

The Interplay of the Global Climate Crisis and Forced Migration

From the Imperial Mode of Living to Practices of Conviviality

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The global climate crisis is not only an ecological disaster, but must be analysed as a multiple catastrophic phenomenon representing the intersection of ecological, social, economic and existential crises. This complex aspect has for instance been increasingly discussed in the context of growing forced migration movements. According to different forecasts, by 2050 the climate crisis could lead to more than 200 million people around the world fleeing their places of residence and countries (e.g. Statista 2022). In the 2022 report by the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), it is assumed that each degree of temperature increase also increases the global risks of involuntary migration by 50% of the previous value (quoted by Hillmann 2022: 6). However, caution is needed with all of these figures since it is often not clear how the data are collected (ibid.). While figures certainly raise awareness of the threats posed by the climate crisis, they do not provide detailed information about its structural causes and the forced migration movements associated with them.

Bearing this in mind, the aim of this article is to highlight the complex interplay of the global climate crisis and processes of forced migration. In doing so, it rejects simplistic causal explanations and understands global forced migration in the wake of the climate crisis as a multifaceted phenomenon originating in the 'imperial mode of living' adopted by industrialized nations, the externalization of the costs associated with it and how this amplified the global inequalities of many marginalized communities, especially

in the Global South. As Carsten Felgentreff (2015) accurately points out, the complex debate on ‘climate refugees’ must not lead us to trivialize problematic societal situations and blame the changing climate alone for the displacement and forced migration of people from the Global South (ibid: 141). Rather, it is important to take the climate crisis as one of several starting points to examine the socially and politically manufactured causes of forced migration from the perspective of global inequality.

For this reason, Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen’s (2017, 2022) concept of the ‘imperial mode of living’ makes a suitable starting point for a critical examination of contemporary forms of power and dominance by the Global North. Brand and Wissen (2017) argue that the capitalist social order exploits the socio-ecological resources in countries of the Global South in favor of consumption and economic growth in capitalist centers. This makes it impossible, they assert, for everyone in the world to enjoy a ‘good life’ and a fair distribution of resources, a fact that has often been ignored by the discourses, institutions and practices of the Global North. Hence, imperialism functions as a constitutive basis of global capitalism, rendering the existing asymmetrical power relations between the Global North and Global South invisible. Working on this basis, this article¹ explores the multiple and shifting ways in which the global climate crisis intersects with forced migration. Based on these reflections, it pleads for convivial practices that seek to implement decolonial, sustainable structures of coexistence in our global society.

On the Interconnectedness of the Global Climate Crisis and Forced Migration

The fact that the global climate crisis and forced migration processes are interconnected in many ways should not be understood either as natural or as unalterable. The concept of the ‘imperial mode of living’ states that global inequalities, the climate crisis, wars and poverty, and intra-societal and global processes of division threaten livelihoods around the world. However, state crisis policies and public debates are strongly oriented toward supporting

¹ Please note that this article contains some passages from a paper we previously published in German (Afeworki Abay/Schmitt 2022), which we have further refined.

the dominant economic and social model (Brand/Wissen 2022). While some people have access to material prosperity, security and social services, the livelihoods of marginalized groups of people and the resources of the planet are being destroyed. Brand and Wissen's (ibid.) analysis is designed to show the necessity of looking for alternatives and countering the imperial model with the idea of a solidarity-based life. The growing climate crisis, however, highlights the urgency of not just thinking about sustainable and future-oriented forms of economic activity and coexistence, but also implementing them. Adhering to the capitalist logic of constant growth appears to run the risk of missing the 1.5-degree target agreed in the Paris Climate Agreement. In order to achieve this goal, global greenhouse gas emissions have to be reduced quickly, while environmentally harmful production methods and lifestyles have to be replaced by sustainable ones.

Many scholars have already pointed out that global inequality is a fundamental problem, as it is primarily the industrialized nations and wealthy sections of the world's population that are responsible for the majority of human-made CO₂ emissions. At the same time, marginalized groups of people, people affected by poverty and racialized people are already suffering particularly from the effects of the climate crisis. Ulrike Brizay (2012) points out that it is mostly people in countries of the Global South who are increasingly being displaced from their familiar living environment by extreme weather events as a result of global warming. Samia Aden and Samira Aden (2021) argue on the basis of their field research in Somalia that nomadic people are being forced to abandon their nomadic way of life due to climate-related droughts. They have been scattered throughout the country as internally displaced persons, and are now dependent on humanitarian aid.

Among others, Sophia Wirsching (2015) draws attention to a central point: when the climate crisis interacts with other problematic situations to trigger forced migration processes, millions of people are not able to migrate and flee from places, although they are particularly exposed to environmental crises there. Their immobilization due to a lack of resources to spatially escape the negative effects of the global climate crisis is a point that needs further debate. It shows that responsible parties in industrialized nations, especially, need to fundamentally address and challenge the existing 'imperial mode of living' of the Global North. At the same time, climate-induced migration is no longer an issue affecting the Global South alone, as shown by climate-related natural disasters such as the floods in the Ahr Valley in Ger-

many in July 2021 (Liedholz 2021a). One difference between marginalized regions in the Global South and capitalist centers, however, is that the latter can afford to ignore climate and environmental problems for a relatively long time thanks to their social security systems. They have the resources to adapt, such as by strengthening dikes, or to pay compensation (Hillmann 2022: 15). These unequal opportunities to respond to climate and environmental crises demonstrate the importance of addressing global inequalities when dealing with the climate crisis and, in doing so, translating principles of equity and global responsibility into policy action. The climate crisis, it can be argued, is being produced by a wealthy elite and borne on the shoulders of marginalized people—who, in the worst case, are losing their lives or their living environment and livelihoods.

Gayatri Spivak (2007) already pointed out this connection almost two decades ago. Even then, she noted that the environmentally destructive production and consumption practices of the Global North play a role in consolidating the post- and neocolonial order of capitalist relations of exploitation and inequality in the Global South. For example, a Euro-American child consumes 183 times as many resources as a child from the so-called ‘Third World’ (ibid: 149). Similarly, presenting his concept of Slow Violence, Rob Nixon (2011) describes these global inequalities as fatal to more socially just and ecological world relations. Jason Hickel (2020: 403) criticizes these unequal relations as ecological imperialism: “Should post-colonial states be held responsible for territorial emissions generated by colonial governments? Or should responsibility for those emissions be allocated at least in part to the relevant colonial power, on the grounds that they were the primary beneficiaries of the underlying industrial processes?”

Many scholars posit that the socio-ecological, political and economic consequences of the climate crisis are further cementing not only the socially and economically unequal structures that exist in the Global South, but also the post- and neocolonial entanglement between the Global North and South (among others: Mayblin 2017; Castro Varela 2018; Achiume 2019). This aggravation is due to various factors, such as a lack of social protection systems, or insufficient access to them by subaltern groups (Brand/Wissen 2017). Lack of social protection leads to increasingly complex hardship against the backdrop of the dramatic impacts of the climate crisis—which include droughts, floods, storms, famines and damage to infrastructure (Weerasinghe 2018): People are dying; poverty, conflicts and forced migration are on the rise and

are mutually dependent. In July 2021, for example, the World Meteorological Organization (WMO 2021), a specialized agency of the United Nations, noted that between the years 1970 and 2019, more than one million people died from droughts (650,000 deaths), storms (577,232 deaths), floods (58,700 deaths) and extreme temperatures (55,736 deaths). Nixon (2011) theorized that the climate crisis, habitat and biodiversity destruction, livelihood loss and forced migration movements are closely intertwined. Despite these findings, the climate crisis and global inequalities have not yet been enshrined in the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees as reasons for forced migration and asylum.

Ecosocial Real Utopias

The authors of this article position themselves in the field of international, postcolonial, solidarity-based social work. Social work has a mandate to create inclusion, social justice, equality, solidarity and participation. It must always get involved when social protection becomes fragile, when people are pushed to the margins of society and when mounting crises and disasters particularly affect marginalized groups of people—as is the case in the climate crisis (Aden/Aden 2021; Kleibl/Lutz/Noyoo 2020; Khoo/Kleibl 2020). In this context, postcolonially informed perspectives are of great importance in revealing the central inequality-generating structures of world society and the resulting manifold, complex entanglements between that inequality and social discrimination—and in working on these issues by means of critical/reflexive research and practice (Castro Varela/Mohamed 2021; Afe-worku Abay/Wechuli 2022). The authors agree with Yannick Liedholz (2021b), among others, that social work must take a position in the debates about whether and how Europe and the industrialized nations have a duty to offer protection to people fleeing their countries due to climate change and related problems.

We see a need to revise the legally recognized reasons for forced migration, and consider a fundamental examination of ecosocial initiatives to be central—against the background of strengthening such approaches and making known their relevance to society as a whole. By ecosocial initiatives we mean those that oppose the mechanism of dividing the world into ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Anderson 2013; Or 2022)—and thus work on the causes of the cli-

mate crisis and the ‘imperial mode of living’ and propose counter-concepts. Such mechanisms dichotomizing the global society are vividly described by Stephan Lessenich (2020) in his work on the externalization of societies. Using the term ‘externalization,’ Lessenich emphasizes how processes of separation maintain capitalist societies’ mode of production and way of life, where possible leaving the collateral damage and consequential costs of capitalist exploitation in external economic and social spaces, or transferring them there (*ibid.*). This includes CO₂ emissions, waste and cheap labor (Peterlini 2023).

This failure to take responsibility for the destruction of a more inclusive, just global togetherness, and of our ecological foundations, is increasingly being criticized not just by ecosocial initiatives but also by scientific associations. In real laboratories, manifestos and concrete practices in the city and in the countryside, community-based concepts, post-growth approaches, and indigenous philosophies are being developed or rediscovered that reach far beyond questions of global forced migration: they deal fundamentally and sustainably with our togetherness in the world. Despite their diversity, these concepts focus on the unifying potential of community and aim to become active in the here and now. One concept that can bracket the many approaches is conviviality.

The Concept of Conviviality

The concept of conviviality is significantly influenced by Ivan Illich (1973). Even in the 1970s, Illich (1973) already saw this term as a critique of limitless, industrial growth and mass production that exploits people’s capacities and has the potential to destroy communities. By ‘convivial’ he meant a society in which technologies serve individuals and not managers and in which actors act responsibly in the world. Following Illich’s concept of conviviality, a small group of initiators was formed at a colloquium in Japan in 2010 (first and foremost: Alain Caillé, Marc Humbert, Serge Latouche and Patrick Vivéret). The group wanted to concretize the concept of conviviality against the backdrop of global crises. Finally, in 2011, sociologist Alain Caillé formulated and published a preliminary version of the convivialist manifesto, which was then intensively discussed and revised by a larger group of around 40 people before being published in 2013 (Adloff 2021: 3). The Convivialist Manifesto

and the subsequent Second Manifesto develop ideas for creating a socially just, ecologically and politically responsible form of human coexistence, going beyond growth ideologies and neoliberalism (Adloff/Leggewie 2014; Die konvivialistische Internationale 2020). The manifestos call for a search for new forms of shared inhabitation of the world. The authors argue in favor of degrowth, treating the planet in a manner that conserves its resources, de-marketization and the assumption of ecological responsibility.

The word *convivialité* is quite common in French and ‘conviviality’ has also become established in English in this meaning. Recently, it has been used in discussions about living together in migration societies (Adloff/Heins 2015: 9). While the term ‘conviviality’ denotes a practice of living together, ‘convivialism’ is about systematizing a social and political perspective on a theoretical level (ibid.: 10). Fundamentally, the practice of conviviality is about decoupling ideas of a good life from the capitalist growth paradigm and linking science, practical convivial experiments and civil society actors in the search for solidary, just, sustainable forms of being together in the world (ibid.: 11).

In our view, the potential of convivial perspectives lies in bringing together different discourses around marginalization and discrimination, examining how they are connected through an intersectional lens and combining them to study how a good life can be possible for everyone. In light of concerns about how to respond to the climate crisis, a move away from neoliberal principles and toward ecological stewardship can be seen as a move towards more justice. This highlights that growth-oriented lifestyles—for example, involving the overuse of water resources or extensive deforestation—have led to people being exposed to water scarcity, drought or landslides, being deprived of their livelihoods and having to leave their living environment.

The concept of conviviality, by contrast, directs our attention to contexts in which people live and work together in an ecosocial, sustainable way. Such forms of togetherness can already be found in cities and in the countryside. They are seen in contexts such as shared green spaces, solidarity-based farming concepts or sustainable housing projects. This sets a task for research and practice: both the potentials and limitations of such practices need to be further explored and sustainable projects need to be institutionalized and supported (in detail see the works of Elsen, e.g. Elsen 2018). This task is, in our view, an interdisciplinary and interprofessional as well as a political task.

Conclusion

This contribution has shown that the global climate crisis is interlinked with forced migration processes; how the major problems of our time are part of the ‘imperial mode of living’ and post- and neocolonial structures of capitalist exploitation and global inequality. The climate crisis and related problems such as poverty, natural disasters and global forced migration call for a fundamental shift towards sustainable and convivial modes of living. While international and national policies do not tend to show any signs of a consistent change of direction, ecosocial movements and laboratories for convivial transformation are emerging at the local level and in associations of practitioners and scientists. The ideas they generate need to be shifted from the margins to the center of the debates. Social research can contribute to this by drawing attention to visionary and decolonial practices by integrating them into teaching as well as advocating for social policies on climate crisis and forced migration that are critical of geopolitical power and work towards inclusion.

Moreover, theoretical reflection reveals a fundamental tension between the rarely questioned principle of growth in global capitalism, on the one hand, and ecosocial real utopias in a post-capitalist world, on the other. In this chapter, we plead for that tension to be used as a chance to examine the colonial continuity of Western domination, hegemonic structures of oppression and the privileged position of an elite minority, in order to come ever closer to the goal of ecosocial coexistence and whole-planet thinking.

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