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Adaptation as biopolitics: Why state policies in Turkey do not reduce the vulnerability of seasonal agricultural workers to climate change

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ABSTRACT

There is a growing interest in the connection between climate change and migration, but literature so far has mostly focused on climate refugees, permanent migrants, and the implications for destination countries. Seasonal workers, one of the most vulnerable groups in the agricultural sector, have received scant attention. Nonetheless, several governments are already planning action to ensure the adaptation of seasonal workers to a changed climate. This article focuses on two recent social and climate change policies adopted by the Turkish government targeting seasonal workers. Based on a discourse analysis of the two policies and fieldwork carried out on a site of intervention, the article argues that such policies, although employed in the name of adaptation, are in fact biopolitical interventions. Their main purpose is to secure the uninterrupted circulation of commodities and workers rather than reduce root causes of vulnerability. As a result the responsibility to adapt is individualized. We contribute to an incipient literature on biopolitics and climate change by showing how the spectre of climate change and the pretext of adaptation serve to expand the state's control of populations rather than reduce core vulnerabilities.

1. Introduction

Walking along the eastern Mediterranean belt of Turkey on a warm and humid day of early spring, one would doubtless be surprised by the dramatic change of landscape that takes place in the few weeks that mark the change of seasons. When spring arrives, the once wide-open plain of the lower Seyhan River swells with tens of thousands of people toiling the land as far as the eye can see. Most of them are Kurdish and Arab migrant farm workers that flock to the district of Karataş from south-eastern Turkey for the agricultural season. By February, row upon row of low, white structures—greenhouses erected for watermelon, tomato, pepper, and eggplant production—dominate the landscape, a visual cue that the agricultural season has started. Seasonal agricultural workers cultivate early-grown vegetables in this region until May, and then migrate—often towards central or northern Anatolia—for the sugar beet, onion, or hazelnut harvest. They plant, hoe, irrigate, and harvest until the end of October, then return to Karataş for the cotton harvest before heading home to the Southeast.

Both in Turkey and other parts of the world, climate change is a major threat for the livelihood of agricultural workers (Vásquez-León, 2009). Increasing heat makes working conditions unbearable. Droughts reduce production and suppress employment as well as wages while states increasingly intervene and implement adaptation policies. Using a case study from Turkey, this article asks how do states respond to the changing conditions that affect seasonal labour, why do they respond the way they do, and to what effect?

Indeed, there is a gap in the literature concerning the effects of climate change on seasonal workers, as well as the role the state plays in reducing or aggravating their vulnerabilities. While there is growing scholar interest in climate change and migration (Warner, 2010; Black et al., 2011), this literature—with few exceptions (i.e. Vásquez-León, 2009; Tacoli, 2009)—has not sufficiently looked at the specific characteristics of seasonal migration. There is some literature on seasonal workers, but this is generic, not based on in-depth case studies, and when it is, links to climate change and natural hazards are underexplored. For example, we do know that seasonal agricultural workers are among the most vulnerable groups (Minkoff-Zern, 2014), working

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in one of the sectors most exposed to climate change, and that labour-intensive agriculture is often constrained by environmental conditions, energy and labour costs, as well as by financial investments (Gertel and Sippel, 2014). Climatic variation, unexpected weather shocks, and market uncertainties cause dramatic fluctuations in the temporal supply of, and effective demand for, labour (Rogaly and Coppard, 2003). Seasonal migration, in this context, often serves as a 'stop-gap measure' by providing temporal relief from erratic rainfall, crop failure, or an overall downturn of household economy (Warner and Afifi, 2014, p. 201). While securing profitability for the agricultural sector, seasonal workers themselves are often caught in a cycle of poverty. Several studies have documented the transience and invisibility of underinsured or uninsured agricultural workers in a profession surrounded by occupational and environmental hazards (Burke et al., 2012; Winkelman et al., 2013). However, links to climatic hazards have not been explored. This is one of the contributions of our study.

Furthermore, much of the extant literature emphasises the invisibility of seasonal workers, and the indifference of the state to their pleas. As Hurst et al. (2007, p. 89) write, seasonal workers often "[r]emain invisible in terms of the goals, policies, programmes, and activities to eliminate poverty [...] in promoting sustainable agriculture and rural development, world food security and sustainable development". What happens however when the state, as is the case in Turkey, renders seasonal workers visible and intervenes to facilitate their adaptation to climate change? We approach this question by analyzing the logic and effects of two key policies of the Turkish state addressing the vulnerability of migrant seasonal agricultural workers (*gezici mevsimlik tarım işçisi* in Turkish, hereafter *seasonal workers*). We argue that such interventions, although taken in the name of adaptation, are in fact biopolitical interventions that enhance control of seasonal workers with the aim to secure the uninterrupted circulation of labour and commodities rather than reduce the root causes of vulnerability. In this way, we contribute to growing scholarly attention to adaptation as biopolitics (Grove, 2014a,b; Cavanagh, 2014; Bettini, 2014; Mason, 2014).

Biopolitics is a conceptual framework that scrutinizes adaptive state interventions, in terms of control and regulation of populations, through processes of normalization, surveillance, and insurance from threats (Coleman and Grove, 2009). Some contributions have so far argued that climate change provides opportunities for states to demonstrate their capacity to *make live* (Adelman, 2009), while others (Mukhopadhyay, 2009) point to securitization in the name of climate change, as in the case of Mexico-U.S. cross-border migration. Individualization of responsibility and adaptability, as Grove (2010) work on the role of the insurance sector in adaptation policies has shown, lies at the centre of such approaches. Similarly, Oels (2013) analysis points out a general shift from the management of possibility to the management of contingency in the face of climate change risks. Oels attributes this shift towards the 'climatization' of security to the biopolitical logic of mobilizing people to adapt to radical contingencies. This relates to the observed shift from a societal understanding of nature-*at*-*risk* towards one of nature-*as*-*risk* (Davoudi, 2014). Our study contributes to this literature by grounding empirically the concept of biopolitics on a concrete case, that of seasonal workers, illuminating how biopolitics work in practice.

Visibility, securitization, individualized risk, and an emphasis on the control of populations are key concepts of biopolitical theory, as we explain in Section 2. Our study contributes to the biopolitics and climate change literature by focusing on the regulation of 'circulation', i.e. of people and commodities, and on how populations—in our case seasonal workers—form part of the flows of power (see also Bailey, 2013). Section 3 describes our methods and fieldwork, and Section 4 identifies the key sources of vulnerability of seasonal workers in Karataş. Section 5 analyses two key policies pertaining to climate change and seasonal workers recently implemented in Turkey, and reveals their biopolitical features and the notable absence of measures that address the root causes of vulnerability. Section 6 concludes with theoretical and political implications.

2. Biopolitics and climate change

In trying to theorize and understand the logic of state intervention in the context of adaptation to climate change, we find useful the conceptual framework of biopolitics, a concept most often associated with the works of Foucault (2003, 2007, 2008), Agamben (1998), and Hardt and Negri (2000, 2004). We adopt a Foucauldian understanding of biopolitics for unearthing the interaction between state interventions and adaptation. Biopolitics, in this vein, refers to "the techniques and rationalities of power mobilized in pursuit of the security, growth, and development of individual and collective life" (Grove, 2014a, p. 22 after Foucault, 2003). For Foucault (2003), biopolitics deal with the population as a power problem: one that is political, scientific and biological all at once. The key here is his historical observation of the emergence, starting around 17th century, of a new form of power, "biopower", alongside traditional "sovereign power" (Foucault, 2003; Reid, 2006). Sovereign power refers to the traditional power of the monarch to "*make die*", i.e. kill (with war, execution or forced exile) those who threaten his territory or alternatively, to "*let live*" those that protect it. Sovereignty makes the territory, its protection and expansion its object. Instead, biopower focuses on the "population", a new conceptual category at the time, as its object of intervention. Power is no longer exercised solely through sovereignty over the territory, but also via health, productivity, reproduction, and wellbeing of the population. In this new model, expressed best in the historical emergence of the science of "political economy", the state is expected to take care of the people, not for the sake of their lives per se, but for the sake of their role in the economy. Under biopolitics, state power *makes live* or, in its extreme, *lets die*. This framework, as others have noted, is particularly apt for explaining certain state interventions in the domain of adapting to climate change under neo-liberalism (Fieldman, 2011).

Through biopolitics, states govern individuals and populations by "practices of correction, exclusion, normalization, disciplining, therapeutics, and optimization" (Lemke, 2010, p. 430). Therefore, the object of biopolitical intervention is the life of populations, seen as a "cohort of individuals" (Dillon and Lobo-Guerrero, 2008). When 'life' itself becomes the object of such interventions, the state finds justification for its coercive policies to enforce individual and collective life-enhancing initiatives (e.g. public health interventions). In turn, calculative practices – censuses, maps and statistics – make life amenable to governmental intervention and improvement (Grove, 2014a, p. 27).

Three concepts from the analytics of biopower are especially useful for our purposes of analyzing seasonal migration and climate change: circulation, (in)visibility, and the individualization of risks. We define a biopolitical intervention as one that: (i) aims to control the circulation of people and commodities, allowing "good" circulation and suppressing "bad" circulation, (ii) renders legible and visible certain aspects of a population, while ensuring that others remain invisible, (iii) displaces the handling of risks to individuals by actively promoting formation of 'adaptable, resilient subjects'. Let us explain each in turn.

Circulation is a key concept in the biopolitics lexicon. Biopolitics is a matter of "organizing circulation, eliminating its dangerous