

Introduction

The Representation of “Exceptional Migrants” in Media Discourse. The Case of Climate-induced Migration

In 1995, Giorgio Agamben interrogated the link between bare life and politics, as the exceptional and exclusionary foundation of Western politics, in order to abandon juridico-institutional models of sovereignty in favour of an unprejudiced analysis of the concrete ways in which power penetrates the very bodies and forms of life of subjects:

In Western politics, bare life has the peculiar privilege of being that whose exclusion founds the city of men. It is not by chance, then, that a passage of [Aristotle’s] politics situates the proper place of the *polis* in the transition from voice to language. The link between bare life and politics is the same link that the metaphysical definition of man as ‘the living being who has language’ seeks in the relation between *phonē* and *logos*.... The living being has *logos* by taking away and conserving its own voice in it, even as it dwells in the polis by letting its own bare life be excluded, as an exception, within it.¹

According to Agamben, bare life is simultaneously defined and excluded from the political space of the sovereign state through discourse. In the juridico-political order of sovereignty, the power of discourse derives from the creation and definition of the space and boundaries of the juridico-political order itself, but also from the state of exception, i.e., the suspension of the juridical order’s validity for certain subjects. Following this line of thought, climate-induced migrants/refugees may be defined as ‘exceptional migrants’ since their very definition has entered political, institutional and legal discourse but does not entail the recognition of rights granted by international legal frameworks.

Climate change has been a contentious and divisive issue in the international scientific and political debate of the last three decades. Political parties have applied different sets of logics and priorities to climate change over time, ranging from the frontline of anthropogenic climate change supporters to scepticism and active obstructionism. Climate change has been central to political election campaigns and debates throughout the years.² For instance, in 2001, the US President George W. Bush proclaimed his unequivocal opposition to the Kyoto Protocol to safeguard the US oil industry and the auto-industry lobbyists, while in 2009 the future Prime Minister of Australia, Tony Abbott, announced his opposition to the Emissions Trading Scheme proposal, and eventually achieved Liberal leadership over this issue. Similarly, Donald Trump has been recently decisive not only in driving policy priorities on climate change, but in undermining public consensus on the science of climate change and the need for action. The same binary opposition can be applied to left-wing and right-wing populism: the link between right-wing populism and the denial of anthropogenic climate change has been on-going since its first appearance.³ As in most right-wing populist discourse, antagonism has been central to climate change denialism.⁴ Right-wing populists have blamed climate change science for threatening or damaging

¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, California: Stanford U.P., 1998), 7-8.

² Maxwell T. Boycoff and Jules Boycoff, “Climate Change and Journalistic Norms: A Case-study of US Mass-media Coverage”, *Geoforum*, 38 (2007), 1190-1204.

³ See Ruth Wodak, *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean* (London: Sage Publications, 2015).

⁴ See Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso, 1996); Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005).

society economically through appeals to common sense and a politics of anti-politics which constructs supporters of climate change and environmentalists as the selfish elite. Appeals to common-sense and anti-intellectualism have also been central in the construction of scepticism towards anthropogenic climate change and towards scientists. In this antagonistic relationship, climate change is an empty signifier “whose efficiency derives from its affective force and paucity of content”⁵ and is constructed as a threat to the ‘future’ of an imagined homogenous community inside a well-protected territory.

As a consequence of the political debate on climate change, terms related to climate-induced migration have greatly expanded and present a high degree of instability, which is typical of new term formation and knowledge. Yet, migration and displacement are bound by shared and established terms based on international legal frameworks.⁶ Therefore, denominations such as environmental refugees and climate refugees have been heavily criticized by legal scholars who warn news practitioners against their use.⁷ Term choice related to the case of climate-induced migration is particularly relevant for the analysis of the many and often contradictory rhetorical and ideological strategies of political and institutional actors. During the last decade, climate-induced migration has become “a well-established policy field” and institutions such as the International Organization for Migration and the UN High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR) have strongly advocated in favour of its recognition.⁸ In 2009, the European Council adopted the Stockholm Programme, which dealt with the potential effects of climate change on international migration and on the EU, and invited the Commission to present a research report on climate-induced migration. As a result of the outcome to consultations and the analysis by the Commission, a revisited Global Approach to Migration was adopted in 2011, emphasising the link between migration, climate change and environmental degradation and the need for a revision of terminology. As a consequence, the last fifteen years have seen a steady increase in the use of a wide range of highly creative and controversial terms, such as *eco-refugee*, *environmental refugee*, *environmental migrant*, *forced environmental migrant*, *environmentally motivated migrant*, *climate refugee*, *climate change refugee*, *environmentally displaced person*, *disaster refugee*, *environmental displacee*, *ecological displaced person* and *environmental refugee-to-be*. Yet, the use of the term ‘refugee’ has been highly contested in the legal field since climate-induced refugees are not a category under the 1951 landmark *United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees*, and the subsequent 1967 *Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees*, which codified changes in the status of refugees. Moreover, the definition in the *United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees* applies to people who have already crossed an international border, while many of those displaced by climate change are internally displaced people.⁹ On the other hand, numerous scholars have pointed out that the use of the term ‘migrants’, which involves the notion of mobility as a voluntary act, should not be applied, since “given the multiple factors determining migration, it is almost impossible to single out individuals or populations whose mobility is determined solely by climatic changes”.¹⁰ Similarly, the choice of the premodifier climate change instead of global warming may be contested as it invites differential associations. As Schuldt, Konrath and Schwarz found, the term ‘global warming’ was highly

⁵ Benjamin Glasson, “The Intellectual Outside: Anti-intellectualism and the Subject of Populist Discourses in Australian Newspapers”, *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, 26.1 (2012), 109.

⁶ Paola Catenaccio, “Dehumanizing the Alien: The Construction of Migrants’ Rights in EU Legislation”, in Giuliana Garzone and Srikant Sarangi, eds., *Discourse, Ideology, and Specialized Communication* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), 355-377.

⁷ Jane McAdam, *Climate Change, Forced Migration, and International Law* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2012).

⁸ Giovanni Bettini, “Unsettling Futures Climate Change, Migration and the (Ob)scene Biopolitics of Resilience”, in Andrew Baldwin and Giovanni Bettini, eds., *Life Adrift, Climate Change, Migration, Critique* (New York: Rowland & Littlefield Publishers, 2017), 81.

⁹ See McAdam, 2012.

¹⁰ Giovanni Bettini, “Climate Migration as an Adaption Strategy: De-securitizing Climate-induced Migration or Making the Unruly Governable?”, *Critical Studies on Security*, 2.2 (2014), 182.

contested by climate science sceptics as it focuses on temperature increases, while the term ‘climate change’ was coined to recruit more general associations with temperature changes, which can easily accommodate unseasonably cold temperatures and record snowfalls. Global warming evokes stronger connotations of human causation, whereas climate change evokes stronger connotations of natural causation.¹¹ Hence, such terms may be used to frame political issues in ways that promote ideologically consistent attitudes and beliefs.

The ongoing labour of nomination and predicational representation of climate-induced migrants/refugees and the discursive power of language as an agent of subjectivation is the focus of several articles in this issue. As a matter of fact, while the aforementioned terms are not recognized by the members of the international legal discourse community, they have undergone a process of appropriation to facilitate structured ‘mediation’ and ‘communication’ between expert and non-expert readers.¹² More specifically, even though the denomination climate refugees is not recognized by international law it is widely distributed in news discourse. In order to communicate and interest the lay public, people must be sorted into facile and rigid social categories, whose meaning is compressed into a few words. In this light, news discourse ‘recontextualizes’ and transforms scientific, political and institutional social practices conveying them in new texts and social practices, including, crucially, everyday life conversations. This complex process, which spreads information across ‘genre chains’ or ‘networks of texts’, is central to the present issue on contemporary representations of the connection between climate change and migration as it focuses on the spread of information and science across news discourse.¹³

The representation of climate-induced migrants in news discourse is another important focus of analysis in this issue. As they have advocated on numerous occasions, climate-induced migrants’ self-representations are largely filtered out of news media accounts and climate-induced migrants are often represented as helpless and powerless victims of climate change requiring salvation. The latter representations have been particularly contested by the very groups who are identified as climate-induced migrants: they have often reclaimed their role as active agents of change (i.e., developing mitigation and adaptation strategies such as mangrove planting and solar power), and have stressed their concerns over the loss of sovereignty, agency and self-determination related to forced migration and refugee status.¹⁴ This is a particularly strategic call since, as Chouliaraki notes, the type of action that the sufferer plays out bears an effect on the spectator’s own orientation to the sufferer. The possibility of the spectator to engage,

depends on the humanization of the sufferer ... humanization is a process of identity construction that endows the sufferer with the power to say or do something about her condition, even if this power is simply the power to evoke and receive the beneficiary action of others. The humane sufferer is the sufferer who acts.¹⁵

The representation of distant suffering and victims of natural disasters through the spectacles of news media does not always result in the creation of a global public with a sense of social responsibility nor

¹¹ Jonathan Schuldt et al., “Global Warming or Climate Change? Whether the Planet is Warming Depends on Question Wording”, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 75 (Spring 2011), 115-124.

¹² Mojka Pecman, “Variation as a Cognitive Device: How Scientists Construct Knowledge Through Term Formation”, *Terminology*, 20.1 (2014), 5.

¹³ Martin Reisigl and Ruth Wodak, *Discourse and Discrimination: Rhetorics of Racism and Antisemitism* (London: Routledge, 2001), 48.

¹⁴ Tanja Dreher and Michelle Voyer, “Climate Refugees or Migrants? Contesting Media Frames on Climate Justice in the Pacific”, *Environmental Communication*, 9.1 (2014), 58-76.

¹⁵ Lilie Chouliaraki, “Towards and Analytics of Mediation”, *Critical Discourse Studies*, 3.2 (October 2006), 169.

orients the spectator towards certain options for action on the suffering and to connect with the spectacle of suffering.¹⁶ According to Chouliaraki, it largely depends on the agency of the sufferer, the semiotic choice of inactivity annihilates the sufferer, depriving her/him of “corporeal and psychological qualities and removes her from the existential order to which the spectator belongs”.¹⁷ Therefore, another important way in which the present issue may be linked to Agamben’s work is that “the living being has logos by taking away and conserving its own voice in it, even as it dwells in the polis by letting its own bare life be excluded, as an exception, within it”.¹⁸ The right to self-representation and to one’s own voice may indeed be one of the few repositories of humanity for those migrants whose greatest fear is that of entering the rows of invisible and stateless citizens. As Jaworski has shown, the political silencing of oppositional voices occurs in situations marked by a significant power differential between participants. Similarly, the denial of access to public expression can be defined as a means through which influence, control and dominance is exerted in mediated communication.¹⁹ The silence and absence of self-narratives impacts on the representation of climate-induced migrants just as much as the other-verbal and visual representations.

The definition of climate-induced migrants as ‘exceptional’ migrants may also be related to a preference for the ‘extraordinary’ and the ‘sensational’ in news coverage. In response to climate change scepticism, environmentalists and journalists often resort to dramatized representations of severely affected countries as a sensationalist “proof” to “concretize climate science’s statistical abstractions”, and in this context the dimension of climate-induced migration has often been amplified.²⁰ In the case of climate science, communication and news operators often background planning and forecasting and privilege spectacular, unexpected events, which have a much higher chance of becoming news. Particularly when the speculations level is high, it may provide a fertile ground for “media spinning, scaring the public, creating solidarity, and diverting attention”.²¹ The representation of climate-induced migration as an alarming and catastrophic scenario may, for instance, be traced in the use of exaggerating quantifiers in respect to the number of potential climate-induced migrants or the merging of climate-induced migrants with natural calamities of great magnitude and in need of urgent control and risk management by the nation. The focus on the mediation of crisis and the “aesthetic contemplation of suffering vis-à-vis the sublimity of the catastrophe”²² rather than on the causes, chronic social problems or long-term consequences of climate change may indeed be rooted in the suspension of law and securitization of the ‘state of exception’. It may also be due to sensationalism as the consequence of the increasing marketization of news discourse and to entertainment purposes. The personification of climate-induced migrants plays a vital rhetorical role in giving a human face and an imagined ‘collective subject’, to the inanimate or abstract idea of climate-induced migration. In this manner, it engages readers through affect and rhetorical pathetic fallacy, appealing to prejudiced emotions, opinions and convictions instead of employing rational arguments.²³

The choice of the term ‘climate refugees’ is also related to the capitalization of news reporters on the framing of new stories according to shared typifications and schemata. As Reisigl and Wodak note, social

¹⁶ Ibid., 154-155.

¹⁷ Ibid., 170.

¹⁸ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 8.

¹⁹ Adam Jaworski, *The Power of Silence: Social and Pragmatic Perspectives* (Newbury Park, CA.: Sage, 1993).

²⁰ Carol Farbotko, “Wishful Sinking: Disappearing Islands, Climate Refugees and Cosmopolitan Experimentation”, *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, 51.1 (2010), 58

²¹ Motti Neiger, “Media Oracles: The Political Import and Cultural Significance of News Referring to the Future”, *Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism*, 8.3 (2007), 313

²² Chouliaraki, “Towards and Analytics of Mediation”, 158

²³ Wodak, *The Politics of Fear*, 65.

actors are linguistically inscribed with certain qualities through the use of predicational strategies.²⁴ As has been shown in key studies in news discourse, lexical items such as migrants or climate-migrants are not “context-independent” units per se.²⁵ On the contrary, as the articles in this issue demonstrate, they are heavily “context- and cotext-dependent” and have to be described according to their functions in discourse, to their reliance on previous scripts, shared meaning and beliefs.²⁶ These may be realized as stereotypical, evaluative attributions of negative and positive traits in the linguistic form of implicit or explicit predicates.²⁷ The articles in this issue show how the consistent occurrence and prominence of a set of topics influences the implicit/explicit portrayal of climate-induced migrants in news discourse. Such discourse domains have been relatively resistant to alternative framings. Unfortunately, news reporters often rely on prior reports in the same sphere (i.e., with those who have previously taken a stand with respect to an issue) and draw upon familiar images and language patterns to construct a discursive framework of alignment and rapport through which readers may be affected. Based on the premise that the power of news media discourse lies in the repetition and incremental effect of images and language patterns, which may be closely examined to reveal presuppositions, cultural stereotypes and ideological inferences in discourse, this special issue investigates the variation and change of familiar and seemingly new terms, discourses and ideologies within and across national borders.

The articles draw upon findings in the field of Critical Discourse Studies in order to analyse the representation of climate-induced migration in news discourse. News discourse has recently offered fertile ground for the combination of Critical Discourse Analysis and Corpus Linguistics. The use of quantitative techniques, such as keyword searches, concordance and collocational analysis using specialized corpus software, has been fruitfully combined with qualitative approaches to investigate concordances and collocations of the terms ‘refugee(s)’ and ‘asylum seeker(s)’ in large corpora.²⁸ Drawing upon these seminal studies, the articles in this issue take into account the following levels of analysis: frequency of language patterns, the level of the text, the relation between different texts and discourses, the context in which texts are produced and the wider historical and political context.²⁹ Although differently, they situate the quantitative analysis of language patterns and the qualitative analysis of a wide range of linguistic discursive strategies within a wider analytical framework which includes extra-linguistic social/sociological variables and situational frames.

More specifically, the discourse about climate-induced migration as a humanitarian crisis and adaptation, mitigation and resilience is addressed by several authors in this special issue as a cosmopolitan problem, which transcends borders. The opening article by Cinzia Bevitori and Jane Helen Johnson focuses on whether any significant discursive shifts may be identified in North-American and British quality newspaper discourse over the period of 2010-2017 through a critical diachronic corpus-assisted discourse analytical perspective, with interesting findings on the gradual shift of the discourse of adaptation from positive to negative. On the other hand, Massimiliano Demata analyses the discursive strategies used by the online editions of two leading newspapers, *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*, uncovering an important power imbalance between climate change refugees and host countries: host countries provide climate change refugees with shelter and legal recognition, while at the same time the characterisation of climate change refugees in terms of figures or metaphors of natural disasters communicates the idea of a dangerous phenomenon which should be controlled.

²⁴ Reisigl and Wodak, *Discourse and Discrimination*, 54-55.

²⁵ Paul Baker et al., “A Useful Methodological Synergy? Combining Critical Discourse Analysis and Corpus Linguistics to Examine Discourses of Refugees and Asylum Seekers in the UK Press”, *Discourse and Society*, 19.3 (2008), 273-306.

²⁶ Teun A. van Dijk, *Society and Discourse: How Social Contexts Influence Text and Talk* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2009).

²⁷ Reisigl and Wodak, *Discourse and Discrimination*.

²⁸ Baker et al., “A Useful Methodological Synergy?”.

²⁹ Reisigl and Wodak, *Discourse and Discrimination*.

Terminological variation in news discourse is addressed by most articles in this issue. The choice between migrant and refugee as a cause of terminological confusion through which climate-induced migration is often construed, is addressed by Mirko Casagrande who adopts a discourse-historical approach when analysing the referential strategies by *BBC News Online*. He demonstrates that, by preferring ‘refugee’ to ‘migrant’, the Corporation frames social actors from a humanitarian perspective. Anna Mongibello addresses the terminological definition of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in the Canadian context and argues that in Canadian news discourse displacement is framed as an environmental rather than a climate-induced event. Antonio Fruttaldo, instead, focuses primarily on the complex legal challenges associated with climate change-induced displacement under international law and how it is popularised on the web.

The special issue aptly closes with two articles which strongly challenge the practice of news construction. Francesca Vigo argues that the shift towards infotainment in many news outlets may be the reason for the specific aesthetic visual representation of climate-induced migration. Nina Venkataraman illustrates how elite newspapers remain silent and mute discussions on climate-induced migration. She argues that while climate change is a global phenomenon and climate-induced refugees are “the human face for the global effects of climate change”, climate-induced refugees are framed as a problem confined to the developing and least developed countries. In this light, the representation of climate change and climate-induced migrants in news discourse may be read as an example of the fantasy of border control.