflict? What political considerations led to the need to migrate internationally, rather than internally? The dominant factors in all these are often – indeed always – political, as disaster risk reduction scholars have long argued.[15] There is a real risk that, in reframing forms of migration as 'climatic' as opposed to political or economic, we engage in a form of political 'greenwashing' – absolving political actors of their responsibility, and ultimately failing to understand the factors that may be acted upon to improve things, regardless of whether one's goal is to protect migrants, stop migration, or both.

As such, the term 'climate migration' has unfortunate consequences both for research and for policy. But what actually is the problem with the term itself, and the causality it implies? There are a number of ways to describe these problems, but perhaps the clearest way is to identify the flawed metaphor that the concept 'climate

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[11] Mayer 2016, p. 301.
[12] Kelley et al 2015, pp. 3241–3246.
[13] Briggs, 2021.
[14] Selby et al 2017, pp. 232–244.
[15] Scott 2020.

migration' holds implicit, and indeed, which lies at its foundations – a metaphor that is, essentially, derived from Classical Mechanics.

As we all remember from school, Isaac Newton's Three Laws of Motion are as follows:

a) That an object will remain as it is unless acted upon by a force;
b) That the movement of an object is proportional to the force applied to it;
c) That every action leads to an equal and opposite reaction.

It would seem to be this model that underpins and frames our thinking when we think about 'climate migration'. It is, after all, a causal concept which assumes that:

a) A person would otherwise not migrate unless acted upon or motivated by some external force (in this case, climate change);
b) That their migration, once it occurs, will then be proportional to that external force;
c) And that the degree of 'threat' or 'challenge' so-called 'climate migrants' pose to the receiving society will be proportional to their numbers.

It is arguable that this metaphor is always implied when we talk about so-called 'climate migration'. However, to the extent this is true, it is simply an inappropriate, and therefore flawed, metaphor in the context in which it is applied. This is because it presumes that people – call us *terrestrial bodies* – can be understood and modelled as physics does celestial ones; it presumes that we are inanimate things, rather than animate people – people with our own minds, mores, motives, and forms of meanings, inclusive of our highly subjective understanding of risk.

People do not necessarily wait to be acted upon by some external force in order to take action, be it to migrate, or indeed to do anything else; when we are compelled to react to external factors and our circumstance, we do not necessarily do so in a linear fashion that can be predicted based on, or extrapolated from, an understanding of the factor or force in question; and once we have taken the action in question (in this case having migrated), we do not necessarily provoke a level of reactive hostility, let alone 'cause problems', in proportion to the scope and scale of the action itself.

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Philosophers of Science have long drawn an important and useful distinction between Science and Scientism. Put simply, if *Science* is a set of methodologies and tools for excavating material facts that are of contextual use for society, *Scientism*, by contrast, describes those circumstances where we believe science may also serve as a guide to excavating the 'truth' of what society's values ought to be. While presenting itself as an exercise in the former, 'Climate Migration' would appear to in fact be an example of the latter.

The concept of 'climate migration', therefore, is not in actual fact a *scientific* one. We cannot simply extrapolate from a quantitative understanding of the physical science of climate change to understand, let alone predict, the qualitative impact of climate change on migration, or indeed the impact of migration on society. Rather, 'climate migration' would appear to be a *scientistic* concept – an attempt to stretch and apply the idiom of science well beyond its range of competence, and thus coherence.

We can plainly see the resulting incoherence in the empirical literature on 'climate migration'. As I've argued elsewhere,[16] the result of this flawed metaphor is that, in lieu of saying anything clearer, the literature – in an effort to say *something* – lapses into six tendencies.

The first is *contradiction*. For example, in a 2021 piece, Ingrid Boas writes that 'there is no direct connection between climate change and human migration', before proceeding, in the same piece, to refer to 'the issue', 'this issue', 'this highly complex issue', 'such movements', 'the movement', 'people…deeply affected', 'the matter', and 'how this type of mobility unfolds', and ends the piece by stating that 'the issue of climate mobilities is real'.[17] Within this is a contradiction – or perhaps a sort of epistemic superposition – where it is first denied that there is a discernible relationship between climate change and migration, but also then claimed that there is one. This is what we might call 'Quantum Reasoning' – where the speaker occupies contradictory positions simultaneously. Like Schrödinger's Cat, the idea of 'climate migration' is both dead and alive at the same time. The contradiction brings to mind an observation of Andrew Abbott, who wrote, in reference to the hegemony of causal explanation among sociologists, that 'action and contingency disappear into the magician's hat of variable-based causality, where they hide during the analysis, only to be reproduced with a flourish in the article's closing paragraphs'.[18]

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[16] Nicholson 2014.
[17] Boas 2021.
[18] Abbott 1998, p. 3.

The second tendency is *logical tautology*. In these cases, statements are made that are necessarily true, as they include both possible options, but not useful, because they do not determine or project which option will, in fact, be the case. Examples include statements to the effect that 'environmental change is equally likely to make migration less as more probable';[19] that there is a continuum from forced to voluntary migration;[20] that some people will flee areas of climate stress, and others will remain;[21] that 'people are as likely to migrate to places of environmental vulnerability as from these places';[22] and that 'we see highly varied forms of human mobility and immobility'.[23] All these claims are true because they could not be otherwise: they are pure tautologies – incontrovertibly true, but completely useless as a guide to understanding, let alone action.

The third tendency is *arbitrariness*. In these cases, a specific case or anecdote is cited, about a particular event or community, where environmental factors have some bearing on a societal outcome. However, it is in the nature of these very specific instances that one cannot induce general claims about the impact of climate from them, transcendent of local social, political, and economic circumstance. A community may indeed have to react to an environmental change of some sort. However, the formulation of this reaction will inevitably have much to do with local culture – inclusive of priorities, attitudes to risk, and so on – to the extent that it is impossible to induce a general causal 'law' between the environmental 'independent variable' and the societal 'dependent variable', which may be applied deductively to other cases.[24]

The fourth tendency is the use of *platitude* – that is, to make claims that are general and sweeping in nature, but which nevertheless offer us little if any guidance on what might occur in any specific case or circumstance. For instance, to state that 'there is a causal connection between climate change and population movement, but this is often not direct and is mediated by a range of factors, playing out in different ways'.[25] Sometimes such general statements are in fact framed as negations, describing what is missing. When people talk of the need for a governance framework for 'climate migration', they are not offering a clear

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[19] Foresight: migration and Global Change (2011) Final Project Report (London: The Government Office for Science). p. 6.
[20] Hugo 2010, p. 12.
[21] Barnard – Webber 2010, p. 40.
[22] Foresight: migration and Global Change (2011) Final Project Report (London: The Government Office for Science). P. 6.
[23] Boas 2021.
[24] Oliver-Smith 1999.
[25] Ibid.

explanation of what is needed, but rather, simply describing – by negation – what we lack.

The fifth tendency is what we might term '*category laundering*'. In the same pieces, we might see a panoply of different terms that all seek to explain the same causal relationship between climate and migration. For instance, in Boas' 2021 piece, these include 'climate migration', 'the climate/migration nexus', 'climate mobilities', and 'mobility in the context of climate change'.[26] The variety of terms suggests a topic that is ill at ease with itself. For, if the underlying ontological claim is stable, why the need to continue shifting the categories we use? And if the claim is unstable, what precisely are the terms describing? Indeed, if they do not share so much in common as to have an identical referent, then what specifically sets them apart? Perhaps, however, if the central causal claim is not clear, the language is simply being 'laundered', as one would launder money, in order to arrest any logical chain of critical investigation.

The final and sixth tendency is what we might call '*epistemic can-kicking*', or equivocation. This is the tendency to tacitly acknowledge the failure of current research by simply calling for more research. Boas' piece, again, provides a good example of this. Despite earlier writing that 'there is no direct connection between climate change and human migration', she goes on to add that 'climate mobilities is [sic] an important subject of concern, in need of further research'.[27] However, she does not make clear how future research might avoid the errors in present research that have led to the need for more.

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It is for all these reasons that the *Nature Climate Change* paper took a *rejection* of the term 'climate migration', and the causality it implies, as its premise. However, in reframing the research agenda to instead focus on 'climate mobility', the 31 co-authors either do not escape the causal assumption they seek to avoid, or if they do, then they are no longer really talking about climate or even migration *per se*. That is, they're either engaging in a distinction without a difference, or they are doing something so different as to be essentially irrelevant to any discussion of climate or migration. This is a provocative claim, and requires some explanation.

In order to avoid the causal assumption, the authors emphasise the need for 'research that better accounts for the nonlinear complexity of mobility in the

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[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid.

context of climate change and social change', to counteract the 'linear "crisis" and "mass" migration assumptions' – built on attempts to quantify and predict 'climate migration' – that are widespread in the news media and policy discourses. To do this, they define 'mobility' as encompassing short and long-term movement; near and long-distance movement; movement to and from a particular location; impacts of such movement on places of origin, transit and destination; the realities of multicausality; and immobility.[28]

However, if they are indeed avoiding the idea of 'climate migration', and if the intentionally general phrase 'context of climate change' is used to keep the causal relationship between 'climate change' and 'mobility' vague, it does raise the question of why they privilege 'mobility' as a societal effect of climate change? Or indeed, why do they privilege 'climate' as an influence on 'mobility'? Surely, by the inclusive logic of 'climate mobilities', climate affects everything, not just migration; and mobility (to the extent this refers to movement rather than just society in general) is affected by everything, not just climate? What, therefore, does the 'climate mobility' framework advance, in terms of a positive project for understanding the societal impacts of climate change? The problem is, when everything is amplified, the risk is that nothing is clarified. If we can say *any*thing, or even *every*thing, we're actually, logically speaking, closer to saying *no*thing than we are to saying *some*thing. We are, at any rate, no better than when we started.

These paradoxes typify where research on the relationship between climate change and human migration is in 2021. After more than two decades of research, there remains little to no clarity as to what 'climate migration' is, or who it could possibly refer to. To talk coherently on the topic requires one to make a mechanical causal claim. But the moment we make such a claim, we are no longer talking usefully about the real world. This is a paradox that has stalked this topic for at least a decade – the elephant in the room at every conference on this topic.

Yet, curiously – and as the *Nature Climate Change* paper I've mentioned itself shows – these problems have not actually slowed the topic down, nor tempered interest in 'it', whatever 'it' – 'climate migration' – is supposed to be. In her 2019 monograph, *Negotiating Migration in the Context of Climate Change*, Sarah Nash has demonstrated that various institutions are engaged in – to draw on a metaphor from finance – what we could call a sort of intellectual self-trading, or perhaps 'epistemic manipulation', in which they are involved in 'creating knowledge [in response] to… calls they have had a hand in creating'.[29] What is the motivation

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[28] Boas et al 2019, p. 902.
[29] Nash 2019, p. 180.

for this sort of incestuously circular relationship, which overlooks the elephant in the room? As one of Nash's interviewees admits, in a moment of startling candor: 'we have to position the organization in a way that we can apply for adaptation funding, and green funding, and climate funding'.[30] In short, elephants become less visible if people's livelihoods depend on ignoring them.

At this point, it's worth considering: why are we interested in 'climate migration' at all? It is undoubtedly for important and valid reasons.

First, since the end of the Cold War, climate change has become the most politically resonant branch of the sciences. We care about climate change because a) the data shows the climate is changing, and that these changes are likely anthropogenic, and b) we are worried about the societal consequences of a changing climate.

Second, and also since the end of the Cold War, migration has become perhaps the most politically resonant theme within the social sciences. These two trends dovetail together, because, in the spectrum of supposed causal societal impacts of climate change, migration has – plausibly enough – been presumed to be low-hanging fruit for research and policy. Indeed, it seems almost 'obvious' that climate would be a major 'cause' of migration, just as it seems 'obvious' that migration might be a – if not 'the' – major 'effect' of climate change.

One's interest in migration may come from various positions, of course. Some have a humanitarian interest in the well-being of migrants, others a national security – or indeed cultural – interest in stopping migration. These concerns are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but in either case, the concern pivots on a presumption that we can a) determine the relationship between climate and migration, and b) distinguish a 'climate migrant' from any other form of migrant.

However, the problem is self-evident: while the science of climate change seems reasonably clear, the social science of its impacts simply *is* not. Where there is a pattern of conclusions in social science, it is that conclusions cannot – or at least have not – been drawn. But this failure to find answers to our questions is not, arguably, something we need be too distressed about, for there is something that failure very usefully encourages us to reconsider: the role and responsibility of researchers.

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As researchers, and especially social scientists, where do we believe our real value lies? Naturally enough, most would argue it lies in *producing* knowledge – finding

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[30] Ibid. p. 50.

answers – that can form an evidence base for efficient and effective policy-making. However, there is an argument to be made that this is only half the role, and perhaps even the less important half. The other role we play is far less glamorous, and often far less welcome, but potentially of far more consequence. This role is not so much to provide *certainty in our answers*, as it is to *clarify our questions* – and if needs be to literally *clear away bad questions* that may, far from being the means by which we solve our collective problems, actually be expressions, or symptoms, *of* those problems.

The meaning of this may make more sense if we first reflect on the concept of 'post-truth'. There are, it would seem, two different ways to interpret the idea of 'post-truth'. The first is focused on the *producer* of knowledge, and the second on the *consumer*.

On the one hand, the 'post-truth' era can be seen as one in which there has been an objective *rise* in untruthful statements in the public domain – 'fake news', 'alternative facts', and so on. This author is sceptical of this argument, simply because ideology has always filtered how we see the world. The primary difference today is not in the existence of falsehood or obfuscation, but rather in how fast and how wide such beliefs can spread, largely due to social media.

On the other hand, the 'post-truth' era can be seen as a time in which there has been a *decline* in the trust people have in the very idea of objectivity, and increasingly – and perhaps rightly – in anyone who claims to be an objective, authoritative expert, free from any ideological filter. The exceptional thing about the 'post-truth' age seems to be less that more 'untruth' is being produced than before, and more that people are increasingly cognizant of just how political all the knowledge they consume in fact is.

And indeed, why shouldn't the general public be sceptical of any claim to expert authority, particularly where it involves society rather than just science? Take, for example, the literature on 'climate migration'. Despite over twenty years of research, clear conclusions have yet to be drawn, and there is little clarity as to what the object of concern even is. As argued, contradictions litter the literature; institutions advocate for action, even when they themselves admit they do not know who the subject of action would be; and there are constant calls for more research, and more funding, even as no one can state clearly how new research might avoid the pitfalls of old research, not least its inappropriately mechanical framing, and therefore how further funding might be usefully directed. Why,

therefore, should anyone believe such 'experts', after the repeated failure to find conclusions, and the leveraging of such failure to appeal for more funding?

How we talk – and how we fail to make sense – when we discuss 'climate migration' may not reveal much about the world itself, not least the *effects* of climate change, or the *causes* of migration; it may not 'provide great insights into the lives of the people being labelled'. However, it does, perhaps, reveal something about how mechanically we think in our modern, technocratic cultures; it can 'provide insights into the people and organisations that use [such labels]'.[31] And it is therefore perhaps entirely reasonable that there is a growing scepticism of technocratic authorities and institutions.

When we look across the political spectrum, from the neopuritan left to the neonationalist right, what we see are antithetical movements that are nevertheless united in what they both reject. Specifically, they share a general rejection of a model of thought and 'governance', dominant in the West for half a century or more, that is founded on a culturally specific and mechanical idea of what constitutes 'truth', and particularly a rejection of the people who claim to be 'experts' and authorities in this mechanical worldview, and who claim it as a basis for both governing society, and engineering justice.

The way we discuss 'climate migration' is, perhaps, best understood as simply an expression, or symptom, of a particular way and culture of thinking and seeing the world – a sort of secular faith in the authority of technocratic experts in apolitical 'truth' – that has lost its nimbus. This loss has in part been because of that culture's failures – notably the cataclysm that was the 2008 financial crisis, and more recently the attempts at nation-building in Iraq and Afghanistan. But this culture's loss of authority is also in part because of its hypocrisies – the realisation that it is no less political or ideological or self-interested than anything that came before, and no more dispassionate or objective than any alternative.

Faced with this 'post-truth' moment, and in the context of climate change, researchers arguably have a clear role and an important responsibility. Yes, we should identify patterns in the real, empirical world of people where we find them. But where such patterns are not forthcoming, and there is instead a compensatory pattern of equivocation in the ideal, conceptual world of politics, we should identify that too, particularly where there is a clear pattern of repeated failure, and subsequent attempts to launder that failure, and engage in intellectual self-trading or epistemic manipulation.

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[31] Ibid. p. 138.

Without identifying patterns in the real world, we will not be able to build evidence-based *public policy*. But without identifying patterns in what people say and do to disguise that they've failed to find empirical patterns in the real world, then it will not be possible to build *public trust* – and indeed trust will be lost, as it has been. And without trust, no one – least of all researchers – will ultimately be in a position to advise anyone; authors are only authorities if enough people believe them. As researchers, we therefore have a role – and surely a responsibility – to encourage caution as much as confidence in our knowledge, and to invoke humility where, as a society, we risk hubris in our actions. This is needed in many areas of knowledge today, but certainly in the context of the social sciences around the societal impacts of climate change, and particularly with regard to the effects of climate on human migration.

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