

Climate Change and Militarized Adaptation Along the U.S. - Mexico Border

On October 18th, 2018, as a “caravan” of migrants composed mainly of individuals and families from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador headed north through Mexico, Donald Trump, the President of the United States, tweeted “...I must, in the strongest of terms, ask Mexico to stop this onslaught - and if unable to do so I will call up the U.S. Military and CLOSE OUR SOUTHERN BORDER!” (Lind, 2018). While the migrants were stopped just short of the United States border by the Mexican government, members of the U.S. Border Patrol fired tear gas into Mexico at a group of around 150 migrants approaching the border fence just over a month later. At the time, the November gassing episode highlighted issues of legal use of force across sovereign borders (Specia and Gladstone, 2018), but the most lasting takeaway was a widely-circulated photograph of Maria Mesa, a migrant from Honduras, running with her two 5-year-old daughters away from a nearby active tear gas canister. Dominant news reports from the November event often noted one of her children’s bare feet, and Ms. Mesa’s assertion that she thought her “...kids were going to die...” (Chokshi, 2018).

As portrayals of large-scale human mobility¹ have increasingly proliferated into public consciousness over the past decade, policy, academic, and media discourses in the Global North have begun to describe this mobility as a “crisis,” and have also started actively tying the “crisis” to climate change. These crisis narratives have helped shape the responses to these human flows, with the standard outcome being increased securitization around borders. While such a crisis-laden depiction of human mobility is evocative and attention-grabbing for media outlets, it is nevertheless problematic from multiple angles: the complexity of human mobility is lost, with monolithic characterizations of “climate refugees/migrants” replacing individual stories and experiences; apocalypse, threat, and crisis narratives, whether tied to large-scale human mobility or not, are often rooted in misconceptions and are likely to produce

¹ I often use the terms *human mobility* and *migration* interchangeably throughout the paper: recent literature on terminology argues *mobility* captures the greater complexity of why individuals move, though *migration* is still dominantly referenced.

militarized responses; and finally, the ascription of climate change as a causal factor is particularly well-suited to ignore and obfuscate the often inherited historical and interrelated socio-political factors that drive mobility.

Introduction

Earnestly investigating these problematic narratives requires a strong conceptual and historical grounding. Recent dominant policy and academic discourses have sought to connect the three strands of anthropogenic climate change, conflict, and migration: for example, multiple articles connected climate-fueled drought in Syria with the outbreak of civil war and a proceeding increase in outmigration (Selby et al., 2017). Global media outlets have adopted and furthered this narrative, increasingly and often directly tying human migration to climate change (Farbotko & Lazrus, 2012) – including in the “northern triangle” of Central America, where the majority of those currently crossing the southern U.S. border originate (Markham, 2019). This dominant, apolitical narrative is not exclusive to academia and the media, either, but is also found in high-level international organizations and official policy-making. These begin with general environmental security analyses that posit causal relationships between resource scarcity, migration, and conflict. A foundational, dominant narrative is the *Ecological Marginalization* theory, which seeks to connect population growth and dwindling local resource access to intra- and interstate migration that can result in conflict in countries and areas that receive migrants (Homer-Dixon, 1994).

Building on this groundwork, updated environmental security theories and analyses focus strongly on incorporating climate change as a main causal factor in conflict and migration, with a diverse range of authors publishing work in this area. For example, academics (Kelley et al., 2015), The World Bank (Verme et al., 2015), and official intergovernmental reports (Adelphi et al., 2015) represent a sampling of the literature providing this line of reasoning. Much of this literature engages on only a cursory level with socio-political factors that may help explain both conflict and human mobility, and it is these narratives that form the backdrop onto which the critical lens of this study will focus on.

The purpose of this paper is to review existing literature at the intersection of these problematic discourses, as well as to advance those readings by building critical arguments around three concepts related to climate change and human mobility: how crisis narratives are created, how the construction of concepts such as “climate refugee” help support these narratives, and how border militarization is both an outcome and progenitor of these two construction processes. Relevant questions that this paper will answer are as follows: How do dominant narratives in the Global North linking climate change to human mobility construct “crisis,” and reinforce militarized responses? What is the process of environmental and border militarization, and how does it forcibly contribute to the creation of “climate refugee” and “climate migrant” environmental subjects?²

Methods

In this paper, I will compare environmental security and political ecology approaches to the intersection of crisis, human mobility, and militarization, and I will often use the United States southern border as a case study to root concepts in the real world. Issues related to climate-related human mobility in the European Union will be briefly touched upon as well. Though the inclusion of primary sources is critical to providing voice and agency to those engaging in migration, secondary sources provide the majority of material in support of this paper – with a focus on literature in the fields of environmental security, political ecology, critical geography, and development studies. These fields in particular offer the breadth of both dominant and non-dominant viewpoints from a spatial and socio-political perspective that the subject requires. Finally, the main arguments in this paper draw from, and connect, three concepts: “climate migration” and the construction of the idea of “climate refugees,” framing climate change in terms of crisis and apocalypse, and environmental/border militarization. Though there are overlaps in terms of general content with each concept,

² “Environmental subject” is a concept put forward by Dr. Arun Agrawal (2005) which theorizes that “...new environmental actions, behaviors, or rules systems lead to new kinds of people” (Robbins, 2011). In other words, the way in which the environment is managed by society in turn leads to different ways in which individuals interact with and experience that environment, as well as how they identify themselves in relation to it.

in the proceeding section I argue that each connect to and rely upon one another in intrinsic ways.

Narrative Construction and 21st-Century Governable Subjects

To chart the evolution of the concepts above, it is critical to start at the beginning of the chain: with how crisis is defined, and the different ways in which crisis narratives are established that frame and enable the actions that proceed them. Looking to the existing literature, establishing a definition—or many definitions—for crisis is an important step in creating a discourse surrounding human mobility crisis narratives for this paper. One interpretation hypothesizes that high uncertainty over disjointed multiscalar decision-making is the main driver of crisis narrative creation (Broome et al., 2012). A second puts forward an actor-driven reasoning for crisis creation that views crisis as a political tool for “...guiding judgements and coordinating actions” (Milstein, 2015).

Concrete examples are illustrative of these two highlighted constructions of crisis: in the European Union, an unprepared, then uncoordinated, and finally militarized official response to migration has created the crisis-laden perception of mass desperation, resulting in images of death and suffering – such as with the infamous 2015 photograph of a drowned three-year-old Syrian boy, Aylan Shenu, on a beach in Greece; in the United States, even with a slight decline in the number of southern border apprehensions between the Obama and Trump administrations (U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 2018), the latter has intentionally built a narrative of invasion and crisis in line with larger political and cultural goals. This latter narrative, I argue, has allowed the administration to heavily militarize the country’s response to border enforcement in the vacuum of an alternative humanitarian infrastructure – a vacuum caused, in part, by decades of neoliberal austerity economic regimes. Another consequence of this austerity is that it serves to artificially amplify public perceptions of crisis by under-resourcing programs and personnel, leading to both being overwhelmed. This is seen acutely in the Trump administration’s decision to change detainment policies without setting aside further resources, stretching existing infrastructure and

creating the perception of crisis – even though the average number of unauthorized border crossings are currently less than half of what was seen during the 2000s.

There is a final theory of crisis creation that is vital to this discussion. This interpretation finds that historical memory of past crises is fundamental for society interpreting a current series of events as a crisis (Samman, 2015). In light of this definition, an interesting concept to explore is the ability of individuals in a highly-connected modern society to rely on historical memories to inform current perceptions of crisis. While the near-universal adoption of the internet has allowed previously unimaginable human connection over space, it has also called into question traditional institutions of truth-creation – replacing them with comparatively transient, distributed sources of information. Research on the impact of sustained internet search use has shown a negative impact on long-term memory formation and recall, which also may impede the creation of individual experiences of history – instead placing responsibility for cataloging such experiences in a “supernormal stimulus;” i.e. the virtual knowledge database of the internet (Firth et al., 2019).

This shift has created both more and less governable subjects³ (Foucault, 1978); more governable in the sense that individuals are now susceptible to actors who distribute “misinformation,” and less governable in the sense that individuals are now less susceptible to accepting truths that are created by traditional institutions such as national governments. Importantly, this governmentality gap has been effectively bridged in national right-wing populist movements by relying on these distributed truth-making apparatuses to construct crises for political aims – including “crises” around human mobility. For example, in October 2018, a fake Facebook account resembling that of a prominent Central American migrant-rights activist was used to encourage individuals to join the aforementioned “caravan” of individuals heading north to the United States’ border a month before the United States’ 2018 midterm elections. As the effectiveness of the online campaign gained traction and the number of individuals in the “caravan” grew, the Trump administration and other prominent American conservatives amplified messages of “invasion” (Bensinger, 2018), using the crisis as a

³ “Governmentality” is a concept put forward by philosopher Michel Foucault (1978) that theorizes one’s individual conduct is the result of societal and institutional power structures, whether conscious or unconscious.

reason to send troops to the border. In this example, multiple conceptual understandings and usages of crisis intersect: the disconnection of historical memories—i.e. previous patterns and numbers of human mobility flows—from the present; loss of faith in institutional truth-making to guide public perception; and the intentional construction of crisis by driven actors in support of political goals. In the following section, I will employ these ideas of crisis construction from the perspective of climate change, and illustrate how they are used in support of environmental and border militarization.

Let No Good Crisis Go to Waste: The Apocalypse as Militarized Opportunity

Building on the conceptual underpinnings of crisis, it is critical to understand how human mobility is being dominantly portrayed as a part of the apocalyptic framing around climate change. Literature on this narrative of environmental change makes the argument that portrayals of “threat” and “danger” related to the environment results in those ideas inherently being viewed as security threats (Elliott, 2010), and thus subject to “inevitable” military responses (Smith, 2007). Robert Marzec’s (2015) work expanding Arun Agrawal’s (2005) concept of environmentality⁴ is instructive in understanding the United States-led militarized response to climate change, what the former refers to as “...a single ecosecurity imaginary for the post–Cold War, post-9/11 occasion.” Marzec describes a critical military vacuum related to this occasion, wherein the largest military in the world is actively seeking new, expansive war theatres following the Cold War and War on Terror. The seeds of this line of thought—that the environment is both subject and tool for militarized control, in essence an opportunity—can be traced back to Robert Kaplan’s apocalyptic 1994 environmental security piece “The Coming Anarchy” in *The Atlantic* (Kaplan, 1994), an article that was called “stunning” by then-President Bill Clinton and widely distributed in his administration (Lester, 1996). The lure of this idea of environment, apocalypse, and militarization among established power structures is

⁴ Environmentality is a concept put forward by Dr. Arun Agrawal (2005) which takes the theory of Foucault’s *governmentality* and expands it to the environment. This concept creates *environmental subjects*, the topic of footnote 1.

simple to grasp: if the environment poses a grave threat, and the military needs a new war theater, what is the proper nature of the response to that threat? The answer in line with dominant decision-making must be militarization – a continuation of over a half century of the shifting lens of American warfare toward different ideas, people, and geographies.

Even in the absence of overt intervention such as invasions and wars, it is clear that the United States military—and connected defense companies—have already adopted apocalypse narratives to drive increased adoption of militarized solutions to environmental change. For instance, the use of the concept of “climate refugees” has been documented as an intentional tool employed by defense interests in tandem with increased international aid militarization (Hartmann, 2010), labels such as “at-risk” are seen as a way of arguing for “expert” or outside intervention in nations and communities (Bravo, 2009), and the mixture of these phenomena with narratives of environmental security concerns surrounding scarcity and conflict make “...the leap from environmental activism to postcolonial nation-state warfare...even faster” (Marzec, 2015). The border has become, then, another “geography of violence” (Parenti, 2012) where the intersection of crisis, militarization, and environment plays out – though with specific nuances and concerns described in the proceeding section. Next, it is critical to understand how these apocalypse narratives that result in militarization of the environment serve to construct, utilize, and rely on the concept of “climate refugees.”

“A Form of Ventriloquy:” The Construction of the Climate Refugee

Literature surrounding climate-induced human mobility tends to fall into two camps: those that promote apocalyptic language and predictions of mass human movement, and those that critique those predictions. The former echo popular environmental security narratives invoking “floods” and “waves” (Bogardi and Warner, 2009), while the best of the latter employ a wide-ranging analysis that canvasses many divergent perspectives on the issue (Bettini, 2013). These critiques of dominant apocalyptic narratives view climate mobility—and the mobile human—as a production of any one of many discourses rather than a discrete phenomenon or entity, ranging from

national governments that view migrants as a threat to advocacy groups that view them as “...the subject of an emancipatory struggle” (Bettini, 2013). These conflicting viewpoints are critical to this paper’s central argument of the “climate refugee” as a construct, and the use of human mobility as a tool for larger political purposes.

Intrinsic to this point of identity construction is the loss of personhood of “climate refugees,” and the flattening of identities and life experiences into a monolith, often for use in constructing dominant narratives which tie together crisis and climate change. While appropriation of migrant voices as a tool for advancing fundraising goals of environmental non-governmental organizations—described in one source as “a form of ventriloquy” (Farbotko & Lazrus, 2012)—has been documented, specific construction of the “climate refugee” identity as it relates to border militarization is an area in need of development. By extending the previous conceptual understandings of crisis construction and environmental militarization, I can now specifically examine the process involved in the militarization of borders, as well as the role of the materiality of their infrastructure in the creation of the subject of the “climate refugee.”

The manifestation of militarization along the U.S. southern border is quite obvious on the surface: the deployment of up to 6,000 troops to border states in late 2018 and early 2019 were high-profile decisions by the Trump administration in response to the “crisis” examined in the previous section of this paper (Schwartz, 2019). However, viewing border infrastructure through the lens of overtly imposed environmentality—as in the *forced* creation of environmental subjects through crisis construction and militarization—yields a new critical perspective. Borders are inherently spaces of duality, of insider versus outsider. Elements such as fences naturally reflect this, though it is also the spaces of less obvious control created by militarization that serve to create environmental subjecthood: for example, the strict control of access points at the southern U.S. border closes routes for human mobility that might geographically and experientially represent paths of least resistance, forcing mobile individuals to assume immense risk—up to and including death—at “unauthorized” crossings. In addition, the Mexican government has sought to channel, and stop, human flows in certain areas throughout the country due to pressure from American authorities (Lind, 2018). The manifestation of militarized/hardened borders thus creates unofficial

structures of human control often far away from the borders themselves, funneling human mobility into spaces that attempt to exist outside of traditional power structures. These spaces are still governed, however, whether intentionally/overtly regulated or not. I refer to these spaces as corridors of control.

These corridors might not act as areas of environmental subject creation were it not for the media's role in crafting a narrative around climate change. Though the official U.S. government response to the border was not in the frame of the environment, the media crafted a climate crisis narrative on top of it – headlines from media outlets in April of 2019, around six months after the migrant “caravan,” are illustrative: “Central American Farmers Head to the U.S., Fleeing Climate Change” (New York Times), “How Climate Change is Pushing Central American Migrants to the US” (The Guardian). The state's crisis narrative was thus filtered through and altered by the media, with both combining in the creation of a singular story of environmental crisis at the border.

The media also feeds off of the idea of these corridors of control by publicly amplifying “unauthorized” human mobility as illicit – casting the individuals involved as a criminal threat. The case of three-year-old Aylan Shenu is once again instructive: arguments that have found traction in the media blame his death on human smugglers or desperate parents, but it is critical to take a structural viewpoint, viewing the decisions that forced his family to hire black-market smugglers and undertake a risky Mediterranean Sea crossing in the context of border militarization policies. It is not simply the black steel border fences and razor wire that seek to cast outsiders as threats to national sovereignty, but also the spaces in between. By forcing human movement into unseen and often dangerous geographies, the north African beach where Syrian refugees load onto rubber dinghies and the expanse of unpatrolled Sonoran desert do just as much to construct the idea of a “climate refugee” as the concrete of a roadblock or the canvas of a detention camp.

Through the creation of illicit spaces and the labels of criminality/othering that are associated with them, a militarized border—in conjunction with media narratives of environmental crisis—finally constructs forced environmental subjects by way of the materiality and immateriality of its infrastructure. This dictates how and where human mobility “should” occur, shapes how those on the other side of the fence view those

moving, and in the process further crafts media narratives of uncontrolled crisis. With this final concept of material and immaterial border control, we see how crisis, militarization, and identity construction come together and interact. Increasingly dire crisis narratives about the “threat” and “dangers” of climate change inherently require a response, which dominant forces of militarization step into. Because the crisis narrative and militarized response both rely on a *physical* threat in order to be publicly legitimized—even in the absence of a physical threat actually existing—one is created if necessary: the figure of the “climate refugee/migrant” is thus constructed, controlled, and displayed by the media and state through the use of unofficial corridors of control and official border infrastructure. The materialities and immaterialities of border infrastructure—the access points, fences, and detention camps, as well as beaches and deserts—become critical in the construction of the forced environmental subject of “climate refugee/migrant,” enabling the positive feedback loop of crisis/threat narrative, physical threat, and militarized response (Figure 1).

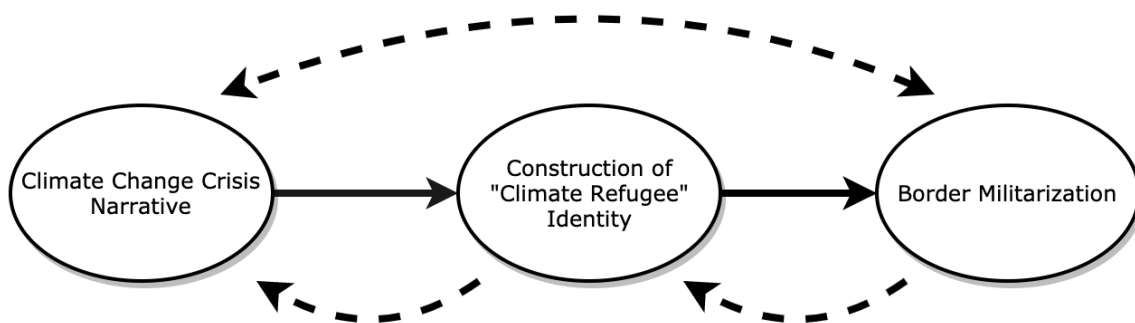


Figure 1. Conceptual map of interconnection between crisis, identity construction, and militarization.

Conclusion

In the preceding sections, I have laid out the processes by which crisis, militarization, and human mobility are interconnected. Increasingly, threat narratives warning of disaster and apocalypse resulting from climate change demand some form of policy response; that response is militaristic due to entrenched decision-making; and

the figure of the climate refugee is constructed by dominant power structures to legitimize both the threat narrative and militarized response. These processes create feedback loops, further entrenching crisis narratives, dominant responses, and identity creation. It is critical to attempt to imagine alternative realities to this loop, however, and the stories of individuals and families that are part of the complex fabric of migration—whether influenced by climate change or not—are important to pay attention to.

Dominant media interviews with those such as Maria Mesa, the migrant mother from Honduras who experienced the tear gas attack at the southern U.S. border in November of 2018, are often sensationalized. However, viewing them through the lenses of the critical concepts in this paper can yield greater understandings of shared humanity, and help imagine those alternate realities. Six months after the famous photograph of her was taken at the border, she was interviewed in Washington D.C., where she awaited an asylum hearing along with her five children. “I think that that photo of me and my kids being gassed helped people see,” she said, “that we are humans too and we deserve to be treated with basic dignity” (Martinez, 2019).

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