
Government: Faculty Publications

Government

11-1-2019

“Climate Refugees”—A Useful Concept?

Gregory White

Smith College, gwhite@smith.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.smith.edu/gov_facpubs



Part of the [Political Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

White, Gregory, "Climate Refugees"—A Useful Concept?" (2019). Government: Faculty Publications, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

https://scholarworks.smith.edu/gov_facpubs/25

This Book Review has been accepted for inclusion in Government: Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Smith ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@smith.edu

Book Review Essay

“Climate Refugees”—A Useful Concept?

Gregory White

Behrman, Simon, and Avidan Kent, eds. 2018. *“Climate Refugees”: Beyond the Legal Impasse?* New York: Routledge.

Miller, Todd. 2017. *Storming the Wall: Climate Change, Migration, and Homeland Security*. San Francisco, CA: City Lights.

Wennersten, John R., and Denise Robbins. 2017. *Rising Tides: Climate Refugees in the Twenty-First Century*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Imagine no “climate refugees.” Contrary to John Lennon, it is hard to do. Specifically, imagine if the concept of “climate refugees” did not exist. What would it be like to *not* pair the climate adjective with the refugee noun?

It is highly unlikely that this concept will go away. For nearly four decades the notion of “environmental refugees” has been used by scholars, environmentalists, security and defense intellectuals, policymakers, artists, and writers. And since the 1990s the ostensibly more specific category of “climate refugees” has been used to convey displacement by anthropogenic climate change (ACC).

There are many problems with the concept of “climate refugees.” It is vague and often ahistorical. It amalgamates coastal inundations, submerging islands, desertification, and “natural” disasters into one category. It highlights one forcer of displacement, thereby underplaying what may be more proximate causes—such as repressive governments, poor policies, failing economies, complicated colonial and cold war legacies, uneven levels of economic development, and civil strife.

While the concept is hardly new, it is often propounded breathlessly—as if it is newly discovered or the audience is oblivious. Much of the discourse has a call-to-action vibe about a future threat. For example, US President Donald Trump cynically used the “migrant caravan” in Mexico during the fall 2018 mid-term elections. In turn, analysts took the opportunity to point to ACC as a cause of the migration. *The Texas Observer* warned:

Donald Trump thinks there’s an immigration crisis at the U.S.–Mexico border. He has no idea what’s coming. Thousands of Central American

migrants arrive at the border each month, fleeing both grinding poverty and unchecked gang violence. Increasingly, they’re also escaping a threat they might never mention to immigration agents: climate change (Bova 2018).

The *Guardian* argued similarly:

[A] crucial driving factor behind the migrant caravan has been harder to grasp: climate change.... Experts say that alongside [other] factors, climate change in the region is exacerbating—and sometimes causing—a miasma of other problems including crop failures and poverty. And they warn that in the coming decades, it is likely to push millions more people north towards the US (Milman et al. 2018).

In both instances, colons punctuate the invocation of climate change, as in, “Dear reader, there is something about this migration about which you are completely unaware (colon goes here): climate change.” Also evident in these and many other examples is the way analysts invoke vague experts, offer rounded demographic estimates (“thousands” and “millions” of people), and warn of an ominous future with an uncertain time horizon.

It is undeniably true that people are deeply affected by environmental change that can be directly linked to global warming. The logic appears to be clear-cut. If people are afflicted by ACC, then it seems reasonable to assume they will move great distances and that we should refer to them as “climate refugees.”

Despite the seeming appeal of this reasoning, an examination of three contributions to the “climate refugees” literature challenges it. By far the most troubling is Wennersten and Robbins’ *Rising Tides*. It opens with a dramatic declaration similar to the quotes above. “Climate change is with us and we need to think about the next big, disturbing idea—the potentially disastrous consequences of massive numbers of environmental refugees at large on the planet” (4). One should not judge a book by its cover, but the paperback from Indiana University Press features a surreal cover photo of a lone businessman holding an umbrella and standing shin-deep in the middle of the ocean. Photoshopped in the distance is a city skyline with storm clouds overhead.

It quickly becomes apparent that the “rising tides” of the title is not so much about storm surges and submerging islands. Instead, the authors refer to refugee “hordes,” often deploying overwrought aqueous metaphors: “tsunamis,” “flows,” and even “streams of global environmental refugees... will lap up on the shores of prosperous developed Western nations” (10).

To be fair, Wennersten and Robbins do a decent job of conveying the scientific basis of ACC. The potential future scenarios are profoundly concerning. But it is on other aspects that *Rising Tides* falls short. For one, the book suffers from a lack of conceptual clarity about refugees. The literature on refugees is voluminous, and, apart from a few brief paragraphs, the authors do not engage it. The complicated nature of refugee law is not addressed, nor are the fraught

terminological debates associated with immigration, forced displacement, asylum regimes, internally displaced peoples, etc.

Refugees have fragile juridical protections under the 1951 Refugee Convention, the postwar treaty that established the modern understanding of a refugee as someone fleeing a “well-founded fear” of persecution. The treaty was grounded in a cold war logic of protecting dissident politicians, artists and activists oppressed by illiberal regimes. During the cold war (and especially in its aftermath), there was little appetite for extending protection to displaced peoples from the Global South. And, more recently, events such as the Mediterranean “refugee crisis” of 2014, the 2015 Rohingya migration in southeast Asia, Brexit and Trump’s election in 2016, and the aforementioned “caravan crisis” of 2018 all reveal the increasing hollowness of support for so-called “convention refugees.” To be sure, the UN’s 2018 “Global Compact on Refugees” sought to strengthen the international commitment to refugee protection. Importantly, the UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, noted that “climate, environmental degradation and natural disasters” contribute to refugee movements. Yet also, to its credit, the UNHCR eschewed “climate refugee” as a category (United Nations General Assembly 2018). The bottom line is that the support for “convention refugees” has been weakening; adding “climate refugees” to an increasingly anachronistic and fraught category will not help.

Rising Tides also fails to engage the extensive literature on migration, especially concerning the complicated ways a changing environment affects population movements. ACC affects people’s lives profoundly, and the impact is uneven and unjust. But it is not at all clear that climate change prompts long-distance migrations. To move great distances takes financial resources, social capital, knowledge, and physical strength. In fact, there is strong evidence that ACC actually *undermines* people’s ability to move, with people more likely to suffer in place.

Oddly, Wennersten and Robbins seem to dismiss the extensive scholarship on the complicated interplay between climate change and migration as “inconclusive,” which is precisely the point of the scholarship. The authors cite out-of-date (and even debunked) sources; as one example, they write, “Current research by Norman Myers of Oxford University and others identify twenty-five million people on the planet as environmental refugees” (32), with a footnote pointing to a 1995 report by Myers.

The book seeks to be geographically specific, with chapters about different parts of the globe. But here again it is imprecise. Wennersten and Robbins assert, “As Africa’s climate worsens and becomes the theater for regional conflicts, there will be an exodus of migrants” (131). “Exodus” is not only biblical in its imagery and portent, but it suggests *leaving* the continent. Not only does this framing ignore the complicated history of circular and regional migrations within Africa, not to mention the continent’s vast geographical diversity, but it also neglects that most people displaced in Africa—by conflict and/or environmental change—remain within their countries or subregions, perhaps moving to nearby cities (White 2011).

There are other issues with the Africa chapter. For example, the authors cite a 2009 *Los Angeles Times* article about Kenya’s Dadaab refugee complex and add,

“Many of Dadaab’s residents are fleeing from the harms of climate change. According to United Nations officials, as many as 10 percent of Dadaab’s refugees could be considered as fleeing from drought that has made their former rural lifestyles impossible.... About ten million people worldwide are estimated to be environmental migrants” (147). Although chronic drought is closely tied to ACC, of course, it is also exacerbated by poor economic policies and civil conflict. Finally, there is the apparent but unnoticed contradiction between the “ten million” cited by the *LA Times* in 2009 and the earlier citing of “twenty-five million” from Myers in 1995.

In the Middle East chapter the authors point to the “climate roots of the Syria crisis,” ignoring the sharp critiques (Selby et al. 2017, and, earlier, Sowers, et al. 2013) of the 2015 article in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* to which they refer (Kelley et al. 2015). Oddly, Wennersten and Robbins write that Syria’s towns were “already flooded with Iraqi refugees from another war” (158). Even apart from the recurring “flooded” imagery, referring to the 2003–2011 war in Iraq (and the subsequent emergence of ISIS) as “another war” is bizarre. Similarly, the authors use passive voice to note that “Libya’s dictator Moammar Gadhafi was ousted during the Arab Spring” (161), ignoring NATO’s intervention. Although the authors note that Syria’s neighbors have hosted the vast bulk of people displaced, they continually mention the possibility of migrants reaching Western Europe as reasons for concern.

Although *Rising Tides* uses alarming language throughout, the authors do criticize xenophobia against refugees. Fundamentally, their call is to address climate change so that people do not become refugees, thereby avoiding the fueling of anti-refugee politics. Nevertheless, in the end, their maximalist framing of the threat of refugees to the Global North will stand as an example of how *not* to examine “climate refugees.”

Miller’s *Storming the Wall: Climate Change, Migration, and Homeland Security* offers a different treatment of the complicated link between climate change and human migration. It is pointed in its argument: border militarization is increasingly the way the environment is securitized by highly industrialized states, with close support from private firms. Affluent classes support the division between rich and poor—especially when the environment is framed in terms of security—while less powerful constituents are deceived by xenophobic appeals.

If the logic of *Rising Tides* is that we must address ACC to contend with the impending problem of “climate refugees,” *Storming the Wall* basically argues that border securitization is already here—and that “climate refugees” will be a further way to justify a security mentality. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, more than forty countries around the world have built fences against more than sixty neighbors (*The Economist* 2016).

What is striking about *Storming the Wall* is the steady discourse of hope and solidarity. Miller often refers to grassroots activists fighting against environmental degradation or advocating for the rights of immigrants incarcerated in detention sites. He writes engagingly in the first person, referring to his beloved

grandmother who migrated from the Philippines many decades ago, as well as his own young child facing an uncertain future. He quotes writers and poets such as Rebecca Solnit and Mary Oliver, and argues that resolute hope, critical inquiry, and activism constitute the best way to counter the prevailing security epistemologies and anticipatory frameworks proffered by powerful interests, which too often have racialized dimensions (Baldwin 2016).

Although *Rising Tides* is slim on the analytical framework that one would find in a book published by a scholarly press, it offers a resonating and idealistic argument: “The problem of global warming doesn’t call for the further fortification of borders between countries, between people, or between the rich and the poor. If anything, it calls for a dissolution of those borders” (211). Miller admits this solution is unrealistic, but he argues that it is an essential posture to begin to get out of the current state of affairs.

Of the three works reviewed here, Behrman and Kent’s edited volume is the most scholarly. It also frames the concept as contested—indeed it puts “climate refugees” in quotes in the title. The entire premise of the book is that the issue is at a “legal impasse.” To their credit, the editors note the terminological challenges and embrace the variety of definitions by the legal scholars who contributed chapters.

In comparison to the other two books, *Climate Refugees* engages the refugee and migration studies literatures in a robust fashion, with different sections devoted to the historical backdrop, the behavior of a variety of intergovernmental organizations (e.g., the International Organization of Migration), the limits for possible protection within existing legal regimes, and the potential for new juridical regimes. Futurity is at the heart of such examinations. The underlying assumption is that there will be more “climate refugees”—even if fewer than maximalist analyses suggest—and that current protections are inadequate. What then must be done to provide governance structures to protect them in the future?

Many chapters are erudite and insightful. Yet one chapter is especially worth the price of admission: the iconoclastic and critical essay by Benoit Mayer. In “Who Are ‘Climate Refugees’? Academic Engagement in the Post-Truth Era,” Mayer challenges the macro-level discourses concerning “climate refugees” as symptomatic of “post-truth politics.” He points to examples in which prominent scholars acknowledge the serious downsides and imprecisions in using “climate refugees” but nevertheless advocate for the category’s continued use because of its political utility. The argument is that “climate refugees” helps to sound the alarm about climate change and draw attention to peoples’ plights and the need for international recognition. Further, it implicates more affluent peoples in the Global North for producing the emissions that cause the climate change in the first place. François Gemenne, for example, argues that “one good reason to speak of ‘climate refugees’” is that it is a political choice—namely, a way of avoiding the depoliticization of climate change (Gemenne 2015). For Mayer, however, this is precisely the cause for concern. Despite “good intentions, scholars put considerations of political advocacy before analytic considerations” (97). The

result is that “telling the truth matters less than tailoring one’s impact on political debates... [which] betrays the trust that [we] place in academia as a reliable source of true information (98).”

Mayer’s kind of footing is essential in “climate refugee” scholarship. Given the tenuous political support for refugee protection at best (and hostility to refugees at worst)—not to mention the empirical uncertainty that ACC is (and will be) responsible for inducing massive cross-border displacements—it is essential that *if* we use the “climate refugee” category, we do so with great caution. At a minimum, scholars should certainly avoid the apocalyptic and catastrophist framing that undergirds so much of the discourse.

Gregory White is the Mary Huggins Gamble Professor of Government at Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts, and does research at the intersection(s) of environmental, security, migration, and North African studies. He authored *Climate Change and Migration: Borders and Security in a Warming World* (Oxford University Press, 2011) and co-edited *North African Politics: Change and Continuity* (Routledge, 2016). He is currently at work on *Refugees of the Climate Apocalypse: Climate Change, the Politics of Anticipation, and Anti-Refugee Regimes*. In 2019–2020 he is a visiting professor at Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane, Morocco.

References

- Baldwin, Andrew. 2016. Premediation and White Affect: Climate Change and Migration in Critical Perspective. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 41(1): 78–90.
- Bova, Gus. 2018. How Climate Change Is Driving Central American Migrants to the United States. *The Texas Observer*, December 3.
- The Economist*. 2016. More Neighbours Make More Fences: Boundary Fences Worldwide. January 7.
- Gemenne, Francois. 2015. One Good Reason to Speak of ‘Climate Refugees.’ *Forced Migration Review* 49 (May): 70–71.
- Kelley, Colin, Shahrzad Mohtadi, Mark Cane, et al. 2015. Climate Change in the Fertile Crescent and Implications of the Recent Syrian Drought. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 112 (11): 3241–3246.
- Milman, Oliver, Emily Holden, and David Agren, et al. 2018. The Unseen Driver Behind the Migrant Caravan: Climate Change. *The Guardian*, October 30.
- Selby, Jan, Omar S. Dahi, Christiane Fröhlich, et al. 2017. Climate Change and the Syrian Civil War Revisited. *Political Geography* 60 (September): 232–244.
- Sowers, Jeannie, John Waterbury, and Eckart Woertz. 2013. Did Drought Trigger the Crisis in Syria? *Footnote*, September 12.
- United Nations General Assembly. 2018. Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees: Global Compact on Refugees. Supplement No. 12 (A/73/12).
- White, Gregory. 2011. *Climate Change and Migration: Borders and Security in a Warming World*. New York: Oxford University Press.