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Manufacturing Crisis, Governing Instability: The Political Ecology of Migration, Power, and Ecocide

Fabricar la crisis, gobernar la inestabilidad: la ecología política de la migración, el poder y el ecocidio

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Abstract

Human mobility is not an anomaly but a historical constant that has been systematically governed, stratified and racialised. This article reconceptualises the "migration crisis" not as an exceptional event but as a political-ecological crisis regime that manufactures crisis, organises instability and legitimises violence at and beyond borders. Bringing together political ecology, world-ecology, governmentality and debates on racial capitalism, it develops a framework for analysing how war, extractivism, ecocide and climate apartheid produce unliveable environments and stratified regimes of (im)mobility. The argument is operationalised through paradigmatic cases from the Ecuadorian Amazon, the Niger Delta, Gaza, the Kafue basin and architectures of climate apartheid, showing how legal, economic and humanitarian infrastructures manufacture dispossession, immobilisation and selective mobility. By treating crisis as a durable regime rather than an episode, the article links border spectacles to slower forms of environmental and colonial violence and clarifies how migrants' lives are governed as a managed instability.

La movilidad humana no es una anomalía, sino una constante histórica que ha sido sistemáticamente gobernada, estratificada y racializada. Este artículo reconceptualiza la "crisis migratoria" no como un acontecimiento excepcional, sino como un régimen de crisis político-ecológica que fabrica la crisis, organiza la inestabilidad y legitima la violencia en y más allá de las fronteras. A partir de la ecología política, la ecología-mundo, la gubernamentalidad y los debates sobre capitalismo racial, desarrolla un marco analítico para examinar cómo la guerra, el extractivismo, el ecocidio y el apartheid climático producen entornos invivibles y regímenes estratificados de (in)movilidad. El argumento se operacionaliza mediante casos paradigmáticos de la Amazonia ecuatoriana, el delta del Níger, Gaza, la cuenca del Kafue y las arquitecturas del apartheid climático, mostrando cómo las infraestructuras jurídicas, económicas y humanitarias producen desposesión, inmovilización y movilidad selectiva. Al tratar la crisis como un régimen duradero más que como un episodio, el artículo vincula los espectáculos fronterizos con

formas más lentas de violencia ambiental y colonial y esclarece cómo las vidas de las personas migrantes se gobiernan como una inestabilidad gestionada.

Political ecology of migration; crisis regime; racial capitalism; governmentality; climate apartheid; ecocide; (im)mobility

Ecología política de la migración; régimen de crisis; capitalismo racial; gubernamentalidad; apartheid climático; ecocidio; (in)movilidad

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1. Introduction

Contemporary migration "crises" are widely depicted through the spectacle of borders, from boats adrift in the Mediterranean and makeshift camps on the edges of Europe to militarised interventions at territorial frontiers. Yet these images, relentlessly circulated in media and political discourse, are not the analytic point of departure. They are the visible surface of deeper, historically sedimented regimes of dispossession, extraction, and the production of unliveable environments. As shown in the work of Sajir and Aouragh (2019), the viral circulation of such iconic images, while capable of mobilising fleeting compassion or even protest, rarely produces sustained solidarity or structural change; instead, it often reinforces the spectacle of crisis while masking its deeper material and political roots. The so-called emergencies that dominate public debate are not ruptures from the past, but the latest phase in a centuries-long dialectic of primitive accumulation, imperial violence, and the recursive manufacture of (im)mobility under global capitalism. In this sense, the crisis imaginary is not simply a response to humanitarian need; it is a key technology in the ongoing management, legitimation, and stratification of human movement.

The persistence and proliferation of "crisis" rhetoric in migration governance cannot be explained solely by demographic shifts or environmental shocks. As De Haas (2023) shows, the proportion of international migrants has remained relatively stable for decades, and most cross-border migration continues to serve selective, politically mediated demands in the Global North. What matters, then, is not the aggregate volume of movement, but the ways in which instability is actively produced, problematised, and rendered governable through evolving architectures of power, knowledge, and violence. The crisis narrative persists and expands not because it maps social reality, but because it performs ideological, economic, and governmental work: legitimising exceptional measures, masking deep-rooted inequalities, and underwriting the emergence of a "crisis-industrial complex" that profits from the perpetual management of (im)mobilities.

The drive to define and delimit "environmental" or "climate" migration, meanwhile, has given rise to a proliferating classificatory debate marked by conceptual, normative, and political impasses. As Agustoni and Maretti (2019) show, the multiplication of terms such as "environmental migrant," "climate refugee" and "trapped population" reflects not merely epistemic ambiguity but the persistent contest over recognition, rights and responsibility. Their

synthesis makes clear that the classificatory impasse is irreducibly political: the allocation of categories determines the visibility of suffering and the architecture of global responsibility, as well as the boundaries of governance and abandonment. The emergence of "environmental migration" as a policy object is thus inseparable from the broader contests over how—and for whom—mobility is rendered governable.

Building on this foundation, Avallone (2024) advances a more radical critique. He contends that the prevailing obsession with definitional clarity—far from being a neutral scientific project—constitutes an "epistemological reduction" of the migration-environment nexus. By narrowing focus to technical debates over risk, adaptation, and emergency, the dominant discourse systematically abstracts migration from its structuring relations of primitive accumulation, capitalist extraction, and the world-ecological production of unliveable environments. Drawing on Sayad's sociology and the tradition of Marxian world-ecology, Avallone argues that the focus on "climate migration" and "environmental refugees" is not simply incomplete; it is symptomatic of a deeper depoliticisation, whereby mobility is transformed from a world-historical and power-laden process into a problem of humanitarian management. The result is a conceptual field in which the roots of displacement are obscured, responsibility is displaced, and the machinery of crisis governance is expanded.

This article makes three contributions to these debates. First, it develops a political ecology of (im)mobility that brings together governmentality as method, world-ecology and racial capitalism. This framework theorises migration not as a response to external shocks, but as part of what I term a political-ecological crisis regime, in which the production of unliveable environments and the governance of mobility are mutually constitutive. In contrast to Agustoni and Maretti's (2019) focus on classificatory deadlocks and to Avallone's (2024) diagnosis of epistemological reduction, the argument specifies how ecological destruction, racialised accumulation and techniques of rule are articulated within a single analytic frame. Second, the article reinterprets the notion of "migration crisis" from event to regime: rather than treating crises as exceptional disruptions, it conceptualises them as recursive formations in which material projects of extraction, war and ecocide are continually converted into governable emergencies through humanitarian, security and risk-management discourses. Third, it operationalises this framework through strategically selected, paradigmatic and illustrative cases drawn from existing research that trace how extractivism, militarised destruction and climate-related interventions generate stratified (im)mobilities and are translated into concrete infrastructures of border control, labour recruitment and abandonment. These moves re-theorise "crisis" as a racial-capitalist political-ecological regime of (im)mobility, seeking both to unsettle dominant policy narratives and to open space for alternative imaginaries of justice, mobility and solidarity in a world marked by deepening antagonisms and an unravelling racial-capitalist order. Within this framework, racial capitalism designates the structural horizon of accumulation and racialised dispossession, political ecology maps how this horizon is materially articulated through socio-ecological transformations, and governmentality provides the method for tracing how these logics are translated into concrete rationalities, technologies and subjectivities of crisis governance.

The political ecology perspective adopted here rejects environmental determinism and push-pull reductionism, instead theorising human (im)mobility as a patterned outcome of imperial, capitalist, and state-led projects of dispossession, extraction, and control. It is by tracing the recursive interplay between structural violence, crisis discourse, and the infrastructures of governance that the analysis reveals both the global roots and local manifestations of injustice.

This approach further interrogates how crisis governance is racialised, marketised, and recursively entangled with the production and management of human (im)mobilities, exposing the mechanisms through which exclusion, selective solidarity, and the crisis-industrial complex are enacted and sustained.

Recent reflexive work in political ecology has also warned against "narrative predictability," the tendency for critical analyses to cast actors into familiar roles of villain, victim and hero in ways that flatten empirical complexity and internal heterogeneity among marginalised groups. Vangsnes (2025) argues that even counter-hegemonic research can slide into confirmation bias and analytical closure if it treats its preferred subjects as morally transparent rather than politically ambivalent. The analysis that follows takes this warning seriously in its use of paradigmatic cases in Sections 3 and 4, while insisting that attending to heterogeneity does not require diluting a sharp account of structural violence.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 advances a governmentality-inflected political ecology of migration, deconstructing the epistemological and political limits of dominant climate and environmental migration frameworks. Section 3 grounds this critique in a historical-materialist analysis of war, extraction, ecocide, and climate apartheid, tracing how (im)mobilities are systematically produced and managed. Section 4 interrogates the recursive entanglement of material and discursive regimes in the making of "crisis"—elucidating the racialisation, marketisation, and selective allocation of solidarity as mechanisms of governance. Finally, the conclusion situates these dynamics within a conjunctural, world-historical perspective: diagnosing the crisis regime as the morbid symptom of an unravelling racial-capitalist order and outlining the theoretical and political stakes for reimagining justice and mobility in the twenty-first century.

2. The Critical Political Ecology of Migration

In this article, I use "crisis" in a double sense. First, following conceptual history debates, crisis denotes a historically specific category of temporal rupture and decision, rooted in legal, theological and medical vocabularies and, from the late eighteenth century onwards, secularised into a central term of political and historical diagnosis (Koselleck & Richter, 2006). Second, following Dobry's sociology of political crises, crises are fluid conjunctures in which the sectoral boundaries, routines and classificatory devices that usually stabilise expectations are partially suspended. Such conjunctures are marked by desectorisation, heightened structural uncertainty and struggles over the very definition of the situation, as actors confront extended interdependence across previously compartmentalised arenas (Dobry, 2025). Building on these insights, I treat contemporary migration "crises" not as isolated events, but as elements of a political-ecological crisis regime in which the production of unliveable environments and the governmental management of (im)mobility are mutually constitutive.

This section advances the conceptual apparatus necessary to dismantle mainstream migration narratives centred around the notion of "crisis." The aim is to provide the theoretical foundations for re-reading human (im)mobilities not as apolitical flows or the mere product of environmental shocks, but as structurally produced and actively managed instabilities, intimately tied to the operations of power, capital, and historical violence. In doing so, it develops the first strand of the article's contribution, namely a governmentality-inflected political ecology of migration that displaces event-based understandings of crisis and locates (im)mobility within historically produced regimes of power, accumulation and ecological violence.

Mainstream migration paradigms, by detaching migration from the material and racialised histories that engender displacement, systematically obscure the foundational role of power-driven processes such as imperialism, ecological extraction and global geopolitical stratification. Canonical accounts of the "European migrant crisis," for instance, have shown how crisis framings legally produce migrant "illegality" while projecting responsibility onto those displaced, rather than onto the border and labour regimes that manufacture their precarity (De Genova, 2017; Sahin-Mencutek et al., 2022; Margheritis, 2025). Similar dynamics are evident in debates on "climate migration," where categories such as "environmental migrant" or "climate refugee" isolate environmental stress from colonial and capitalist histories, thereby depoliticising responsibility for displacement (Agustoni & Maretti, 2019; Avallone, 2024). The "crisis" label, in this sense, is not an objective descriptor of demographic or environmental events, but an active technology of governance that masks the interests and logics sustaining unequal mobility regimes. As the cases examined in Section 3 illustrate, from extractivism in the Ecuadorian Amazon and the Niger Delta to war in Gaza, toxic spills along the Kafue River and the stratified architectures of "climate apartheid," crisis narratives repeatedly displace moral responsibility, obscure political accountability and normalise the schizophrenic configuration in which migrants are needed as cheap labour yet refused recognition as fellow human beings.

While classic theorists of crisis and emergency, most notably Schmitt and Agamben, interrogate the suspension of juridical order as the sovereign response to instability, framing the "state of exception" as the legal paradigm of contemporary governance ("Sovereign is he who decides on the exception;" Schmitt, 1985, p. 5; see also Agamben, 2010), this article articulates a different analytic: the dispersed, everyday rationalities and calculative practices by which migration and instability are rendered governable. Rather than focusing exclusively on moments of overt suspension or exceptional rule, the political ecology and governmentality approaches adopted here trace how crisis itself is manufactured as an object of intervention, normalising exclusion and violence not through explicit suspension, but through routinised regimes of calculation, management, and technocratic consensus. This analytic shift is not a repudiation of the exception paradigm, but a strategic emphasis on the mundane, recursive, and infrastructural ways in which instability and precarity are governed. Section 3 addresses this issue directly, examining the legal and institutional architectures of emergency.

As Erik Swyngedouw (2015) argues, the contemporary elevation of environmental crisis to a global humanitarian cause often operates as a gigantic operation of depoliticisation, foreclosing dissensus and reducing environmental governance to technocratic management and consensus, rather than agonistic contestation over alternative futures. Here the invocation of "crisis," whether climatic or migratory, functions as an empty signifier that sutures antagonisms while enabling the reproduction of unequal socio-ecological arrangements. As we will develop further in Section 3, this critique illuminates how "crisis" discourse in migration governance serves to manage instability while narrowing the horizon of possibility and pre-empting transformative change.

This argument resonates with Avallone's (2024) epistemological critique of "climate migration" and "environmental refugee" categories, which, by framing mobility as a technocratic emergency, obscure the historic, political and world-ecological forces underpinning displacement. Drawing on Sayad's sociology and Marxian world-ecology, Avallone contends that population movements are not exceptional responses to crisis, but the expected, patterned outcomes of primitive accumulation, state and corporate dispossession, and the on-

going transformation of liveable environments under global capitalism. To theorise migration without this longue durée perspective, he argues, is to reproduce the very epistemic violence that policy discourse and humanitarian governance claim to remedy. The analytic stance adopted here thus explicitly aligns with this call for a radical politicisation of the migration-environment nexus.

2.1. Conceptual and Theoretical Framing

A political ecology of migration departs radically from established explanatory frameworks by theorising modes and possibilities of human mobility at the intersection of environment, power, history and capital (Radel et al., 2018; Sánchez & Riosmena, 2021; Vigil, 2024). For example, Radel et al. (2018) show, through detailed fieldwork in Nicaragua, that migration emerges not as simple adaptation or failure, but as a structurally produced necessity, rooted in land inequality, state withdrawal and the reproduction of vulnerability under neoliberalism. Extending this critique, Vigil (2024) proposes a feminist political ecology of migration, showing how climate-migration interactions are shaped by intersectional and multi-scalar power relations. Rather than treating gender and social inequalities as contextual or secondary variables, Vigil positions them as constitutive of the climate-migration nexus itself, explicitly linking global processes of ecological unequal exchange and capitalist extraction to the differentiated vulnerabilities and mobilities experienced by marginalised populations. Illustrating this through examples from Cambodia, Vigil exposes how technocratic "resilience" and "adaptation" discourses often depoliticise intervention and reinforce existing hierarchies, thereby arguing for an intersectional, historically situated analytic capable of revealing both the global roots and the local manifestations of injustice.

Recent scholarship exemplifies these dynamics through granular, situated analyses of maritime migration. For instance, Iranzo and Dupain (2025) develop the concept of "aquapelagic necropolitics" to interrogate the governance of migrants along the Atlantic route to the Canary Islands, a corridor marked by record fatalities and shifting geographies of violence. Rather than treating the sea as a passive medium or discrete actor, their posthuman analytic foregrounds the "aquapelago:" a volumetric, more-than-human space where waves, weather, surveillance technologies, legal zones, and racialised bodies converge to enact a distributed, often spectral regime of power. Their reconstruction of a 2023 shipwreck case reveals how death is not an accidental outcome but the predictable product of infrastructural, technological, and policy decisions that manufacture "zones of non-being" (Mbembe, 2003; Fanon, 1967), in which disappearance, in/visibility, and abandonment are routinised through apparatuses of search, rescue, and bureaucratic erasure. By theorising the Atlantic as both a material and political space, Iranzo and Dupain's work expands political ecology to encompass the recursive, relational, and necropolitical forms of governance that now structure mobility and its mortal risks in Europe's borderlands.

Central to this analysis is the concept of racial capitalism, understood as the historic and ongoing structuring of capitalist accumulation, extraction and governance through racialised forms of dispossession, labour control and border violence (Robinson, 2004; Melamed, 2015; Bhattacharyya, 2018). Rather than treating race and capitalism as separate or merely intersecting, this framework posits their entanglement as constitutive of the spatial, political, and epistemic architectures that produce and manage migration "crises." Building on such innovations and extending them to the broader architectures of global migration, this article advances a political ecology framework attentive to the recursive interplay of infrastructur-

al, epistemic and racialised regimes of governance. In doing so, the analysis foregrounds the constitutive roles of power, knowledge and racial capitalism in manufacturing and managing crises.

In contrast to "push-pull" or environmental determinist models, exemplified by Ravenstein's "laws of migration" and Lee's typology, which treat migration as a function of discrete, apolitical forces, political ecology situates migration within the circuits of dispossession and extraction that define capitalist and imperial orders (for overviews and internal debates in the field of political ecology, see Brannstrom, 2013; Robbins, 2012; Watts, 2000).

As Enrique Leff (2021) argues, the tradition of political ecology is grounded not in abstract environmentalism, but in the power-laden processes by which nature is socially appropriated, managed, and rendered productive within capitalist and governmental rationalities. Drawing on critiques of dependency and internal colonialism, Leff shows how structural underdevelopment and dispossession are historically produced in a world-economy that positions the Global South as a reservoir of resources and precarious labour. This order is also epistemic, as Eurocentric rationalities delegitimate subaltern knowledges. Hence, his call for an alternative environmental rationality, rooted in dialogue among knowledges and materialised through "territories of difference" and re-territorialisation (see also Escobar, 2008).

Extending this optic to migration, technical categories such as "environmental migrant" or "climate refugee"—though not Leff's own terms—operate as power/knowledge artefacts that manage visibility, obligation, and rights; they stabilise hierarchy by depoliticising the structural roots of displacement. Reframing rights as equality-in-difference, therefore, requires decolonising both knowledge and territory. Taken together, these strands define the first dimension of the crisis regime that this article theorises. Political ecology specifies the socio-ecological field in which (im)mobilities are produced through land appropriation, ecological degradation and unequal exchange. Racial capitalism identifies the structuring logic that organises this field through hierarchised dispossession, labour control and border violence, linking particular landscapes of extraction to the world-historical dynamics of capital accumulation. The next section introduces governmentality as the critical method that connects these material formations to the rationalities, calculations and subjectivities through which migration "crisis" is rendered visible, intelligible and governable.

2.2. Governmentality as Critical Method: Bringing Foucault into Political Ecology

To complete this framework, the analysis turns to governmentality as a method for tracing how the crisis regime is assembled and stabilised in practice. Theoretical innovation in political ecology has long depended on importing and adapting frameworks from other domains, notably political economy, postcolonial studies and critical theory; the turn to governmentality continues this move by specifying how the racial-capitalist dynamics outlined above are operationalised through particular regimes of calculation, expertise and intervention. In recent decades, however, the field has been profoundly shaped by post-structuralist approaches, especially those developed by Michel Foucault. As Wang (2015) observes, the "Foucault effect" is increasingly felt in political ecology, as the concepts of governmentality and biopolitics offer new ways to interrogate how power, knowledge, and life are entangled in processes of environmental and social governance. This section foregrounds governmentality not as a mere theoretical reference, but as an indispensable analytic for understanding how migration

and "crisis" are problematised, rendered visible, and governed within contemporary regimes of power.

At its core, governmentality shifts the analytic gaze from grand narratives of repression or ideology to the practical ways in which power is exercised as the "conduct of conduct," understood as the organisation of possible actions through programmes, knowledges and techniques (Foucault, 2005; Wang, 2015). Rather than locating power solely in state coercion or ideological persuasion, governmentality interrogates how governance is assembled through the interplay of institutions, scientific discourses, and technical devices that actively render both people and environments governable.

This framework is particularly valuable for political ecology and migration studies because it exposes how supposedly neutral categories, such as "crisis," "environmental migrant" or "carrying capacity" are not mere descriptors of reality but the contingent outcomes of complex governmental rationalities. Drawing on Foucault's later work, the analysis mobilises two conceptual toolkits: the sovereignty-discipline-government triangle and the episteme/techne/subject triad, which together illuminate how authority is configured, knowledge legitimates intervention, and subjectivities are formed within migration-environment assemblages (Foucault, 2009, 2008; Wang, 2015).

Importantly, governmentality is not a comprehensive theory but a critical toolbox, a method of mapping how domains of life become sites of calculation and intervention, and how resistance itself is relocated and recoded within these architectures. As Wang (2015) argues, this approach enables us to move beyond abstract critique to empirically map the shifting architectures of power and visibility. In this article, it is deployed to trace how these architectures structure (im)mobility and make the "migration crisis" governable.

3. Historical-Structural Drivers of Human (Im)mobilities: War, Ecocide, and Capital Accumulation

Human (im)mobilities, encompassing both forced movement and enforced stasis, do not arise solely from environmental stress or market "push-pull" forces. As argued in Section 2, these processes are best understood as outcomes of power-laden, historically embedded projects that reshape both ecologies and people's biographies.

Far from exceptional or spontaneous, such (im)mobilities are systematically produced by strategies of imperial expansion, resource extraction, and environmental violence. Across contexts, the governance and justification of these processes, via discourses of "security," "development" or "sustainability," form a persistent historical pattern that privileges capital and geopolitical interests over the right to remain, move or return.

This section, therefore, grounds the abstract critique advanced earlier in an empirically informed analysis of how (im)mobilities are materially produced, managed and justified through historically sedimented relations of power. In so doing, it embeds the theoretical apparatus of Section 2 within concrete cases, establishing the material foundation upon which subsequent ideological constructions of "crisis" are built—a dynamic analysed in detail in Section 4.

Before turning to specific contexts, a brief methodological clarification is necessary. This article is a theoretical-conceptual intervention that draws on existing empirical and documen-

tary research rather than on new fieldwork. The cases mobilised in what follows, including the Ecuadorian Amazon, the Niger Delta, Gaza, the Kafue River basin and contemporary configurations of climate apartheid, are selected as strategic and paradigmatic instances of the political-ecological and racial-capitalist dynamics outlined in Sections 1 and 2. They do not constitute a representative sample but function as illustrative sites that condense particular configurations of extraction, war and ecocide, slow violence and climate governance. Their role is heuristic: to operationalise the crisis regime framework in historically and geographically situated settings and to trace how the material production of (im)mobilities and their subsequent government as "crisis" are recursively intertwined.

Taken together, the following cases bring into focus how the production and management of human (im)mobilities are not merely the outcomes of material violence, but are rendered intelligible, actionable, and governable through shifting governmental rationalities, whether cloaked in the languages of development, security, or sustainability. This exemplifies the governmentality of crisis as diagnosed in Section 2 (Foucault, 2009; Wang, 2015) and prepares the ground for the discursive analysis of "crisis" in Section 4.

3.1. From Primitive Accumulation to Neo-Extractivism: The Engineered Production of (Im)Mobilities

The global production of human (im)mobilities is rooted in the violent appropriation of land and labour—diagnosed by Marx as primitive accumulation and reformulated by Harvey (2003) and Glassman (2006) as "accumulation by dispossession." These logics are not vestiges of an earlier epoch but remain constitutive features of capitalist modernity, perpetually reconfigured through shifting frontiers of extraction, regimes of value, and governance apparatuses (Moore, 2015).

Colonial enclosures, forced removals, and the containment of indigenous populations, from the Americas to Africa and Australasia, were foundational in the making of the modern world-system (Robinson, 2004). The massive displacements initiated by plantation economies, the transatlantic slave trade, and mass indenture persist in contemporary forms. Extractivist projects, whether mining, agribusiness, or energy, systematically engender new patterns of displacement and immobilisation, often under the legitimising banners of development, modernisation, or "green growth."

Ecuador's Amazon illustrates these dynamics. The oil and mining boom, led by state and corporate actors such as Texaco/Chevron, was rationalised through technical discourses of progress, leading to the expropriation and contamination of indigenous territories, the collapse of subsistence economies and mass out-migration or "trapping" of Kichwa, Cofán and Secoya communities (Sawyer, 2004; Global Witness, 2022). The legal mobilisation by indigenous coalitions, culminating in the protracted Chevron litigation, illustrates that dispossession is neither linear nor uncontested. Even when power asymmetries constrain outcomes, these forms of resistance generate alternative subjectivities, unsettle extractive regimes, and compel transnational visibility (Sawyer, 2004).

In the Niger Delta, the confluence of multinational oil interests, local elites and state complicity has produced an archetype of "slow violence", where environmental devastation has rendered traditional livelihoods untenable (UNEP, 2011), driving displacement and immobilisation (Nixon, 2011). Official narratives frequently reduce this to poverty-driven migration,

obscuring the structural violence that generates "trapped" populations, subsistence farmers and fishers converted into "urban refugees" or irregular migrants. Here, humanitarian and corporate social responsibility discourses function to depoliticise structural harm and responsibilise affected communities, while grassroots environmental movements, such as the Ogoni campaign, periodically force negotiations, reparations or international scrutiny, albeit at considerable human cost and with contingent results (Frynas, 2005).

The current land rush for agribusiness, biofuels, and carbon offsets reveals the strategic plasticity of accumulation regimes. Across Sudan, Ethiopia, and the Sahel, vast territories have been leased to foreign investors, displacing pastoralists and smallholders or confining them to degraded landscapes, nominally in pursuit of "climate mitigation" or "food security" (Zoomers, 2010; Fairhead et al., 2012). Conservation initiatives, rebranded as carbon offsetting, have led to the expulsion and immobilisation of indigenous populations to create fortress parks (Büscher & Fletcher, 2015). While discursive rationales shift from development to green growth, the material outcome remains consistent, namely patterned dispossession and the managed orchestration of (im)mobility.

At the same time, extraction and accumulation are not seamless. They are marked by contradictions, failures, and periodic acts of refusal. Local agency, whether articulated through litigation, direct action, or epistemic challenge, can disrupt, delay, or partially reconfigure imposed orders. "Enclosure," as Corson and MacDonald (2012) observe, is never absolute; it remains a contested, historically contingent process. Attention to these moments of rupture and contestation is vital for any critical political ecology of migration. Recognising the dialectic between orchestrated dispossession and situated resistance avoids both determinism and the romanticisation of agency. The contemporary cartography of (im)mobilities thus emerges from the interplay of structural violence and the contingent possibilities opened by contestation, negotiation, and alternative world-making.

3.2. War as Ecocide: Militarised Destruction and the Weaponisation of (Im)mobility

Armed conflict has long been recognised as a catalyst for human (im)mobilities. What demands sharper analysis is the deliberate weaponisation of ecologies, in which war is conceived not as collateral disruption but as the systematic destruction of environments necessary for civilian life, with mass displacement and enforced stasis as intended outcomes. Contemporary cases such as the infrastructural devastation in Gaza and targeted attacks on energy and water systems in Ukraine reveal how military strategy increasingly targets the material basis of survival, rendering entire territories uninhabitable (UNEP, 2023; UNEP, 2024; Forensic Architecture, 2024). This is not simply collateral damage but a calculated exercise in ecocide and necropolitics (Mbembe, 2003), in which the power to force flight or immobilise populations is achieved through environmental ruination.

Nowhere is this more visible than in Gaza, where the systematic targeting of water, sanitation, health, and energy infrastructure has produced not only an environmental catastrophe, but what an expanding body of legal, academic, and civil society analysis now recognises as a genocidal operation. The International Court of Justice, while not yet issuing a final judgment, has found a plausible case of genocide in its provisional measures (ICJ, 2024); critical scholarship underscores how the logic of elimination, through infrastructural destruction, forced displacement, and the deliberate creation of unliveable conditions, meets both the letter and

spirit of the Genocide Convention (Pappé, 2024; Falk, 2024). This exceeds the logic of infrastructural devastation, exemplifying the fusion of necropolitics, ecocide, and genocide in the orchestration of mass flight, immobilisation, and the unmaking of place.

The convergence of environmental destruction and forced (im)mobility underscores that war, extraction, and migration cannot be analytically separated. The same rationalities that underpin resource extraction and land dispossession, theorised by Harvey (2004) as "accumulation by dispossession," are at work in the militarised terraforming of territory and the governance of movement. In this sense, war is not a temporary interruption of "normal" extractivism, but an integral strategy in the recursive production and management of human (im)mobilities.

3.3. Extraction, Pollution, and Slow (Im)mobility: Structural Violence and Everyday Exile

The production of human (im)mobilities is not always precipitated by spectacular crises; it is often the result of incremental, cumulative harm, a modality Rob Nixon theorises as "slow violence." Chronic environmental degradation, state neglect, and extractive industries reshape not only landscapes but also the conditions for movement and stasis, systematically generating "trapped" populations whose precarity remains largely invisible within policy and humanitarian registers (Nixon, 2011).

The Niger Delta remains a paradigmatic site of this dynamic. Decades of oil extraction, abetted by corporate impunity and state complicity, have produced widespread contamination of water and farmland, undermining subsistence agriculture and fisheries and driving both chronic out-migration and involuntary sedentarisation (UNEP, 2011). Official narratives routinely recast these phenomena as poverty-driven migration, thereby obscuring the underlying structural violence that immobilises affected communities or compels their transformation into urban refugees.

Recent events along Zambia's Kafue River reinforce and update this logic. Since early 2025, four mining companies—one British and three Chinese—have been implicated in repeated toxic discharges into the Kafue watershed, a system essential to the livelihoods and health of millions (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, 2025; Gondwe, 2025). The most catastrophic incident, a tailings dam failure at Sino-Metals Leach Zambia, released over a million tons of acidic effluent, compounding earlier spills linked to both Chinese and British operators. The devastation was immediate: fisheries collapsed, crops were poisoned, livestock perished, and acute public health crises ensued—including a spectrum of forced (im)mobilities, from mass evacuation to chronic entrapment. While Western embassies issued evacuation orders for their personnel, most affected residents reported receiving minimal compensation, experiencing persistent intimidation, and, in numerous cases, being coerced into signing legal waivers. Zambian authorities downplayed ongoing risks and prioritised rapid remediation over accountability, exemplifying the politics of denial and the systematic externalisation of risk onto the most vulnerable.

Such cases exemplify the structural logic of transnational extractivism, in which capital and state actors externalise ecological risk, appropriate profit and produce stratified (im)mobilities. The phenomenon of "climate apartheid," in which expatriate elites evacuate

rapidly while local populations absorb chronic harm, exposes the recursive entanglement of power, ecology and mobility (Alston, 2019).

Not all those affected are displaced; the destruction of land and livelihoods often generates populations rendered immobile amid environmental precarity, a dynamic increasingly highlighted in work on environmental immobility and "trapped" populations (Zickgraf, 2019). The politics of denial and invisibilisation underpin these patterns, revealing how extractive regimes manufacture both spectacular displacement and the chronic stasis of everyday exile. The analytic imperative is not merely to catalogue instances of slow violence, but to theorise their constitutive role within the recursive regime of crisis governance. By rendering harm invisible and mobility unattainable, these processes ensure that (im)mobilities remain managed, depoliticised, and profitable, that is, a human reservoir of desperation and cheap labour.

3.4. Climate Change as a Manufactured Disaster: Stratified (Im)mobility and Climate Apartheid

Climate change now functions as a central axis in the organisation of global (im)mobility, operating not as a neutral "driver" but as a regime in which adaptation and risk are mediated through existing relations of wealth and power, as shown in concrete Global South settings where climate impacts articulate with debt, surplus labour and unfree work (IPCC, 2023; Natarajan et al., 2019). In this context, "climate apartheid" denotes the patterned production of privilege and expendability, where populations least responsible for emissions, often those systematically targeted by colonial extraction, face heightened exposure to ecological violence while being denied mobility, rights, and political recognition (Alston, 2019; see also Rice et al., 2021).

Legal and institutional architectures reinforce this stratification. As McAdam's work on climate change-related movement shows, cross-border climate-displaced persons inhabit a persistent protection gap, in which existing refugee and human rights frameworks do not systematically secure entitlements to admission, status and protection (McAdam, 2011; 2012). Building on Achiume's account of migration as decolonisation and her critique of border regimes that cast Third World migrants as political strangers rather than co-sovereigns, contemporary governance of climate-related (im)mobilities can be read as rendering those most affected simultaneously hyper-visible within "crisis" narratives and structurally marginalised as political agents, particularly where colonial histories of subordination structure who may legitimately move and belong (Achiume, 2019).

A growing body of empirical research consistently indicates that policy responses to the climate crisis frequently reinforce patterns of segregation, exclusion, and displacement. For example, infrastructural adaptation projects in Jakarta and Lagos, as well as what Rice et al. (2019) term "carbon gentrification" in North American cities, illustrate how protective measures secure privileged populations while further marginalising those rendered precarious by climate change. These dynamics exemplify, in Alston's (2019) terms, the emergence of "climate apartheid" as a regime in which protection and exposure are systematically stratified.

The persistent refusal of international law to recognise climate-displaced persons as rights-bearing subjects serves as a mechanism of exclusion rather than oversight (Natarajan, 2021). Consequently, those most affected by climate-related (im)mobilities are rendered simultaneously visible—as objects of crisis management—and invisible as political agents. Climate

apartheid, in this analytic, materialises through recursive processes in which both the movement and stasis of populations are regulated, and the possibility of rights or belonging is persistently deferred.

The management of climate-induced (im)mobilities thus operates at the nexus of ecological violence, legal denial, and recursive governance. The cases of climate-adaptive urban fortification, the stratification of adaptation resources, and the legal containment of climate migrants collectively anchor this argument within the broader dynamics mapped throughout the article. Rather than natural or episodic, these outcomes reflect the ongoing production and management of instability within a world order defined by extractivism, racial capitalism, and technocratic crisis governance.

Despite the risk of "overattribution" to Western, state or corporate actors, the evidence strongly suggests that the orchestration of (im)mobility is always mediated through global circuits of capital, race and geopolitical power, even where local agency or regional actors intervene. Apparent exceptions, such as moments of resistance or participation by non-Western powers, are themselves shaped by historically sedimented relations of structural constraint and complicity. Where the empirical record is incomplete, the convergence of ethnographic, legal, and remote-sensing data overwhelmingly supports the thesis that human (im)mobilities are not accidental or apolitical, but the outcome of coordinated projects of extraction, dispossession, and containment. The same institutions and rationalities responsible for producing instability are those that name, frame, and govern it as "crisis," thereby displacing responsibility and legitimising their own prerogatives. This recursive process, where material projects of extraction, war, and ecological violence are converted into governable emergencies, constitutes the core dynamic of contemporary mobility governance. The analytic lens must therefore shift from the material production of (im)mobilities to the discursive and institutional regimes through which "crisis" is manufactured, authorised, and normalised: not as a sequential process, but as a mutually constitutive dynamic that underpins the persistent architectures of exclusion and violence detailed above. Section 4 interrogates this recursive logic in detail, mapping how the management of crisis operates as both spectacle and infrastructure in the regulation of mobility.

4. "Crisis" As Governance: The Ideological Management of (Im)Mobility

The architecture of contemporary migration governance is not the result of accidental crises but is constituted through the recursive interplay of material and discursive regimes. The instability generated by war, extraction, and ecological violence is rendered intelligible and manageable through the continual production of "crisis"—as both spectacle and infrastructure. In what follows, crisis is analysed as the point of articulation between the racial-capitalist structuring of the global order, the socio-ecological transformations mapped by political ecology and the governmental rationalities that render instability governable. "Crisis" discourse functions not simply as narrative but as a technology of governance that sutures the production of displacement to its ideological management, thereby authorising exclusion, rationing solidarity, and restricting the possibility of alternative projects.

4.1. From Event to Regime: Crisis as a Technology of Governance

Recent scholarship has intensified scrutiny of the conceptual indeterminacy that underpins the crisis regime, even as, in Dobry's sense, crisis continues to designate fluid conjunctures in which sectoral boundaries, routines and definitions of the situation are unsettled (Dobry, 2025). Margheritis (2025), in a comprehensive reassessment, argues that "migration crisis" functions as a "joker card" in policy, media and even academic discourses: a mutable signifier whose definitional vagueness enables endless re-elaborations and contradictory rationales, from humanitarian urgency to securitarian closure. This plasticity, far from being an analytic failure, is an active resource for institutional actors, legitimating both extraordinary measures and chronic policy drift, and recasting governance failures as external shocks. Critically, Margheritis (2025) shows that "crisis" is neither self-evident nor unitary, but is instead constructed, qualified and operationalised with specific adjectives ("creeping," "protracted," "exogenous," "border," etc.) to fit divergent political, spatial and temporal contexts. Her comparative analysis across Europe, Latin America and the Mediterranean reveals that the multiplication of crisis types, far from resolving ambiguity, entrenches it, enabling recursive reframing and persistent management-by-emergency. This proliferation, as Margheritis (2025) contends, devalues "crisis" as an analytic tool, even as it multiplies its utility as a governance strategy.

This section therefore elaborates the second contribution of the article by specifying crisis as a regime of governance in which the material production of instability and its discursive management form a single, recursive assemblage.

At the core of this regime lies a double imperative: the persistent structural need for migrant labour and the simultaneous ontological rejection of migrants and their descendants as full social and political subjects. Crisis discourse mediates this contradiction, rendering economic dependence compatible with the reproduction of exclusion and moral distancing.

As Foucault (2009) and Swyngedouw (2015) underscore, what is at stake is the recursive normalisation of exception: the transformation of extraordinary measures into mundane modalities of rule, authorised through technocratic and humanitarian rationalities rather than overt sovereign will. The crisis regime thus becomes self-reinforcing, entrenching both policy inertia and administrative consensus. This mutually constitutive entanglement of discursive and material regimes is not a sequential process but a recursive dynamic, wherein crisis discourse justifies, consolidates, and recalibrates the infrastructures of exclusion it presupposes.

Recent comparative research corroborates this diagnosis. Sahin-Mencutek et al. (2022), analysing eleven countries across Europe and its periphery, identify three constitutive features of this crisis modality: the proliferation of actors at multiple levels (state, international, civil society, private sector); the continual fragmentation and ad hoc reinvention of legal and policy frameworks; and a renationalisation narrative that seeks to reimpose order and control amidst deepening uncertainty. These dynamics do not signal a temporary deviation from normality, but institutionalise legal ambiguity, discretionary power, and temporality as permanent characteristics of migration governance. In this reading, the "crisis" regime operates as a structural technology for managing the chronic instability of the world order, institutionalising exceptionalism while obscuring the systemic failure of prior migration governance models (Sahin-Mencutek et al., 2022).

4.2. Selective Solidarity, Racialisation, and the Redistribution of Blame

Crisis discourse is never neutral. Its performative labour extends to the reallocation of blame and responsibility, displacing the causes of instability onto those who bear its consequences, while masking the structural complicity of elites and institutions. The metaphoric lexicon—waves, swarms, invasions—legitimises fortification and allows states to present themselves as besieged, obscuring both the origins of displacement and their own role in its production.

The allocation of solidarity and empathy is systematically racialised and geopolitical. The European border regime, as De Genova (2017) insists, is not merely a frontier of legality but a mechanism for the reproduction of a postcolonial racial order. The selective openness to "European" refugees, alongside the abandonment and exclusion of non-European others, exposes the crisis regime as a technology of racial statecraft, through which the boundaries of humanity and belonging are continually re-inscribed. The question of whether Black and brown lives matter in Europe is not rhetorical, but is inscribed in the architectures of exclusion, which repeatedly render migrant deaths at the border as apolitical and inevitable.

The deployment of crisis discourse also enables political elites to mask their own structural impotence and governance failures in relation to broader global trends. By narrating instability as an external emergency linked to human (im)mobilities and presenting migrants as either existential threats or humanitarian objects, policymakers recast chronic governance incapacity, notably the inability to manage demographic decline, labour shortages or the uncontrollable logics of globalisation, as temporary crises requiring exceptional measures. This allows states and supranational actors to present themselves as embattled defenders or compassionate saviours, rather than as actors fundamentally dependent on migrant cheap labour for economic and demographic reproduction. In this way, the crisis narrative not only scapegoats the most vulnerable, but does so in accordance with what can only be described as the perennial logic of being "strong with the weak and weak with the strong." It enables policymakers and institutions to shift responsibility onto those least able to resist, while simultaneously recasting the West as both a besieged victim and a magnanimous guardian, thereby inverting the true direction of dependency. The structural irony is that the very individuals rendered disposable by the language of crisis are, in fact, indispensable to the economic sustainability and demographic reproduction of these societies.

4.3. Marketisation, Depoliticisation, and the Crisis-Industrial Complex

The most far-reaching achievement of the crisis regime is its capacity to simultaneously marketise human mobility and foreclose political contestation. By transforming migration into an object of technical management, where experts, consultants, security firms and humanitarian actors govern the symptoms of instability, crisis discourse renders both solidarity and antagonism structurally obsolete. The migration-industrial complex does not merely respond to instability; it produces and commodifies it, integrating public, private, and humanitarian actors into an ever-expanding infrastructure of security, consultancy, and emergency response.

Viewed through Moore's world-ecology lens (Moore, 2015), crisis functions as a durable mechanism for the appropriation and exhaustion of both human and extra-human "cheap nature." Building on this perspective, Sajir (2021) analyses how the proliferation of trade, migration and security agreements, especially between core and peripheral states, notably in Africa, operates as a strategic infrastructure. These agreements do not resolve instability but

systematically extract surplus labour and ecological resources through the machinery of crisis governance, deepening structural inequalities and accelerating depletion. The presentation of governance innovation thus disguises a regime that is fundamentally marketised, securitised, and ecologically destructive.

The recursive interplay of marketisation and depoliticisation is most apparent in the emergent discourse on "climate refugees." Here, the crisis regime expands its scope, enabling new domains of management and profit, without extending substantive protection or rights. The legal and political void surrounding climate-induced displacement allows states to fortify borders, develop surveillance infrastructures, and deflect responsibility, while those affected are rendered objects of risk management rather than rights-bearing subjects. Under the sign of crisis, suffering is translated into data, risk, and business opportunity.

The crisis regime thus does not merely govern (im)mobilities; it also produces new domains of accumulation by rendering instability, risk and loss calculable and tradable. Natarajan's critique of climate "loss and damage" regimes is instructive here: the six assumptions on which they rest—that loss is identifiable, calculable, compensable and attributable, and that such regimes will deter harm and advance justice—ultimately converge on the commodification of nature and harm, embedding climate governance within expanded markets for insurance and "green" finance even as ecological destruction intensifies (Natarajan, 2021). From a crisis-regime perspective, loss and damage appears less as a belated correction than as one of the juridical technologies through which climate crisis is turned into an object of calculation, liability management and profit, sustaining the very infrastructures of extraction and abandonment that generate displacement in the first place.

This transformation is not accidental but constitutes the core ideological achievement of the regime. The crisis-industrial complex thrives on the recursive entanglement of emergency discourse, new forms of extraction, and the systematic deferral of structural alternatives. By neutralising political antagonism and reframing struggles over justice, redistribution, and accountability as questions of management and resilience, the apparatus of crisis governance consolidates a hegemonic order: mobility is perpetually managed, justice is postponed, and the possibility of substantive contestation is foreclosed.

4.4. Hegemonic Formation: The Regime of Crisis

The cumulative effect of the crisis regime is not merely to manage mobility but to consolidate a hegemonic formation, understood as a discursive, affective and institutional apparatus that fuses the production, management and justification of (im)mobilities. As Avallone (2024) observes, the proliferation of "crisis" and "emergency" categories in migration governance not only obscures the structural production of displacement but also severs mobility, epistemologically, from its world-historical, socio-ecological roots.

This closure enables technocratic and humanitarian interventions that manage symptoms while leaving intact the violent architectures of dispossession and accumulation. The crisis regime, in this sense, condenses the structural imperatives of racial capitalism, the socio-ecological configurations analysed by political ecology and the governmental techniques through which instability and (im)mobility are rendered objects of rule. Crisis becomes the essential condition and rationale for the perpetuation of exclusion, the displacement of responsibility, and the indefinite postponement of justice. Its strength lies precisely in its ability to render the

consequences of extraction, war, and ecocide as accidental, while transforming the struggle for mobility into a perpetual emergency to be managed, never resolved.

The architecture of crisis governance thus sustains infrastructures of exclusion and forecloses substantive alternatives; as long as "crisis" endures as the governing horizon, struggles for mobility are trapped within cycles of emergency, management, and moral evasion. The analytic task is not to refine the techniques of crisis management, but to interrogate the logics that sustain it—and to envision the political and institutional conditions under which justice, rather than exception, could govern the organisation of human (im)mobilities.

5. Conclusion

The spectacle of the "migrant crisis" is best understood not as a surface shock, but as the visible fissure atop a tectonic reordering of global power. Analytically, the article has argued for a political ecology of (im)mobility that does three things. It has integrated governmentality, world-ecology and racial capitalism into a single framework for analysing how (im)mobilities are produced within projects of extraction, war and ecological destruction; it has reconceptualised "migration crisis" as a recursive regime rather than an episodic disruption; and it has shown, through a set of paradigmatic cases, how this crisis regime is operationalised through racialised, marketised and humanitarian techniques of governing instability. These moves reposition debates on migration crisis away from classification disputes and managerial concerns, towards a conjunctural and world-historical analysis of how crisis is manufactured and governed.

The deep ruptures at work today are the result of centuries of extraction, militarism and racialised exclusion, processes that are now convulsing into open crisis. While not all episodes of instability are the direct result of calculated governance, the dominant pattern remains one in which crisis is produced, named, and operationalised to sustain existing orders.

As Danewid (2021) argues, drawing on Stuart Hall's seminal conjunctural analysis, the very spectacle and policing of the "migrant crisis" must be understood as more than the episodic management of instability. It is, rather, the visible symptom of a deeper rupture: the waning of a racialised world order whose logics of whiteness, extraction, and exclusion can no longer secure hegemony, and the convulsive emergence of an as-yet indeterminate successor.

The intensification of border enforcement and the proliferation of crisis discourse directed towards migrants and their descendants signal not the sudden onset of chaos, but the slow, convulsive collapse of an order predicated on white military supremacy, moral democratic superiority and racial capitalism, a system now struggling to reproduce its hegemony amid eroding privileges and global dislocations. The notion of "crisis" thus marks not simply a curtain hiding managerial policy failures and societal moral bankruptcy towards the sufferings of other fellow humans, but more generally the "morbid symptom" (Gramsci, 1948) of an interregnum: a world where the old order is dying but the new has yet to be born.

Integrating this insight compels us to recognise crisis discourse as both a defence mechanism—clinging to obsolete privileges—and a terrain of struggle, wherein the boundaries of belonging, humanity, and (im)mobility are violently renegotiated. The analytic task, then, is to expose the manufactured character of "crisis" and to confront the deeper, world-historical antagonisms that make crisis governance narratives centred on human (im)mobilities both plausible and central to the reproduction of contemporary regimes of migration governance.

In this reading, the present "crisis," along with previous and future ones, is neither a random shock nor an exogenous emergency as portrayed within Western policy and media discourses, but the protracted unravelling of old regimes of racial exploitation and the defensive attempts, through border fortification, moral panic and technocratic management, to police the birth of the new and delay the change. This "interregnum," to recall once more Gramsci's formulation, is saturated with morbid symptoms: exceptionalism becomes routine, solidarity is rationed, and suffering is marketised, all as ruling orders struggle to recompose legitimacy.

Yet historicising the notion of "crisis" as interregnum is not merely an exercise in theoretical diagnosis. It forces a reckoning with the stakes of the present, since the management of crisis is inseparable from the attempt to rescue or recompose a faltering order, often through intensified exclusion and the violent reassertion of borders. The analytic implication is clear: to interrogate the machinery of "crisis" is to render visible both the exhaustion of dominant logics and the contested emergence of new imaginaries and practices of mobility and justice. For scholarship, this means moving beyond surface critique to map systematically how governance, legitimacy and resistance are reconfigured in moments of protracted transition. For policy and political strategy, it underscores the urgency of articulating alternatives, grounded in solidarity, decolonial justice and the dismantling of racial-capitalist infrastructures, against the normalisation of emergency and exception. The struggle over human (im)mobilities is inseparable from the broader contestation over the meaning and future of global justice itself.

If the constant narrative of "crisis" marks the interregnum of a dying and decomposing global order, the task is not to endure or manage its ruptures, but to seize them as openings for genuinely alternative futures. This requires refusing both the governance of nostalgia and the foreclosure of new imaginaries and instead advancing scholarship and praxis that illuminate how justice, mobility, and solidarity might be reconstituted amid ongoing planetary transformation. The politics of crisis can only be displaced by the creative articulation of alternatives—historically grounded, empirically attuned, and uncompromising in their challenge to the world that creates the crisis.

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