

Climate Change, Social Stress and Violent Conflict

State of the Art and Research Needs

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Abstract

Towards a biopoliticization of security? The relevance of a Foucaultian framework for studying the “securitization” of climate change

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Climate change is increasingly being articulated as the most important security issue by scientists, politicians and the media. To what extent is the policy field of climate change being transformed as a result of security discourses? Is the introduction of climate change as a security issue transforming traditional security institutions like the UN Security Council? In this paper, I develop a theoretical framework based on Michel Foucault for studying the changes in governmental rationalities and technologies that result from the articulation of climate change as a security issue. The first part of the paper introduces the Foucaultian framework and discusses its merits by comparing it to alternative theoretical concepts. The Copenhagen School's Securitization Theory is a useful tool for investigating one particular case of articulating climate change as a security issue. The Copenhagen School studies elite speech acts that articulate climate change as an existential threat in order to legitimise extraordinary procedures or measures. As up to now, there is no evidence of exceptional measures in the field of climate change (only a lot of security talk), a different theoretical approach is needed. The Foucaultian concept of governmentality distinguishes between various discourses of security, each of which is related to a different set of rationalities and technologies of government. Foucault has emphasized the relevance of geopolitical and biopolitical security discourses and directed attention to the way in which the two discourses co-exist. This means that security today is not (only) about securing national identity and territory (geopolitics), but also about securing the biological life of the population (biopolitics). The biopolitics of security is a form of risk management that secures life by securing circulation, i.e. by securing life's freedom to engage in transactions that are required for its reproduction and for its fructification. As a result of advances in molecular biology and the digitalisation of information, the “life” that is to be secured by biopolitics has changed. Life is now conceptualised as a continually emergent self-organising system, whose capacity to adapt to contingencies is the key to its survival, as Michael Dillon has demonstrated. Where a particular form of life is conceptualised as a threat to the continuation of circulation and therefore to life's survival, the sovereign right to kill may be legitimised in a regime of biopolitics, as Michel Foucault has argued in his lecture on state racism. The major strength of the Foucaultian concept is that it provides a broader framework for analysing the implications of different security discourses.

The second part of the paper illustrates the relevance of the Foucaultian framework for the analysis of climate change as a security issue by advancing a number of hypotheses. The Paris School of securitization which draws heavily on Foucault has demonstrated that a biopoliticization of traditional institutions of security can be observed, for example in the field of HIV/AIDS or in the field of migration. The Foucaultian framework allows the researcher to ask: Is the articulation of climate change as a security issue product and driver of a biopoliticization of security? For the field of climate policy, I advance the hypothesis that the introduction of security discourses is linked to a shift in policy emphasis from mitigation to adaptation. The biopolitics of security that drive the politics of climate change are about forging adaptive, emergent life that is fit for the increase in contingency that the impacts of climate change are assumed to produce. The focus of international climate policy is not on preventing or pre-empting risks but on developing institutions that foster resilience and adaptation to the contingent impacts of climate change. The commodification of climate-related risks in the form of speculative financial products and the trading of these in global financial markets is a prime example for biopolitical securitization in the field of international climate politics. For the field of security policy, I propose the hypothesis that climate change as a security issue is speeding up the already ongoing but still highly contested biopoliticization of international security institutions like the UN Security Council and the G8. I suggest that military capacities are more and more put into the service of securing circulation and are transformed by the demand to thrive on contingencies. I advance the hypothesis that in the UN Security Council, the biopoliticization of security is fostered by industrialised countries. Developing countries fear that the weakening of geopolitical security discourses will open the door for biopolitical interventions in national affairs by the industrialised countries.

I conclude that a theoretical framework that features the biopolitics of security is essential in order to make sense of the transformations in governmental rationalities and practices that can be observed as a result of the articulation of climate change as a security issue.