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**on the move**

**Katrin Sontag**

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**Migration, Sustainability  
and Democracy  
Current Debates on Environmental,  
Social, and Political Issues**

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# nccr on the move

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# Migration, Sustainability and Democracy Current Debates on Environmental, Social, and Political Issues

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## Abstract

This paper explores connections between migration on the one hand and sustainability and democracy on the other. It presents an introduction to ongoing debates and will be submitted to the Handbook of Sustainability and Democracy<sup>1</sup> in a later version.

The paper addresses three issues. Firstly, climate change as a cause of migration. It argues that the relation is not straightforward and the complexities of both, climate change and migration need to be acknowledged. Secondly, it addresses migration policies and sustainable policies of inclusion in countries to which people migrate. And thirdly, it considers the question of political rights in democracies of arrival. In each section, the paper looks at specific forms of mobility that are not part of the logics of official migration regimes.

## Keywords

Sustainability, climate change, sustainable migration, sustainable migration policy, migrant voting rights

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<sup>1</sup> Bornemann, B, Knappe, H, and Nanz, P. (Eds.) Handbook of Democracy and Sustainability, Routledge (in preparation)

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# 1 Introduction

This paper is a draft for a handbook on sustainability and democracy. It presents a number of discussions on sustainability and democracy in relation to migration.

Discussions about both migration and sustainability tend to polarize political positions and votes. They are exploited in populist arguments and can therefore be a challenge to democracies. The topic of migration, for instance, played a role in the debates around Brexit in the UK, while in Germany and other countries movements in favour of migration or sustainability (e.g. “Fridays for Future”) are highly controversial, and viewed very differently by people from opposite ends of the political spectrum.

These discussions are hardly surprising considering that both topics have the capacity to shake up dominant, deep-rooted narratives of modernity. On the one hand, concerns about environmental sustainability question the narrative of linear economic growth and development. On the other hand, migration and mobility call into question aspects of modernity such as sedentariness, nationalism, and the notion of societies as homogeneous entities. The ways in which the topics of sustainability and migration are framed and negotiated often interconnect with such larger narratives and counter-narratives.

A central issue is that industrialization and economic growth have the greatest negative environmental impacts on less industrialized and poorer countries. This raises questions as to whether and to what extent industrialized countries are prepared to deal with the resulting migration, and in turn how democracy and inclusion are understood or need to be re-negotiated.

This paper will introduce and critically discuss three major, inter-related debates surrounding sustainability and democracy in the field of migration:

- Migration, especially from the Global South to the Global North, arising from poor sustainability and consequences of climate change. (Section 3)
- Controversial migration and integration policies in the Global North that sometimes limit migrants’ access to local life and future prospects and thus hinder socially sustainable livelihoods. (Section 4)
- Migration from the perspective of democratic deficits when migrants are not granted voting rights, raising the question as to who should have the right to decide about local matters: those who live there, or those who hold the citizenship of a place – even if they don’t live there? (Section 5)

In highlighting these issues and debates, this paper largely focuses on current and salient debates in and about Europe. And as a background to sections 3-5, the paper starts with an introduction to some of the current debates in migration and mobility studies. (Section 2)

## 2 Migration and Mobility

Migration is a phenomenon that has been and is being understood in very different ways depending on the perspective and worldview from which one looks at it. The general definition is a definition from a state perspective. From this perspective it can be defined as a move across a national border resulting in several years of residence (see e.g. UNESCO 2019). This view of migration has its roots in the context of nation building and nationalism in the 19th century, when national citizenship and fixed home addresses – the “double container perspective” – became a dominant issue (Duchêne-Lacroix et al. 2013). It led to the perspective that “immigrants appear as natural enemies of a political world divided into culturally homogeneous and territorially bounded nations each represented by a sovereign state” (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002, 217).

Criticism of methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002) has pointed out how this prevalent national perspective has traditionally been largely unquestioned, not only in politics but also in social sciences, because official migration data, statistical knowledge production and funding for research is most often based on the parameters of the nation state. As a result the focus for many years was on immigrants/foreigners (of particular groups, constructed as ethnic) in a particular nation state and their assimilation or integration (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002). Other aspects of migration and mobility, such as trajectories of movements, mobile lifestyles, or indeed emigration were largely ignored. Being sedentary was taken as ‘the normal’ and being mobile as ‘the other’ or less normal way of living. The most extreme expression of this ideology can be seen in the discrimination, incarceration, or suppression of nomadic or mobile peoples in different countries of the world.

Recent migration research in cultural anthropology and other social sciences has challenged this perspective and has started to analyze migration as “the norm”, the “autonomy of migration”, by taking a post-migrant perspective on society (Hess 2010; Bojadžijev and Karakayali 2007; Römhild 2015), or by looking at trajectories of migrants (Schapendonk 2012). It has also focused on transnational social fields and the different connections that migrants might have to different places at any given time (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). It is now understood that people can have parallel places of living (multilocalism) or move in various patterns that do not necessarily match the definition of a one-time, one-way move across national borders (Sontag 2018b). Meanwhile, research associated with mobility studies or the “mobility turn” has investigated the many different ways of being mobile (Rolshoven 2011). And the “migration-mobility nexus” has been depicted as a scale ranging from permanent to less permanent movements (D’Amato et al. 2019).

Even though international migration increased by 49% (in numerical terms) between 2000 and 2017, as estimated by the UN, the percentage of the world’s population that is actually migrating is still only around 3% (United Nations 2017). In 2000 it was 2.8%, in 2019 3.5 %. (United Nations DESA 2019). While these numbers can be criticized, it is nonetheless clear that international migration involves only a small percentage of the world’s population at a given time.

It is also important to keep in mind, especially in view of the next section, that migration or mobility can take place on various scales. While the discourse in the West is mostly about migration that takes place between countries – with a marked bias towards migration towards the West – it is important to note that more migration takes place within countries and regions than between them,

even if these movements remain largely “invisible” under the Western spotlight. The UN estimates that there were 272 million international migrants in 2019 (United Nations DESA 2019), and 740 million internal migrants in 2009 (International Organization for Migration 2018, 2). Moreover, there were 25.9 million refugees and asylum seekers (United Nations 2017) and 40.3 million internally displaced persons in 2016 (International Organization for Migration 2018, 2). In fact, the next section shows that migration that takes place in connection with environmental degradation mostly leads to the internal displacement of people.

### 3 Migration and Climate Change

The most salient topic in the context of sustainability and migration is the migration caused by environmental transformation, such as through human-induced climate change. It goes without saying that climate change has already affected how and where humans can live – and will have an even greater impact in the future. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimates between 25 million and 1 billion “environmental migrants”<sup>2</sup> by 2050 (IOM 2019). Most of these are predicted to be displaced within countries or geographical regions – in contrast to the populist discourse in Western countries that focuses on and promotes fear of migration into Western countries.

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Center states for the last 10 years environmental disasters have been causing significantly more internal displacement than conflicts or violence<sup>3</sup>. However, precise numbers are difficult to come by, and the general understanding is that there is still too little knowledge about these processes, their complexities, and future developments. Moreover, the issues of migration, local conflicts, and environmental degradation are often interconnected. Climate change can have many different effects and create different vulnerabilities and some of the slower developments are difficult to depict. In addition to such effects as flooding, droughts and the rise in sea levels, there are others that are more difficult to determine like the spreading of disease, scarcity of resources, consequences of water shortages, or the death of insects.

Migration and mobility, too, can have various causes and take different forms (Warner et al. 2010; Piguet et al. 2011; Migration Data Portal 2019). It is in fact often the poorest and most vulnerable people who move within their proximity, within rural spaces (and not into cities), or who cannot afford to move at all (Tacoli 2009). Black et al. have called these “trapped populations”, as they face a double set of risks: “They are unable to move away from environmental threats, and their lack of capital makes them especially vulnerable to environmental changes.” (Black et al. 2011) This term has in turn been criticized by others for under-playing the agency of the people (Ayeb-

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<sup>2</sup> The IOM defines environmental migrants as: “Environmental migrants are persons or groups of persons who, for reasons of sudden or progressive changes in the environment that adversely affect their lives or living conditions, are obliged to have to leave their habitual homes, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, and who move either within their territory or abroad.” (IOM 2019b)

<sup>3</sup> The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre estimates for 2017, that there were 18 700 000 new internal displacements because of disasters and 11 774 000 because of conflicts. In 2010, the numbers differed as much as 42 350 000 against 2 900 000 (IDMC 2019).

Karlsson et al. 2018). Factors other than poverty, e.g. gender, play a role in possibilities to be mobile.

A number of debates have critically engaged with broad statements on migration and climate change. First of all, the very notions of “environmental migrants”, “environmental refugees” (El-Hinnawi 1985) or even “climate refugees” have been criticized for implying a direct causal link between environmental changes and migration – to the detriment of the social, political, and economic factors that affect how climate change impacts on different groups of people (Piguet et al. 2011, 14).

These are not simple linear processes, but have to do with political and economic power structures. Governance and local infrastructure can play a major role in tackling effects of environmental transformation. Richer countries bear a greater responsibility for causing climate change and are also better equipped to react to climate change and environmental degradation. Concepts in social sciences that relate to power relations and possibilities of movement, such as motility, the potential to move (Kaufmann et al. 2004), regimes of mobility (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2012) or mobility justice (Sheller 2018) are useful in order to assess the multiple facets of migration and mobility and their relation to power structures.

Secondly, the term “environmental migrants” has also been criticized for overlooking the multiple dimensions that lead to migration in the first place and that cannot be only pinpointed to environmental changes (Piguet et al. 2011, p. 14-15). Migration processes are often multifaceted and show interlinking motives. In fact, the analysis of push-and-pull factors as drivers of migration has been criticized for being too simple and one-dimensional and for overlooking the dimension of individual agency.

Thirdly, there is the issue of the use of the term “refugee” in this context. As defined by the Geneva Convention of 1951, the term “refugee” does not include people displaced by environmental factors, and some critics fear that the term might be weakened if the definition is widened to apply also to those who are not directly persecuted (Piguet et al. 2011, 17). On the other hand, if the alternative term “migrant” is used to refer to people who are displaced as a consequence of worsening environmental conditions and possibly natural hazards, this could wrongly imply a certain degree of voluntariness<sup>4</sup>.

Fourthly, the terms “environmental migrants” or “environmental refugees” suggest the sole relation that migration is the effect of environmental change. But scholars have pointed out that there are also other connections. Migration can also be seen as an adaptation strategy (Tacoli 2009, McLeman & Smit 2006; Black et al. 2011). Again others point to the effect of migration on nature (e.g. when humans leave landscapes or come to new places), or to the fact that nature can also support people in adapting to climate change<sup>5</sup>. There are also the different effects of remittances by migrants on the environment of the countries of origin (Moran-Taylor and Taylor 2010).

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<sup>4</sup> See for example the broad UNESCO approach quoting the Commission on Human Rights: "The term 'migrant' in article 1.1 (a) should be understood as covering all cases where the decision to migrate is taken freely by the individual concerned, for reasons of 'personal convenience' and without intervention of an external compelling factor." (UNESCO 2019)

<sup>5</sup> Presentation by Giacomo Fedele at the CLISEL conference Ascona, March 3-6, 2019

An aspect that should not be overlooked is that frequent mobility, taken with the building and usage of associated infrastructures, generates greenhouse gas emissions and thus itself contributes to climate change. On a continuous scale that ranges from long-term, permanent migration at one end to more frequent mobility at the other (D'Amato et al. 2019), it is the latter end that has a higher impact in terms of greenhouse gas emissions. The European Commission estimates that international aviation emissions (that already make up 2% of global emissions) increased by 70% between 2005 and 2018 (European Commission 2019), to which one should add emissions caused by the infrastructure that supports mobility and air travel, as well as the industry of mass tourism. Thus migration and mobility are not only an effect of environmental issues, but in turn also contribute to climate change.

To counter the largely Eurocentric perspectives in the public and political discourse on migration there have been some insightful studies on the effects of migratory movements on the environment and societies in the countries that people move away from. While the common narrative centred on Western countries receiving migrants and how they are affected by these movements, these perspectives illustrate the multiple directions in which material, informational, and financial remittances flow and the many ways in which they affect the communities, the institutions and the environment in the nations from which the migrants originate (Moran-Taylor and Taylor 2010; Davis and Lopez-Carr 2010). As well as challenging the narrative of homogeneous nation states in the West, these studies question the notion of the “others” as a more or less static collective that is largely separate from the realities in the West.

There are thus a variety of causes, effects, and forms of migration and mobility. History also shows us that migration has always taken place, regardless of attempts to confine it, and often independently of environmental changes. And one might well argue that the migration regimes of nation states hinder the kind of migration that has always taken place and is now even more necessary in the face of environmental transformations.

## **4 Migration Policies and Social Inclusion**

People who move towards the Global North – often for complex reasons as mentioned in the last chapter – are faced with difficult migration regimes. Migration routes across the Mediterranean and in many other areas used by refugees and migrants are dramatic examples of the failure of migration regimes and policies. In 2018 the UNHCR counted 2262 deaths in the Mediterranean (UNHCR 2019). Attempts to stem migrant flows, e.g. the deal struck by European countries with Libya, have increased vulnerabilities and led to worse detention practices (Cwienk 2019). Private rescue teams in the Mediterranean have been taken to court and accused, among other things, of human trafficking (e.g. Kaschel 2019). Sometimes even the basic principle of non-refoulement – that people who have come to seek asylum should not be turned away – is not observed by European countries.

People who do manage to arrive in Europe under these circumstances are then often faced with inhumane conditions in overcrowded camps, e.g. on the Greek islands. Moreover, migration regimes that hinder social inclusion and access are also an issue in the further process of migration

within countries of arrival. As a result, there is a tension in some countries between demands to integrate quickly and policies that limit access to different areas of society. In Switzerland, migrants are taken through different bureaucratic “channels” according to whether they are coming for work, family reunion, as students, or in the context of resettlement or asylum. The different channels, and the different residence titles that they may lead to, provide specific opportunities (Sandoz 2018).

The situation can be especially precarious for asylum seekers, who can face waiting times of up to several years. The governments of e.g. Switzerland and Germany have recently worked on introducing faster procedures. Waiting for years in uncertainty, sometimes in remote places and without access to language courses, the job market or social life was, for some, followed by a sudden decision which, if positive, lead to the equally sudden need to take care of everything at once: finding an apartment, a job, and learning the language.

In a recent project we conducted qualitative interviews with student refugees in Switzerland to find out which factors either foster or bar their access to universities. We found that the experience of the asylum system can add to the pressure and uncertainty that people have already experienced in their home countries or during their journeys and can lead to insecurity and lack of trust with regard to the future. The study also showed how difficult it is for these students to access higher education in the face of different sets of policies, not least the difficulty in gaining access to information (Sontag 2018a, 2019).

However, the situation is also difficult for non-EU nationals who come with a student visa and graduate in Switzerland. They face difficulties if they choose to stay in the country and look for a job, as a recent study has shown (Riano and Piguet 2018). For one, they fall under the yearly quota of non-EU migrants, but there are also other obstacles, such as the selection of preferred disciplines, and the difficulty in accessing relevant information. Moreover, those who remain after graduation may only stay for six months, which can be too short a time to find a job (Riano and Piguet 2018).

There are thus a number of formal or semi-formal mechanisms like waiting periods or exclusion from language courses, the job market, or education. These add to the informal dynamics of exclusion and discrimination that exist, for example, in the labour market as a current study in Switzerland shows “that children of immigrants holding Swiss qualifications and dual nationality need to send 30% more applications to receive a call-back for an interview when applying for apprenticeship level occupations” (Zschirnt and Fibbi 2019).

Undocumented migrants are in an especially precarious situation with regard to access and inclusion, and this has given rise, in the US for example, to initiatives like “sanctuary cities” that do not cooperate with national immigration agencies, or “urban citizenship” schemes (Schilliger and Atak 2017). Urban citizenship initiatives demand that all the inhabitants in a city have a city ID card, which gives undocumented migrants access to official institutions, hospitals, social services, the police, different kinds of contracts, and cultural facilities. Such schemes can benefit all the inhabitants, not only the migrants. A famous example is already in operation in New York City, but there are discussions also in other cities, such as Bern<sup>6</sup> in Switzerland, about the introduction of a city ID card.

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<sup>6</sup> See for example for the Swiss city of Bern: <https://wirallesindbern.ch/city-card/>

The group of undocumented people is diverse and includes those who have overstayed a visa, those whose residence permit has expired, whose asylum claim has been denied, or refugees who travelled through Italy or Greece to other European countries. Afraid of being sent back to their country of origin or to Italy or Greece within the framework of the Dublin Agreement, some refugees have now become homeless in Europe. This is evident in Brussels, for example, where a group of local citizens have, off their own bat, set up a supporting infrastructure which organizes home hosting, an emergency shelter, food and clothes distribution and other projects to show solidarity and humanity (Plateforme Citoyenne<sup>7</sup>).

The issues surrounding migration policies are addressed in Sustainable Development Goal 10.7 of the United Nations<sup>8</sup>: “Facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies.” The examples given above show that democratic migration regimes need to better adjust to current and future movements of people, and rethink values and mechanisms of exclusion and access, such as who can access which resources and who decides this.

In fact, some scholars have developed the concept of “sustainable migration” – a term with scope for controversy, because it begs the question as to which actors and policies should be taken into account. Betts and Collier, for example, define sustainable migration as “migration that has the democratic support of the receiving society, meets the long-term interests of the receiving state, sending society, and migrant themselves, and fulfils basic ethical obligations” (2018, 9). They take the perspectives of local citizens, anti-immigrant attitudes and political effects into consideration, for instance the growth of right wing parties in many European countries, and argue that sustainable migration policies should avoid “politics of panic”, “tipping points”, and backlashes against migration in receiving countries. This is a controversial approach, not least because the roots of anti-immigrant attitudes are complex, and it is important not to draw direct conclusions between the arrival of migrants and anti-immigrant attitudes. The authors themselves mention economic and context factors. Moreover, it is arguable that the concept of sustainable migration should take more stakeholders into account, e.g. the countries of origin or transit. In a parallel report on sustainable migration, Erdal et al. elaborated the following definition of sustainable migration: “migration that ensures a well-balanced distribution of costs and benefits for the individuals, societies and states affected, today and in the future” (2018, 9).

## 5 Migration and Political Participation

Migration and mobility also lay bare the deficits in the organization of democratic participation. Migrants may have no – or limited – voting rights in their country of arrival, while still having voting rights in the countries they left. In Switzerland, 25% of adult residents are not citizens and thus have no voting rights (Blatter 2016, 40). Yet Swiss citizens who live abroad can still vote in Switzerland. So who should have the right to vote and decide where? And how will this topic develop with increasing migration?

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.bxlrefugees.be/en/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg10>

Marshall (1950) differentiated between social, civic, and political rights. Migrants often gain social and civic rights before they gain political rights and can participate in official elections. One way to gain political rights is through naturalization, which requires different periods of (continuous) residency. Switzerland, for example, is comparatively strict, requiring 10-12 years of residence. Before that, migrants are excluded from voting rights, except in a few communes and cities. But while migrants are denied the right to vote, they are at the same time expected to integrate quickly. Leimgruber argues that citizens have to be “formed” and that it is not realistic to expect migrants to be able automatically to participate politically after obtaining citizenship if they have been excluded from political participation for the previous 10-12 years (Leimgruber 2016, 26). Current proposals suggest 5 years of residence before migrants receive voting rights, which, as Blatter et al. argue, ties in with legislative periods, leaves time to become familiar with the system, and excludes those who are only staying for short periods (Blatter et al. 2017, 452).

The idea of naturalization also springs both from a traditional understanding of homogeneous societies, and from the idea of migration as consisting of one permanent move. Citizenship has been described as a “device for sorting out desirable and undesirable immigrants” (Bauböck 2006, 18). Even so, naturalization does not automatically result in social acceptance, as the Swiss term for naturalized citizens, *Papierlischwitzer* – “Swiss on a little paper only” – clearly shows. Moreover, Switzerland’s right wing party, the SVP, criticized an information campaign about naturalization aimed at long-term foreign residents as “excessive devaluation of the Swiss passport” (NZZ *nil* 2019).

People who do not have full citizenship rights are referred to as *denizens* (Hammar 1990). They include people who are very mobile and keep moving on, or who have other reasons for not wanting to change their nationality (e.g. as EU citizens). These groups find themselves excluded from democratic processes based on the nationality of the electors, even if they want to engage. This is the case in Brussels, a hub for highly skilled, highly mobile professionals. Here 39% of the population is not allowed to vote even at the city level – an issue that the non-partisan initiative “1bru1vote”<sup>9</sup> has taken up in their campaign for voting rights for all Brussels residents. Within the EU, citizens from one EU country can vote in other EU countries at the communal and EU levels, but not at city, regional, or national levels. The result is a complex multi-layered citizenship regime in which different people have different combinations of voting rights depending on their nationality. Cities other than Brussels now also have groups demanding voting rights for foreigners at local levels.

A further factor is that many people are citizens of more than one country, and hold dual citizenship. In fact, more than 73% of the Swiss who live abroad have dual citizenships (Schlenker et al. 2017). However, within Switzerland people with dual citizenship are sometimes criticized for not being “Swiss” enough, for example if they play for the national football team of a different country. Dual citizenship can be an illustration of how people move and live in different places at the same time in what has been called “transnational social spaces” (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004; Schlenker et al. 2017). Recent studies on mobility and multilocality have also highlighted this phenomenon.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.1bru1vote.be/>

Scholars point to the fact that citizenship has always been a matter of negotiation and development, as can be seen in the gradual granting of voting rights to different groups of the population in Switzerland, as Leimgruber (2016) illustrates. The right to vote, first restricted to men with residence rights and assets, was extended to men without these, then (in 1866) to non-Christian men, and finally (in 1971) to women. In 1975 Swiss living abroad were included, and in 1997 the age limit was reduced (Leimgruber 2016, 29-30). Leimgruber sees parallels in the arguments against extending voting rights to women and extending the same rights to foreigners today (2016, 31).

Seen in this light, citizenship has been discussed as a process, an act (Isin and Nilsen 2008), or as insurgent (Holston 2009). Current examples of such processes are the campaigns for extending voting rights to migrants, or, at city level, schemes such as sanctuary cities and urban citizenship, referred to in the previous section.

While the discourse on a democratic deficit in the West exposes issues in these countries, it ignores the countries and communities of origin. The trans- and international connections and mobilities between migrants, their places of origin, and the receiving countries have opened up networks that facilitate flows of information, knowledge, money, and shared experiences. There is some discussion as to how this might lead to a diffusion of new values and norms, and about the extent to which international migrants can be understood as “agents of democratic diffusion” (Pérez-Armendáriz and Crow 2010).

## 6 Conclusion

This paper focuses on three issues of sustainability and democracy in the field of migration: the complex situation around climate change and how a lack of environmental sustainability can lead to migration (section 3), migration policies and discussions about “sustainable migration” in countries of arrival in the Global North (section 4), and how democratic participation in terms of voting rights is organized and negotiated with regard to migration and mobility (section 5). The topics in section 4 and 5 could also be discussed under the umbrella term of “social sustainability”. The focus on Europe, especially in sections 4 and 5, is intended as a contribution to the discussion in this particular area, but other local and global cases, issues, and connections are of course equally important in this context, such as issues of migration, mobility, and democracy in countries of the Global South.

The paper also introduces the concept of mobility and argues that human movement is not restricted to the traditional concept of migration understood as an international, long-term move. Rather, mobilities can be complex, internal, short-term, and un-monitored. This was discussed in section 3 with regard to displacements in the context of climate change, which often take place locally or regionally. It was also an issue in section 4 which discussed how people become excluded, stuck, undocumented, homeless, or even incarcerated as a result of failing migration regimes. And it was addressed in section 5 with regard to highly mobile people who want to participate politically in a democratic country, even though they do not want to become permanent residents or citizens.

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