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Practising the ‘Not Yet’: On the Climatization of Ordinary Life

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Abstract

Climate security is shaped by an absent presence: a threat that unfolds materially while simultaneously existing as an anticipated future of a ‘not yet’. This column argues that practice theory offers a productive approach for understanding how this dual character emerges through the practices of everyday life. Moving beyond macropolitical accounts of climate securitisation, we highlight how climate (in)security is increasingly enacted through ordinary preparedness, resilience, and adaptation practices, revealing both a diffusion of security responsibility to civilians and a horizontal blurring of civilian and military domains.

Author Biography

Svenja McGrath is a Doctoral Researcher and Research Associate at the University of Hamburg. Her research lies at the intersection of political geography and critical security studies, with a particular interest in how defence and security practices are changing in the face of climate change. Focusing on the Canadian Arctic, her current research draws on fieldwork with military and civilian actors to examine these transformations in a region increasingly shaped by the intersecting dynamics of environmental change and geopolitical pressures.

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Keywords

anticipation; civil–military entanglements; climate security; everyday security; preparedness; resilience

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One of the conceptually challenging features of security is that it typically exists only in relation to a perceived threat that is both present and absent at the same time. Threats are present insofar as they are grounded in lived experiences, material conditions, and expert assessments; yet they are also absent while they persist as anticipated possibilities, imagined dangers, and projected futures, which shape action before they fully materialise. Safety precautions of various kinds demonstrate this: for instance, extraordinary surveillance in so-called 'crime hot spots' in major cities is legitimised on the basis of actual incidents and experiences of violence and the imagined threat of attacks and assaults. Likewise, military preparedness draws legitimacy not only from existing conflicts but also from anticipated threats forming what Jacques Derrida describes as a 'not yet' – a haunting future possibility that exerts force in the present.

This duality becomes particularly visible in the case of climate security: climate change is already a material reality, experienced through rising temperatures, extreme weather events, and ecological transformation. Yet it also exists as a 'not yet': a source of anticipated risks, cascading effects, and uncertain futures, which shape action in the present. Governments and security institutions increasingly mobilise these projected futures in framing climate change as a matter of national security.

The simultaneity of presence and absence in climate security is not paradoxical. Rather, the two dimensions are mutually constitutive. Absence and presence support and complement each other in complex and often unnoticed ways that deserve greater analytical attention. Practice theories – known for concentrating on social practices and their material entanglements as the central phenomena through which social life

transpires, reproduces, and changes – may help to shed light on this relationship.

As cultural geographer Lars Frers (2013) discusses in his article 'The Matter of Absence', absence does not simply mean that something, for example, a threat, is not there. Instead, absences can materialise in and express themselves through lived experiences, corporeal emotions, and bodily practices caused by the circumstance that something is not there yet (e.g., an aspired objective such as a just society) or anymore (e.g., a past event). This situation may seem paradoxical, but particularly the latter is well demonstrated by the loss of a person, a place, or a thing. What is felt is not the lost object or subject itself, but rather its absence, a gaping hole, which can be emotionally painful, confusing or relieving.

Climate change, as we all know, contributes to manifold losses – of biodiversity, wellbeing, sense of place, health, habitability – which in turn result in emotional distress and a general sense of insecurity. At the same time, climate change invokes future-oriented imaginaries oscillating between dystopian futures of impending disasters and utopian hopes for socioecological transformation.

The combination of these different temporalities – the loss of what was once there and the imagined fear of, or desire for, what is yet to happen – creates powerful feelings engendering a wide array of practices ranging from progressive action (e.g., climate activism) to defensive reaction (e.g., denialism and indifference). This is the case not only in exceptional moments of crisis and sudden dislocation, but also in everyday situations and dispersed sites when feelings of absence and uncertainty creep into and increasingly dominate daily lives.

Given the complex temporal characteristics of climate insecurity, the heuristic, ontological

character of practice theories fosters deep understanding of how people, entangled with the non-human, experience, aim to control, anticipate, struggle against, accept, adapt to, or disavow climate insecurities. The absent, but ever-present threat of climate change plays a crucial role here. In contrast to other clearly identifiable and localizable threats such as impending war, and leaving aside catastrophic and sudden events such as wildfires and flooding, global warming generally unfolds as a slow but steady transformation of background conditions that alters infrastructures, ecological systems, and patterns of social life. The frontline of climate insecurity thus emerges in manifold dispersed sites of varying size, levels of connectivity, and density in which social practices are guided and legitimised by the threat of global warming – both progressive practices aiming to confront or adapt to it and regressive practices involving denial, national particularism, border control, and climate apartheid. While reality is often more complex and ambiguous, these two basic responses represent opposing 'climatizations' of ordinary life that embrace different visible and invisible micropolitics of climate security imbued with diverse emotions, intentions, and rules, as well as increasingly contested understandings of how life ought to be.

Climate security research has not yet fully realised the analytical potential of practice theories. Critical security scholars, particularly those associated with the Paris School of securitisation theory, have long argued that security emerges and plays out through diverse social practices. But as Joshua Busby (2021) argues in 'Beyond Internal Conflict', this strand of research has tended to focus on the actions of security professionals – such as police, military, think tanks, politicians, intelligence officers – as an emerging community of climate security practitioners. The internal organisation and

material entanglements of climate security practices, as well as the ordinary, mundane micropolitics of climate security, remain a less explored terrain. In light of recent climate change-induced developments in the security sector, this gap is particularly striking.

Consider the growing proliferation of civil defence and preparedness practices responding to climate change and related threats. Here it becomes very apparent how manifold social practices are organised around an absent presence, an ever-present but still largely imagined and elusive threat to entire systems embracing anticipated disruptions, projected disasters, and climate-modelled potentialities. Across societies, preparedness for extreme heat, floods, wildfires, droughts, or partial infrastructure collapse increasingly migrates from the realm of extraordinary emergency management to the routines of everyday life. Citizens are encouraged – and in some cases expected – to download warning apps, modify homes, purchase insurance, participate in resilience trainings, or cultivate capacities of self-sufficiency.

Preparedness practices thus perform climate (in)security in the now. Although they protect in the event of catastrophe, they preemptively enact insecurity, bringing uncertain futures into the present materiality of the everyday. The flood that has not yet occurred, the heatwave expected in coming decades, or the looming possibility of evacuation are no longer distant abstractions. They are materially embedded in contemporary everyday routines and social awareness because of their large-scale, all-encompassing threat to systems. In consequence, not only the threat, but also its ramifications once it occurs, seem elusive and everywhere at the same time.

Here, a practice theoretical approach becomes particularly valuable. Its core strength lies in a capacity to move beyond rigid analytical binaries: structure versus agency, the local versus the global, the here versus the there, the macro versus the micro. By taking practices, rather than these oppositions, as its point of departure, practice theory understands practices as simultaneously ordered and ordering, situated within the social world and constitutive of it. This dual character is reflected in an analytical gaze that moves between exceptional moments and dispersed, mundane, and everyday situations, thereby enabling us to trace a profound (re)distribution of security responsibility across such scales as national, local, and individuals without essentialising them.

To illustrate this, consider how such a redistribution of security responsibility unfolds through civil defence and preparedness. The following discussion highlights two analytically distinct yet empirically interdependent processes: a diffusion of security responsibility from state apparatuses to civilians, households, and individuals and a horizontal blurring of the boundaries between civilian and military domains.

The diffusion of security responsibilities entails that preparedness and resilience are increasingly practised in the everyday, vernacular settings of households and individuals. A practice theoretical approach enables us to ask and comprehend how the fragile status of being secure in the face of climate change and related uncertainties is enacted, normalised, and contested by individuals in the practices they carry on. What does it practically mean to be prepared, i.e. what kind of new preparedness practices should be adopted and to what extent are existing, routinised social practices being climatized? According to which rules and

guided by what kind of teleo-affectivities does preparedness take place? And what specific competencies, knowledges, and material resources are required to be secure? These questions underscore and make researchers attentive to how climate security practices are organised and integrated into the everyday, thereby rendering the constant yet elusive threat of climate change increasingly mundane.

Moving into civilian security, often framed as civilian preparedness, practice theory can yield insights into spaces where adaptation fosters collective capacities of care, mutual aid, and solidary resilience. At the same time, a practice theoretical approach can also illuminate regressive, exclusionary, and authoritarian forms of adaptation and resilience such as privatised security and practices of fortification and bordering. This, in turn, reveals the deep ambivalence of adaptive strategies and civilian preparedness practices: as preparedness becomes normalised, it risks producing unequal 'regimes of safety', in which wealthy enclaves insulate themselves from climate impacts while marginalised populations remain structurally abandoned and in permanent need of protection.

The diffusion of security responsibilities into civilian spheres is accompanied by a second phenomenon of horizontal security responsibility redistribution: the blurring of civilian and military domains. Militaries are frequently first responders to floods, wildfires, and heatwaves, bringing logistics and command structures that civilian agencies often lack. This role as first responder repositions defence establishments as permanent partners in everyday resilience-building. Relatedly, national defence doctrines increasingly treat civilian resilience as a strategic necessity, giving the military increasing justification to engage in domains

once considered purely civilian. This blurring unfolds less through singular decisions on policy levels than through the accumulation of dispersed and partially ad hoc practices across scales, making it a development that practice theory is particularly well positioned to trace.

Attending to these phenomena as practices, rather than as policy shifts or institutional arrangements, makes visible small but significant changes at the level of doing: the competencies deemed necessary for being prepared increasingly derive from military planning cultures, and the meanings attached to resilience merge mutual aid with strategic readiness. Moreover, the teleo-affective structures organising local adaptation – what is deemed important to do, and why – increasingly resemble threat-anticipation logics developed for conflict rather than care. These emerging re-configurations take shape gradually, in the routines of joint drills, shared infrastructure, and co-authored planning documents, and are dispersed, increasingly routinised, and mundane.

Because the threat driving this shift is diffuse and both absent and present at once, moving across temporal and spatial scales without a single event, clear front, or moment of arrival, military involvement resists being bound to the exceptional. Instead, it permeates civilian domains, justified by a danger or threat that is at once there and not there. The result is less a suspension of civilian rule in specific moments of crisis than an ongoing entanglement of defence logics and practices with civilian safety domains. By tracing these dynamics at the level of everyday practice, this quiet entanglement and co-production can be brought into analytical view and public debate.

In conclusion, a practice-theoretical paradigm enables us to shift focus from how future

climate threats are imagined and politicised towards the real-life consequences of the climatization of ordinary life. While scholars have largely focused on the processes and implications of anticipation and pre-emption in the production of the present, we argue that the central analytical challenge for contemporary climate security scholarship is to understand how climate security practices literally take place in everyday life in the context of present and future threats. In other words, we need to understand how these practices play out in multiple and changing spaces once they have become commonplace.

As this column has illustrated, tracing the diffusion of security responsibility and the horizontal blurring of civil and military domains exposes a landscape where emergency governance is increasingly moving from the exception to a normalised baseline of daily existence. This has consequences that warrant exploration, since armed forces, municipal emergency services, humanitarian networks, and ordinary citizens are moving into overlapping spaces. For contemporary climate security research, the critical frontier is therefore not only found in modelling catastrophic tipping points or deconstructing state-level security rhetoric. An equally urgent task lies in assessing the micropolitics of these everyday practices and intersections, thereby understanding how distributed, seemingly mundane practices are already reshaping institutional structures and redrawing boundaries of civil society and defence in an era of the absent presence of insecurity.

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