

## INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR ANDREW BALDWIN\*

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In the last few years the European Union Commission has funded several projects concerning with the issue of climate change and migrations. We have the opportunity to interview the coordinators of two of those projects, offering an idea of their rationales and visions

**Question:** Professor Baldwin, could you please explain in few words the COST Action program you are coordinating: Climate Change and Migration: Knowledge, Law and Policy, and Theory?

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\*Andrew Baldwin is a lecturer in human geography at Durham University (2009-present). He received his doctorate from the Department of Geography, Carleton University in 2006, and worked as a consultant with the International Institute for Sustainable Development from 2000-2006. Andrew's research interests are wide-ranging, yet consistent throughout all of his work is a concern for the way in which "race" works as an organising principle in environmental political discourse. Andrew chairs COST Action IS1101 *Climate Change and Migration: knowledge, law and policy, and theory*, which is funded under the European Union's 7<sup>th</sup> Framework Programme. Andrew is also a member of EMI<sup>2</sup>GR (environment and migration group of research). [w.a.baldwin@durham.ac.uk](mailto:w.a.baldwin@durham.ac.uk).

**Answer:** *COST Action IS1101 Climate change and migration: knowledge, law and policy, and theory* was the brainchild of about 10 European scholars interested in expanding social science research on the phenomenon of climate change and migration. It now includes scholars from 13 different European countries as well as from Canada, Australia and India, and I expect the number of Action participants will continue to grow over the next year.

Many of us involved in the early discussions that eventually led to the Action recognised that while normative and empirical debates on climate change and migration were fully underway, the social sciences remained relatively insignificant to the way those debates were unfolding. Indeed, many felt that much of the research fuelling these debates came from the environmental rather than social sciences and that, as a result, the emerging phenomenon of climate change and migration was at risk of being misunderstood. In order to correct for this, my colleagues and I designed the Action in a way that provides European and non-European scholars with the networking activities required to build a fulsome social science research on climate change and migration. These activities include: a series of annual workshops, short-term scientific missions primarily for early-stage researchers, training schools and a virtual network.

**Q.:** Climate change is a major topic in the current scientific and political debate; several scholars have argued that it is leading to the depoliticization of the struggles over the environment (Swyngedouw, for instance). What is your opinion on this issue? Will focusing on climate change depoliticize migrations?

**A.:** I must admit that I rather like Erik Swyngedouw's interpretation of climate change politics as post-political. I have reservations about it, too. But, on balance, I like it because it dares to challenge the innocence that characterises so much of environmental political discourse. For me the most significant element of Swyngedouw's thesis is the idea that the political institutes the social. What this means is that the political is the founding antagonism that creates society; it names the moment when the subjects of a society recognise themselves as such. However, more than an innocent moment of collection recognition, the political is that which bars the Other from the moment of recognition. The result is that the social is not some harmonious whole but permanently split. Coloniser/colonised, White/Black, and citizen/migrant name just a few of the founding antagonisms constitutive of the social. For Swyngedouw, environmental political discourses often bear directly on such constitutive antagonisms by naturalising them, by rendering them timeless features of the social landscape rather than social divisions born out of struggles for power and control. When Swyngedouw

claims that climate change politics are post-political he is suggesting that the split of the social is of peripheral concern to the much more serious matter of managing the global climate; particular demands matter little against the looming catastrophe that climate change represents. Swyngedouw then exhorts us to reanimate the political the context of environmental politics and especially climate change politics.

**Q.:** Again, I rather like Swyngedouw's formulation because it reminds us that climate change politics are not just about 'saving the climate' or designing sound adaptation policy but are predicated on some sort of founding social antagonism. Keeping this in mind when thinking about climate change-induced migration is critical if we are to fully grasp the phenomenon. For instance, we might ask after the founding antagonisms of climate change and migration discourse. Or we might ask: For whom is climate change and migration a problem?

**A.:** In your question, though, you ask whether a focus on climate change risks depoliticising migration. I'm not so sure this is the correct question to pose. I think a better question is: does a focus on climate change risk *dehistoricising* migration, and in that sense, yes, I believe it does. To argue that future climate change has the potential to induce massive migration draws attention away from the fact that vulnerability to climate change is an artefact of history, an effect of historical antagonism as opposed to a timeless feature of the landscape of vulnerability. The migrations catalysed by Hurricane Katrina, for instance, were not the result of any innate failure on the part of those displaced most of whom were Black. They were the result of a historically-specific form of infrastructural racism and structural neglect. Dehistoricising migration means rendering such histories insignificant. Thinking and analysing migration as a function of climate change risks doing just this. Thus, one of the key tasks for social scientists working in the area of climate change and migration is to foreground such histories and to challenge those narratives that seek to naturalise migration in the climate change context.

**Q.:** The political and cultural context in so many parts of Europe seems to go towards a rather anti-immigration feelings, if not, actual anti-immigration policies. In times of crisis, ecological and economical crisis, it is easy to look for scapegoats. Do you agree that this is what is occurring in Europe and beyond? If yes, in which way could your project contribute in fighting against this attitude?

**A.:** The proposition that ecological and economic crises beget anti-immigration sentiment and policy in Europe is surely a very tempting one. But in my view, this is an extremely limited analysis because it fails to account for the fact that anti-immigrant sentiment is a permanent feature of modern liberal democracies, including those of Europe. It is certainly the case that immigration policy in the UK was tightened by the existing coalition government not long after the 2008 financial crisis. But to assume that this policy was the direct result of the crisis overlooks the fact that anti-immigration sentiment in the UK pre-existed the 2008 crisis and certainly existed throughout the 2000s which by most accounts was a period of phenomenal economic prosperity.

In a very excellent book called *Globalizing Citizenship*, Canadian scholar Kim Rygiel challenges the notion that Canadian immigration policy was tightened after 2001 as an immediate result of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, which were a political crisis of sorts. Rygiel's central claim is that whatever border measures the Canadian authorities imposed following 9/11 had been in the offing *well before* 9/11. All 9/11 did was hasten their implementation. As such, Rygiel argues that globalisation offers a far better explanation for these changes to Canadian immigration policy than the political crisis of 9/11. Rygiel's book is important because it invites us to consider how restrictive immigration policy is not so much an expression of anti-immigrant sentiment instigated by acute episodes of crisis so much as it is a structural feature of modern economic life. By definition the immigrant is a subject who is said to be 'alien', 'foreign' and 'strange' to a particular place. Producing the immigrant this way requires a related set of categories such as the citizen, the domestic and the familiar. I am much more inclined to analyses that seek to explain anti-immigrant sentiment as a function of symbolic discourses like citizenship and nationalism, than to those that seek to explain such sentiments as a function of crisis. Much more interesting to me is the way notions of crisis are endemic to the very meaning of terms like citizenship and national identity.

With this in mind, do I agree that European countries are scapegoating migrants for the current ecological and economic crisis? No. I think that anti-immigrant sentiment in Europe is probably far more complicated. I'm no expert on the topic, but my hunch is that it is tied as much to the waning economic significance of Europe relative to China and India, as it is to the perception of waning sovereignty in the context of globalisation. Do anxieties about climate change have a part to play in this as well? Possibly, but this is much harder to pin down empirically since climate change policy has for so long been framed in terms of

mitigation and adaptation and hardly ever in terms of migration, although this is certainly beginning to change. A photographic exhibition at the Museum of London in 2010-2011 called *Postcards from the Future*<sup>1</sup> strikes me as one of the first attempts to galvanise public support for a strong climate change policy through an appeal to anti-immigrant sentiment. The US film *Climate Refugees* works in the same sort of idiom. Both are important cultural interventions in my view because they seem to give visual expression to what I've long suspected is an unstated but nevertheless prevalent anxiety in climate change discourse, which is that the failure to mitigate climate change will result in all manner of unconscionable social consequences, including migration. One thing I'd like our Action to do is catalyse some original empirical research across Europe on public values and attitudes towards the so-called climate change migrant. The purpose of this work would be to understand how Europeans feel about this issue. So far the phenomenon of climate change-induced migration has only really been examined as a set of possibilities associated with the Third World. From this perspective, we have lots of qualitative and quantitative data about the phenomenon, some of which is fairly reliable, some not so much. Yet, we know surprisingly little about how Europeans actually feel about this phenomenon and about the figure of the climate change migrant.

**Q.:** Do you believe that it is possible, or even useful, to discern between environmental and social causes in the migration processes? How will your project deal with the relationships between environmental vulnerabilities and social inequalities?

**A.:** I'm firmly of the view that it is pointless to disaggregate a singular cause (environmental trigger) from a complex phenomenon (social relations). As for how the Action will deal with the issue of causality, this is a matter for individual researchers to work out for themselves. The Action doesn't endorse any one ontological orientation.

**Q.:** In your project you has explicitly mentioned the necessity to challenge an approach to migration and climate change based only on natural sciences or on security studies. Could you explain to our reader why this statement? And connected to this point, a very soft critique: among the disciplines you has listed in the project there are not environmental history or political ecology, and generally speaking not at all any discipline from the humanities. Do

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.postcardsfromthefuture.co.uk/>

you think that those disciplines might contribute to the scientific project you want to carry on? If yes, in which way?

**A.:** When we drafted the Action many of us felt that the issue of climate change and migration was being constructed almost exclusively through knowledges derived from the environmental sciences. Indeed, the popular framing of the issue follows this basic form of reasoning: climate change = sea level rise/desertification = migration. This is partly why low-lying coastal regions and arid regions of the world, such as Bangladesh and the Sahel, respectively, often get figured as the ‘ground zero’ of climate change. There is a quality of inevitability to this simplistic reasoning. But as we know from the study of history, geography, politics, sociology and anthropology, migration is far more complex than is allowed for in deterministic reasoning. Bringing the social sciences to bear on the phenomenon of climate change and migration is imperative insofar as social scientists are trained to think critically about complex social phenomena. Social scientists are very well equipped to ask questions about phenomena that physical and environmental scientists may not think to ask. I do not mean any disrespect to my colleagues in the physical sciences. It’s just that the social and physical sciences pursue very different methodologies that are largely result of asking very sets of questions.

Concerning your question to do with security studies, I think it is important for your readers to understand that the Action does not reject a security studies approach to understanding climate change and migration. In fact, the Action is already planning a major international workshop in 2012 that looks critically at the phenomenon of climate change and migration from the perspective of security studies. So rather than the Action challenging a security studies approach, my vision for the Action is to cultivate research that challenges the widely held view that climate change-induced migration is a security threat. To frame climate change and migration in the language of threat and security reinforces the notion that migration is an undesirable phenomenon. It also raises the possibility that countries might chose to fortify themselves from the perceived problem of migration in the climate change context. In my view, neither of these are viable ways of conceptualising the phenomenon.

In regards to your ‘soft critique’, I interpret the social sciences very broadly. My failure to explicitly mention disciplines like environmental history and political ecology in the Action Memorandum of Understanding was purely the result of expediency in grant writing. Both environmental history and political ecology are clearly relevant to our Action and strongly encourage scholars from both to get in touch about ways they might get involved in Action

activities. In fact, I have long believed that we need a comprehensive genealogy of the figure of the climate change and migrant, a task which no doubt requires the skills of historical method and interpretation. For anyone interested, there's a PhD dissertation to be written on that topic! Similarly, I am of the view that political ecology, especially in the Marxist and poststructuralist traditions are immensely pertinent to the Action. As for the humanities, again, they are extremely relevant to our Action. Literary and art historical analyses on climate change or environmental and migration would surely add something to the discussion that just wouldn't be captured by the social sciences. Although I'm no historian of antiquity, as I understand it one of the most prevalent explanations for the fall of Rome is migration. Understanding the extent to which these migrations were construed in terms of environment, nature and climate seems to me to be a fascinating question. Another possible dissertation, perhaps?

**Q.:** What are the next steps of your project?

**A.:** Next steps: The Action is currently planning activities for 2012. These include scholarly workshops on climate change, migration and security (May) and on human rights, climate change and migration (August). We are also planning a series of interrelated workshops in Paris in early October that would be more policy-facing the aim of which is to feed into the policy debates in the run up to COP 18. Beyond that plans are in the works for workshops in 2013 on political theology, postcolonial theory and environmental history. We also expect to send out a public call in the next few weeks for up to four short-term scientific missions, which might be of interest to postgraduates interested in short-term residencies. We're also planning major international conferences for 2013 and 2015 and training schools for 2013, 2014 and 2015. We've got lots planned and in the works. Hopefully, your readers will take full advantage of these and get involved in what we're doing.