

Critical Climatic, Migration & Biopolitics: The Mexico-US Border and Beyond

By

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Climate Refugees

United Nations Secretary General has declared 2009 as the year of Climate Change along with a call for 'responsibility to protect' in the realm of human rights and 'responsibility to deliver' in larger sphere of common international action. Christian Aid Report, 2007 has predicted that around a billion people may be displaced by 2050 from their habitats for gradual worsening of climate and environment (Christian Aid 2007) this is awfully alarming in view of the fact that due to lack of resources and social contacts, a sizable portion of climate victims can not abandon their inhabitable environment. Perhaps the only option left to them is to pray for miracle International Law does not confer refugee status to such climate-enforced migrants crossing borders Neither the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) nor its Kyoto protocol has any provision of protection to numerous affected poor people of less developed world.

Ever since humans gradually left nomadic life to adopt agriculture, over the last 10,000 years, there were drought, erosion, and soil depletion to rapture the stability of agricultural societies. Modern agricultural methods, depending considerably on fewer crop varieties, have long term impact on ecosystems resulting in massive crop failure. Pollution of various origins had always been there, both from natural sources and from human garbage. Most pollution set slow degradation forcing migration of small number of people, rather than a mass exodus. But the nature and extent of concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere engendered global climate change along with critical vulnerabilities threatening lives and livelihood of innumerable number of poor people of Southern countries.

Environmental, economic, social and political degradations are connected and can bring forth catastrophes collectively. Even the utmost scientific precision cannot segregate any mono-casualty behind peoples' becoming refugees. Apparently termed as economic migrants, many of the estimated one million people who illegally crossover into the United States

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annually from Mexico are, at least partly, driven by declining ecological conditions in the country where 60 percent of the land is classified as severely degraded (Gofman 2006). The possible consequences of climate change are many and varied, and some of them potentially very serious for human's survival. Adverse Impacts of climate change on biodiversity, agriculture, water supply, etc. will certainly hamper current patterns of consumption and production, as well as human settlement. Climate stresses are gradual and will lead to increasingly sustained 'human tide'.

The consequences of climate warming, as forecast by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) for the end of the 21st century, that appear to be the most threatening potential causes of migrations are: 1) the increase in the strength of tropical hurricanes and the frequency of heavy rains and flooding, 2) the growing droughts, with evaporation contributing to a decrease in soil humidity, often associated with food shortages, and 3) the increase in sea levels resulting from water expansion as well as melting ice.

Ice sheet decay may be set in motion in this century reducing subtropical precipitation to cause the most severe hydrologic effects. Water stress may become particularly acute in the regions like, Southwest United States and Mexico as well as Mediterranean and Middle East, where rainfall decreases of 10-25% (regionally) and up to 40% (locally) are predicted (Shindel 2007). The consequences of climate change, including changes in the frequency and violence of extreme weather events have large impacts on people's livelihoods, especially in poor and vulnerable rural societies. Forced migration has already been a livelihood strategy for generations.

Genesis

Mexico is a country subject to extreme climate variability in the form of droughts in the north and centre, while the coast of the Gulf of Mexico is frequently hit by hurricanes. Obviously Mexico has a long history of trans-border migration and is the second largest migrant sending country in the world. It is also a country subject to extreme climate variability in the form of droughts in the north and centre, while the coast of the Gulf of Mexico is frequently hit by hurricanes. About 85 per cent of the crops in Zacatecas were destroyed by droughts in 2005 and 2006 according to the Mexican media. In Veracruz, hurricane Stan destroyed large parts of the coffee crops in October 2005, and in August 2007 the state was hit by hurricane Dean that again caused extensive damage, mostly by devastating floods. The incidence of tropical cyclones is likely to decrease, their strength is predicted to increase with higher peak wind intensities and increased mean and peak rainfall intensities (Kniveton et.al. 2005). In terms of future climate change water stress is predicted to become particularly acute in the South-West US and Mexico with rainfall decreases of up to 40 per cent locally (Shindell, 2007).

The 'uncompromisable' life-style in neighbouring United States, with a per capita emission of 5.61tonnes, has forged a sharp declining tendency in rainfall and thus the prediction of water stress and other calamities in southwest United States. This has an adverse impact over a larger geo-climatic zone including the retarded ecology of Mexico. An estimation by World Resource Institution, endorsed by US Department of Energy, reveals that cumulative carbon-dioxide emission by United States and Mexico during 1900-2004 have been 3,14,772 and 11,458 metric tons respectively (US Department of Energy 2004). Mexico's per capita emissions of 1.11 metric tons of carbon in 2005 is slightly below the global average and is almost negligible vis-à-vis per capita US emission.

The deadly hemorrhagic form of dengue fever is increasing dramatically throughout Latin America primarily due to climate change and overall dengue cases in Mexico have increased by more than 600 percent since 2001 (China Post 2007). The March 2008 report by Good Neighbour Environmental Board, the United States presidential advisory committee, recommends ways for United States and Mexican authorities to improve their cooperation in coping with natural disasters that occur along their shared border. To cope with natural disasters like, hurricanes, mudslides, tornados, wildfires and earthquakes, etc. is a colossal challenge. Around the Mexico-US border region, roads and foot trails created by undocumented migrants, migrant smugglers, drug smugglers and the agencies that pursue them damage fragile ecosystems and harm wildlife. Trash and other solid waste left behind puts people and wildlife at risk for disease, and impenetrable Border-fences interfere with wildlife migration patterns and harm the environment .The Board says at least \$1 billion worth of water and wastewater infrastructure projects remain unfunded but are urgently needed to bring the border area up to the level prevalent in the rest of the United States (Environment News Service 2008)

The Mexico-U.S. border crossing process was coined "a game of cat and mouse" in the late 1980s.US border enforcement arrested migrants and voluntarily deported them back to Mexico, permitting them to enter again. On one side are business interests and advocacy groups seeking permission, direct or indirect, to hire cheap immigrant workers The Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) was introduced in 1986 providing amnesty, and punishing employers who knowingly hire undocumented migrants. But in practice, there were ample opportunities for employers to find and exploit loopholes and continue their practice of hiring illegal workers (Calavita, 1992, cited in Donato 2008) Prior to September 11, 2001, immigration policy reforms centered on concerns to safeguard United States borders from foreigners crossing without legal documents. During the early 1990s, local border enforcement buildup efforts emerged east to west as many favoured the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) strategy of building walls and holding the line as the answer to the problem of undocumented crossings at the Mexico-US border. In 1993/4, the United States government initiated a strategy called 'prevention through deterrence'

which aimed to 'restore the rule of law' to the border by militarizing the border reciprocated by shifting location of undocumented flows and paved the rise of people smuggling through more physically challenging areas. The US Border Safety Initiative (BSI) and the Mexican Grupos Beta work together to combat the 'inhuman' smugglers who are responsible for deaths of numerous undocumented Mexican migrants in the desert who have to pay fabulous fees. When the crossing process is complete in the US, the migrant body becomes a commodity for cheap and disposable labour stimulating the economy on both sides of the border. The undocumented as a subaltern becomes border subjects, "whether they are apprehended or even in death" (Woodling 2006).

Post 9/11 Mexico-US Border

In United States, Border security has emerged as an area of public concern after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. As Congress passes legislation to enhance border security (e.g., P.L. 109-13) and the Administration puts into place procedures to tighten border enforcement, concerns over terrorists exploiting the porous southwest border continue to grow. The U.S. border with Mexico is some 2,000 miles long and the two countries are linked together through trade, investment, migration, tourism, environment, and familial relationships. To United States, the most pressing concern at its southwest border with Mexico has been the number of undocumented aliens who still manage to cross the border every day, the majority of which are Mexican nationals.

As the number of illegal aliens that are present in the United States continues to grow, attention is directed at the border patrol and the enforcement of immigration laws within the interior of the country. The Department of Homeland Security's Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) units have launched several initiatives aimed at apprehending illegal aliens and dismantling human and drug smuggling organizations. Despite these efforts, the flow of illegal migration continues. Issues such as enforcement of immigration laws and organizational issues such as inter- and intra-agency cooperation, coordination and information sharing continue to be debated. In the view of United States' interest, a more comprehensive approach that addresses the push factors of the sending countries and the pull factors of the United States, coupled with more effective enforcement of current laws in the interior of the country merit further examination (Seghetti, 2005) In this connection, the civilian border patrol groups' decision to patrol the Mexico-U.S border constitutes a decision as the participants perceive themselves as involved in a mission to combat an existential threat from the alleged 'human flood'. The Minuteman Project (MMP), a civilian border patrol group has been founded in October 2004 by retired California businessman Jim Gilchrist and Chris Simcox (owner and editor of the Tombstone Tumbleweed). The locality-specific precedence like the October 1977 Ku

Klux Klan's Border Watch at the San Ysidro, California Port of Entry has probably feed backed Border patrolling volunteers like the Minutemen that such local border vigil is inextricably linked to the global. Thus the 'local' groups problematize presumed boundaries that separate the local, national, and global as well as between the private realm of civilian action and the public realm of government action to usher in an era of "statecraft from below" (Doty 2001, Doty 2007).

Both sovereign states, Mexico and United States have abandoned those undocumented migrants – and it is this abandonment that grants the decisions of those dispersed actors greater consequences. The border patrol groups are acting politically, and acting as security actors, but they are not acting as sovereign (Salter 2008). But the phenomenon suggests that a normal situation is not fully controlled by the state or elites. The goal of border patrol activists is not to suspend the law, but rather to uphold it more vigorously and rectify neglect of the law to ensure the return to a 'normal' situation, as perceived by them. There are similarities to some extent between anti-immigrant movement and white nationalism in creating an atmosphere of intolerance that can and does encourage taking the law into one's own hands (Doty 2007). Ultimately this exceptional act tends to be routinized and perceived as normal.

A human rights group in Arizona collects the names of the victims of undocumented crossing deaths and have wooden crosses inscribed with the names of crossers who have died, or sometimes simply read as 'unknown' in Spanish. The crosser becomes the symbol of a human being's crossing, a cross 'lives' in the US and moves freely across the border in the hands human rights activists during protest rallies. This is some mode of arrival, yet also a resolution to forever. This same group, have a strict policy to refer to those who have died crossing as 'migrants'; not as illegals, nor as undocumented- just as migrants. They emphasize a common humanity and common migrant struggle is more important than legal status, rather to mention legal status in death would be inhumane.

In contrast, civilian border patrolling groups are engaged in spotting and reporting undocumented Mexican migrants along Mexico-US border in collaboration with law-enforcement. This refers to the politics and rule of exception when the normal border vigilance is not fully controlled by the State or elites. Dispersed decisions at borders construct hegemony of self-over retched bare-life of 'others'. The border-patrolling volunteers deny human security of climate migrants even by demanding foreclosure of the scope for amnesty advocacy (Doty 2007).

Strategic Securitization of just Exception

The mainstream debates on climate change center round the rhetoric of mitigation and adaptation and by-pass, consciously or otherwise, the critical issues perpetuating climate disasters and the resultant human vulnerabilities. The reflections on links between climate change and

migration have been undermined by dominance of an 'Economic Paradigm' in migration studies, a dominant 'Political Paradigm' in refugee studies, and general skepticism about the concept of climate migration. The environmental motives in the definition of refugees seems politically unfeasible due to possible reservation of receiving countries, and would not achieve its objective of protection as the majority of displacements take place in the interior of the countries. Thus it is advocated that the international system should respond in sharing collective burden of assistance and prevention in countries confronted with disasters and the opening of emigration channels in subsidiary international instruments of protection, such as temporary pro schemes (Piguete, 2008). The critical reflections on climate-enforced vulnerabilities probe into historical roots and contemporary devastation potential of emission-intensive capitalist circulation and 'supply creates its own demand' led conspicuous life style of the industrialized countries. Climate disasters and displacements become a humanitarian issue where generous industrialized countries offer aid as acts of charity to assist affected developing countries. This may remind one the historic 'white men's burden'. The noble act to offer this assistance is framed by security concerns about undesirable and unsafe immigration rather than by human rights concerns (Oels 2008)

Climate changes raise critical concerns for long-term human security- the means to secure basic rights, needs, and livelihoods, and to pursue opportunities for human fulfillment and development. The increasing occurrence "complex extremes" and "complex emergencies" are pressing challenges for the climate (O'Brien et.al. 2008).

From the perspective of strategic securitization, however, the human vulnerabilities, including the climate-enforced ones, should not be addressed by humanitarianism as a long-term remedy. In stead, the victims' political voice needs proper recognition. This does imply the recognition of fundamental human rights like the right to reside, to work and to non-discrimination and above all, right to live as a political being. The emissions rights as property rights oppose the most directly relevant human security to each individual to an environment adequate for their health and wellbeing (Hayward 2008). This can only be achieved if the framework encompasses not only issues of climate change narrowly construed, but recognizes how the command of natural resources and environmental goods is relevant to wealth, vulnerability and welfare reinforced by the synergy of a host of historical, ecological, social and economic factors.

Strategic Securitization of climate is founded on the human security of each and all individuals supplemented by the desired inter-spatial equity between industrialized North and underdeveloped South. The metropolitan western countries have been the main source as well as main beneficiary of climatic deterioration since the days of colonial despotism. Their post-war recovery-boom-burst for the long four decades has emitted greenhouse gases to a colossal amount' to plunder the planetary ecosystem that, as a recent research document observes, "is largely irreversible for 1,000 years

after emission stop”(Solomon et.al.2009). The zero-sum game has its obvious tolls on teeming millions of ‘other’ world. The retarded societies become retarded ecologies too and the ‘development of underdevelopment’ diversifies with deadlier dimensions. Their retched populations have been deprived of critical minimum basic needs, including a habitable environment. The neo-liberal insights to overcome the post-burst saturation have literally looked towards greener pastures. The globalization of manufacturing has facilitated the same climate-polluting countries to offshore their emission-prone manufacturing in the underdeveloped South and thus to further the plunder of live and livelihood there.

The strategic securitization Framework can engender a comprehensive emancipatory agenda to reduce unequal ecological exchanges and spatial divide with a far-reaching policy-relevance in securing each and every human being against threats to human development and dignity.

The Westphalian states necessitate the rule of exception for their securitization of various perceived threats, which ultimately becomes inseparable from their normal politics. In such an arena of exception abandoned by the rule of law, bare-lives of refugees or undocumented migrants are recipients of brutality and explicit denial of right to live. The fate of such retched people depends on the whims of the state, its military and police and even the fanatic border patrol volunteers. The citizens of a bordered territory are entitled to human rights which their fellow human beings, the irregular migrants, can never be provided. Securitization of such non-citizens can be visualized by transcending the territorial confines by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Thus it has been demanded that the protection of humans, not citizens, must be the watchword in international refugee policy (Rajaram and Grundy-Warr 2004). The demand has definite resemblance with Derridan concepts of ‘new international’ and ‘democracy to come’. Derrida observes, ”If I feel in solidarity today with this particular Algerian who is caught between the F.I.S. and the Algerian state [...] – it is not a feeling of one citizen toward another, it is not a feeling peculiar to a citizen of the world, as if we are all potential or imaginary citizens of a great state [...]. What binds me to them – and this is the point; there is a bond but this bond cannot be contained within the traditional concepts of community, obligation or responsibility – is a protest against citizenship, a protest against membership in a political configuration as such. (Derrida, 1994 cited in Vaghan-Williams 2004)

There are emerging hopes, away from the Mexico-US borderzones, even in mainland United States where the homo sacers and their supporters have taken up strategies to securitize themselves by upholding their cause of ‘just exception’. Anthropologist De Genova’s research on ‘Mexican Chicago’ indicates an alternative political discourse. The Mexican migrants, the ‘cheap, compliant and expendable labour’ for over a century, are integrated into the economy, ecology and society in a typical global city like Chicago. The ambiguous identity of Mexicans outside of a racialized, homogenized

and imagined United States serves to critique this imagined community and aspire to forge an alternative imaginary of political belonging to substantiate their political claims (De Genova 1998). The emerging alternative politics of belonging in Chicago has its obvious impacts on relevant regional, national and transnational policies and scholastic deliberations (McNIVEN 2007). And the solidarity of socio-political activism world-wide would be stimulated.

It is only recent past that a coalition of immigrant workers, many of whom had irregular status, campaigned for Unpaid Wages Prohibition Act 1997 passed by the New York Legislature. It had been meant to address the frequent withholding of wages from migrants employed in and around New York and Long Island. The solidarity among working class had motivated a group of irregular migrants campaigning in their mother-tongue 'Spanish' for changing employment law. The movement had blurred the divide between legitimacy and illegitimacy by demanding the protection of wage levels for low-paid workers, irrespective of their being US citizens or irregular migrants. In a similar mobilization in dozens of cities across the United States during March to May 2006, 'hundreds of thousands' of irregular migrants and their supporters have demonstrated for legal recognition and against restrictive immigration legislation passed through the House of Representatives in December 2005. The demonstrations, organized by coalitions of church, community and labour organizations, deserve the credibility of continuing the democratic protest culture of 1997 activists' campaign for the Unpaid Wages Prohibition Act in New York. The broad participation in 1997 was made possible through campaigners' visualization of themselves as legitimate and effective political actors regardless of their formal status (Gordon 2005, cited in McNEVIN 2007). This shift in self-identification is also evident in the terms in which irregular migrants fought the case for immigration reform in 2006. They have self-identified their cause as a democratic struggle for political rights and the movement has been compared with American civil rights movement (McNEVIN 2007).

A landmark judgment in United States in February 2009 has ruled for compulsory carbon -audit of industrial projects, including overseas ones, promoted by American public financial organizations. It is in response to a suit to US Federal Court brought by the environmental NGOs Friends of Earth and Greenpeace, along with the city of Boulder, Colorado in 2002. They alleged that the Export-Import Bank and the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) provided more than \$32 billion in public financing for overseas projects that cumulatively produced carbon-dioxide emissions in between 1990 and 2003, equivalent to over 7 per cent of the world's annual emissions in 2003. Three California cities—Arcata, Santa Monica, and Oakland—later joined the suit, arguing that the climate change caused by these overseas projects would harm them. Santa Monica became, for instance, involved in the law suit as there was evidence that Santa Monica would suffer in tourism within a number of decades due to climate

change and that changes in sea level would have an effect on Santa Monica's coastal infrastructure will have negative impacts on the Santa Monica local economy. A suit of almost seven years (*Friends of the Earth, Inc., et al. v. Spinelli, et al.*) that demanded two US government run financing agencies to take into account the effects of their overseas projects on climate change. The case had an important ruling long before final settlement back when the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals upheld the right of the 6 parties to sue under (US) National Environment Protection Act (NEPA) even though the projects took place over seas. This was the first court holding of its kind at the appellate level and set the precedent of the right to sue under NEPA an alleged unlawful act beyond the territorial boundary of United States (Berliant L 2009).

This is again a great leap towards securitizing the just exceptions. The judgment has recognized the indivisible root-cause and general indivisibility of climate crises that American south-west share with many a regions of the globe. Thus the jurisdiction of Federal Court has undermined the official US border to ensure sustainability of the cities in south-west United States. The areas along with Mexico belong to a trans-border geoclimatic zone which is again dialectically networked with planetary dynamics. The foundation for a sociology of cosmopolitan harm conventions like United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change is to protect and securitize the vulnerabilities any where of the world. But to accomplish this, it needs to emphasize the multi-faced forms of harm that a particular group of countries inflict on others and the more diffuse types of harm caused by global capitalism. The emerging moral commitment to domestic as well as international political community lies at the heart of a sociology of cosmopolitan harm conventions with an emancipatory intent (Linklater 2001).

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