

FROM THE APOCALYPSE TO THE POSSIBILITIES.  
NEW STORIES ABOUT IMMIGRANTS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Marco Armiero, Richard Tucker, Sergio Prieto Díaz (comp.)

The last scenes from the apocalyptic Hollywood movie “The Day After Tomorrow” showed an upside-down world: thousands of people from the U.S. crossing the borders of Mexico looking for salvation. In the science fiction version of the world, the rich Americans needed to be hosted in refugee camps, flying away from the massive and rather abrupt transformation of the climate in their country.

The environmental apocalypse is a popular genre in the science fiction movies and, of course, climate change could not be absent from the scene; after the atomic disaster, climate change seems to be the next popular fear for the future. Surely, it is not the only fear that is haunting our worst nightmares; pandemics, terrorism, and economic crash, just to mention a few others, are not less present in our imaginary about the future. Nevertheless, currently there is no doubt that climate change is at the top of our worries and extremely significant in the global political and scientific agenda.

Actually, the difference between politics, policies, and science are blurred when the focus is on climate change; the future of the planet must be saved through global agreements between states based on the findings of hard core scientists, the only ones able to understand the complicated patterns of the ecosystem, and the solutions proposed by the economists, new priests of a strange cult of economic growth and the market. Some green stars from Hollywood or a former vice president of the United States can add some sparkle to the argument, making moral statements about saving the Earth in a common effort; a common threat is menacing us – whatever “us” might be – and we, the humans, must address the issue as a cohesive community.

Instead, we – in this case it is a clear “we”, that is, the editors of this special issue – think that there is twofold mistake in the public perception: the threat is not menacing everybody in the same way and to address climate change we need to politicize it, and not to transform it into a moral or scientific issue.

We believe that the case of migration is an excellent one for unpacking the narratives about climate change and its social effect. In the last few years, climate change induced migrations have been a rising concern in the public as well as in the scientific discourse. In 2011 the Government Office for Science of the United Kingdom has published its report on Migration and Global Environmental Change; in the same year the IDDRI (Institut du développement durable et des relations internationales) published its report on the State of Environmental Migration; just one year before in 2010 the Pentagon planners had included climate change among the security threats identified in the Quadrennial Defense Review. Actually, the genealogy of this fear connecting climate change and mass migration goes further back in the past; as early as 1990, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 1990:20) warned that “the greatest single impact of climate change could be on human migration” and in 2007 the UN Security Council identified climate change-induced migration as an issue of international security.

Fears and prophecies: those have been the most relevant concepts around which politicians and the public opinion have built their understanding of the connections between climate change and migrations. Images and numbers have conspired in building a threatening narrative which prophesies millions of people moving from vulnerable places to others, like grasshoppers. The impact of this massive dislocation of people due to environmental factors is generally represented as biblical plagues; the effect of this narrative has been a progressive shift of the environmental migration studies towards security studies and, thereby, securitization policies. Just to offer an example of this securitization, in 2008 the National Intelligence Council (NIC) completed a new classified assessment exploring how climate change could threaten U.S. security in the following twenty years by causing mass movements of refugees.

With this special issue, we would like to contribute to decolonizing the environment-migration studies in two directions: on one hand from the securitization and security studies;

on the other from an obsession with climate change which, according to us, led to focusing exclusively on a hard sciences approach.

We think that a humanistic and a political ecology perspective can uncover some new aspects of the connections between migration and the environment. First of all, we reject the obsession with an ultimate cause which aims at searching for the “real environmental immigrants” who must be distinct from the economic, political, or whatever other kind of people leaving their country. The idea that the environment can be separated from the economy, the politics, and the cultural is, according to us, a mistake. People leaving New Orleans after Katrina were, of course, environmental migrants; but shouldn't we think about the merging of the natural disaster with the racial power relationships and the economic and class stratification which have been so significant in that story? Is reducing the causes of the displacement to a single factor – the “natural” disaster maybe induced by climate change – a productive exercise for understanding and coping with this issue in the best way possible? The obsession with an ultimate cause can be dangerous, leading to a naturalization of the social dimension and of its inequalities.

Our approach wants also to challenge the idea that climate change is the only environmental link connecting migration and “nature”. Of course, as even mainstream reports recognize today, there are several other environmental driving forces behind migrations; however, we think that the connections between people and places are more complex than just a push and pull factor. Historically migrations have been an extraordinary laboratory for the mixing of cultures and different environments. In historical works it has even become mainstream to consider the so-called Columbus exchange – or the less well-known Magellan ones – that is, including animals, germs, plants and other “natural” agents in the conquest of the New World. Nonetheless, while in the case of the imperial conquest of the world those elements have become significant, it has not been the same when we start considering not the imperial conquistadores, but just the regular people who moved into other places as workers searching for a better life. Did they have an environmental impact on the places where they arrived, even if they did not have any army or flags following them? Migration and the environment is not a one way road; the transformation of the environment implied the transformation of the immigrants' nature too, their bodies as well as their culture and practices.

With this special issue, we have made a call to rethink the connections linking migration and the environment. Others are thinking about those connections and they are building their own narratives. A green-washing of the anti-immigration discourse is advancing in the US, Canada, and probably will soon reach Europe. The Federation for American Immigration Reform, the Center for Immigration Studies, and the Center for Immigration Policy Reform are all making the point that immigrants are going to become a significant problem for the environment in the US and Canada. According to these think-tanks, to save the environment we need to fight against immigration which will imbalance the relationships between local inhabitants and their places. Like locusts, illegal immigrants want to take advantage of the place where they arrive but never belong to it. Green-washing is a powerful rhetorical tool. Nature is by definition neutral, it does not have color or political identities; appealing to it is ideal to depoliticize the discourse over immigration, shifting to some kind of scientific/objective discourse. But nature has never been neutral. Who and what is native is a rather controversial issue; the protection of nature has had various meanings coming from the negotiation among interests and power. A scapegoat for the environmental mess in which we are, or a victim of a shared global disaster, are archetypical figures ready to be used. However, immigrants are neither scapegoats nor victims; and there is no such a thing as a shared global disaster caused by an undifferentiated “us”. Someone is going to pay the bill. Immigrants are in the first row for that, as well as poor people, minorities and marginals. Maybe, it is time to fight back and start resisting. Who never knows, it might time for revolution...

### References

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