



Displacement, Migration, and Environmental Change

An Interview with Anthony Oliver-Smith

**conducted by Uwe Lübken
and Franz Mauelshagen**

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Uwe Lübken: Environmental migration is a “hot topic” these days. There are hundreds of scholarly articles, plenty of conferences, and at least a few empirical studies. The discourse, however, is dominated by the social sciences; the humanities have so far been rather silent. What, in your opinion, is and can be the role of the humanities in general, and of anthropology and history in particular, in analyzing the relationship between environmental change on the one hand and mobility, displacement, and migration on the other?

Anthony Oliver-Smith: I think it’s a really important question and one that, in a sense, has suffered from a certain neglect. I think this would characterize a lot of migration studies and environmental studies, but also disaster studies – the whole domain in which nature and society come together, with events and disasters or radical environmental changes that may occasion an uprooting process, a displacement process, or a migratory process. It’s been looked at in largely political-ecological and political-economic terms. There is nothing wrong with that, but it tends to deemphasize the cultural dimension, in particular the connections between humans and their places in the world that are largely expressed in cultural terms. Identity, in many societies, is very much tied to place and place attachment, so if people have to leave their origins they are in some sense separated from their lives. The anthropologist Keith Basso says that being separated from place is like being rendered mute, as you lose the source of your identity.¹ These cultural dimensions are all rooted in history. A community does not develop instantaneously; it’s a historical process, it’s a shared history, and the shared history of people is one of those dimensions that is deeply disrupted by forms of uprooting and displacement and migration. Now, I don’t think it’s an inevitable process, because what we often see – and here is where I speak from my research in Peru² – is people who migrate to the city but maintain

¹ See, for example, S. Feld and K.H. Basso (eds), *Senses of Place*, School of American Research Press, Santa Fe, NM 1996.

² See, most importantly, A. Oliver-Smith, *The Martyred City: Death and Re-birth in the Andes*, University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, NM 1986.

ties to their community. The community is not reconstructed in the city, but the intimate ties are maintained. Everyone knows about the importance of remittances, but those remittances are in effect the expression of a continual tie to a place. Sometimes those remittances go to finance local festivals, local rituals. So you don't necessarily see a complete fragmentation, a loss; rather, people try to maintain those ties. But to go back to the question, I think it's important we pay attention to the cultural aspects of the uprooting process, and certainly the cultural aspects of migration as relatively deeply embedded in the society over long periods of time. Heather Lazrus has done work in Tuvalu.³ Migration for the people of Tuvalu is not something new but is part of their overall adaptation to life on these islands. Climate change does not demand a revolution; it will be integrated into the larger framework of long-term cultural adaptation.

UL: Do you see a danger in overemphasizing the importance of rootedness, which might lead to a form of essentialism, where people are determined by their place?

AOS: We are both rooted and mobile. And we have been like that throughout history. Because of our incredible mobility, our attachment to place can sometimes be overridden. Liisa Malkki, an American anthropologist, has written some great stuff on the sedentarization of the native by anthropologists.⁴ She worked with Hutu refugees who were less concerned with place than with people. If they were with their people, then, in effect, the Hutu community was intact. It was less tied to place. Another colleague of mine, Art Hansen,

³ H. Lazrus, "The Governance of Vulnerability: Climate Change and Agency in Tuvalu, South Pacific," in *Anthropology and Climate Change: From Encounters to Actions*, S.A. Crate and M. Nuttall (eds), Left Coast Press, Walnut Creek, CA 2009.

⁴ See for example L. Malkki, "National Geographic: Rooting of Peoples and the Territorialization of National Identity among Scholars and Refugees," in *Cultural Anthropology*, 7, 1, pp. 24-44; id., *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 1995.

with whom I have published,⁵ has also looked at how people separate from place but not from identity. Art worked with Angolan refugees in Zambia. He looked at two communities of Angolan refugees from the civil war that had crossed the Angola-Zambia border: one group was put into a refugee camp run by the government and the other settled with co-ethnics, the Luvale. His research showed that even though the people in the refugee camp were materially better off, they felt like refugees, whereas the people who lived with co-ethnics never felt like refugees. They never felt uprooted per se because they were with their people. So the ideas of people and of place act as the grounding of identity. Your point is well taken. We do have real place attachments. But they are overridden all the time.

I guess I have a place-attachment bias. I recognize this bias. That's why I read Liisa and Art: to counter-balance it. I've worked with populations who tenaciously resisted displacement and resettlement, so I know that place attachment is significant to some groups. Is this universally true? No, there are too many exceptions. The global history of migration demonstrates this. But I think that something important to take into account is that we in the industrialized "modern world" tend to assume a kind of flexibility and "natural" mobility. In our societies we pride ourselves in our "adaptability." If you work in Berlin and your company asks you to go to London, you go to London. We adapt. We see ourselves, in effect, as this kind of mobile population. We make assumptions that other people are the same as us and we become blind to the impacts of these kinds of displacements and migrations on our own lives – on our relationships with family and community, on our sense of history, on our identity, and so on. We see these costs in the example of retired people who go to retirement communities and are suddenly all alone; they have no social fabric to relate to, and they get into this anomic situation.

⁵ See A. Hansen and A. Oliver-Smith (eds), *Involuntary Migration and Resettlement: The Problems and Responses of Dislocated Peoples*, Westview Press, Boulder, CO 1982.

Franz Mauelshagen: You said that you have a place-attachment bias possibly because of your area of study. You work a lot with Peruvian peoples and you look at displacement in the context of development politics. I wonder if there is an element of resistance in there – resistance that looks like attachment to place but is connected to the idea of political self-determination. Is there a political element in these discussions?

AOS: I don't think you can ever reduce human motivation to single causes; they are too complex and there are too many things operating. There's a cultural dimension, a political dimension, a political economic dimension, and maybe an environmental one too. Not only are they all there and operating; they also shift in emphasis. At some point, culture may take a privileged position and the discourse may be all about fidelity to a cultural tradition; at another stage in the process it may be all about resources. "No, we're not going to move because the resources are all here" or "we are going to move because they've got better resources." It may be important, but you cannot simply say, "these people moved for economic reasons." They moved for a variety of reasons, and depending where they are in the process, they'll tell you what's the most important at that moment. Furthermore, they might tell you what is most important to them or what they think you think is the most important. In other words, if you say that people are resisting migration or resettlement because of their economic interests, they may say, "We are going to privilege the cultural and the moral discourse and say how the whole idea of displacement is morally and ethically untenable," when their real agenda may be economic.

UL: Economic success depends on resources, on the land. Basically it depends on environmental factors; the two are intimately connected. But, to return to our discussion, what is environmental migration and environmental mobility? Is there such a thing? Quite a few people have disputed that environmental migration exists because so many other factors are involved. I don't think that this is a fair argument because this is also true of social migration, political migration, and labor migration. How do we deal with this question of complexity? Does it lead us anywhere?

AOS: I think you can elucidate particular issues and say, “okay, those are political, social, and cultural.” But what I want to look at here is the environmental dimension; I want to illuminate that without suggesting that it’s the only cause, the only driver. I also want to look at how environmental drivers or forces intertwine with culture. When I worked with people who survived an avalanche in Peru,⁶ the environment was absolutely central to how they defined themselves: they looked up from their plaza at Peru’s tallest mountain, Huascarán, that killed 95 percent of them after an earthquake caused the avalanche. And they began to talk about the mountain as being a vile assassin, a traitor. But they wouldn’t move because they said that Yungay, the town, would not be Yungay without Huascarán. So here is an environmental force – an earthquake and then an earthquake-produced avalanche – that caused the virtual demise of the community. And that same environmental source was integral to the recovery and the reconstruction of both their community and their identity. And there were plenty of other reasons behind their resistance too. Admittedly, there was out-migration, there were people who left. But the arguments of the people who remained were arguments that were culturally and morally intertwined with the environment; the environment took on a moral force, along with fidelity to the dead, along with access to resources. In the Andes, when you get land that’s workable and that’s not at a 45 degree angle, you don’t leave it without good reason.

All these things are intertwined, so when you say, “yes, it’s impossible to cope, to deal with this complexity,” I grant you that. You will never capture everything. But just because you can’t capture everything, it doesn’t mean you shouldn’t look at dimensions of it. I think we are entering a period in which there is increasing recognition that a lot of the problems we face are so multi-dimensional that they require integrated research – that is almost a research topic in itself. The formation and design of integrated research is enormously complex; I think it’s something we are beginning to see as an important trend. Anthropologists are, on the one hand, very famous for a stance of, “You go out and

⁶ See Oliver-Smith, *The Martyred City* cit.

do your ethnographic work; it's just you; you're all alone." But at the same time the perspective of anthropology is holistic.

FM: So is the perspective of history.

AOS: Yes, we have a theoretical congruence of these kinds of phenomena that favors us. We know that we are not going to be respectable hydrologists or climatologists but we have to gain enough of a vocabulary to converse and to understand. Today, everyone knows what integrated research is but everyone defines it differently. In some ways it has become as much a sociological experiment as a scientific enterprise.

FM: We all agree that the relationship between the environment and any social phenomenon such as migration is complex, but is complexity already the message? Or is it rather a feature of socio-cultural reality we need to recognize before choose our methods and approaches for research? I wonder if, for example, complex approaches allow us to see the culture in a completely different way. I think in most of the humanities and social or cultural studies there has been a tendency to isolate culture and to look upon it as a purely social phenomenon. But the environment is deeply intertwined with culture and it leaves its traces in culture. How can you wrench these two things apart? That poses a new challenge and brings us to the question of determinism. If it is true that culture is influenced by environmental circumstances – for example, in the places people live – doesn't that challenge us to look on the entire relationship from a new perspective, without falling into the trap of determinism?

AOS: This is one of the research paths that have emerged since the late 1980s. In my work I frame it in terms of mutuality, but there are many ways to characterize this mutual constitution of nature and culture. Certainly what has emerged from both environmental and cultural research is that when humans occupy a space, we cease to talk about a place of nature and start to talk about a human-constructed environment – one that is embedded with meanings, affected by practices, and reconstituted in its relationship to humans. As Tim Ingold

says, human history is inseparable from its environment; they've become interpenetrating, not necessarily deterministic, but in a sense co-evolutionary.⁷ Environment and society affect each other's resilience and vulnerability, so the environment becomes vulnerable in its interaction with human beings, just as human beings may become vulnerable in their interactions with the environment. The whole concept of vulnerability is about the social channeling of risk. Who gets it? Who suffers environmental risk? It's a social construction. Almost like in a caste system, some people are designated as the absorbers of risk. That is the cultural channeling of a "natural force." But that expression is not a natural expression, it's a socio-ecological expression. I think we need to look more closely at how these interactions take place.

FM: But if you point out the traces that nature leaves in the cultural framework, then you run the risk that some of your colleagues will call you a determinist.

AOS: I don't see determinism in mutual constitution; I see interpenetration, interaction, and something temporal that changes through time.

UL: But are we really paying enough attention to the role of nature? If we focus on the construction of hazard, of risk, of displacement, of migration, don't we relegate nature to a secondary place? Different environments are endowed with different hazards.

AOS: I see your point. Human beings don't control nature; there are processes in each, nature and society, that are not affected by or controlled by the other. A colleague said he was uneasy with the term "agency of nature," a term that I am using in my work, because it carried the idea of intentionality. I agree and I think I need to reconsider it. What I'm after is the capacity of nature to act autonomously. But if you talk about the "autonomy of nature," you go too far. We

⁷ See T. Ingold, "Culture and the Perception of the Environment," in *Bush Base: Forest Farm*, E. Croll and D. Parkin (eds), Routledge, London 1992, pp. 39-55.

need a way to characterize how nature and society are endogenous, and that's a difficult thing to capture.

FM: But isn't part of the problem that in describing this relationship we use too general terms? We may understand landscape and culture in very general terms, but when it comes to concrete analysis – for example, in certain cases of climate migration – researchers often fail to point out the effects of climatic variability, effects that may cause food scarcity or other difficulties. We often lack specific data or examples. So in the concrete recombination, say in climatic or environmental evidence and migration studies, I think many of these studies fail to address this mutuality and to really discover it. That is a huge methodological problem in many of those studies.

AOS: I agree. For example, adaptation is a term we can't escape; it's been reified in the official literature. But it's not adaptation. It's a much more complex form of adaptation than the basic concept. I think that climate change literature generally elides the nature/society interpenetration. When we are talking about climate change adaptation, we are talking about adapting to a certain set of physical processes that has been entrained by climate change. We are talking about our adaptation to those purely environmental changes: less rainfall, higher temperatures, "objective" kinds of information or data. In effect, though, people will be adapting to the social constructions of the changes. Is adaptation designed to make those people more resilient or safer? Can you do that if you only address climate change?

Part of the risk comes from the social structure of society. The problems of the agro-pastoralists of the Andes or of those who live in the slums of Mumbai do not start with climate change. That unequal exposure to risk is historically and structurally embedded; we should not address climate change without taking these factors into account. I think a lot of these studies and policies de-historicize the process. They don't see it as embedded in long-term social processes. It's like we have this synchronic slice. The same applies to the concept of vulnerability. Scholarship on vulnerability started forty years ago as an attempt to embed disasters in society rather than in nature. Today, the

concept of vulnerability has been de-fanged; it has lost its critical edge. It has now become a term to describe a set of circumstances, with no understanding of how those circumstances came into a being, how they are perpetuated, and how they interact with the environment.

FM: That's part of the problem. Climate is particularly tricky. Mike Hulme has addressed the problem of climate reductionism that is deeply enrooted in the debate on climate change and its potential consequences.⁸ Climate is a very abstract scientific construction, distant from people's everyday lives. Apart from changes in heat and cold or in the rainfall, how do we notice climate change in our lives? Many of the effects of climate change are indirect. We first have to understand the way people interact with certain crops or breed animals before we understand the complexity of human-climate interactions. This involves the study of history. Many climatologists don't understand that relationship, which is why many of their studies on the impacts of climate change turn out to be deterministic.

AOS: Well, I haven't done much research on climatologists, so I don't know their perspectives. The ones I do know are quite receptive to these ideas. Regarding the idea that the climate is very abstract: it is quite an objectified domain as well. For instance, there are no degrees in nature. A degree is something we've established; it is based on the behavior of a chemical in a glass tube. It rises up to a level that we classify as a degree. It's not in nature. We take these measurements and impose them on nature; they are cultural constructions. People in the Andes do not talk about degrees of temperature; they talk about it being "warmer" or "colder." Traditional ecological knowledge is based on centuries, if not millennia, of experience in an environment without objective measurements. Communities have established an agricultural cycle that is now being distorted and is becoming unpredictable. When I was in Peru a couple of years ago, we were doing research on environmental change and

⁸ See M. Hulme, "Reducing the Future to Climate: A Story of Climate Determinism and Reductionism," in *Osiris* 26, 1, 2011, pp. 245-66.

migration. We didn't find a lot of it. But we did find a high level of consciousness that things were changing. Migration might be something down the road, but we didn't find a lot of evidence that people were packing up and leaving. We found that their traditional knowledge of seasons was becoming less dependable, which is crucial. If you put out your peppers to dry at the end of the rainy season and it starts to rain again, your crop is destroyed. And now it's raining when it's not supposed to rain. The cycles have been distorted. It's not just how much change; it's when.

FM: You mentioned adaptation. There are three ways to look at the relationship between migration and adaptation. Some scholars have argued that migration sets in when adaptation fails. Others say it's a form of adaptation. Then there is a position between these two. For example, Nick Stern says it's an adaptation of the last resort.⁹ What are your thoughts on this debate?

AOS: For one thing, I think adaptation has been misinterpreted. I know that it doesn't conform to the way adaptation is being used, but my understanding comes from anthropology, as you would expect. When we talk about adaptation, we are talking about a form of belief or behavior, and material outcomes that enable a society to live within a certain level of cultural expectations within an environment. It's part of the cultural toolkit that enables you to live in the environment. It is institutionalized; it is culturally reinforced; it makes sense. We understand that culture is not entirely integrated. There are lots of contradictions in culture, but adaptations tend to be embedded and reinforced by multiple dimensions. It is socially-activated, it's culturally-justified, it may be politically-enforced.

An adaptation is a process but it also describes a certain form of behavior or belief. You can't watch adaptation happen; you can only look at the results. What we're talking about today regarding adaptation are certain kinds of interventions: external, internal and exter-

⁹ N.H. Stern, *The Economics of Climate Change: The Stern Review*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2007, p. 128.

nal, or internal. People are taking the initiative to change things. Are those adaptations? No, they're the beginning of adaptations. They're projects and directions; they won't be adaptations until they're embedded and accepted within the society. Today, the process can be much more rapid than it has been. Now that the poles of global and local knowledge have been dissolved, we all share some of the same knowledge, so our adjustments to what we see happening may become adaptations. They will become adaptations when they become institutionalized in the culture. Most of the time they are coping mechanisms; they are not adaptations of the last resort. Coping mechanisms are basically what you do when you don't have an institutionalized response. You start improvising; you take your resources and you figure out how to deal with situations. Sometimes coping mechanisms can lead to adaptation. Sometimes they can be very maladaptive, particularly over the long run.

In the ethnographic record, there are circumstances in which migration definitely is an adaptation. I spoke earlier of Heather Lazrus's work in Tuvalu, in which she says that the people of Tuvalu have traditionally migrated a lot; they've been migrating before climate change was an issue. When we look at the Tuareg in the Sahel during the 1970s droughts, actually droughts through the millennia, they sedentarize, with people they don't normally like: farmers. Pastoralists and farmers in East Africa coexist, but they come together as an adaptation during drought. The "badlands" in Northeast Brazil, the Sertão, is a constructed environment. It used to be an arid forest but was cut down in the early years of the colony. It is now basically desert. And people move out of it during drought. It's a traditional response. So yes, migration can be an adaptation, it can be part of the way life is lived. Can it be a failed attempt at adaptation? In some circumstances, yes.

You might migrate because local circumstances have become unmanageable. For instance, suppose you live in an arid environment with 200 mm of rain per year and under climate change it drops to 100 mm. With 200 mm, you were living with chronic risk, but now you're going down into rapid onset risk. Now you've got to leave. I'm uncomfortable with the idea of failed adaptation, but right now you don't have any means by which to cope with 100 mm less of rain. Is that your failing?

Maybe you don't have that because you've been marginalized; maybe you've been pushed by virtue of your social, political, or ethnic identity into an environment that is characterized by scarcity of resources.

The classic example of this idea of failure I take from Robert Bullard's work about the location of toxic waste disposal facilities in African-American communities in the South of the United States.¹⁰ To say that the vulnerability of those people is a failure of their adaptation is to put aside the whole question of power. So, I'm uncomfortable with the idea of "failed adaptation" but I recognize that in some circumstances people have to migrate because they don't have the resources to deal with the situation. Putting toxic waste facilities in African-American communities may be extremely adaptive for the wealthy but the fact that African-Americans are forced to suffer those impacts is not a result of their failed adaptation. It's a function of power relations.

UL: This leads me to the question of how patterns of vulnerability translate into mobility, migration, and displacement. Because I don't think it's a linear connection. People who are most exposed to risks are not automatically pushed out of their environments and their livelihoods into other regions because in many cases they don't have the means to travel, to be mobile, to migrate. What's your take on this?

AOS: It's certainly true. We've known prior to any discussion of the environment or of climate change that within communities there are members that migrate and members that do not. You can usually characterize them based on their accessibility to resources. From what I have studied of migration, it is usually the middle sector. The poor do not have the resources. The wealthy may travel back and forth but they have resources and the attraction of migration isn't so overwhelming. It is the middle sector, the people who have some resources. There is also the idea of chain migration – people already have links. The people that migrate have the resources to make mi-

¹⁰ R.D. Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, And Environmental Quality*, Westview Press, Boulder, CO 1990.

gration possible. To me the issue of migration as adaptation is the maintenance of the social, cultural, and economic integrity of the community. This is related to the unit of adaptation. Is it the individual, the community, the family? In some cases, the people who migrate are the most capable people, the ones with the resources. You have to be aware of these internal social dynamics to understand who is migrating, why, and what the role of the environment might be.

UL: According to traditional definitions, migration has to be long-term, long-distance, collective, and so on. If we use such a definition, many of the things that we talk about today as migration would not be classified as migration. Still, migration can be seen as one form of displacement. Do you think people who are affected differently also migrate differently?

AOS: Destinations shift according to resources. Right now we're seeing a growth of secondary cities. We're also seeing much more rural to rural migration, for a variety of reasons, some of which are environmental. To a certain extent, people's resources will dictate where they migrate. And those resources may be economic or social. You get different migrations in different stages. People may move from one rural area to another rural area to a smaller town, and over generations may end up in the city. I find there are not enough distinctions drawn between different forms of human movement. I do not think displacement can be equated with migration. Displacement is a process; you may migrate after it but in and of itself it is not migration. Resettlement is not migration but maybe its end point. And there are different kinds of resettlement.

FM: But that could be forced migration.

AOS: Well, that is interesting. Most migration, I think, is somewhere between the two poles of voluntary and involuntary. There is some forced migration where the government comes with trucks and rifles and tells them to get in. That is not migration; that is displacement, even though you've moved through space. If you want

to describe it as “forced migration,” okay. However, that seems very different from someone who is assessing the environmental changes and his or her resources, weighing possibilities, and then moving – to me, that’s migration. Then you get to the “I’m going to the big city because that’s where all the action is.” That’s migration too. Voluntary migration is “I’m changing environments because I want something that is there.” A classic push-pull idea. I think it is inaccurate to say that people will be displaced by climate change. Except in extreme circumstances, the vast majority will consider an array of options and act accordingly. It will not be a displacement process, yet we hear about environmental displacement all the time.

FM: What about climatic extremes? When people leave after or sometimes even before disaster it is a coping strategy, not an adaptive strategy. In the long term, it can develop into adaptation, for example after evacuation.

AOS: It’s a coping strategy when people evacuate to survive. If the evacuation becomes permanent, it may lead to a series of immediate coping strategies that, if effective, may ultimately become adaptations in the new environment.

FM: I would call it an adaptation. It wasn’t possible to evacuate a city two hundred years ago. You can see that very clearly in the context of New Orleans. People just didn’t have the capacity to deal with this recurring problem in the same way as today.

AOS: Well, they didn’t have the capacity to predict when the hurricane would hit the city.

FM: Prediction is the key in many ways. But, actually, they could predict events to some extent in the nineteenth century and people still didn’t evacuate. It requires moving away, saving some of their belongings, having the capacity to move to safer places rapidly, which requires a certain type of mobility, and so forth. Looking back into history, and on a collective level, this may be termed an adaptive strategy unavailable a hundred or two hundred

years ago. But that wasn't actually my point. The primary problem is that extreme events like hurricanes may force people to leave places although they have no intention of migrating in the long term. There is a distinction between displacement and migration. But displacement might be the first step towards permanent migration, because people won't return although they had planned to.

AOS: I think unquestionably the displacement of people in New Orleans was partially environmental and partially political. In effect, many inhabitants were evacuated against their will, in the vast majority of cases. They have resettled in other places now and have no intention of returning. So yes, you could say that the evacuation led to a migration. I would say that the evacuation really was a displacement but resulted in a migration. People had very little access to resources to return and the costs were prohibitive. The idea of evacuation can be a coping device but it is also part of a “culture of disaster” – I am thinking of Greg Bankoff's work here.¹¹ There are escape plans and they are part of the way we live. So, when we know there are going to be environmental forces that will disrupt our lives, we have a path, a set of practices that are institutional and are understood. They are activated when we need them. We are not coping; that kind of movement is highly adaptive.

I go back to my understanding of cultural adaptation from an anthropological standpoint. Will projects initiated by NGOs and international agencies become adaptations now? They may. Efforts are now being made to reduce vulnerability and exposure. And I think those efforts will help people adjust to the changes. Perhaps those projects will become institutionalized, although development projects have a poor record in this area. When they become embedded culturally and are socially coherent with local values and local human-environment understanding, they will be adaptations.

I think I'm in the minority in this issue, but that's the way I understand adaptation. What is being called “adaptation” is now largely

¹¹ G. Bankoff, *Cultures of Disaster: Society and Natural Hazards in the Philippines*, Routledge, London and New York 2003.

outside interventions. But if you only address those physical characteristics, you are in some circumstances reinforcing a socially-unequal status quo. You are giving people the means to survive, but not changing what puts them at risk. In effect, this is where these issues intersect with concepts and policies of more sustainable forms of development.

UL: My final question deals with neither the past or the present but the future: What will it bring in terms of research topics, in terms of actual displacement, migration, and climate change?

AOS: If the projections about climate change are accurate, we are going to see environmental issues become more powerful in the combination of forces that stimulate migration. I think economics is still the strongest driver of migration, but of course this varies from context to context but we will see environmental factors become much more important.

FM: Is there any economics with no connection to the environment? I would say no. The resources we use and distribute through our economic channels – even in modern societies – constitute an environmental base we tend to overlook.

AOS: We know that there have been famines and migrations in societies that were doing quite well agriculturally. Was the cause environmental? No, it was expressed environmentally. It was driven by the way we were socially structuring access to environmental resources.

Everything emerges from the natural world: we extract and combine and re-combine and create products that we consume in various ways – not just biologically, but socially and culturally. The material bedrock of society is the natural world and that is unavoidable. For human beings, though, the natural world is culturally constructed and expressed; it's not an external resource. The fact that it is defined as a "resource" is a cultural construction. There are plenty of things we could eat that we define as not food – dogs, for example. In some societies, it's alright to eat dogs. Here, it is close to cannibalism. Even those natural resources are culturally defined as "usable" and "not usable." It

is culture that defines the situation, even if it is a mountain that comes down and buries you. There may be a physical event but a cultural text gets built around it. Yes, you end up with dead people buried in mud; that is a physical fact. Nature doesn't care, only humans care. It only becomes significant for those humans who have survived.