Towards a Politicization and Historicization of "Climate Migration": A Political Ecology Perspective on Global Mobility under Capitalism

Hacia la politización y historicización de la "migración climática": Una perspectiva de ecología política sobre la movilidad global en el capitalismo

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The climate change discourse that emerged in the 1990s has foregrounded climate-induced migration; yet, terms such as *environmental refugee* or *climate migrant*, frequently invoked in public debate, remain undefined within international refugee law, generating legal ambiguities and gaps in protection. This absence is not merely terminological but reflects historical frameworks that excluded ecological considerations from migration governance. Drawing on political ecology, Marxist scholarship, and Moore's world-ecology approach, this paper critically examines the limitations of climate migration debates when disconnected from the structural dynamics of global capitalism. It situates mobility within the long-term transformation of socio-ecological relations, emphasizing that displacement is both a product and a driver of capitalist expansion, ecological change, and uneven power relations. By framing climate-induced migration within historical and structural processes, the paper highlights the necessity of critically reassessing mobility classifications in light of alarmist and securitarian frameworks and the war regime emerging from the 2022 invasion of Ukraine and Israel's military action in Gaza since 2023.

El discurso sobre el cambio climático que surgió en la década de 1990 situó en primer plano la migración inducida por el clima; sin embargo, términos como refugiado ambiental *o* migrante climático, *aunque se emplean con frecuencia en el debate público, siguen sin estar definidos en el derecho internacional de los refugiados, generando ambigüedades jurídicas y lagunas en la protección. Esta ausencia no es meramente terminológica, sino que refleja marcos históricos que*

Abstract

han excluido las consideraciones ecológicas de la gobernanza migratoria. Basándose en la ecología política, la literatura marxista y el enfoque de la ecología-mundo de Moore, este artículo examina críticamente las limitaciones de los debates sobre migración climática cuando se desconectan de las dinámicas estructurales del capitalismo global. Sitúa la movilidad en el contexto de la transformación a largo plazo de las relaciones socioecológicas, enfatizando que el desplazamiento es tanto un producto como un motor de la expansión capitalista, el cambio climático y las relaciones de poder desiguales. Al enmarcar la migración inducida por el clima dentro de procesos históricos y estructurales, el artículo subraya la necesidad de reevaluar críticamente las clasificaciones de movilidad a la luz de marcos alarmistas y securitarios y del régimen bélico que emerge tras la invasión de Ucrania en 2022 y la acción militar de Israel en Gaza desde 2023.

1. Introduction

Who is a *climate migrant*? More than thirty years after the publication of the first Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report in 1990, which highlighted the link between human mobility and climate change for the first time (McLeman et al., 2025), and despite the concept's widespread adoption by policymakers and its diffusion into public discourse—which might suggest a shared understanding—the notion of so-called climate-related mobility remains ambiguous and is subject to divergent interpretations shaped by economic, socio-ecological, and political processes. Responses to this seemingly straightforward question vary widely, reflecting differing emphasis on migratory versus ecological factors—from the idea of *environmental refugees* fleeing sudden environmental disasters to analyses that incorporate appropriation processes in rural areas as drivers of internal displacement (McLeman et al., 2025). As Chiara Scissa (2024, p. 10) observes, "at least 16 definitions have been suggested by UN Agencies, institutions, NGOs, and scholars to define human mobility in the context of disasters, climate change, and environmental degradation. Yet, all failed to reach an international consensus."

Framing this concept challenges the classifications that shape the migration regime by foregrounding two key issues: the complexity of its definition, which requires engagement with both the concepts of *climate* and *mobility*; and the limitations of existing frameworks for categorizing people on the move, which tend to separate economic patterns from ecological ones, focusing primarily on individual or collective experiences at borders while overlooking the structural contexts that drive such mobility. This conceptual complexity has prompted a range of scholarly responses and the elaboration of multiple definitions (McAdam, 2012, 2020; Behrman & Kent, 2018; Gemenne, 2011; Scissa, 2022). Over the past two decades, some scholars have explicitly engaged with the concept through a political ecology approach (Vigil, 2024; Sánchez & Riosmena, 2021; Radel et al., 2018; Ahmed et al., 2018). Others, while not explicitly using the terminology of political ecology, have examined the relationships be-

tween mobility, immobility, and socio-ecological transformations (Zickgraf, 2021; Agustoni & Maretti, 2019).

Building on this critical literature, the present article aims to interrogate the expansive conceptualization of *climate migration* by repoliticizing its usage and situating the concept within a broader political ecology critique of the expanding migration regime within capitalism, with a historically and geographically situated understanding of its definitions. These works and this contribution share a critical stance toward studies and public representations of so-called environmental and climate migrations, challenging alarmist narratives that envision a world "flooded" or "invaded" by hundreds of millions of climate refugees within the next twenty years—without addressing the underlying causes and structural forces. The climate migration discourse often emphasizes numerical and predictive dimensions, reflecting a solution-oriented political imperative typically framed within the dominant paradigm of "adaptation," one of the main pillars of climate change action since the 1980s, which paradoxically addressed institutional expectations more than the problems faced by affected local populations (Jennings, 2011, p. 238; Orlove, 2009, p. 131). Yet, without a nuanced understanding of the socio-ecological contexts in which mobility and immobility are embedded, calculations of potential so-called climate migrants and proposed policy responses risk addressing political purposes while obscuring the structural processes that organize the migration regime and, more broadly, the socio-ecological relations sustaining the expansion of global capital, including its reliance on labor mobility (Sassen, 2021). A state-centric approach—often framed through a Western-centered urgency to manage migration as an external phenomenon—constrains the debate within both physical and epistemological borders, overlooking the historical global processes that have given rise to and continue to shape patterns of global mobility (Anghie, 2004; Sassen, 2021).

This article is organized into three sections. Following the introduction, the first section examines the development of the concept of "climate migrant," with a particular focus on the use of the term "refugee" and its limitations in capturing ecological transformations, thereby highlighting the gaps in international consensus regarding its definition. The second section moves from a critique of alarmist tendencies in migration discourse—often framed around projections of potential "invasions" amid worsening climate change—toward a historical contextualization of displacement processes, emphasizing the long-term socio-ecological dynamics of appropriation and enclosure. Finally, the third section presents a critical analysis of climate migration, employing a political-ecology perspective that reveals the structural drivers of mobility within global capitalism.

2. Limits and Implications of the Climate Criterion in Refugee Protection Regimes

Neither scholars nor international actors—including UN agencies, public institutions, and NGOs—have reached a consensus on a definition that adequately captures the relationship between climate change and human mobility (McAdam, 2012, 2020; Behrman & Kent, 2018; Gemenne, 2011; Scissa, 2022). Terms such as *climate mobility* and *climate migration* are increasingly employed by media and policymakers; yet both *climate* and *mobility/migration* remain conceptually ambiguous and open to multiple interpretations. Over the past three decades, since the climate crisis entered the public and scientific debate with the first 1990 IPCC report, this conceptual indeterminacy has given rise to a variety of evolving categories,

including *climate refugees*, *climate-induced migration*, or *human mobility in the context of disasters, climate change, and environmental degradation* (Scissa, 2024). Such formulations tend to emphasize the relationship between people on the move and isolated environmental conditions, rather than providing a precise articulation of how the *climate* context should be defined or what the climate/environmental category might encompass, considering the ongoing global transformations. Indeed, the invocation of "climate change" tends to privilege sudden extreme events, whereas slow-onset processes—those that progressively affect habitability and unsettle socio-ecological dynamics regulating local ecosystems—remain comparatively underexamined.

McAdam (2012) observes that traditional legal frameworks remain "ill-equipped" to address the complex realities of climate-induced displacement, underscoring the need for interdisciplinary approaches that extend beyond international law. Far from being a secondary concern, this definitional indeterminacy is pivotal: the absence of a shared terminology perpetuates significant gaps in the protection framework, even as growing numbers of people seek recognition of their right to mobility in the face of environmental degradation. The most well-known case, widely labeled in the media as that of "the first climate refugee" (Weiss, 2015), is *Ioane Teitiota v. New Zealand*, which established important legal precedents regarding the principle of non-refoulement in contexts of ecological harm. Mr. Ioane Teitiota, from the Pacific island nation of Kiribati, applied for protection in New Zealand on the grounds of insufficient access to freshwater, overcrowding, inundation, erosion, and land disputes in Kiribati (McAdam, 2020). Following a series of unsuccessful appeals before New Zealand's courts and his eventual deportation, Teitiota lodged a complaint against New Zealand with the UN Human Rights Committee, which acknowledged that "the impacts of climate change may themselves be a bar to deportation" (McAdam, 2020). His case is widely regarded as a major legal development, while also drawing attention to the lack of legal consideration for ecological vulnerabilities.

Establishing normative consensus is inseparable from the historical evolution, politicization, and reconfiguration of international migration law since the post-World War II period, and from the concurrent expansion of global capitalism that profoundly transforms the relations sustaining complex living ecosystems. In the UNHCR glossary, the entry for "climate refugee" directs readers to "persons displaced in the context of disasters and climate change," with a note clarifying that the term "can cause confusion as it does not exist in international law." The UNHCR emphasizes that attributing displacement to a single driver—climate change—is problematic, as it is better understood as a "risk multiplier" that interacts with other drivers of displacement, as recognized by the Global Compact on Refugees (UNHCR). The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (CSR), by contrast, does not explicitly address ecological factors, defining refugees as persons fleeing persecution based on race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion. This legal framework reflects its historical and political production: codified in the aftermath of World War II in response to displacement in Europe, the CSR established the first legally binding international refugee protection regime. Rejecting the use of *climate refugee* as a misleading expression, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) provided a complementary definition in 2007:

> Environmental migrants are persons or groups of persons who, predominantly for reasons of sudden or progressive change in the environment that adversely affects their lives or living conditions, are obliged to leave their habitual homes, or choose to do so, ei-

ther temporarily or permanently, and who move either within their country or abroad. (IOM, 2007, p. 33)

IOM stresses that this definition is not intended to create legal categories but to clarify a concept used by UN agencies, governments, and NGOs "to inform policy and practice," acknowledging that no international agreement exists on terminology for environment-related migration. Nevertheless, linking the refugee status to *environmental* or *climate* factors is not without precedent. Prior to its academic reconsideration, the concept was invoked by political actors and scholars "to draw attention to this issue and encourage the development of forms of international protection" (Scissa, 2024), as exemplified by the 2015 legal case of Mr. Ioane Teitiota. More importantly, regional refugee instruments have extended protection to environmentally displaced persons, notably the Organization of African Unity (OAU) Refugee Convention and the Cartagena Declaration, which address the African and Latin American contexts, respectively. These frameworks challenge a Western-centered approach that detaches the refugee concept from the socio-ecological realities of displacement, while simultaneously raising alarms about potential "climate mass migration."

Signed in September 1969 in Addis Ababa, against the backdrop of African independence struggles and just a few years after the establishment of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1963, the OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa was primarily designed to address the large number of Africans fleeing conflicts arising from anti-colonial struggles (Okello, 2014). Similarly, the 1984 Cartagena Declaration emerged in response to refugee flows in Latin America, which, as the convention itself notes, necessitated considering a broader definition of the term "refugee." Both instruments recognize the right to international protection in cases of displacement resulting from events that seriously "disturb public order," reflecting their historical colonial context, which, as discussed below, has significantly influenced the evolution of socio-ecological relations in many departure countries, particularly in the Global South. Neither text, however, explicitly mentions "environment" or "climate change" as a driver, since the concept of "climate-induced displacement" had not yet entered international legal discourse at the time, nor was the ecological character of colonial occupation considered. Nevertheless, contemporary scholarship has interpreted the "disturbing public order" provisions as encompassing environmentally or climate-induced displacement (Okello, 2014). Despite the symbolism of these alternative conventions, which have the merit of recalling the historical and political nature of the 1951 Geneva Convention and, more generally, of international refugee law, the limitations of these two texts extend beyond the geographical sphere: they are not legally binding. Moreover, as Okello (2014) notes in his analysis of the OUA Convention, "in most of Africa these days, refugees are not welcomed with the exuberant sense of solidarity that surrounded the promulgation of the OAU Convention. Instead, African states are increasingly following the lead of other regions by closing their borders and threatening to forcibly return those who have made it into their territories."

The 1951 Geneva Convention continues to represent the universal legal reference underpinning the international protection of individuals recognized as refugees, within a context of expanding Western border externalization policies—such as the Schengen framework and U.S. policies—particularly in African and Latin American regions. As Anghie (2004, p. 32) recalls, "it is today hard to conceive of an international law which is not universal. And yet, the universality of international law is a relatively recent development," highlighting the positivist

dimension of jurisprudence as a consequence of the imperial expansion of "the long nineteenth century." Indeed, the debate on the definition of climate migration contributes to interrogating the grounding of international law itself in a statist conception, which coincides both temporally and politically with the expansion of capital founded on the positivist division between Society and Nature (Moore, 2017). Reframing the debate through the critical lens of political ecology is, therefore, even more essential to interrogate, first and foremost, the climate criterion itself, before determining, according to current classifications, the type of mobility that can be referenced within or outside the frameworks of international law.

In response to growing concerns about the relationship between refugee status and climate change, the UNHCR published a report in 2020, followed by an updated version in 2023, titled *Climate Change Impacts and Cross-Border Displacement: International Refugee Law and UNHCR's Mandate*. The report seeks to clarify UNHCR's position regarding the protection of people displaced "across borders due to the impacts of climate change and disasters" (UNHCR, 2023). It affirms that "climate change impacts can give rise to international protection needs under international human rights law" or may warrant "temporary or humanitarian forms of protection," drawing on relevant regional case law such as the 1969 OAU Convention on Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa and the Cartagena Declaration on Refugees of 1984 in the Americas (UNHCR, 2023). At the same time, the 2023 edition explicitly stresses that not all people displaced in the context of climate change will qualify for international protection (UNHCR, 2023). This includes, for instance, individuals "who move in the context of climate change, solely for economic reasons," thereby distinguishing between economic and ecological drivers (UNHCR, 2023). The report relies on the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR, 2017) definition of a disaster, which characterizes it as a "serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society, involving widespread human, material, economic, or environmental losses and impacts." Yet, the ambiguity of this definition appears once again to privilege sudden and catastrophic events over slow-onset processes. Such framing risks excluding what Sassen (2021, pp. 285-295) terms "development refugees," displaced by "certain modes of economic development." Emphasizing the capitalist context in which the postcolonial migration regime is embedded, Sassen highlights the responsibility of European and U.S. "development" practices—pursued over several decades—and their formative influence on international institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank. As she argues:

> Nor is there a law that recognizes the fact that much "economic development" and wealth is based on land grabs from rural smallholders, destruction of land and water bodies by mining and plantations, and more. Migrants who lose their land or have their water supplies poisoned by nearby mines are refugees of such modes of economic development. There should be a law that recognizes them as such. However, for now, the basic interpretation is that these development modes are beneficial for a country. (Sassen, 2021, p. 291)

In conclusion, the international debate on definitions remains fragmented, often reducing climate-related mobility to the image of a sudden disaster or treating the "climate criterion" merely as an exacerbating factor. Yet, as scholars emphasize, those who move are often not only the victims of violent tropical storms, but also individuals unable to adapt to profound transformations in their living environments (McLeman, 2017). This broader perspective shifts attention from isolated individual experiences to what McLeman (2017) terms the macro-level forces that generate structural displacement over time. Building on this perspec-

tive, the following analysis examines the interconnections between extractive capitalism and the structural production of mobilities and immobilities, thereby challenging existing categorizations and questioning the artificial dichotomy between economic and climatic migration.

3. Dismantling the Alarmist Perspective: Toward a Historical Materialist Understanding of "Climate" Mobility

The catastrophic discourse that characterizes reports on so-called *climate migration* is closely tied to a recurring issue: the projection of potential numbers of climate migrants, often mobilized as evidence for the urgency of "mitigating" or "adapting" to climate change. In doing so, international organizations and media narratives perpetuate alarmist and securitized portrayals that reinforce xenophobic discourses. Although the notion of a climate migration apocalypse is more myth than reality (De Haas, 2020), such rhetoric has nonetheless contributed to legitimizing the expansion of extensive border control regimes in wealthy regions such as Europe, the United States, and Australia, thereby reinforcing what has been described as a system of "climate apartheid" (Alston, 2019; Long, 2024). As Rice, Long, and Levenda (2021, p. 626) argue, recent climate policies paradoxically amplify "systems of discrimination, segregation, and displacement as they attempt to adapt to the climate crisis and safeguard dominant economic and socio-political structures."

They highlight initiatives such as carbon credit programs and urban infrastructures that prioritize profit over the vulnerabilities of local communities, contending that one of the consequences of "climate apartheid" is an increasingly exclusionary conceptualization of citizenship, particularly in relation to migration and securitization under climate change (Rice et al., 2021). As further emphasized by Rice, Long, and Levenda (2021), and echoed by figures such as Desmond Tutu (2007) and Philip Alston (2019), this system entrenches unequal vulnerabilities to climate impacts. Climate-focused policies and programs frequently protect privileged groups while marginalizing, harming, and even criminalizing those rendered most vulnerable by climate change. The alarmist approach thus fosters an emergency-driven perspective that legitimizes profit-oriented measures, often articulated through language that is catastrophic and sensationalist. It reinforces this framing by projecting scenarios in which hundreds of millions may be displaced, implicitly invoking imagery of large-scale population movements as threatening, thereby sustaining a quantitatively driven public discourse on so-called *climate migration.* Yet the very evolution of this discourse reveals the fragility of its underlying assumptions.

The first systematic prediction dates back to 1985, when the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) commissioned Egyptian scholar Essam El-Hinnawi to prepare a report on "environmental refugees," estimating that 30 million people could potentially be displaced by climate change. His definition was broad, encompassing both internal and international migration, as well as temporary and permanent migration (El-Hinnawi, 1985; Gemenne, 2011). Subsequent estimates emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s based on a similarly expansive understanding of "environmental refugees" (Gemenne, 2011). Perhaps the most widely cited figure, however, was Norman Myers's projection that 200 million people could be displaced by 2050 as a result of sea-level rise, coastal flooding, the disruption of monsoon systems and other rainfall regimes, and droughts of unprecedented severity and duration (Gemenne, 2011; Myers, 2002). This figure was referenced in multiple IPCC reports and widely circulated in public debates.

Between the 1990s and 2000s, Myers published a series of papers aimed at raising awareness of "environmental refugees," a category he employed despite the absence of formal institutional or legal recognition. He defined these populations as "people who can no longer gain a secure livelihood in their homelands because of drought, soil erosion, desertification, deforestation, and other environmental problems, together with the associated problems of population pressures and profound poverty" (Myers, 2002, p. 609). While implicitly addressing displacement, Myers's definition—similar to El-Hinnawi's—did not differentiate between internal and international migration, nor between temporary and permanent forms (Gemenne, 2011). Throughout his work, Myers repeatedly recalculated the potential number of "environmental refugees," differentiating them from "traditional refugees" while simultaneously calling for the category's formal recognition. He characterized the issue as "one of the foremost human crises of our times" and a potential "cause of turmoil and confrontation, leading to conflict and violence," conceived as an "aberration from the normal order of things" (Myers, 2002, p. 611). The list of predictions—whose methodologies have been critically examined by numerous scholars (Gemenne, 2011)—is extensive. Myers himself later admitted that his estimates involved "heroic extrapolations" (Brown, 2008, p. 12). Contemporary projections remain highly variable, with estimates suggesting that anywhere between 25 million and 1 billion people could be displaced by climate change by 2050 (IOM, 2008). Alongside the IPCC, the World Bank has projected that climate change could internally displace between 44 and 216 million people by mid-century (Clement et al., 2021). These wide-ranging estimates reflect the definitional ambiguities and methodological uncertainties that continue to shape the debate over climate-induced displacement.

Despite their critical intent and emphasis on the environmental dimension of migration, statistics on environmental and "climate-induced" displacement often reproduce an emergency-driven perspective, particularly when framed with alarming metaphors or forecasts projecting hundreds of millions of displaced people (Kamal, 2017). Within this framework, so-called climate migration is framed as a threat to social and political order, a disruptive consequence of environmental disruption conceived as external and heterogeneous to the "normal" functioning of the global system. Public debates often imply that a warming world will compel large populations from poorer countries to migrate to wealthier ones, thereby jeopardizing local security and economic stability. Institutions such as the U.S. Department of Defense (2021) and the UK's Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Boas, 2015; Warner & Boas, 2019) have explicitly portrayed climate change and climate-driven migration as potential security risks, a framing that has fueled media-driven panic and xenophobia (Tong & Zuo, 2019). According to De Haas (2020), a narrative of a "climate migration apocalypse" has been constructed, whereby politicians, media outlets, environmentalists, and migration experts increasingly assert that global warming—through sea-level rise, altered rainfall patterns, and extreme weather events such as hurricanes—will trigger mass displacement. He warns that linking climate change to the specter of mass migration is largely based on myth and is intellectually misleading. Moreover, employing apocalyptic migration forecasts to advocate for urgent climate action risks undermining the credibility of both migration research and the broader climate change agenda.

As Poletti and Avallone (2025) observe, this sense of urgency has legitimized the establishment of extensive control measures, amounting to a low-intensity "war" on migrants along the borders of wealthier regions—most visibly in Europe, the United States, and Australia. In this context, far-right migration policies centered on the "defense of national borders" have been increasingly normalized and incorporated into mainstream agendas, with governments

and international institutions translating what once were exclusively far-right proposals into concrete policy measures. Hanna Cross (2021, p. 44), in her analysis of liberal migration policies and their denial of imperialism and ongoing power relations, notes that "displaced people are treated as a threat to civilization, even if their displacement is a direct consequence of that 'civilized system.'" More broadly, Cross (2021, p. 29) calls for a historical materialist analysis of the international migration regime in order to "move beyond the impasse between authoritarian migration politics, a liberal rights doctrine that can do little more than improve the code of conduct of a market-focused order, and various intellectual approaches that detach migrants from the wider circumstances of their life histories and social relations." Accordingly, rather than pursuing predictive quantitative estimates, we argue for a qualitative historicization of mobility, tracing the evolution of socio-ecological relations and situating movement as a structural outcome of capitalism's geographical and ecological expansion. From this perspective, global mobility must be understood not as an anomalous crisis but as embedded within the long history of capital's drive to appropriate cheap labor, land, and resources (Moore, 2021).

This article aims to strengthen and further connect this set of orientations and research, recognizing that in a world facing unprecedented environmental changes and escalating climate shifts, the predicament of displaced populations has emerged as a paramount global concern. At the same time, there is historical awareness that displacement processes linked to socio-ecological transformations are neither exclusive to the last five decades nor solely related to contemporary climate change. A historical perspective highlights how capitalism has continuously produced conditions of displacement—through dispossession and extractive activities necessary to open new commodity frontiers and produce cheap natures fundamental to the Capitalocene (Moore, 2017)—from the enclosures of feudal Europe to colonial dispossession and contemporary land grabs (Federici, 2004). Some scholars connect migration to the persistent logic of capitalist and imperialist expansion, in which the creation of inhospitable living environments systematically forces populations into mobility or precarious living conditions (Hamouchene & Sandwell, 2023; Cross, 2021; Sassen, 2021; Natarajan, Brickell, & Parsons, 2019). Based on Rosa Luxemburg's (2003, pp. 348-365) assumption that capitalism arises and develops historically amidst non-capitalist societies—relying on the gradual disintegration of natural economies through the dispossession of land and the creation of a landless working population—Hannah Cross (2021, p. 49) argues that mobility is intrinsically linked to the imperative of mobilizing global labor power. This process enables capitalism to overcome the limits of a system based on producing surplus value in a continuous "battle of annihilation in every historical form of natural economy it encounters" (Cross, 2021; Luxembourg, 2003).

The historical transformation of socio-ecological relations is thus closely linked to the organization of labor in a world where capitalism generates surplus labor in the form of propertyless people (Cross, 2021, p. 51). This dynamic reflects the historical and repetitive expansion of capital into what Federici (2004, 2019) terms' new enclosures', whereby rural societies are dispossessed of their land and their habitats are degraded through the commodification of ecosystems. Critiquing Malthusian theory—which ties population size to a fixed quantity of necessities—Cross (2021, p. 51) emphasizes that people have lost, and continue to lose, the conditions necessary to access resources. Access to land and resources is inseparable from the relationships that populations sustain with their ecosystems, raising critical questions about the ongoing transformation of socio-ecological relations in territories historically shaped by patterns of coloniality. In dominant migration discourses, these regions are often reduced to "departure zones," constructed around the assumption that people migrate from "poor ter-

ritories." At the same time, however, they serve as sites of profitable land appropriation and dispossession for mining, energy production, agriculture, and other extractive industries. The construction of large infrastructures and the relocation of extractive activities reflect a well-known historical process, which critical scholars trace back to the establishment of the first sugar plantations in the fifteenth century and the slave trade throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Avallone, 2024; Martiniello, 2023; Moore, 2009; Mintz, 1985).

In today's world, increasingly fragmented into global production chains that externalize socio-environmental costs onto countries with weaker regulation, this process continues to be framed as "development" or "modernization" (Sassen, 2021), legitimized by the promise of "new jobs." Yet such narratives obscure how populations, deprived of access to their means of production, have undergone gradual proletarianization, ultimately becoming part of a landless labor force or migrating elsewhere. This rhetoric aligns with what scholars have termed "green colonialism" or "green grabbing:" the rebranding of capitalist appropriation under the guise of environmental sustainability, which extends land grabbing into ostensibly green agendas (Fairhead, Leach, & Scoones, 2012; Hamouchene & Sandwell, 2023). Recent EU migration agreements systematically combine funding for border militarization with partnerships framed around social and environmental objectives, presented as measures to address "the political, social, economic and environmental factors that constitute the root causes" of migration (Aivatidis, 2024). In practice, however, these agreements often fail to deliver substantive support, instead reinforcing trade policies that promote market liberalization and perpetuate processes of dispossession, which are framed as exchange in the form of peer-to-peer partnerships. The 2023 EU-Tunisia Memorandum of Understanding (EPRS), which encompasses five pillars—macroeconomic stability, trade and investment, green energy transition, people-to-people contacts, and migration and mobility—exemplifies this strategic alignment, demonstrating how "development," the green transition, and migration policies are intertwined with broader objectives of economic gain and border securitization.

Analyzing capitalism's expansionist dynamics through the historical transformations of socio-ecological relations in local ecosystems—often revealing recurring patterns of appropriation and dispossession that precede transgenerational migratory movements—provides a critical lens for understanding the border as both a geographical and conceptual construct. As Avallone (2024) emphasizes, a historical perspective re-politicizes the nexus between mobility and socio-ecological change, exposing long-term processes and conditions of historical actuality. Two processes have been particularly instrumental in shaping global mobility under capitalism (Avallone, 2024): first, the origins of modernity in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, marked by shifts in power and living environments that generated both mobility and spatial immobility (Avallone, 2024; Saito, 2021; Smith, 2021); and second, the renewed mechanisms of primitive accumulation, evident over the last fifty years in the proliferation of new enclosures driven by the agendas of institutions such as the IMF and World Bank, promoting liberalization, privatization, and the integration of new markets (Luxemburg, 2003; Harvey, 2003; De Angelis, 2004; Federici, 2019). Only a historically grounded, long-term analysis can reveal how mobility classifications emerge from specific social, political, and ecological contexts, highlighting that mobility is not merely a demographic phenomenon but a structured mechanism that organizes labor and sustains capitalist expansion.

4. The Proposal of a Political Ecology of Mobility: A World-Ecology Perspective

In contrast to dominant perspectives that emphasize forced migration as a direct consequence of environmental crises, political ecology approaches consider both mobility and immobility. They examine the role of policies, state control, and resistance in shaping migration dynamics, criticizing securitized narratives while situating mobility within broader socio-ecological and political contexts. Political ecology also interrogates contested definitions of climate refugees, highlighting that international migration organizations, such as the IOM and UNHCR, acknowledge the absence of a legal consensus on the term. This ambiguity partly stems from blurred distinctions between economic and forced migration, as well as from the limited analytical depth of institutional definitions. From this perspective, migration is understood as an inherently political phenomenon (Sayad, 2004), tied to long-term socio-ecological transformations. It challenges individual, apolitical, and securitized framings by emphasizing historical processes of dispossession, primitive accumulation, and environmental degradation that shape patterns of mobility. Ultimately, political ecology reframes displacement not merely as a response to environmental crises but as a structured outcome of historical and political-economic forces, broadening the understanding of migration beyond simplistic push-pull models and emphasizing the roles of power, governance, and global inequality.

Among these contributions, Moore's world-ecology framework provides a critical lens for reinterpreting mobility and its structural link to global capitalism (Avallone, 2024; Gürcan, 2024; Molinero Gerbeau & Avallone, 2020). Expanding on traditional world-systems approaches—which analyze human mobility through the incorporation of peripheral countries via capital exports, international trade, and military coercion, thereby producing structural imbalances (Gürcan, 2024)—world-ecology integrates the interconnections between socioeconomic and environmental spheres, advancing a capitalocentric analysis that moves beyond core-periphery distinctions. In Moore's view (2023), emerging climate discourses represent only a partial recognition of environmental crises: they acknowledge geophysical realities while obscuring their geohistorical causes and responsibilities. The vague definitions of mobility conditions based on the "climate factor" illustrate how, if global mobility classifications continue to be isolated from the capitalist context in which they are embedded, such criteria remain ambiguous and politically instrumentalized. The overemphasis on climatic factors, at the expense of structural power inequalities, paradoxically depoliticizes the connection between global mobility and environmental conditions, sometimes justifying interventions that exacerbate vulnerabilities rather than address them (Vigil, 2024).

World-ecology frames capitalism not merely as an economic system but as a mode of organizing the web of life: capitalism does not simply act upon nature; it produces nature. Likewise, neither migration "crises" nor the climate crisis can be separated from the broader crisis of the capitalist world-ecology, which Moore conceives as a structural "polycrisis" rooted in historical cycles of capital accumulation and the long-term process of cheapening Nature (Moore, forthcoming). Moore's critique of the Society/Nature binary (2017)—the conceptualization of Nature as an external entity enabling its exploitation—is especially relevant for understanding mobility, particularly in so-called departure contexts. These territories are frequently approached from anthropocentric perspectives and analyzed mainly through their statist and socio-political dimensions, rather than as interconnected socio-ecological systems. Moreover, climate mobility discourses often frame "natural events" or "catastrophes" as external disruptions to a previously stable human environment, obscuring the historically inter-

twined processes that sustain living ecosystems. In contrast, Moore (2021, p. 2) frames capitalist expansion as a movement: frontiers are not "linear boundaries on the edge of a cartographic projection," but "strategies of power, profit, and life"; not "regions as such, but patterns of inter-regional movement." The theorization of commodity frontiers opens the way to a political-ecological understanding of the border, conceived both as the physical expression of the repressive organization of the global migration regime and as a site of territorial militarization and *biophysical violence* (Squire, 2016). From a political-ecological perspective, mobility and immobility are co-constituted, both emerging as outcomes of capitalist expansion into new territories, as it constantly traces new commodity frontiers (Moore, 2021).

This expansion is accompanied and sustained by militarization, as evidenced by recent migration agreements and the extensive allocation of resources to military apparatuses—including physical barriers, surveillance technologies, and border security equipment—that increasingly shape the borders of the European Union, the United States, Australia, and many other states. Yet the crystallization of militarized mechanisms underpinning capitalist expansion extends well beyond border management, permeating territories reorganized through new enclosures and global supply chains. As Jenss and Schültze (2023) emphasize:

> Analyses of transnational infrastructure expansion need to recognize that the quest for new spaces of capital accumulation across borders has driven the employment of a spectrum of antidemocratic practices… that mobilize administrative and coercive institutions both at the state scale, and beyond, to legitimize and shield them from socio-political contestation in the context of perpetuated crises. (Jenss & Schültze, 2023, p. 4)

Jenss and Schültze (2023) argue that authoritarian contexts are particularly conducive to capital expansion insofar as they allow imaginaries of unrestricted opportunities for capital accumulation, freed from possible demands of local populations. While seizing new opportunities for extractive capital, militarization often proceeds alongside processes of forced displacement and enforced sedentarization. These dynamics reshape patterns of mobility and immobility alike, profoundly transforming the socio-ecological relations that define a territory—for instance, the interactions between local communities and the communal use of land, as well as livelihoods that remain rooted in subsistence practices. As Federici (2019) argues, the primary goal of new fences is precisely to make mobile and migrant labor the dominant form of work. Labor is thereby detached from the land—an identity metaphor of belonging, community networking, and local resource management—in order to ensure "cheap wages, communal disorganization, and a maximum vulnerability in front of the law, the courts, and the police" (Federici, 2019, p. 29). The cultural and political discourses sustaining capitalist expansion construct binary realities of otherness that, since colonialism, have been framed in terms of the "Barbarian" versus the "Civilized." The dehumanization of populations and the inscription of alterity are, in Moore's analysis, central to capitalism's expansion. He argues that the cheapening of Nature and the relentless drive to "advance the rate of profit in the worldwide competitive struggle" are deeply intertwined with ideologies of domination, including racist and sexist discourses (Moore, 2021, p. 15). In the postcolonial context, Moore further observes that "xenophobia was progressively displaced by a new logic of modern domination, pitting the Civilized against the Savage" (Moore, 2021, p. 18). His analysis resonates with mainstream migration discourse, which repeatedly employs degrading and alienating terminology to reinforce the legitimacy of securitarian policies. Similar processes of annihilation are evident in political discourses that justify land appropriation or environmental degradation under the principle of *terra nullius*, which frames territories and their ecologies as empty or

useless, thereby legitimizing occupation (Davis & Burke, 2011). These narratives reproduce colonial vocabularies and logics, sustaining contemporary practices of dispossession.

As Dinc and Türk (2025) highlight, one of the roles of political ecology and environmental security frameworks is to recognize the environment's function within power structures, thereby enabling a more comprehensive understanding of ecological destruction as a deliberate and systemic tool of colonial domination. Within this analytical lens, the consolidation of the war regime—particularly following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine and Israel's military action in Gaza since 2023 (UNEP, 2022, 2024)—highlights the nexus of war, ecocide, and population displacement. The devastation of living environments during conflicts—sometimes framing an ecocide-war or ecocide-genocide nexus—is closely linked to what Glassman (1992) described as the strategic interplay between counterinsurgency, ecocide, and the production of refugees. Consequently, understanding the war-ecocide-migration nexus is fundamental for political ecology analyses of both displacement and resistance. In Gaza, patterns of accumulation and dispossession reflect a genocidal local reality, in which Palestinian lands were initially organized under militarized occupation and a colonial economy, then seized through the violent, forced displacement of Gaza communities, supported by Israeli and US-led military apparatuses. This internal displacement—a form of forced mobility—coexists with the impossibility of leaving a hostile environment such as the Gaza Strip, a condition of immobility enforced by political decisions, supported by military structures, and reinforced by economic incentives underpinning a genocide deeply embedded within the migration regime, as evidenced by restrictive visa policies and the hardening of existing borders, as well as the creation of new ones, such as the corridors established by the Israeli administration (Bakr, 2025).

Conceiving Gaza as a living ecosystem shaped by socio-ecological relations, the ecological dimension of genocide becomes central, notwithstanding that Lemkin's (1944) definition of genocide made only limited reference to ecological factors. Palestinian communities demonstrate that their relationship with the land and broader living environment extends beyond CO_2 calculations of bombing and rubble disposal (Lakhani, 2025), encompassing complex cultural knowledge and historical ties, such as the symbolic and material significance of access to the sea and olive groves (Dinc & Türk, 2025). Moreover, the discursive framing of Gaza as barren or "void"—allegedly awaiting transformation into productive land, as depicted in the US administration's AI-generated video[1] released amid the ongoing massacres—reinforces the dehumanizing portrayal of Palestinians as "Barbarians," legitimizing occupation and dispossession. In this context, the essentialization of Palestinians and their conflation with terrorism—a paradigm frequently mobilized by Orientalist narratives on the Middle East—has been used to justify systematic population annihilation. This cultural annihilation, driven by environmental degradation and ecocide, is fueled by corporate agendas and the structural imperatives of capitalism (Dinc & Türk, 2025) and carried out by state actors as part of a broader settler-colonial counterinsurgency strategy. The environment lies at the core of these processes, which continue even outside periods of active conflict: industrial and developmental interventions systematically degrade ecosystems and human habitats, erasing biological, cultural, and socio-ecological diversity (Glassman, 1992). From an analytical perspective, the production of refugees through ecocide is not an exceptional feature of war or development (Glassman, 1992); rather, it represents the intensification of structural patterns inherent in

1 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PslOp883rfI

Western capitalist expansion. According to Glassman (1992), "for far from being an anomalous feature of development, ecocide and 'forced-draft urbanization' represent simply the acceleration of tendencies that are already present in the broad process of modernization as they have evolved over time."

While war is frequently justified through ideological and cultural discourses, such as the notion of "saving democracy," the acceleration of military expansion is integral to neoliberal policies. As Federici (2019) observes:

> Confident in its military arsenals, convinced that the "99 per cent" has no alternative, the capitalist class today abandons all pretense of progress, declares that crises and catastrophes are inevitable in economic life, and eliminates the guarantees obtained from more than a century of workers' struggles. (Federici, 2019, p. 22)

In the post-2022 war regime, where ideological frameworks and political propaganda resonate with the controversial framing of Civilization versus Barbarism, migration discourse is embedded within the same context of political exploitation, serving to justify extensive security measures that support the expansion of capitalism. It is therefore urgent to adopt a critical lens to interrogate the links between the ongoing expansion of capitalism through militarization and the rapid transformation of socio-ecological relations. Political ecology provides a necessary framework for re-politicizing and contextualizing historical processes often conceived as external drivers of political instability, such as the production of refugees and, more broadly, global mobility. By framing displacement, ecological devastation, and war not as collateral outcomes but as structural elements of capitalist expansion, political ecology uncovers the logics of accumulation by dispossession that underpin the contemporary "polycrisis" (Moore, forthcoming).

5. Conclusions

By interrogating the legal gap surrounding so-called climate-induced migration and the proliferation of definitions since the 1990s—such as "environmental refugee" or "climate migrant"—advanced by international organizations like the IOM and UNHCR, as well as within academic debates, this article highlights the unresolved questions stemming from the absence of a common definition. While this absence constitutes a gap in the international protection system, it also highlights the limitations of climate discourse—and, by extension, climate mobility discourse—when it is detached from the capitalist context in which the migration regime is embedded. The lack of an ecological criterion in the 1951 Refugee Convention, together with the possibilities opened by regional frameworks such as the OAU and Cartagena Conventions, relativizes the claim of international law as a universal framework by revealing its political and historical contingency. To interrogate the "climate" dimension of this debate is essential for contextualizing and historicizing the phenomenon. Forms of mobility and immobility are not external threats but structural consequences of the evolution of socio-ecological relations within capitalism—from the forced labor of early sugar plantations to the renewed processes of primitive accumulation that have characterized the post-World War II period through liberalization, privatization, and the integration of new territories into global commodity markets. These dynamics reorganized labor in the constant pursuit of profit, severing rural communities from subsistence economies and access to land. Mobility and immobility, therefore, are not secondary effects but central mechanisms for the organi-

zation of labor within surplus economies. They cannot be understood, nor can they be politically instrumentalized, as merely external phenomena.

Instead of projecting numbers for a supposed "climate invasion," as much of the scholarship of the past four decades has done, this article calls for a step back: to analyze the borderization of the world through a world-ecology approach, situating mobility as a contingent phenomenon accompanying the expansion of commodity frontiers (Moore, 2021). The ecological and economic dimensions of migration cannot be separated, despite dominant classifications that attempt to distinguish "economic migrants" from those displaced by environmental catastrophe. These represent two sides of the same process, and isolating one from the other produces a reductionist and politically exploitable understanding of a global phenomenon. Likewise, the current migration regime cannot be disentangled from the ongoing militarization of the world under a post-2022 war regime, in which dispossession, enclosure, and resource extraction serve as key mechanisms for the expansion of capital. In a moment when these dynamics are accelerating, and when genocide and ecocide alike raise urgent questions about the capacity of international law to prevent annihilation and desertification, problematizing global mobility is essential to resisting the political deployment of ideological and cultural categories that justify increasingly violent and anti-democratic forms of accumulation. By situating mobility within the long historical transformation of socio-ecological relations, political ecology provides a necessary framework for challenging the ongoing entanglement of war, capitalism, and the production of refugees.

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