ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARDS AND MIGRATIONS: A REJOINDER AND A PLEA FOR DISCOURSE AWARENESS

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The papers published in this issue of *JAm It!* respond to the urgent need for multi-disciplinary approaches to the study of the relationship between migration and the environment, especially in the North American context. This relationship has always existed and has been the main cause, or one of the main causes, of many mass migrations across or between nations or continents. However, the last three decades or so have witnessed dramatic, and often apocalyptic, changes in the environment caused by climate change and the ensuing damage to human communities and their livelihood. The rising importance of climate- or environment-induced migration is not limited to the changing degree of intensity and frequency of such events or the dimensions of the phenomenon of migration itself. Rather, the connection between migration and the environment has become a controversial topic in many areas of the public sphere, as nowadays we are witnessing changes in the *discourses* and *languages* evolving around, and feeding into, narratives of migration and the environment. Indeed, a crucial factor in the perception of the relationship between migration and the environment is *how* this relationship is discussed in the public sphere: narratives addressing environment and migration by, or about, communities displaced by environmental changes are at the crossroads of discourses of various kinds, employ language originating in political, legal and scientific domains, and have become more and more frequent in media narratives (see Demata 2017; Herrmann 2017; Høeg and Tulloch 2017; Russo 2018).

The narratives (both real and fictional) exploring the nexus between migration and the environment and the language used in them may be evaluated in terms of the relationship among language, discourse, and society as theorized by Critical Discourse Analysis. As argued by Fairclough (2001, 23-26), there is a close relationship between social order and the order of discourse, the social order, *i.e.* the way society is structured

(including the political and social hegemony exerted by certain groups over others) and order of discourse, i.e. the practices (including speaking) which are part of the social identity of groups. The relationship is mutual and bidirectional: changes in one order are both the cause and the effect in the other. In this sense, language is socially determin*ing* as well as determin*ed*: language represents social realities and changes responding to social changes, but also constitutes social reality and is part of these social changes, as it shapes people's knowledge and social behavior. In this sense, Critical Discourse Analysis can be particularly useful in uncovering the hidden discursive strategies used by dominant groups to marginalize socially marginal groups, or outgroups: social differences (including those leading to social exclusion, discrimination, and marginalization) are encoded in language, whose repetition, especially by dominant discourses, such as politics and media, could lead to the naturalizations of such differences and to their general acceptance in the public sphere as "common sense."

Discourses on environmental hazards and migration are a very good example of how discourse and language shape, and are shaped by, a changing social reality. While a changing environment poses new challenges to society, discourse and language respond to such challenges—and become part of them. Social groups are routinely evaluated in discourse through a number of strategies, such as nomination or referential strategies, by which groups are given certain qualities by the way they are labelled, and this may shape their identity as ingroups or outgroups (Reisigl and Wodak 2001, 45). Nomination strategies are connected to predicational strategies, i.e. the way implicit or explicit predicates lead to certain evaluative attributions of social actors; another set of key discursive strategies which show the importance of language in the way knowledge about social actors is spread in society (Reisigl and Wodak 2001, 54-56). Nomination of social groups is crucial in their evaluation, as different appellations may direct people's judgement. The lexicon representing the groups of people fleeing from environmental disasters reflects the social instability and precariousness of these groups, as terms of address of this new phenomenon in the public sphere are still uncertain. In fact, there are many appellations used by refugee agencies, the media, and politicians, and they

include *environmental migrant, environmental refugee, climate change refugee, environmentally displaced person, eco-refugee, environmentally motivated migrant,* etc. (Boano, Zetter & Norris, 2008; Russo 2018). Of these, the phrase "climate change refugee," often shortened to "climate refugee," has become very common in the last decade. This lexical and semantic instability is a sign of the fact that discourse evolving around climate refugees still relies on previously used language: for example, *refugee* and *migrant* are widespread appellations which refer to well-known social categories (even though their meaning is often mixed up, especially in racist discourse). However, these nouns are premodified in order to provide the public with a meaningful definition of new social actors in a new social reality. The different nominations given to climate refugees in media and politics reveal the attempt to frame these social actors according to pre-existing categories which at once allow and limit their interpretation.

In discourse, even simple and seemingly uncontroversial nomination strategies may foreground or background certain features of the social actors involved, their agency and the causes of their condition and, as a consequence, different evaluations of the relationship between migration and the environment. For example, there is a marked preference in non-specialized media discourse of denominations such as *environmental migrant* or *climate refugee* over, respectively, *environmentally induced migrant* and *climate change refugee* (Demata 2017, 27; Russo 2018, 126). This may be seen as a way to compress information and facilitate comprehension, but the effect is that the ultimate cause of migration, i.e. man-made environmental or climate change, is somewhat backgrounded and left vague, as it is not spelled out clearly. Furthermore, climate migrants are associated to standardized predicates which characterize them within a narrow range of actions: according to a study on climate refugees in *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*, migrants *flee, stream* or *escape,* but are *recognized* and *protected* by external entities and are the recipients of help from other nations through verbs such as *accommodate, relocate*, and *support* (Demata 2017). As happens with the representations of other outgroups, these discursive strategies which emphasize socially subordinate and marginal positions are used in media and political discourses to create stereotypical representations of climate migrants. As a

consequence, climate migrants are confined to fixed social roles narrowly defined in the narratives representing them. Other standard discursive strategies used to represent climate migrants are the same as those used by other "outgroups," such as refugees, migrants or asylum seekers, i.e. humanization, victimization, and aggregation. Humanization implies the representation of climate migrants in discourse as individuals, reporting their names and personal stories. Their everyday lives are often presented in detail, also with the help of images, which often portray women and children. Victimization is what Reisigl and Wodak call "social problematization" (Reisigl and Wodak 2001, 52), that is, the presentation of a social group by using language that communicates a threat or a problem to society. Information on the dramatic conditions experienced by people escaping from climate-induced catastrophes and their day-by-day activities are often described with very personal and subjective details, often by quoting the accounts of refugees themselves. Aggregation is the quantification of participants as groups through figures or indefinite quantifiers. Presenting migrants as figures has the double effect of dehumanizing them, as they are seen merely as statistics, and this also aims at causing a sense of threat because of their massive number (Demata 2017, 30-32).

The linguistic strategies discussed above reflect (and are part of) the social tension caused by changes in the environment in the narratives both by and about displaced communities. Indeed, this tension operates at two levels: 1) the geographical and social environment of the host countries, where media tend to marginalize displaced communities, often by making use of tropes routinely associated with racism; and 2) the narratives of the displaced themselves, whose social pleas are often unheeded and whose narratives are hardly visible. Indeed, the social identity of the environmentally displaced is still questioned, which makes their interactions with the host communities quite problematic, to say the least. As environmental changes unfortunately become more and more dramatic, the social changes that will inevitably take place will increase the necessity of a critical approach to the language used in the narratives focusing on migrations.

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