

## Who are “climate refugees”? An inquiry into post-truth academic politics

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### Abstract

Climate change impacts human mobility in multiple ways. Analytical studies in the last twenty years have shown that, because the causal relation between climate change and migration is indirect and complex, it is rarely, if ever, possible to attribute a particular migrant to climate change in any meaningful way. Yet, by and large, the law and policy literature has ignored these findings. Many in the field continue to talk about “climate refugees” as if they were a definite population, and of “climate migration” as if it was a distinct phenomenon. This chapter seeks to explain this disconnect between the analytical findings and the law and policy literature regarding the climate-migration nexus. Besides issues of academic compartmentalization and the incentive to publish, to which the author relates his individual experience, the chapter denounces the attitude of some scholars in the field who distort reality to serve political advocacy. In what should perhaps be called a “reactionary” defense of truth in the era of post-truth academic policy, this chapter submits that political advocacy must never come at the cost of our best endeavor to represent the truth.

### Keywords

Climate refugees; climate migrants; post-truth politics; academic advocacy.

### Introduction

People have always wandered around the world. Human mobility responds to multiple factors – socioeconomic and political conditions, demographic or cultural evolutions, as well as, naturally, underlying environmental changes, among others. In recent decades, the environment in which we live has been increasingly affected by the way we live, especially in modern societies. The concept of Anthropocene, as a new geological era, was developed to reflect the idea that humans are now the greatest force that alters planetary systems, in particular (but not only) the climate system.<sup>2</sup> It is almost tautological that, in the Anthropocene, human mobility is being affected by our impacts on the global environment.

The question, therefore, is not *if* but *how* global environmental changes are affecting human mobility. It is well documented that climate change impacts are diverse and far ranging, often affecting poorer societies and their poorer members first.<sup>3</sup> It needs not be recalled in details here how climate change is increasing the frequency and severity of extreme weather events<sup>4</sup> while also inducing slow-onset environmental changes such as sea-level rise, ocean acidification and land degradation. Human societies are affected in multiple ways. Like an impact on the water surface creating concentric circles, climate change affects societies in many different ways, with diffuse consequences extending *ad infinitum* and *ad absurdum* in time and space. Mobility occurs at different stages of this chain of consequences, but migration can rarely if ever be directly attributed to climate change.

One can think of many scenarios through which climate change induces migration. Some flee in the midst of a disaster, others plan for economic migration. Yet others might reconsider their traditional mobility patterns, as going to work in town during part of the year might become less affordable. New economic opportunities may also appear, for instance in the agricultural sector of Northern countries,

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<sup>2</sup> [http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/3-540-26590-2\\_3](http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/3-540-26590-2_3)

<sup>3</sup> [IPCC AR5 WGII chapter on human security]

<sup>4</sup> [IPCC special report on extreme weather events, 2012 I believe]

driving a need for cheap labor which, historically, has often been filled by foreign workers. Some States or provinces may become wealthier and others poorer, thus intensifying economic “push” and “pull” factors of migration. Political communities may change their policies on land use to progressively induce populations to move away of harm’s way. Environmental changes may also exacerbate conflicts for access to natural resources, in particular water, and contribute to conflicts which, in turn, might trigger internal displacements of populations or international flows of refugees and migrants. Responses to climate change may also have consequences on human mobility. Development projects aimed at pursuing climate change mitigation or adaptation often induced displacements and resettlement of populations. A transition to a green economy is also destroying jobs at some places and creating jobs at other places, which also has an impact on migration.

The discourse on “climate refugees” developed in this book is largely focused on the scenarios through which physical impacts of climate change, in particular extreme weather events or slow-onset environmental changes, induce migration. More specifically, other chapters in this book are likely to give particular emphasis on *forced* migration and on *international* migration. Forced migration is often related with a greater need for protection simply because forced migrants have nowhere to come back to. Likewise, international migrants enter the jurisdiction of a State other than that of their nationality, placing them at a greater risk of human rights abuses. Sometimes, these conditions are not strictly considered, and “climate refugees” can be considered to include individuals migrating within their State of origin and/or individuals situated along the continuum between forced migration and migration where freewill plays a greater role.

More fundamentally, all discourses on “climate refugees” (or, indeed, on “climate migrants” or any other alternative denomination) rely on a particular assumption: they take it for granted that particular individuals can be flagged as migrating *because of* climate change. Any doctrinal analysis assessing whether existing international laws and institutions provide effective protection to “climate refugees” or any discussion of international cooperation relative to “their” situation, any attempt to identify a gap in how “they” are taken into account by the refugee convention or the guiding principles on internal displacement, any evaluation of whether laws and policies should encourage “them” in their migration endeavor, any assessment of how “their” rights are being affected through migration or at the place or destination, or any discussion on a possible status that could be applied to protect “them” or alternative assistance or protection policies for “their” benefit – any such discourse inevitably relies on the assumption that “they” are a discrete population and that one could distinguish someone who is a “climate refugee” from someone who is not.

It is well-known, however, that this assumption is false. A host of analytical studies published over the years have shown that, although climate change impacts affect human mobility in diverse ways, it is not generally possible to attribute an individual migration to climate change in any meaningful ways.<sup>5</sup> For instance, a 2011 study commissioned by the UK Government Office for Science, Foresight, concluded unequivocally that “the range and complexity of the interactions between [multiple] drivers [of migration] mean that it will rarely be possible to distinguish individuals for whom environmental factors are the sole driver.”<sup>6</sup> This and many other analytical studies, whether from migration studies or from environmental studies, show that climate change impacts (or environmental factors generally) are rarely, if ever, discrete factors of migration.<sup>7</sup>

The media and political discourses have not generally taken these nuanced accounts into account. Instead, “climate refugees” became a global topic of concern, as a human face to the abstract reality of

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<sup>5</sup> For a review of such studies, see, for instance, Robert McLeman, ...

<sup>6</sup> Foresight (The Government Office for Science), Foresight: Migration and Global Environmental Change (Final Project Report, London, 2011) at 9.

<sup>7</sup> <http://collections.unu.edu/view/UNU:2901>  
<http://collections.unu.edu/view/UNU:5903>  
<http://collections.unu.edu/view/UNU:5856>; <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10584-016-1665-6>  
[http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-94-007-6208-4\\_2](http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-94-007-6208-4_2)

climate change or, like the canary in the coalmine, the first symptoms of greater crises to come. The concept appeared to feed a need for a “human face” to climate change, a concrete illustration that could readily convey an abstract concept (a “creeping normalcy”<sup>8</sup>) into a palatable, simple and impactful political discourse. What is perhaps more surprising is the connivance and, often, active backing of many scholars in legal studies or political sciences to that simplistic and misleading political discourse. An abundant law and policy literature – other contributions in this book being part of it – has aimed to assess how existing laws and institutions relate to “climate refugees” and to prescribe new developments in “their” regard.<sup>9</sup> This academic literature certainly had an impact. It is likely that it provided a semblance of scientific authority that reinforced political discourses on “climate refugees,” thus hindering the reception of the most nuanced message that analytical studies tried to convey on the relations between climate change and human mobility.

This chapter has two complementary goals. It aims first at documenting this gap between our analytical literature and the law and policy literature on the climate-migration nexus. Building on these bases, it seeks then to understand what made it possible for the law and policy literature to get their analytical premises so wrong for such a long time. Some classical factors clearly play a role in this disconnect, including the lack of interaction among disciplines, the transition period characterizing a shift in paradigms, and perhaps also the impact of publication incentives. Yet, this chapter suggests that the resilience of the discourse on “climate refugees” within the academia can best be understood through the concept of post-truth politics, a concept that developed in 2016 largely to describe the growing acceptance of false statements during the campaign leading to Brexit and to the election of US President Trump.<sup>10</sup> Law and policy-oriented scholars have used discourses on “climate refugees,” knowingly disregarding evidence in the analytical literature that this was an incorrect framing of the issue, in order to make political arguments. This chapter argues that this turn to post-truth academic policies amounts to crossing the Rubicon of academic honesty, and that this could lead to an irreversible loss of public confidence in the role of the academia “to provide the best information possible as the basis for public policy.”<sup>11</sup> Much, much more is thus potentially lost than gained in the utilization of the scientific authority of scholars to make political arguments, however important the causes pursued are.

The chapter is structured as follows. Section I retraces the evolution of our understanding of the impact of climate change on human mobility. It shows that, while analytical studies have evolved towards a more nuanced understanding of the impact of climate change on migration, most law and policy literature published in recent years has not taken this evolution into account. Section II then reviews and assesses possible explanations, in particular in relation to the concept of post-truth politics and its dangerous implications for public confidence in the academia. This chapter concludes on what should perhaps be called a “reactionary” defense of truth in the post-truth policy era, especially within academic discourses on the implications of the climate-migration nexus for laws and policies.

## **I. Analytical inconsistencies**

The impact of environmental changes on human mobility was first flagged in alarmist terms by environmental scholars in the mid-1980s, but, in the early 1990s, some important nuances were added at the initiative of migration scholars (A). The law and policy literature received the alarmist discourse of the late 1980s but, by and large, has not fully taken into account the nuances brought to it since the early 1990s (B).

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<sup>8</sup> Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (Penguin, 2011) at 425

<sup>9</sup> For a systematic review, see Benoît Mayer, “Constructing ‘Climate Migration’ as a Global Governance Issue: Essential Flaws in the Contemporary Literature” (2013) 9:1 McGill Int’l J. Sust. Dvlpt L. & Pol’y 87.

<sup>10</sup> The Oxford Dictionaries named “post-truth” as their 2016 Word of the Year due in particular to “a spike in frequency this year in the context of the EU referendum in the United Kingdom and the presidential election in the United States.” <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016>

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.nature.com/polopoly\\_fs/1.210541/menu/main/topColumns/topLeftColumn/pdf/540009a.pdf](http://www.nature.com/polopoly_fs/1.210541/menu/main/topColumns/topLeftColumn/pdf/540009a.pdf)

### A. Analyzing the impact of climate change on migration: from panic to nuances

Migration studies have never totally ignored that environmental factors had an influence on migration<sup>12</sup> but, in the context of the Cold War, more emphasis was generally put on economic or political drivers. Awareness of the impact of human societies on the environment rose progressively before and after the adoption of the 1972 Stockholm Declaration on the Human Environment.<sup>13</sup> Advocates of environmental protection sought to highlight the benefits of environmental protection by emphasizing the impacts that environmental degradation would have on human societies. In the mid-1980s, Jodi Jacobson of the Worldwatch Institute was among the first authors to highlight the plight of “environmental refugees” as “a yardstick of habitability.”<sup>14</sup>

The concept was rapidly echoed by scholars in environmental studies. Norman Myers, undertaking a study with the Climate Institute in Washington, D.C, wrote in 1993 that “[l]arge numbers of environmental refugees could be among the most significant of all upheavals entrained by global warming.”<sup>15</sup> Myers clearly noted that the existence of large numbers of “environmental refugees” could “serve ... as a powerful further rationale for policy measures to slow global warming while there is still time.”<sup>16</sup> Myers predicts that 150 million “environmental refugees” would be displaced within or across international borders by 2050. Myers’ methodology was rudimentary, boiling down to little more than adding up the populations living within exposed areas. His limited interest for the “subtleties” of migration studies is reflected, for instance, in his comparison between a *total flow* of internal and international migrants over more than half a century with the then *stock* of 17 million of “refugees.”<sup>17</sup>

These early studies did not develop strong analytical tools to understand how climate change impacts human mobility. No distinction was made, for instance, between different scenarios of migration or, say, between internal and international migration. The concern of these alarmist reports was to highlight the connection of environmental degradation, in particular climate change, with social turmoil. “Environmental refugees” were not approached as individuals but as a measure (a “yardstick”), in much the same way as the reading of a thermometer, as an indicator of the level of gravity of environmental changes. Thus, the First Assessment Report published by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in 1990 mentions that “[e]ven a modest rise in global sea-levels could *produce* tens of millions of such [environmental] refugees.”<sup>18</sup> The choice of the word “produce” is telling not only of a lack of awareness of the different factors interacting with sea-level rise (e.g. development strategies to promote a sustainable human settlement), but also a de-personification of “environmental refugees” in this early literature. Nevertheless, this alarmist discourse rapidly achieved a certain political prominence.

By the early 1990s, scholars in migration studies became actively involved in the debate. Their approach was naturally different, giving much more attention to a rigorous analysis of the process of migration. These scholars opposed the use of the term “refugee” not just as a legal misnomer, but also because that term implied an excessive simplification of migration and was analytically misleading. Richard Bilborrow, JoAnn McGregor, Astri Suhrke and Steve Lonergan, for instance, all insisted that it would be unhelpful to approach migration as if it was “produced” by environmental factors in a

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<sup>12</sup> See Etienne Piguet, From “Primitive Migration” to “Climate Refugees”: The Curious Fate of the Natural Environment in Migration Studies (2013) 103 *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 148.

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<sup>14</sup> See e.g. Jodi Jacobson, *Environmental Refugees: a Yardstick of Habitability* (1988) 8 *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society* 257.

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/1312319.pdf> at 752.

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/1312319.pdf> at 753.

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/1312319.pdf> at 752. It is not clear what Myers included in this number of “refugees.”

<sup>18</sup> IPCC, *Climate Change: The IPCC Impacts Assessment: Report prepared for Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change by Working Group II* (1990) at 5:10 (emphasis added).

vacuum.<sup>19</sup> By implying that migration was forced and international, the term “refugee” was analytically misleading. They argued that environmental factors could influence migration decision without necessarily *forcing* migration, and that any individual migration decision should rather be situated on a continuum between “voluntary” and “forced” migration. Moreover, environmental factors were part of a wider cluster of causes. There was little gained, and much lost, in approaching “environmental migration” in isolation from social, economic, political, demographic and cultural circumstances, as if “environmental migration” was a distinct phenomenon.

Since the 1990s, plenty of analytical studies have been carried out and published which came in support of this critique.<sup>20</sup> A consensus thus emerged, involving migration scholars as well as environmentalists, to recognize that migrants can rarely, if ever, be directly attributed to climate change. Rather, it appeared increasingly clearly that “[m]igration decisions are complex, reflecting the interconnectedness of environmental factors with economic, social and political factors.”<sup>21</sup>

The causal chain between climate change and migration is composed of two links: migration needs to be attributed to a particular physical event which, in turn, needs to be attributed to climate change. Yet, attributing particular physical events to climate change remains challenging. Scientific evidence that climate change increases the frequency of extreme weather events could lead to *probabilistic* attribution but not to *binary* attribution.<sup>22</sup> Attributing some slow-onset events to climate change can also be problematic when natural regional climate variability or local environmental degradation may also be at play. On the other hand, the impacts of physical events on societies “are always mediated through complex political, social and economic structures,”<sup>23</sup> and, surely, no disaster is ever *entirely* natural. As climate change does not determine the weather on a particular day which, in itself does not determine migration in abstraction from a host of other intermediary causes, the causal attribution of a migrant to climate change faces important analytical difficulties.

## B. The selective reception of analytical studies in the law and policy literature

The nuances brought by analytical studies in the last twenty years have not been fully taken into account. Most political leaders and newspapers continue to refer to “climate refugees” as if they were a definite population of migrants who were, as the IPCC had first put it, “*produced*” by climate change.<sup>24</sup> This certainly results from the tendency of simplistic conceptions to prevail in the media and in political discourses. A more nuanced discourse, being more complex, is at a comparative disadvantage. It is regrettable that even some of the newspapers that aspire to the highest standards of quality often ignore the findings of relevant analytical studies on the impact of climate change on migration in the last twenty years.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> See e.g. Richard Bilborrow, *Rural Poverty, Migration and the Environment in Developing Countries: Three Case Studies* (World Bank, Policy Research Working Paper 1017, 1992); JoAnn McGregor, *Climate Change and Involuntary Migration: Implications for Food Security* (1994) 19 *Food Policy* 120; Astri Suhrke, *Environmental Degradation and Population Flows* (1994) 47 *Journal of International Affairs* 473; Steve Lonergan, *The role of environmental degradation in population displacement* (1998) 4 *Environmental Change and Security Project Report* 5.

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<sup>21</sup> Foresight report, *supra* 6, at 9. For a review of the literature, see e.g. Mayer, *supra* note 9; Morissey, “Rethinking the “debate on environmental refugees”: From “maximalists and minimalists” to “proponents and critics” (2012) 19 *Journal of Political Ecology* 36.

<sup>22</sup> Pardeep Pall et al., *Anthropogenic Greenhouse Gas Contribution to Flood Risk in England and Wales in Autumn 2000* (2011) 470:7334 *Nature* 382.

<sup>23</sup> Mike Hulme, “Attributing Weather Extremes to ‘Climate Change’: A Review” (2014) 38 *Progress in Physical Geography* 499.

<sup>24</sup> See for instance Remarks by US President Obama at United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon’s Climate Change Summit (New York, 2009).

<sup>25</sup> See e.g. [http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/10/25/world/asia/china-climate-change-resettlement.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/10/25/world/asia/china-climate-change-resettlement.html?_r=0)  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/03/us/resettling-the-first-american-climate-refugees.html>

More surprisingly perhaps and supporting this trend in journalistic and political discourses, a large part of the law and policy literature on the climate-migration nexus does the same. Numerous scholars continue to advocate straightforwardly for a protection of “climate refugees,” possibly through a convention creating a status to “climate refugees,”<sup>26</sup> or for an extension of complementary protection mechanisms for “their” benefits.<sup>27</sup> Most recently, François Gemenne, a prominent scholar in the field, submitted that “they” should be called “climate refugees,” arguing that this term would more than any other “recognise ... that *these migrations* are first and foremost the result of a persecution that we are inflicting to the most vulnerable.”<sup>28</sup>

Many other scholars in the law and policy literature changed terminology without modifying their underlying conceptual framework. Rather than “climate refugees,” they referred to “climate migrants” or “environmentally-displaced persons,” for instance, as if “climate migration” was a distinct phenomenon that specific laws and policies could address and as if “climate migrants” were a definite population “produced” by climate change, to which a particular status could be granted.<sup>29</sup> Many publications in the field contain caveats acknowledging the complexity and nuances of the impact of climate change on migration, but, as Calum Nicholson noted, they “often then go on to discuss ‘environmental migration’ as if those caveats had not been made.”<sup>30</sup> These publications thus recognize the “multicausality of climate migration”<sup>31</sup> without perceiving the paradox of the expression – that migration cannot be attributed to climate change alone if it is multi-causal.

A mere terminological shift from “climate refugees” to “climate migrants” in part of the literature obviously does not address the conceptual disconnect between the analytical literature and the law and policy literature on the climate-migration nexus. While analytical works indicate a rather diffuse and indirect causal relation between climate change and migration, many law and policy scholars continue to refer to an elusive population of “climate migrants” and to “climate migration” as a phenomenon. This disconnect is puzzling. Possible explanations are discussed in next section.

## II. The reasons of the disconnect

There is inconsistency in the literature relating to the climate-migration nexus. Analytical studies suggest that climate change has a diffuse and indirect impact on human mobility. Yet, the law and policy literature remains largely based on the assumption that “climate migration” is a distinct phenomenon and “climate migrants” form a definite population. This section seeks to understand this disconnect and its implications.

Several factors that are often hindering academic research certainly play a role here too. The compartmentalization of knowledge certainly plays a role. Scholars tend to interact mostly with other scholars within their own field and modern universities often fail to encourage interactions across departments. Legal scholars are more likely to hear about “climate refugees” from the media before accessing to the analytical literature on the indirect and diffuse impact of climate change on human mobility. Consciously or not, researchers are generally unwilling to take new studies into account when they would fundamentally alter the assumptions on which they based months or years of research. With the constant arrival of new cohorts of scholars and postgraduate students interested in “climate refugees” as apparently an obvious cause, the debate fails to evolve beyond such simplistic

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<sup>26</sup> See e.g. Frank Biermann and Ingrid Boas, [in my volume].

<sup>27</sup> See e.g. Susan F. Martin [in my volume].

<sup>28</sup> See François Gemenne [in my volume] (emphasis added).

<sup>29</sup> See Calum Nicholson, Book review (Climate Change and Displacement: Multidisciplinary Perspectives, edited by Jane McAdam) (2012) 25 J. Refugee Stud. 584; and Nicholson, Calum. Book review (Climate Change, Forced Migration, and International Law, by Jane McAdam) (2013) 26:2 J. Refugee Stud. 311.

<sup>30</sup> Calum Nicholson, Climate Change and the Politics of Causal Reasoning: The Case of Climate Change and Migration (2014) 180 The Geographical Journal 151 at 153.

<sup>31</sup> IOM [my volume]

assumptions. Publication incentives may also encourage us, as scholars, to publish documents that are not fully researched, even while knowing that we kept some stones unturned and failed to address some inconsistencies in our arguments.

I could use my own testimony to illustrate these factors. As part of a Master in Laws (LLM) at McGill University in 2009-2010, I had to write a Supervised Research Project. After reading news reports on the plight of populations inhabiting low-lying island States, I chose to focus this research on “climate-induced migration.” I was advised that a normative argument would facilitate the publication of this paper. As a treaty appeared politically unlikely, I argued in this research paper that a resolution of the UN General Assembly could provide a general framework – it could in particular spur diplomatic negotiations in regional or bilateral fora. A slightly revised version was accepted for publication in the *Colorado Journal of International Environmental Law and Policy*,<sup>32</sup> and this certainly facilitated my subsequent application to join the doctoral programme in the National University of Singapore.

During most of the writing of this research project, my understanding of the relation between climate change and migration remained largely influenced by news reports. I could not have read all the existing literature within the few weeks that I spent on this research project. Yet, I do distinctively remember coming face to face with one, then several analytical articles developing a more nuanced analysis of the causal relation between climate change and migration. This was just a few days before the due date of my research project. Although slightly disturbed by the inconsistency of my assumptions with this late encounter with the analytical literature on the influence of climate change on migration, I simply added a caveat in my research project. The cost of taking this “caveat” truly into account – that is, writing a different research paper – was much greater than the benefit of avoiding a contradiction unlikely to bother but the most meticulous assessor. Like many other publications in the law and policy literature on the climate-migration nexus, my first article included an explicit recognition of the multicausality of migration, and, then, continued to refer to “climate migration” as a distinct phenomenon and “climate migrants” as a definite population.<sup>33</sup> This inconsistency, however, would become the focus of my research on the concept of climate migration for half a decade.<sup>34</sup>

Although academic compartmentalization and the naivety of young researchers certainly play a role, they do not suffice to explain misrepresentations in the law and policy literature and their persistence over more than two decades. Other reasons appear to push scholars to keenly defend an alarmist approach to the climate-migration nexus despite their knowledge of more nuanced analytical studies. In particular, some scholars appear to seek a role in political advocacy. François Gemenne, for instance, made an explicit decision to promote the concept of “climate refugees,” despite many reasons he recognized *not* to use it, because of the responsibilities that it implies and the blames that it carries on activities that affect our global environment.<sup>35</sup> Many others share Gemenne’s approach of the concept of “climate migration” as a tool for advocacy, whether they seek to protect of the environment, advance the protection of the human rights of migrants, or even promote investments in defense capabilities and border controls.<sup>36</sup>

This, I would argue, has a close resemblance with the current trend towards post-truth politics. “Post-truth” was named the word of the year 2016 by the Oxford Dictionaries after being widely used by in relation to the political campaigns leading to Brexit in the United Kingdom and to the election of

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<sup>32</sup> Benoit Mayer, “The International Legal Challenges of Climate-Induced Migration: Proposal for an International Legal Framework” (2011) 22 *Colorado Journal of International Environmental Law and Policy* 357

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* at 366.

<sup>34</sup> This led to a doctoral thesis, published as Benoit Mayer, *The Concept of Climate Migration: Advocacies and its Prospects* (Edward Elgar, 2016).

<sup>35</sup> Gemenne, refugees in the Anthropocene

<sup>36</sup> See generally Benoit Mayer, ““Environmental Migration” as Advocacy: Is It Going to Work?” (2014) 29 *Refuge: Canada’s Journal of Refugees* 27.

President Trump in the United States.<sup>37</sup> PoliFact, an independent fact-verifier project, suggested that over three fourth of “factual” statements made by Donald Trump during his campaign were false.<sup>38</sup> But the post-truth era is not limited to British and American politics. It stems largely from a technological evolution throughout modern societies, in particular the development of social media and “homophilous sorting” – the creation of clusters of like-minded individuals to whom a tailored “version of truth” can be served.<sup>39</sup> While lies have been in politics for long,<sup>40</sup> liars used to seek the appearance of truth. In the post-truth era, a memorialist of Russia’s President Vladimir Putin wrote, “no one even tries proving the ‘truth.’ You can just say anything.”<sup>41</sup>

Post-truth politics is often understood to be confined to populist demagoguery and commercial news outlets. Modern societies have traditionally relied on a set of institutions on a set of institutions to develop some relative consensus on what is most likely to be true. The academia plays a central role in the creation of truth by influencing schools, the legal system and the media as its echoing chambers. Our role, as scholars, is thus “to provide the best information possible as the basis for public policy.”<sup>42</sup> As *The Economist* noted in a report on post-truth politics, the “truth-producing infrastructure” of modern societies “is never close to perfect: it can establish as truth things for which there is little or no evidence; it is constantly prey to abuse by those to whom it grants privileges; and, crucially, it is slow to build but may be quick to break.”<sup>43</sup> Although we may make mistakes, we, as scholars, have a moral duty to exert our expert authority with honesty and due diligence.

At first sight, most scholars in the law and policy literature relating to the climate-migration nexus are strongly opposed to post-truth politics. Few, if any, would support Brexit or Trump. Most believe that our societies should do more to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and to protect migrants. In many cases, our interest for research on the climate-migration nexus relates from our political views. But despite the opposition of most to post-truth politics, the method used by some scholars in the law and policy literature is disturbingly reminiscent of post-truth politics. Like US President Trump during his political campaign, influential scholars in the field have given little regard to even the most obvious inconsistencies internal to their narrative and ignored non-sequiturs. François Gemenne, for instance, argued that, after all, we should use the terms “climate refugees” because this would help in “forgoing the idea that climate change is a form of persecution against the most vulnerable and that climate-induced migration is a very political matter, rather than an environmental one.”<sup>44</sup> Yvonne Su defended his position on the ground that “‘climate refugees’ may better evoke victims of climate change-induced displacement that should be entitled to international protection.”<sup>45</sup>

Although much less explicitly, many other scholars continued to speak about “climate migrants” as if “they” were a definite population, and about “climate migrant” as if it was a distinct phenomenon, largely because they thought this would promote particular causes they supported – either climate change mitigation or the protection of the rights of migrants –, although they knew that this framing

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<sup>37</sup> The Oxford Dictionaries named “post-truth” as their 2016 Word of the Year due in particular to “a spike in frequency this year in the context of the EU referendum in the United Kingdom and the presidential election in the United States.” <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016>

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<http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2015/dec/21/2015-lie-year-donald-trump-campaign-misstatements/>

<sup>39</sup> See Yochai Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom* (2006); [http://archives.cerium.ca/IMG/pdf/The\\_Consequences\\_of\\_the\\_Internet\\_for\\_Politics\\_Farrell.pdf](http://archives.cerium.ca/IMG/pdf/The_Consequences_of_the_Internet_for_Politics_Farrell.pdf)

<sup>40</sup> See Machiavelli [find source] “Those princes who do great things have considered keeping their word of little account, and have known how to beguile men’s minds by shrewdness and cunning”

<sup>41</sup> Peter Pomerantsev, *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia* (2014) at [check].

<sup>42</sup> [http://www.nature.com/polopoly\\_fs/1.21054!/menu/main/topColumns/topLeftColumn/pdf/540009a.pdf](http://www.nature.com/polopoly_fs/1.21054!/menu/main/topColumns/topLeftColumn/pdf/540009a.pdf)

(speaking about the role of “science”, but this should certainly include social science and academia as a whole).

<sup>43</sup> “The post-truth world: Yes, I’d lie to you” *The Economist* 10 September 2016.

<sup>44</sup> <http://www.fmreview.org/climatechange-disasters/gemenne.html>

<sup>45</sup> <http://oxmofm.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Yvonne-Su2.pdf>

of the diffuse and indirect causal relation between climate change and human mobility was a distortion of existing analytical studies. These scholars seem animated by the understanding that, despite the analytical inconsistencies, talking about “climate migrants” was justified because it could generate well-needed political reforms. Academic publications thus put considerations of political advocacy before analytical considerations. They considered that telling the truth matters less than tailoring one’s impact on political debates. Thus, they betrayed the trust that modern societies place in the academia as a reliable source of true information.

I am not suggesting that we, as scholars, should play no role in political advocacy. Scholars who are politically engaged can help promoting enlightened policies and a better government. In some situations, it may even be a moral duty for scholars to take part in political debates. However, this political engagement as scholars should be consistent with our role – what we are trusted for – namely, “to provide the best information possible as the basis for public policy.”<sup>46</sup> Knowingly and intentionally distorting reality in an effort to influence political changes would amount to crossing the Rubicon of academic honesty. Doing otherwise would “take an arrogant view of the public”<sup>47</sup> and elude the fundamental role that fact-based democratic deliberations could play in decisions that involve subjective values. More pragmatically, this political utilization of expert authority for political causes reinforces the growing idea that, in post-truth politics, facts are for bargain. Scholars who accept to distort reality in order to make a political argument tend to give reason to the many who think that “[i]f you really want to find an expert willing to endorse a fact, and have sufficient money or political clout behind you, you probably can.”<sup>48</sup> Thus, they discredit the strongest defense societies have against demagoguery – and the best weapon we have for an enlightened government where the human rights of migrants would be protected and where climate change would be mitigated – which is, a trustworthy and trusted truth-producing infrastructure in a rigorous academic system.

### III. Conclusion

Despite a formal recognition of multicausality, a large part of the law and policy literature relating to the climate-migration nexus has continued to seek “solutions” to “climate migration” and, often, to propose a status for “climate migrants,” as if they were a definite group of migrants of whom it could be said that they would not have migrated had the climate not changed. In some cases at least, this results an intended distortion of existing evidence on the influence of climate change on migration, the purpose of which is to influence political debates. Some scholars seem to assume that the end may justify the means but, by betraying the confidence that many place in them, these scholars tend to discredit the best defense modern societies have against post-truth politics – a strong, reliable academic system as a trustworthy and trusted truth-producing infrastructure.

Even the most direct effects of discourses on “climate refugees” are uncertain. Playing with fears of migrants is a dangerous strategy. Such alarmist discourses could foster greater engagement in struggling against climate change or flag the need for structural changes in global migration governance, but they could also lend support to political arguments on the control of international borders and military investments abroad. But the most dangerous impact is perhaps on the credibility of scholars amidst strong currents towards the post-truth era. When US blogger David Roberts first coined the expression “post-truth politics,” he was discussing American climate policies.<sup>49</sup> American climate deniers have little factual argument, but they do make the best use they can of whatever ambivalence may appear in an isolated hacked email.<sup>50</sup> Our best response, as scholars, to such accusations is strict rectitude. While we may want to take part in political debates, we must not forget that our legitimacy is primarily in our commitment to our best effort to disentangle the truth.

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<sup>46</sup> [http://www.nature.com/polopoly\\_fs/1.21054!/menu/main/topColumns/topLeftColumn/pdf/540009a.pdf](http://www.nature.com/polopoly_fs/1.21054!/menu/main/topColumns/topLeftColumn/pdf/540009a.pdf)

<sup>47</sup> [http://www.nature.com/polopoly\\_fs/1.21054!/menu/main/topColumns/topLeftColumn/pdf/540009a.pdf](http://www.nature.com/polopoly_fs/1.21054!/menu/main/topColumns/topLeftColumn/pdf/540009a.pdf)

<sup>48</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/24/opinion/campaign-stops/the-age-of-post-truth-politics.html>

<sup>49</sup> <http://grist.org/article/2010-03-30-post-truth-politics/>

<sup>50</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/cif-green/2009/nov/23/leaked-email-climate-change>