The Uses and Abuses of “Migrant Crisis”

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Media and humanitarian organizations inundate us with headlines and press releases decrying the “Global Refugee Crisis”, the “Syrian Refugee Crisis”, the “Mediterranean Migration Crisis”, the “2014 American Immigrant Crisis” and much more. Careers in academic and policy circles are built on analyzing and proposing solutions to migration crises. The representation of migration as a crisis is a default response to the challenges of human mobility. This default response is often misguided and harmful.

This claim may seem odd or even perverse. Why should we represent the forced displacement of millions of women, men, and children around the world as anything other than a crisis? Nonetheless, crisis is an evaluative term, representing an event as dangerous, difficult, and exceptional and often justifying drastic measures. In what follows, I identify four ways in which the representation of migration as a crisis is an abuse, mischaracterizing the nature of migration and harming migrants. I end with a series of remarks about when migrant crisis may be an appropriate label.

Questions of Definition

A 2017 *Guardian* article announces “Devastating Climate Change Could Lead to 1m Migrants a Year Entering EU by 2100.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Itcites a paper by Anouch Missirian and Wolfram Schlenker that predicts that an increase of temperatures will serve as a “threat multiplier”, leading to an increase in asylum applications to the EU[[3]](#footnote-3). *The Guardian* quotes Bob Ward of the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment at length:

This study shows how Europe will be impacted by one of the most serious impacts of climate change. Hundreds of millions, perhaps billions, of people will be exposed to coastal sea level rise and shifts in extreme weather that will cause mass migrations away from the most vulnerable locations. We know from human history that such migrations often lead to conflict and war, with devastating consequences. The huge potential costs of migration-related conflict are usually omitted from economic models of climate change impacts in the future.

The *Guardian*’sreport of Missirian and Schlenker’s research raises many concerns. First, the focus is on the impact of migration for Europe. Reporting and research on migration often proceeds from the perspective of the governments of rich, Western states, despite the knowledge that migration will almost certainly be more significant outside of Europe. Second, this focus distracts attention from those most directly and deeply affected: migrants. Third, the projections of mass migration are highly speculative. Climate change is one factor that influences migration in non-linear ways with many other factors that we cannot reliably predict. We have very little conception of what migration will be eighty years in the future[[4]](#footnote-4). Fourth, the projection of 1 million annual migrants arriving in the EU sounds alarming and newsworthy. In fact, this is not a large number for Europe which currently has over 500 million inhabitants. The United States with 325 million people has routinely absorbed 1 million immigrants a year with few adverse effects.

This relates to a fifth point. Ward’s commentary insists that migration is the cause of conflict and war and stresses the “devastating consequences”. This is representative of how discussion around migration and climate change is framed as a security, rather than a humanitarian issue. The reference to climate change as a “threat multiplier” - a military term - is particularly significant[[5]](#footnote-5). Finally, migration is a response to environmental degradation[[6]](#footnote-6). While climate change will no doubt contribute to migration, this ignores a potentially even more perturbing scenario: a crisis of stasis in which people who do not have access to basic resources are unable to migrate[[7]](#footnote-7). None of this is meant to suggest that we should not be deeply concerned about climate change and how it will contribute to forced migration. Rather, it indicates the risks of framing migration as a crisis.

Climate change is one example among many in which “crisis” has become the default category for understanding the movement of large numbers of migrants. Climate change - with its links to conflict and violence - adds a new dimension to the plethora of depictions of migration as a crisis. Unfortunately, the term “crisis” is often used imprecisely and not closely linked to objective circumstances[[8]](#footnote-8). If we go back to the Greek roots of the word crisis (*krisis*,meaning “decision”), it is a decisive moment or a turning point, for example, the point in an illness in which the patient either recovers or dies. A crisis is a break that may foretell disaster, but also may lead to something better. Though this meaning endures, today the term “crisis” is almost uniformly negative, referring to an exceptional situation of grave difficulty or danger.

The phrases “migration crisis”, “migrant crisis”, and “refugee crisis” (often used interchangeably) add further ambiguity. Is the crisis for migrants? Are *migrants* the crisis that needs to be stopped[[9]](#footnote-9)? If so, is the crisis then for the regions through which migrants pass, sojourn, and possibly settle? Or is the crisis something migrants are fleeing from and thus not a *migration* crisis at all? These questions are often not posed with sufficient care.

Talk of migration crises is never simply a matter of describing the world. In important respects, crises are not so much discovered as constructed. When presented with events, we choose whether we characterize it as a crisis, as a challenge, or even as an opportunity. Crisis language is value-laden, imposing particular judgments. While we might say, “people disagree about the desirability of migration,” it makes little sense to say, “people disagree about the desirability of the migration crises”.

There are some cases in which migration crisis is an appropriate description. Nicholas Van Hear uses the phrase “migration crisis” to describe particular “sudden, massive, disorderly population movements”, usually caused by “particular catastrophic events - the collapse of the economy, war, invasion, collapse of state institutions, disintegration of the nation-state, persecution of a minority, or a combination of these and other developments.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Though Van Hear’s definition of “migration crisis” is appropriate in many situations, caution is needed. Not all events that are commonly described as “migration crises” meet his criteria. Too often, migration crisis is an inappropriate category for understanding human mobility.

Many abuses that arise from representing migration as a crisis are epistemic: the language of crisis can negatively affect our ability to understand the causes and effects of migration. The study of migration is subject to a number of cognitive biases, including the methodological nationalism and sedentarism. Methodological nationalism is a cognitive bias in which theorists explicitly or implicitly assume the perspective of the nation-state and its most powerful actors[[11]](#footnote-11). Closely connected to methodological nationalism is the sedentarist bias in which migration is seen as unnatural and - especially in cases such as refugee flows that escape state regulation - undesirable[[12]](#footnote-12). These biases encourage people to assume without sufficient reflection or evidence that large-scale mobility must be a crisis.

The issue is not merely that the category of crisis prevents an adequate understanding of the world. The label “crisis” is often imposed on migrants, contributing to epistemic injustice[[13]](#footnote-13). Miranda Fricker has shown how bias toward some groups can lead to testimonial and hermeneutic epistemic injustice. Testimonial injustice occurs when members of a social group find that their words are discounted because of their identity. Hermeneutical injustice occurs when a society’s resources for interpretation fail to capture the experience of marginalized groups. Migrants are frequently marginalized and silenced, subjected to hermeneutical injustice. Though forced migration is indeed a crisis for migrants, they are rarely invited to participate in shaping the rhetoric and categories through which their lives are understood. In fact, the language of crisis contributes to the dehumanization of migrants, reducing them to “flows”, rather than agents responding to adversity, frequently with considerable courage and ingenuity.

Since how we understand migration influences policies, epistemic errors can contribute to other types of injustice. The act of representing migration as a crisis affects how people respond to it, potentially causing harm. Furthermore, crisis language is action-guiding: to call something a crisis is to suggest the need to remediate it. Migration policies impact people, restricting their opportunities and sometimes endangering their lives. Our categories inform our policies, so an epistemic error in which we falsely see migrants as a threat can give rise to grave harms.

Four Abuses

Abuse #1: Faux Crises

The first abuse is epistemic: too often events represented as migration crises do not merit the label of crisis. Consider the “2014 Central American migrant crisis” - sometimes called the “2014 American immigration crisis” - which entered the popular consciousness with images of Central American children detained in *hieleras* - ice-boxes[[14]](#footnote-14). From October 2013-September 2014 (FY 14), the Border Patrol apprehended 68,541 unaccompanied children at the US/Mexico border, a 77 percent increase over the previous fiscal year. There was also a dramatic rise in the numbers of families apprehended, jumping from 14,855 in FY 13 to 68,445 in FY 14[[15]](#footnote-15). Many of the youth and families were fleeing violence in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras and claimed asylum at the border.

Media, policy makers, and academics largely construed the migration of these youth and their families as a crisis. The Obama Administration responded by announcing that children crossing the border would be deported, increasing the capacity to detain asylum-seekers (including minors), investing in Central America to increase security and to eliminate some of the causes of migration, and enlisting Mexico as a partner in enforcing immigration at the Mexico-Guatemala border[[16]](#footnote-16).

Crisis was in no way an inevitable way of understanding the events. The absolute numbers did not suggest an *American* immigration crisis. As Josiah Heyman, Jeremy Slack, and Emily Guerra point out, total Southwest border arrests in the mid-2000s were over double the number of total arrests in 2014 (*e.g*., 1,071,972 in FY 2006 compared to 479,371 in FY 2014)[[17]](#footnote-17). They locate the explanation in competing nativist narratives of invasion and loss of sovereign control and humanitarian narratives of youth in need of protection. Both narratives relied on conceiving the Central American influx as a crisis, demanding a response - either increased border enforcement or additional resources for asylum seekers. These narratives floated free of the actual scale of migration. In many respects, the “2014 Central American Immigration Crisis” was in most respects a *perceived* migration crisis, an overreaction to human mobility unsupported by evidence about its actual impacts.

Treating relatively small numbers of migrants as a crisis is not unusual. An important US precedent is the response to Haitian asylum seekers who have been treated as a crisis since the early 1980s. The absolute numbers of Haitians seeking to migrate have never justified the US response of intercepting boats and pioneering offshore detention in Guantanamo Bay[[18]](#footnote-18). The number of Cuban migrants has been significantly greater, but they have faced less resistance due to their role in Cold War narratives. The stigmatizing of Haitian migrants shows no signs of abating and is not unique to the US. Recently, an influx of 7000 Haitians who feared losing their temporary protected status into Quebec was framed as a crisis[[19]](#footnote-19).

In a March 2018 speech, Hungary’s prime minister Viktor Orbán railed against an immigrant invasion, claiming that “Africa wants to kick down our door, and Brussels is not defending us.”[[20]](#footnote-20) Under Orbán, Hungary has built razor wire fences and barbed wire transit zones, criminalized border crossing, and increased immigrant detention, as well as drastically reduced opportunities to apply for asylum. As a result, asylum seekers plummeted to 29,432 people in 2016 (and only 425 accepted)[[21]](#footnote-21). Whatever motivates its policies, Hungary is not facing an immigrant invasion.

Though a sudden increase of migrants or asylum-seekers can indeed be a challenge, the levels are often well within states’ capacity to adjudicate applications for asylum and to absorb new residents. In these cases, crisis is not an objective description of migration; rather, it is imposed for political reasons, with dire effects for migrants.

Abuse #2: A Permanent Crisis is not a Crisis at All

Recall Van Hear’s definition in which migration crises are “sudden, massive, disorderly population movements”. Many migration flows are not sudden; they are longstanding and sustained. Many events described as migration crises are not exceptional at all. Nor are they disorderly except in the sense that they do not conform to states’ preferred migration paths (or their preference that people do not cross international borders). The lethal US and Mediterranean borders, and Australia’s practice of offshore detention, are now *normal* states of affairs[[22]](#footnote-22). They are longstanding, predictable consequences of policies that close out safe travel routes, brutalize asylum seekers, and prevent people from settling in countries of refuge.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the confinement of refugees to camps and to precarious existence in urban areas for years and sometimes decades. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, two thirds of refugees (11.6 million) are in protracted refugee situations, surviving in a country of asylum for five consecutive years or more. Palestinian refugees in Egypt and Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Iran are among the 4.1 million refugees who have endured in limbo for 20 years or more[[23]](#footnote-23). As the civil war in Syria continues, many Syrian refugees in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey have passed the 5-year threshold.

Though it is common to claim that forced displacement today is unprecedented, the reality is more nuanced. Migration patterns have shifted, but global migration levels have been remarkably stable since the 1960s[[24]](#footnote-24). The millions of displaced Syrians (many who have fled to neighboring countries and many more who are internally displaced) is a human tragedy, but it is not unprecedented. Spikes in forced migration have occurred throughout the last seventy-five years. Europe had a significantly higher refugee population post-World War II[[25]](#footnote-25). The partitioning of India and Pakistan displaced 14 million people. Millions more have been displaced in struggles for national independence and in civil wars[[26]](#footnote-26).

In many cases, insofar as it is appropriate to speak of crisis, it is a crisis of the international system and the lack of political will to address large-scale forced migration and to find a morally acceptable solution to long-term displacement (*e.g*., by creating more opportunities for resettlement). This leads to the next abuse in which migrants, rather than the causes of forced migration, are incorrectly identified as the crisis.

Abuse #3: Misidentifying the Source of Crisis

Another way in which the language of migration crises is often problematic is by identifying *migrants* as the source of the crisis. For example, much of the language around climate migration emphasizes the projected influx of migrants as the crisis. There is little doubt that climate change will cause crises and that one of its effects will be human migration. Nonetheless, the emphasis here should be on the circumstances that potentially lead to involuntary displacement, not on the migrants.

Similarly, crisis may be an appropriate label for some dimensions of Central American migration to the United States. Migration from Central America is often a response to violence, crime, poverty, and institutional failure. Migrants frequently suffer physical and sexual abuse from traffickers, border guards, and police. Attempts to evade capture during the journey too frequently result in serious injury or death. But none of this means *migrants* are the source of the crisis; rather, migrants are responding to conditions in their countries of origin that may well merit the label of crisis.

The language of crisis frequently plays into xenophobic discourses in which migrants and refugees are characterized as invaders, plagues, floods, waves, or terrorists[[27]](#footnote-27). Viktor Orbán’s talk of “invasion” is a common racist trope in which people fleeing war, poverty, and oppression are turned into a threat[[28]](#footnote-28). Kelly M. Greenhill takes this tendency to an extreme with the phrase “weaponing migration”[[29]](#footnote-29), describing people on the move as “weapons of mass migration”[[30]](#footnote-30). Greenhill analyzes how governments have used or threatened to use “migration-drive coercion”[[31]](#footnote-31) to achieve foreign policy goals and obtain concessions in return for curbing migration[[32]](#footnote-32). Insofar as the strategies Greenhill describes are successful, they depend on receiving states viewing migration as a threat.

A sudden increase in immigrants, including asylum seekers, can strain resources and cause tension. Nonetheless, the emphasis on *migrants* as the crisis artificially narrows the policy response. If we think migration is the problem, we are tempted to endorse policies such as the interception, detention, and deportation that aimed at restricting or diverting migrants to other locations. By concentrating on the effect of crisis (*i.e.*, human mobility), this fails to address the root problems. It also frequently leads to the next abuse: creating crises where they did not previously exist.

Abuse #4: Creating Actual Migration Crises through Responses to Alleged Migration Crises

Too often, the response to migration is a cause of crisis. The language of crisis feeds the politics of fear and can justify the suspension of rights and privileges under the pretext of a state of emergency. In recent decades, migration has been increasingly treated as a security issue[[33]](#footnote-33). This has been accompanied by the illegalization and criminalization of many immigrant populations, subjecting them to criminal penalties and incarceration[[34]](#footnote-34). The language of crisis suggests that extraordinary measures are merited and sufficient.

Ruben Andersson observes that the European migration crisis is largely a result of the shift towards border security that accompanied the Schengen agreement on free movement. The imposition of visa requirements for North Africans shut down legal pathways, diverting people into irregular routes and creating a market for smugglers. Europe then sought to contain the “migrant crisis” by restricting people’s mobility through border patrols and partnerships with foreign governments[[35]](#footnote-35). The ensuing humanitarian crisis was assured.

A similar story can be told of Australia and its brutal practice of offshore immigrant detention in Nauru and Papua New Guinea. Again, the perception of crisis gave way to a very real crisis. Jane McAdam writes:

Operation Sovereign Borders is premised on the idea that Australia is experiencing a “border protection crisis” that is “a national emergency”. According to the policy, “[the] scale of this problem requires the discipline and focus of a targeted military operation, placed under a single operational and ministerial command and drawing together all the necessary resources and deployments of government agencies.”[[36]](#footnote-36)

With regard to the migration of Central American children and families, Heyman and his co-authors identify another genuine, though largely unrecognized crisis brought about by the Department of Homeland Security’s punitive response to unaccompanied minors and their families. They write:

This failure to adapt by DHS, its management and officers, deliberate or not, helped constitute objectively and subjectively a “crisis” at the center of contention and reworking of the border. It was indeed a bureaucratic crisis to be forced to treat detainees in a humane manner, something that was totally anathema to their approach[[37]](#footnote-37).

Other migration crises are in fact crises of immobility, brought about by policies that restrict movement. This is the case of the migrant crisis in Greece’s Aegean islands that resulted from EU policies that prevent migrants who wished to move on to other countries from doing so and failed to provide sufficient opportunities for family reunification and settlement in other states[[38]](#footnote-38). This was compounded by Greece’s economic crisis (with its roots in the EU’s austerity policies).

Two interrelated processes are implicated here. First, there is the production of illegality[[39]](#footnote-39). Legal and social policy determine immigrant categories and whether there are pathways to legal status. States also choose how migrants are conceptualized. Portraying human movement as a crisis makes it easier to treat migrant and refugee flows as inevitable products of natural or social causes in sending countries, rather than as social and political policies that could be altered. Refugee crises are the result of human actions and policies. Not only are governments and militia that murder and persecute civilians responsible; receiving states that do nothing or impose restrictive policies that push migrants into the hands of smugglers also contribute to crises.

Illegalization is closely connected to securitization in which migration is treated as primarily a security issue. The language of crisis contributes to securitization so that restrictive, coercive border controls become the norm. Measures such as the offshore detention of people seeking asylum or the repatriation of refugees to dangerous regions become more palatable when they are seen as responding to crisis. The combination of framing migration as a security issue and the language of crisis creates a vicious feedback loop in which increased interceptions and detention give rise to a heightened perception of lack of control.

The securitization of migration is in many ways driven by what Ruben Andersson has dubbed the “illegality industry”[[40]](#footnote-40). Immigration enforcement agencies, private security companies, and the prison industry manufacture crisis and promote security narratives that justify their growth[[41]](#footnote-41). In the US context, Douglas Massey explains how the Latino Threat Narrative was used as justification to militarize the border (benefiting the agencies and corporations who secured border enforcement contracts). The result was the transformation of a circular migration system into a system that favored settlement of a newly illegalized population[[42]](#footnote-42).

Many so-called migration crises are in fact what Nassim Majidi calls a “crisis of responsibility” in which “seeing [migration] as a crisis prevents us from bringing real solutions”[[43]](#footnote-43). Real solutions would involve changing fundamental economic and legal institutions and structures. Jaya Ramji-Nogales has argued:

The contemporary international migration law regime is actually part of the problem. Its outdated approach helps, alongside other factors, to construct migration emergencies. These crises distract attention from the systemic nature of the problem, focusing energies on specific events that appear to arise from nowhere. But it is the current structure of international migration law that leaves migrants vulnerable to exploitation and host states subject to massive flows of migrants at their borders[[44]](#footnote-44).

Categorizing migration as a crisis frequently misrepresents and dehumanizes migrants, treating them as a problem to be contained or detained. It distracts from the underlying social, economic, and political causes of forced migration. Furthermore, it muddies our thinking, interfering with reforms necessary for a just response to migration. Admitting that migrants and refugees are a normal component of our social, economic, and political systems would require more ambitious structural reform.

How to Use the Language of Migration Crisis

When can we ever speak of migration crises? Though I contend that many instances of migration crises should not be analyzed as crises, crisis and migration can be intimately linked. Terrible things happen to migrants and sometimes migration is justly viewed as a crisis. In fact, we might include a fifth abuse of migration crises - their omission. Sometimes the way in which migration crises are conceived prevents people from seeing actual migration crises. The cognitive bias of methodological nationalism favors the language of crisis for migration that is perceived to clash with state objectives. At the same time, it effaces crises caused by powerful states’ immigration policies.

Whether migration is considered a crisis is deeply politicized. Mexican migration, including internal displacement as a response to criminal violence, is generally depicted as economic migration. This is true both of the Mexican state which attempts to minimize the level of violence inside of the country and the United States which wishes to avoid treating Mexican immigrants as refugees[[45]](#footnote-45). In the United States, the proposed loss of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and the threatened loss of temporary protection for Haitian and Salvadoran US residents have not been labelled crises[[46]](#footnote-46). They are examples of forced migration driven by the policies of the US state and are certainly crises for people who have been deported, as well as those who live in continual uncertainty about their future. The Dominican Republic’s deportation of tens of thousands of Dominicans of Haitian descent was a major crisis that did not receive anywhere near the attention it deserved[[47]](#footnote-47). Similarly, South Africa’s deportation of asylum seekers as they attempt to renew their permits arguably counts as a crisis[[48]](#footnote-48). This point holds around much of the world in which detention and deportation of vulnerable populations have increasingly become the default strategy for addressing migration[[49]](#footnote-49).

If migrants were actively involved in shaping the language around migration, these events would be deemed crises. They should be. What we think about migration should reflect migrants’ understanding and experience. The category of migration crisis should not be imposed on people by international bodies, states, or humanitarian organizations, but developed in consultation with people forced to move. This is a matter of sound policy and research, but also of epistemic justice. We disrespect and dehumanize migrants by not giving them a role in shaping how we understand migration.

In general, the language of crisis should only be adopted to describe migration after careful reflection. We need to guard against the perception that human mobility is a problem, rather than part of the human condition. *Forced* mobility is of course a problem, but so is *forced* stasis. Moreover, we must consider how the language of crisis affects action. We can turn something into a crisis by our failure to act or our failure to respond adequately. When migration is seen as a crisis, it can appear overwhelming and encourage apathy. Arguably, something of this sort is at the root of the worldwide failure to resettle refugees in protracted situations. Perhaps even worse, the perception of a migrant crisis can lead to the creation of a crisis through policies designed to curtail movement, rather than recognizing the normality of migration and adapting our social and legal systems to facilitate mobility.

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