Climate refugees: A useful concept? Towards an alternative vocabulary of ecological displacement

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Abstract
Against the background of climate scepticism and raging anti-immigrant sentiments across Europe, the politics of climate change and the politics of migration are fraught with tension. The two converge over discussions about 'climate refugees'. But what merit does the term 'climate refugee' have, and are there potential problems associated with it? This article pays attention to how racialised discourses underwrite the concept of climate refugees in ways that further exclude already marginalised populations. In place of 'climate refugees', it proposes 'ecological displacement' as a notion which stresses how and why people are displaced within or across borders. While, indeed, anthropogenic climate change is a real threat to the livelihoods of humans (among other species), it is not the only environmental driver of displacement. By using the term 'ecology', this article argues that we allow for a description which encompasses other potential displacement drivers beyond climate change, such as volcanic eruptions, landslides, and political violence. Citing 'displacement' makes the term available to populations who are displaced by damaged ecologies both within and across borders, in and outside of Europe. The notion of 'ecological displacement' and 'ecologically displaced people' tries to rehumanise those carrying the heaviest social and climate burdens on a burning planet.

Introduction

The multiple causes of displacement and migration are often difficult to disentangle. Increasingly, climate change and environmental degradation directly cause or compound with other factors to create or exacerbate conditions that cause people to flee their

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homelands (UNHCR, 2021). As climate change and environmental degradation emerge as new drivers of migration and displacement, so too do new vocabularies and discourses, such as the notion of the 'climate refugee' – a term used to describe those migrating because of environmental changes to their habitats.

In recent years, the spectre of the climate refugee has begun to haunt European politics. Amid a presence of climate scepticism (Almiron et al., 2020; Labohm, 2012) and raging anti-immigrant sentiments in Europe (Carastathis, 2015; Czaika and Lillo, 2018; da Silva Rebelo et al., 2020; McLaren and Johnson, 2007; Rustenbach, 2010; Siebers and Dennissen, 2014), the politics of changing environments and human migration are fraught with tension. The European focus on climate refugees marks the site at which racialised anxieties around climate change and migration onto the continent converge in deeply challenging, and often problematic, ways (Baldwin, 2013). But what are the implications of a notion such as that of the climate refugee? And crucially, is it a concept that can be put to good use in the genuine interests of those it attempts to describe? These are the conceptual questions which frame the argument of this article, for the ways that we define the concept and understand its potential usages are crucial for how public opinion and government policies (which interact significantly in most European countries) are constructed.

In this article, I develop a position in favour of an alternative framework of 'ecological displacement', arguing that the latter might offer us different, more inclusive possibilities of talking about how and why people are displaced within and across borders beyond the heavy burdens of the racialised stigma attached to the notion of the climate refugee. The notion of the (climate) refugee has often been misused, misshapen, and stigmatised to an extent in Europe which seems difficult to rescript. As Ben Wisner argues, '[w]ords matter, and terms such as "environmental refugee" and "climate migrant" have been used in contexts that could accidentally [and, even, consciously] give fuel to xenophobia and racism' (cited in Oliver-Smith, 2012: 1026). Thus, the purpose and contribution of this article are to add to existing efforts to denaturalise and counter the racialised language used to bolster xenophobic narratives across Europe while proposing the alternative notion of 'ecological displacement'. Thus, this article moves to examine some of the political questions which accompany the challenges in giving a precise definition to the term 'climate refugee'. It studies how exclusionary racialised discourses undergird the concept of climate refugees to the detriment of already marginalised populations. Building on these observations, I articulate ecological displacement as an alternative vocabulary to that of climate refugees.

The uses of the term 'climate refugee' are far and wide-ranging (as we will see below), but the term itself remains a site of contestation with varying stances on the extent to which it is useful. This article reflects on some of the political and analytical merits and pitfalls of the notion of 'climate refugee' as a term, exploring and responding to some of the problematics it gives rise to. Thus, the following discussion engages with the extant scholarship which deals with some of the definitional difficulties around the term 'climate refugee'. It therefore takes a language-based, textual intervention in debates surrounding migration and climate change or environmental degradation. The latter rests on an understanding of language as a site of struggle at which violence can be produced, facilitated, and legitimised (Corsevski, 1998; Gay, 1997, 2018; Orwell, 2003; Senghor, 1966; Žižek, 2016), whether direct (e.g. inciting physical harm) or structural (e.g. policy framings and decisions which harm particular groups; Galtung, 1969, 1990). As anti-colonial movements and postcolonial scholarship show us, both structural domination and bottom-up resistance to oppression also take place on the terrain of language. People

resisting domination interrogate, denaturalise, and subvert the ways in which we come to use certain words (Britton, 1999; Glissant, 1981; Igoudjil, 2014; Klemperer, 2013; Mayr, 2003). In language lies the budding promise of transformation. Since any 'change in our sensitivity is sustained by language' (Žižek, 2016: 3), shifts in language are a necessity to move towards a more compassionate politics of solidarity. It is therefore necessary to reflect on the language which frames our current hostile environment in Europe and use these reflections to turn towards other linguistic postures. This study thus focuses on language as one of the key political instruments which constructs the discursive boundaries within which migration politics take place, arguing for the adoption of 'ecological displacement' and 'ecologically displaced people'.

In the first part of this discussion, I spend some time setting out and justifying this article's language-based approach. From this perspective, I examine some of the political challenges in defining the term 'climate refugee' before providing a working definition of the term. Section 'Definitional difficulties: What is the meaning of "climate refugee"?' concentrates more closely on how exclusionary racialised discourses undergird the concept of climate refugees to the detriment of already marginalised populations. Building on existing literature on this topic, I demonstrate how climate refugee discourses often play into racialised, xenophobic, and othering narratives whether intentional or not. In the fourth part of the discussion, I begin to articulate ecological displacement as an alternative vocabulary which is as follows: (a) expands the category of climate to think about textured ecologies of displacement, (b) widens the remit of forced displacement to include white populations affected in Europe as a strategic de-racialising move, and (c) attempts to counter the dehumanising effects of refugee discourses by explicitly naming the affected parties as ecologically displaced *people*.

It should be noted that much of the proceeding discussion focuses on the context of Europe. This concentration arises both from the place at which I think and write (London, England), as well as a keen attention to the emergent European racialised anxieties about an influx of somehow threatening (climate) refugees onto the continent.

Language as a place of struggle

Given that there is no clear, official, international legal framework designed to protect the people who are already being displaced because of climate and environmental changes (as section 'Definitional difficulties: What is the meaning of "climate refugee"?' of this discussion illustrates), this article's focus on language could be interpreted as a matter of semantics. Considering the urgent material circumstances in which displaced people find themselves, the need for legal provisions is evident; but there is certainly a discussion to be had about how the dialogue about climate change, displacement, and migration can be framed in the most effective terms possible. Hence, I briefly situate this article's focus on language within feminist and anti/post-colonial traditions which understand language as a key political terrain on which both domination and resistance can and do occur before reviewing working definitions of the term 'climate refugee' in the following section for clarity's sake (as multiple definitions exist).

As theorists, writers, and activists of numerous political persuasions have asserted throughout history, there is an important and intimate relationship between language and politics – a relationship with concrete political implications (Butler, 2009; Gay, 2018; Ngũgĩ, 2011; Orwell, 2003; Žižek, 2016). This has been well-illustrated by scholars of media, for example, who show how the language used to talk about war is sanitised by

military and scientific discourses emphasising surgical precision works to obscure the physical, violent, fleshiness of warfare (Petley, 2003), and therefore, manufacture public acquiescence to state violence in lieu of outrage and pushback. The cases of the Shoah (Bain et al., 2013; Klemperer, 2013) and the Rwandan genocide (Slocum-Bradley, 2008; Vollhardt et al., 2007) are often cited as harrowing examples of the ways that dehumanising language frames acts of extreme violence against certain groups. More generally, psychological studies have demonstrated concrete links between the use of dehumanising language and increased hostility towards and willingness to enact violence on targeted groups (Goff et al., 2008; Kteily et al., 2015; Rudman and Mescher, 2012; Tipler and Ruscher, 2019). Language, then, is a powerful tool which can be manipulated to serious effect, with implications for the ways that politics is conducted, interpreted, and responded to (Orwell, 2003). We should note, however, that this forceful use of language in the interests of domination is not limited to use as state technology.

Alongside the explicitly material and political spheres more traditionally associated with the concerns of those who resist domination, feminists, and anti/post-colonialists continuously remind us that '[l]anguage is also a place of struggle' (hooks, 1989: 15). That is to say, the words we choose to use matter. From this perspective, this study – although not explicitly literary in approach – uses a textual approach to build on the extensive work of scholars who have already closely examined and interrogated language and linguistic choices in relation to processes of structural domination, pointing to the importance of words as containers for cultural meaning with political implications. More specifically, I build on existing scholarship which considers the implications of the term 'climate refugee' from legal and policy perspectives (Biermann and Boas, 2010) as well as discursive axes (Baldwin, 2012, 2013; Bennett et al., 2015) among others, in order to argue for a linguistic shift in the way we talk about forced migration, displacement, and climate change. This shift aims to address and counter the dehumanising effects of current racialised refugee discourses.

Definitional difficulties: What is the meaning of 'climate refugee'?

Human displacement and the existence of refugees are nothing new. Forced flight dates back centuries and has occurred across a variety of countries and contexts. Ancient texts such as the Bible recount stories of human displacement. Processes for providing refugees with protection can be traced at least as far back as Ancient Greece and Rome (Fullerton, 2016). The category of refugee as one which is protected on a legal, international basis, however, is a much more recent one which stretches back to the aftermaths of the First World War and the Second World War (Grahl-Madsen, 1966; McGregor, 1994). The initial legal international frameworks which allocated provisions for refugees were first constructed through efforts by the League of Nations to protect Russian and Armenian refugees following the First World War (Jaeger, 2001). These early legal architectures were built upon in the wake of the Second World War, with the establishment of the International Refugee Organisation in 1946, and later, in 1951, the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugee. The latter is perhaps the most significant existing international legislation relating to refugees (Grahl-Madsen, 1966).

In the 1951 UN Convention, a refugee is defined as someone who

owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his [sic] nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself [sic] of the protection of that country. (UNHCR, 2010: 14)

The definition rests heavily on the aspect of forced displacement as driven by (fear of) persecution by other people. As such, there is currently no official legal definition of a 'climate refugee' under UN frameworks. The absence of a definition and legal provisions for those displaced by climate and environmental issues means that people already vulnerable to environmental catastrophe may find difficulty accessing adequate protection and support to resettle elsewhere. For this reason, many have called for the adoption of climate refugees as a legal category (Mayer, 2011). However, among those who call for this adoption, there is no consensus over whether this legal adoption should take the form of subsuming climate refugees into the existing UN legislature or rather, creating a new, separate legal framework (Biermann and Boas, 2010).

Despite having little legal pertinence on an international scale, the term has been used by a range of media outlets (Dinshaw, 2015; Gilbert, 2009; Teffer, 2015; Carrington, 2016), activists and non-governmental organizations (NGOs; Friends of the Earth, 2017; Vong, 2017; Climate Refugees, 2021; Environmental Justice Foundation, 2021), politicians (Juncker, 2015; Castro, 2020), and scholars (Lister, 2014; Faber and Schlegel, 2017; Salem and Rosencranz, 2020) while being actively rejected by others (Farbotko and Lazrus, 2012; Munoz, 2021). The debates around climate refugees pose challenges in that there remains a serious lack of consensus both on what exactly is meant by the notion of climate refugee (Bates, 2002; Biermann and Boas, 2010; Brown, 2008; Dun and Gemenne, 2008) and the basis on which it should or should not be used (Kniveton et al., 2008; Munoz, 2021; Piguet, 2010). These debates attest to the tangible ways in which the realms of the linguistic, legal, and material triangulate.

So, what does it mean to talk about a climate refugee? Many have called for a clearer definition of climate refugees, arguing that the lack of definitional consensus obstructs the necessary international organisation and cooperation necessary to put the appropriate legal and material infrastructures in place to resolve issues relating to displacement (Berchin et al., 2017; Bettini and Andersson, 2014). Although the term has been emphatically rejected by prominent elements from within the United Nations (UN) today (e.g. Ionesco, 2019), one of the earliest definitions of an adjacent term – environmental refugees – was originally articulated by United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) researcher Essam El-Hinnawi in 1985. El-Hinnawi defined environmental refugees as

those people who have been forced to leave their traditional habitat, temporarily or permanently, because of a marked environmental disruption (natural and/or triggered by people) that jeopardized their existence and/or seriously affected the quality of their life. By 'environmental disruption' in this definition is meant any physical, chemical, and/or biological changes in the ecosystem (or resource base) that render it, temporarily or permanently, unsuitable to support human life. (El-Hinnawi, 1985: 4)

Arguably, El-Hinnawi's definition of *environmental* refugees demonstrates a degree of compatibility with the framework of ecological displacement which I propose here. El-Hinnawi emphasises changes to the entire ecology including and going beyond

climate change and recognises the role that people can have in inducing these changes. However, I still take issue with the use of 'refugee' as a label which El-Hinnawi retains, and more precisely, the specific notion of *climate* refugees which is coming into vogue. For the purposes of this article, then, I work with a more recent definition of climate refugees which emphasises the role of climate change:

> people who have to leave their habitats, immediately or in the near future, because of sudden or gradual alteration in their natural environment related at least to one of the three impacts of climate change: direct impact of climate change to: sea level rise, extreme weather events, and drought and water scarcity. (Biermann and Boas, 2010: 67)

Here, there is a clear emphasis on environmental changes caused by climate change, whether immediate or long-term, as the key factor driving people to leave their usual areas of residence.

The notion of the climate refugee is by no means useless. The use of the word *refugee* specifically partly draws on a rights-based vocabulary that is normally tied to legal force. Under international law, refugees have a right to safe asylum and countries 'may not forcibly return (refoulement) refugees to a territory where they face danger or discriminate between groups of refugees' (UNHCR, 2002). This illustrates what many political theorists have argued; that rights generate duties (Kolstad, 2008; Nickel, 1993). The designation of refugee thus has tangible consequences: it requires host countries to properly provide for and protect them, not as an act of kindness or hospitality but rather, as a legally grounded obligation. However, the 1951 Geneva Convention does not currently have provisions for those whose displacement is understood to be caused by environmental factors, that is, where (the threat of) targeted human violence is not cited as the reason for flight. The term climate refugee might be argued to contain more force and relevance if it carried legal weight. However, this is not the case.

Indeed, the legal force of the existing category of refugees has been emphasised as the term's redeeming feature. Its legality offers clear, tangible, and concrete implications for those who are able to claim it (Lister, 2014). But the notion of a *climate* refugee still has no legal pertinence, and the baggage of the term refugee alone is manifold. As we will see shortly, the reference to 'climate' does not sufficiently consider the wider ecology in which people find themselves. Nor does it address the *politics* of environmental drivers of displacement that stretch beyond the restricted category of climate change. Moreover, the problems with the ways that the category of 'refugee' has been appropriated and warped by violent rhetoric in Europe are concerning enough for us to consider the term in question practically irrecuperable.

A useful concept? Analytical evaluation of the notion of climate refugees

There are many problems with arriving at an agreed definition of climate refugees. There are many reasons for which the notion of climate refugee invokes concern, particularly as viewed from a critical anti-racist perspective. Here, I focus on the processes of racialised othering that occur in climate refugee discourses, the ways in which displacement comes to be depoliticised when boxed into the ostensibly neutral category of the 'environment', and concerns around how we highlight or obscure the agency and vulnerability of displaced people as we reflect on the terms that we use to describe human displacement in

rapidly shifting ecologies. This section thus concentrates more closely on how exclusionary racialised discourses undergird the concept of climate refugees to the detriment of already marginalised populations. Building on existing literature, I demonstrate how climate refugee discourses often play into racialised, xenophobic, and othering narratives whether intentional or not.

As noted earlier, the term 'climate refugee' enjoys usage among mainstream media outlets. It has notably been used to refer to refugees fleeing Syria citing drought as the cause of their flight (Dinshaw, 2015). Those displaced by drought in Syria are no doubt affected by the shifts in their surrounding environments into uninhabitable spaces, as provoked by climate change (Selby et al., 2017). However, the backdrop of political violence complicates this picture. The definition of a climate refugee is thus embroiled in the difficult business of distinguishing the initial reason for the ecological breakdowns that cause the physical displacement of human communities and individuals. This is a conceptual difficulty which appears, in practice, to be impossible to resolve. How do we accurately distinguish between climate change and political violence as drivers of flight when the two can be intertwined? As Jan Selby et al. (2017) argue, anthropogenic climate change is likely to function as *one of many* compounding factors contributing to human displacement. It is hard to delimit the concept of the climate refugee to those whose displacement is exclusively driven by a change in the climate; a reason for which some call for the term to be abandoned (Ionesco, 2019).

There are certainly questions to be raised here about how useful it is to unilaterally graft the term climate refugee onto people's experiences, which are frequently more complex and multidimensional than the climate-centric nature of the term suggests. In practice, the use of the climate refugee frame often manifests as the unilateral forging of narratives (often by NGOs and policymakers) for displaced people or people at risk of displacement. Such narratives do not converge with the situated concerns and understandings articulated by the very people they are said to describe (Farbotko and Lazrus, 2012; Munoz, 2021). This raises serious questions about how the empty, symbolic invocation of embodied experiences of displacement in the context of climate change, environmental degradation, and disaster can be made to function as components of wider narratives constructed from without. While debates and discussions about the types of terms we use to address the collective issues of displacement and refuge are important, we should retain some critical reserve which recognises the ways in which even terms which are reached by academic, legal, or otherwise institutional consensus may not always accurately or sufficiently capture and describe the experiences of the people who said terms attempt to portray.

Elsewhere, the notion of the climate refugee can also be seen as a strategic catalyst for political action, targeting those who live in parts of the world that are not first in the climate firing line. We have seen this invocation of the climate refugee used as a wake-up call by politicians such as in former European Union (EU) Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker's first State of the Union speech in the European Parliament (Juncker, 2015). Juncker's warning of eventually unmanageable flows of climate refugees in Europe are designed to get ordinary people in Europe thinking about the ways in which we will all be affected by climate change in the future. This approach is not incoherent. It attempts to incite political action among the masses – arguably what is partly needed to arrive at more urgent solutions to the climate crisis. But this strategy is a double-edged sword. Such strategies can be exploited by xenophobic narratives which whip up fear about 'climate refugees', with the concrete result of 'promot[ing] strongly self-enhancing

values, encouraging a very inward-looking perspective, fear of outsiders, and a nationalistic attitude' (UK Climate Change and Migration Coalition, 2012) among audiences to such communication from media outlets and politicians. These processes are already taking root in the UK media landscape, where the mobilisation of climate refugee discourses has a distinct othering effect (Sakellari, 2021).

A UNHCR commissioned report links hostile press coverage citing 'climate migrants' and 'refugees' to a rise in the prevalence of far-right politics (Bennett et al., 2015). Although, arguably, today such rhetoric can also be seen in traditionally left-leaning newspapers such as *The Guardian* (Carrington, 2016) pointing to an increased normalisation and acceptance of exclusionary discourses. We know that anti-migration and anti-asylum language and rhetoric translate into hostile European migration policies which have serious consequences for people trying to flee uninhabitable environments. Detention camps multiply on the borders of Europe where conditions are dangerous and futures uncertain (Frelick, 2016). Brutal legal frameworks which effectively criminalise displacement into Europe are being proposed in countries such as the United Kingdom (O'Carroll, 2021). There is an urgent need for a comprehensive legal framework that addresses ecological displacement and turns away from the divisive racism and xenophobia that plagues Europe's politics.

There is much to be decoded around the notion of the climate refugee as a repellent and/or worrying figure who is, more often than not, constructed as a racialised other (Baldwin, 2012, 2013; Burrell and Hörschelmann, 2019; Raghunath, 2021). As Andrew Baldwin (2013: 1474) argues, 'the figure of the climate-change migrant [and, I would add, refugee] expresses a set of "white" anxieties to do with an impending loss of control and disorder, and the dissolution of boundaries'. The eye-watering numbers used to talk about a future incoming 'wave' of climate refugees (supposedly somewhere between 50 million and 250 million) feeds into a concerned desire to 'take back control' – a phrase used during campaigns in the lead-up to the UK referendum on leaving the EU. The fears stoked around immigration as a means to inciting action on climate change can thus be understood within the existence of a 'nature-nation-purity nexus' (Forchtner, 2019) in Europe; a desire to maintain an insular, enclosed 'purity' of the European landscape and its communities, coded as white.

Refugee discourses in Europe are situated in the heavy historical contexts of European colonialism, Eurocentrism, and practices of orientalism. The idea of the climate refugee easily plays into the notion of 'Europe as refuge' (Latour, 2017). Although Latour advocates for a hospitable politics in the face of climate-related migration in Europe, this is a conceptual move which risks providing fodder for an orientalised construction of dangerous, faraway lands which hold a single, dark mass of refugees menacing an idealised Europe. As we think about Europe as a small haven for climate refugees, we lack emphasis on the vulnerability and agency of the displaced person or the political causes of their displacement, and instead, focus on the ostensible threats to the Europe which have disproportionately contributed negatively to hostile natural, political, and social environments across Asia, Africa, and South America. Such assessments of the situation fall into the trap of the de-historicised climate refugee (Hartmann, 2010); an approach which falls short of engaging with matters of inequality invoked by climate justice frameworks that situate contemporary environmental imbalances across the world within historical global inequities embedded in the legacies of European colonialism and imperialism. Thus, we see the definitional and methodological difficulties which arise from the notion of climate refugees – especially around how the political causes of displacement, as well as agency

and vulnerability, are highlighted or obscured by the language used to describe the affected people. Such concerns are relevant in the context of Europe as an environment which is increasingly, and tremendously, hostile to the figure of the racialised other which it has constructed.

Towards an alternative paradigm: *Ecological displacement*

There are some very powerful arguments in favour of the use of climate refugee as a relevant term and there are many who are in favour of its official adoption and legal usage (Bell, 2004; Berchin et al., 2017). However, in terms of painting an accurate picture of the challenges that displaced humans are faced with in a changing environment, the term climate refugee does not do the conceptual or political heavy lifting required. I therefore suggest an alternative framework of ecological displacement and/or ecologically displaced persons. This move towards the language of ecological displacement mirrors the International Organization for Migration's (IOM, 2014: 13) usage of the term 'environmentally displaced person' which they describe as 'persons who are displaced within their country of habitual residence or who have crossed an international border and for whom environmental degradation, deterioration or destruction is a major cause of their displacement, although not necessarily the sole one'. This articulation of an alternative vocabulary attempts to (a) move beyond the category of climate to think about the various textured ecologies of displacement, (b) widen the remit of forced displacement to include white populations affected in Europe as a strategic de-racialising move, and (c) counter the dehumanising effects of refugee discourses by explicitly naming the affected parties as ecologically displaced *people*.

First, I stress the use of the term 'ecological' as opposed to 'climate'. While, indeed, anthropogenic climate change is a real threat to the livelihoods of humans (among other species), it is not the only environmental driver of displacement. By using the term 'ecology', we allow for a description which encompasses other potential displacement drivers beyond climate change, such as volcanic eruptions, landslides, and air or water pollution. The climate refugee label contributes to a hyper-concentration on climate change which is reduced to a singular, apolitical, global driver of displacement extracted from existing situations organised and informed by power relations at local, national, and international levels. This distorted focus on climate change is contested by scholars who affirm that the convergence of multiple social conditions such as poverty, violence, political instability, and poor governance often lie at the root of the type of displacement that the term 'climate refugee' attempts to describe (Black, 1998; Farbotko and Lazrus, 2012). Furthermore, fundamental philosophical contestations surface from the implied binaristic separation of nature from culture as we separate out *climate* refugees from other types of refugees (McGregor, 1994). The notion of ecology attempts to understand the numerous components of a shifting ecology – an entire habitat – which becomes uninhabitable for a web of simultaneous intersecting reasons.

Second, by proposing that the category of ecological displacement include the displacement of (largely white) populations living in Europe whose mobility is catalysed by factors which we associate with environmental degradation, I attempt to enact a strategic de-racialisation of the notion of displacement triggered by climate and environmental drivers. If racialisation is the process by which concepts and groups are violently defined and constructed through racial alterity (usually situated in opposition to whiteness), de-racialisation is an attempt to counter this process. The UN definition designates national

borders as the site at which refugees comes into being. Currently, the majority of climate change and weather or disaster-related displacement takes place *within* rather than *across* national borders (Migration Data Portal, 2021). This means that the international refugee framework does not address the needs of most people who currently experience displacement which is framed by disasters, climate breakdown, and/or environmental degradation. I stress again that I use the notion of ecology to include drivers of displacement which are not necessarily directly related to climate change, such as disasters.

On this point, the term ecological displacement is broad enough to encompass, for example, the displacement of flood-affected populations moving further inland from the coast of England. This expansion of the category, as opposed to that of climate refugees, may also contribute to a de-racialisation of the notion of climate-related displacement. We have seen a series of environmental crises in Europe in 2021, from flash flooding in the United Kingdom, Belgium, Germany, and Holland, to fires across Greece. Unlike in their coverage of 'climate refugees', European press outlets describe the displacement caused in European countries in terms which much more explicitly tackle the source of the problem – climate change. Rather than stoking fears about invasive 'waves' of strange refugees clogging up the shores of Europe, the environmental cause of internal displacement is established without the burden of racialisation, xenophobia, and division. Such discussions enable audiences to cultivate compassion, sympathy, and empathy for the current and potential victims of ecological change. These are aspects which are worryingly less present in the racialised conversation about 'climate refugees' (Bennett et al., 2015).

The inclusion of internal and international displacement in the same category necessarily creates a more expansive approach which, as a corollary, is less specific. In losing this specificity, we create the potential to join up the existing, more sympathetic discussions around the ways that (mostly white) people are affected and displaced by ecological change *within* Europe. From here, there is potential to develop a more understanding attitude towards displaced people coming from *outside of* Europe. The language of displacement becomes necessary to constructing a paradigm which roots the phenomenon in its political causes, moving us away from the distracting discourses of race that the notion of climate refugees has come to be associated with. We can see this in the observable shift towards conversations about how ecological issues are beginning to affect Europe(ans), with many newspapers and media outlets covering the subject. Mainstream media outlets such as the *BBC* (McGrath, 2021), *Le Monde* (Birague, 2021), *The Evening Standard* (Howie, 2021), and *The Guardian* (Carrington, 2021) publish on the urgency of climate change as an issue which is happening now and in Europe. The notion of ecological displacement attempts to account for environmentally framed mobility within and without Europe. Framing these conversations through a shared experience and vocabulary complicates efforts to construct ecologically displaced people as threatening others. This generates useful conversations that could empower people to act on climate change on a positive basis of solidarity, rather than divisive fear.

Finally, the notion of ecological displacement, which forces us to refer to the affected groups as 'ecologically displaced *people*' as opposed to 'climate *refugees*' or 'climate *migrants*' is an effort to humanise the displaced people to whom we are referring. The lexical construction of the term is a deliberate reminder that what we are talking about here are *people* – an explicit pushback against the dehumanising distance created by the terms upon which the violent battleground of migration politics often takes place. Fear is stoked up among Europe about threats of a mass influx of racialised others onto the

content, a process which is partly made possible by the dehumanisation of people who are almost exclusively referred to as migrants or refugees. While the terms migrant or refugee are not, by definition, derogatory or dehumanising, the cultural implications they have come to encompass have been racialised to the extent that their meanings have been transformed (Baldwin, 2013). A significant part of the long struggle against racialised domination has been the struggle to be included in the category of persons (Marzagora, 2016). By pronouncing the word 'people' or 'person', the notion of ecological displacement stresses personhood – a concept which carries with it a certain historical and moral weight. The concept of personhood and, indeed, who is allowed to claim it is extremely significant. As Charles W. Mills (2011) writes, personhood is 'a robust moral status implying not merely formal juridical equality, but substantively guaranteed equality, in the sense of the political will and allocation of material resources to actively enforce anti-discrimination measures and correct for the legacy of past discrimination'. Still, in practice, this status is not actually conferred to most humans (MacKinnon, 2006; Mills, 2011). Nonetheless, the category is a powerful one which entitles protection and recognition to those who can claim it. By directly invoking personhood, the notion of ecological displacement attempts to direct the protection of personhood towards displaced people and humanises them as 'human[s] recognized as equally human' (Mills, 2011).

Crucially, unlike the historical use of the term refugee, the notion of ecological displacement works to recognise the ways that entire ecologies contribute to migration or displacement, whether they consist of political violence, resource scarcity, flooding, or (as in many cases) two or more simultaneous drivers of such nature – something which the current UN Convention does not do. We should recognise, however, that the notion of displacement does not currently harbour the full legal force that the term refugee does. Arguably, rethinking the legal strength and status of displaced persons will allow for greater rights for those who flee their homes, regardless of whether they cross national borders or not. Ecological displacement moves to shed the racialised baggage of the climate refugee while making itself available to populations who are internally displaced because of climate change, other biophysical changes, which may be compounded with further causes.

Concluding remarks

No corner of the planet is left untouched by issues relating to displacement, migration, and environmental or climate issues. Despite having cumulatively emitted the least carbon emissions, those being hit first and the worst by anthropogenic climate change are largely concentrated in countries touched by the colonial and imperial violence of European empires (Reschechtko, 2020). For example, it is estimated that between 2008 and 2014 in Bangladesh, 4.7 million people were displaced due to disasters (Displacement Solutions, 2021). Although countries across Asia, Africa, Oceania, and South America are being hit disproportionately by the multiple catalysts of migration and displacement, Europe, too, does not emerge from the picture totally unscathed. Data from the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC, 2021) show that 44.8% of all displacements within Europe between 2008 and 2020 was caused by flooding, with other weather-related hazards such as wildfires posing similar threats. The detrimental changes to our environments and the social or political factors which contribute to human displacement within and across borders only increase in importance with time. Against this backdrop, deciphering the notion of the climate refugee is no easy task. Nor, however, is finding and

moving towards the appropriate language to frame the difficult yet necessary conversations we must face about climate change, environmental degradation, and forced migration.

The idea of the refugee normally requires national and international legal obligations towards vulnerable groups seeking refuge away from their homes. However, as emphasised earlier, there is currently no such legal category as a climate refugee. Even if there were, the category would struggle to do the necessary work it should for those who are displaced for ecological reasons. The reference to 'climate' does not sufficiently consider the wider ecology in which people find themselves. Nor is it able to sufficiently address the political charge of displacement as a phenomenon embroiled in contested relations of power and domination nor recognise the wide and far-ranging textures of environmental drivers of displacement which stretch beyond the restricted category of climate change. Moreover, as feminists and anti-post/colonial scholars, theorists, and activists have reminded us, language always has important historical and political contexts which have real consequences for the people that it is or can be used against. From this view, I have argued that the problems with how the category of 'refugee' has been appropriated and warped by exclusionary and divisive policy and rhetoric in Europe are significant enough for us to reconsider whether the term in question is recuperable, my suggestion being that it is not.

Indeed, the notion of ecological displacement is by no means a perfect alternative to climate refugees. But it goes some way to moving towards an idea which is better equipped to sensitively approach the challenges of displacement. By taking an expansive approach, it attempts to build an alternative framework which understands the layered complexity of what causes displacement, while aiming to strategically turn away from the racism and racialisation which is currently rearing its ugly head in Europe.

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