

On Causality, the Modern Contract and Inertia in “Climate Migration”

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Submitted: October 30, 2023

Accepted: December 20, 2023

Abstract

Commentary to the Lecture “Moving the immovable: Climate change and the multiple tensions between mobility and immobility”, by Huub Dijstelbloem (this issue).

Keywords

climate migration; causality; modern contract; denationalization; (im)mobility; inertia.

When first listening to Huub Dijstelbloem’s keynote lecture, I was enticed to read his contribution about “climate migration” as an attempt to expose STS’ tendency to stress contingency and what he calls a “mobility bias”. After all, what more intrinsically mobility-biased than replacing a sociology of the social with a sociology of associations (Latour 2005), which requires following the movement of an element from one assemblage to another? Dijstelbloem indeed proposes to advance the political theory component of STS, and resorts to established social science conceptualizations of state and structure.

Yet more than to an opposition, Dijstelbloem is pointing to a constitutive trait of STS, at least since when in 1981 Aaron Cicourel and Karin Knorr-Cetina included representatives from the field in their edited book on the integration of micro- and macro-sociologies (Cicourel and Knorr-Cetina 1981). Explaining both transformation and durability has been a non-secondary goal in STS scholarship, as much as sidelining determinism has been. More recently, STS attempts to problematize the co-constitution of emergency and stability have emerged from the dialogue with neighboring disciplines. In their introduction to a special issue on “scripts of security”, for example, Aradau and Pelizza (forthcoming) show how contingency and obduracy represent two extremes capable of productively articulate (in)security. Similarly, the relationships between what is mobile and what remains immobile is for Dijstelbloem productive of a nuanced and refined understanding of “climate migration”, despite the shortcuts entailed by this formulation, which he attentively addresses.

I agree with Dijstelbloem that “climate migration” constitutes a slippery concept that nevertheless needs to be retained and investigated. This is true of policy discourse, where in the last two decades resistances to linking desertification with migration have revealed the vested

interests of nation states. The efforts the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) has put in foregrounding such nexus were not detached from a political mission. At the very least, talking of “climate migrants” allows opening up the narrative which is usually focused on the unrealistic concept of “economic migrant”. It shows that not only poor people move, but also those hit by climate change. Although the two populations may overlap to a great extent, I suggest that the two diverse framings involve different distributions of responsibilities: while poverty in many cultures may be imputed to individuals, climate change is by definition a phenomenon to be attributed to collective choices.

And yet the concept of “climate migration” has value not only at the policy level, but also as an analytical lens and theoretical formulation, as I will try to argue in what follows. I see three reasons why climate migration can constitute a key object of study (and provocation) for the STS community. First, it revitalizes one of the original concerns of STS: the multiplicity of relationships, which cannot be reduced to direct causality. Second, given its capability to show that nation states have not lived up to their responsibilities, climate migration constitutes a powerful evidence of denationalization and questions the modern contract between science and society. Third, immobility in climate migration can be framed in a novel light by interrogating the STS notion of inertia.

First, as Dijkstelbloem suggests, composite terms imply a relationship which is usually assumed to be causal. When it comes to climate migration, climate change is supposed to trigger mobility. I suggest that it is exactly this direct, deterministic relationship, this short chain of action that produces the collective anxiety about climate migration that Dijkstelbloem describes in his contribution: an input (climate change) will without fail produce a well-defined output (mass migration). Hence the securitization of climate change, that can be conceived of as an anxious reaction to a deterministic relationship. To avoid the short-cuts of determinism Dijkstelbloem resorts to multi-factoriality, which is indeed one way to escape direct causality. As he suggests, “climate change is not an independent driver but part of an assemblage of life circumstances, development, environmental conditions, state governance, and international relations”.

While I agree with this interpretation, I would like to suggest a further way out of determinism, drawn from the STS toolkit: focusing on the specificities of the mediators. It is necessary to unpack both the black boxes of “climate change” and “migration” to follow the minute details of how their relationship is built, the mediators that come into the equation, and the multiple directions in which the relationship could unfold. How do mediators like infrastructures, regulations, family networks, expectations, media discourses, colonial imaginaries, period of life intervene in the meaning given to climate change, as well as in the decision to move or to stay? Do they support, facilitate or discourage and hamper mobility? Asking these questions would facilitate to avoid determinism – and the related anxiety – by acknowledging the multiple, invisible, more-than-human forms of agencies mediating the relationship between climate and migration.

The second reason why climate migration can open new fields of inquiry for the STS community has to do with responsibility. Dijkstelbloem discusses climate migration as a field of study, a repertoire of technologies and a space for international political action. All these three aspects hold together: climate migration entails new methods to produce knowledge about an emerging phenomenon, new technologies to deal with it, and new alliances between global actors. At the same time, this speaks for a novel relationship between climate migration and responsibility. Who and what is to be held responsible for climate migration, how are they ex-

pected to deploy technologies, and towards which desirable new future alliances? Dijstelbloem provides a scant hint in this direction when he writes that “if there was an intended monopoly by the nation state, climate change puts pressure on the right to control people’s movements from all sides”. He seems to suggest that nation states’ monopoly in controlling mobility could be jeopardized by their lack of responsibility in curbing climate change.

Even more explicitly, I suggest that climate change shows that states cannot morally claim a monopoly of mobility over territory because they have not been able to assure livable conditions in those same territories. They were expected to be responsible for territories according to the modern contract (Mukerji 2011; Sassen 2006), and yet have not been. Therefore, they could be seen as having lost monopoly over mobility to, in and across those territories. Climate change, in other words, by showing that Hobbes’ king is naked, constitutes a powerful evidence of denationalization.

More precisely, climate change is evidence of denationalization because it questions the modern contract between nation-states, human beings, science and capital. We know that such XIX century contract was grounded on colonial and homeland exploitation of nature. This contract was in turn based on the XVII century epistemological division of labor between politics and science, with the first in charge of moral, economics, rhetorics and religion, and the second in charge of nature, machines, engines (Rip 2014). In both cases, science and technology were free to experiment insofar as their outcomes could contribute to advance the progress of society, and did not mingle with politics and religion. It is also important noting that in this division of labor, in this contract, nature was not included as an active agent, but silenced as mere reservoir of value.

Now, climate change is showing that this contract is shaking, as nation states have not lived up to their responsibilities over territory. Of course, they were not alone, and science and capital have made their part, but still nation states were the ones constitutionally responsible for the livability of their territories (Sassen 2006). On top of that, nature is pressing to be emancipated from its role of mere reservoir of value and be included in the contract. And yet in STS we know that adding a part to a contract is not a painless process. If a further agent is involved, the whole network, in this case the whole contract, must be renegotiated. This includes a renegotiation of the identity, roles and responsibilities of the other actors already involved. If states have not been responsible towards their territories and nature pushes to enter the contract, then also the roles, responsibilities and identities of society, capital and science have to be renegotiated.

This is where mobility kicks-in: if nature presses to be included and humans and non-humans are not bounded anymore to the modern contract – if they feel they have been betrayed by irresponsible states who failed to assure livable conditions in their territories, then they feel they have a right to establish other types of contracts. We have seen it with viruses and the recent pandemic. We see it with mobility and climate migration: people are seeking contracts with other, more suitable assemblages. Then the question is: who and what is signing new contracts with whom? On the basis of which living needs? Is any regulation possible – any new contract redistributing roles and responsibilities, and in case, on the basis of which criteria?

While there is no easy answer to these questions, an observation is possible. Accounts of climate mobility often resort to asymmetrical narratives. Viruses jump from one host to another. Humans are seen as individuals longing to reach a new state, a new polity, a new society. In both

cases, accounts are asymmetrical in that they oppose mobile individuals (i.e., the threatening guests) to immobile collective entities (i.e., the vulnerable hosts). Dijstelbloem lecture is insightful in that it problematizes this asymmetry and all too easy semi-symbolism between mobility as a threat and immobility as vulnerability. His argument that we need a more conceptually refined understanding between mobility and immobility to deal with the challenges of climate migration in this light is to the point. Schewel's proposal of four categories of mobility/immobility, including voluntary immobility and acquiescent immobility, is to be appreciated, as well.

This appreciation eventually leads to the third reason why STS might enter a dialogue with the ambivalent concept of climate migration. I suggest that STS can offer a strategic concept to pursue the refinement of immobility: the concept of inertia. That we should not fully overlap the onto-epistemic dimension of becoming with the spatial dimension of mobility becomes clear once we take inertia into account. In STS, inertia cannot be taken for granted. Assemblages, social actors, organizations are not endowed with some inertia, but need to be constantly kept up by group-making efforts. If they are not performed, they stop existing. Inertia, durability, stability, obduracy can only be explained by appealing to technologies, artefacts, infrastructures that crystallize change into material-semiotic assemblages.

In this view, both the mobile and the immobile can be considered as outcomes of efforts to counteract inertia. Immobility too requires the expensive deployment of means to keep things immobile, to counter the decay that would come with lack of action. Consequently, the question about immobility transcends the semi-symbolism between a threatening mobility and a vulnerable immobility. The questions about immobility concern how people can organize their immobility; at what costs; through which means; how those costs can be compared to the costs and means of mobility. Dijstelbloem seems to imply something along these lines when he states that "it is interesting to see [...] what specific configuration of mobility and immobility is developed in the research field" of climate migration. Studying such configuration through the STS notion of inertia could help to make further novel steps in the foundational discussion between contingency and stability. Eventually, STS could even contribute to the study of immobility through its performative approach.

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