



# What can adaptation to climate-related hazards tell us about the politics of time making? Exploring durations and temporal disjunctures through the 2013 London heat wave



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## ABSTRACT

Temporalities seem to have made a comeback as an object of geographical enquiries. Drawing on a set of in-depth interviews conducted with elderly residents of London during the heat wave of 2013, this paper explores temporal awareness through the concept of duration and its wider relevance to the geography of risk and the social studies of disasters. It argues that the overwhelming attention given to the logics of speed and urgency that underpin adaptation to climate change has restricted the capacity for geographers interested in risk and disasters to recognise distinct temporal perspectives and logics of action situated outside the open futures promoted by the concept of adaptation. The paper concludes by emphasising that a better comprehension of what temporal durations entail could also help to find different ways to understand and experience the inherent movements and changes that are intrinsic to time and to life more generally.

## 1. Introduction

In his sociological account of the deadly 1995 Chicago heat wave, Eric Klinenberg (1999: 242) defines environmental hazards as “revealers of social conditions”, providing us with an opportunity to see the underlying political processes involved in framing these events as biophysical. Building on Klinenberg’s work, Keller’s (2015) recent inquiry into the reasons that transformed the 2003 heat wave into a devastating political and social crisis in France, more specifically in Paris, has shown how a different valuation of life in French society pre-conditioned certain categories of citizens (e.g. the poor, the elderly, the homeless) to fall victim to the heat. With the exception of some yellow grass patches, the 2013 London heat wave has left few traces and can hardly be compared with the heat waves in Chicago and Paris. Nonetheless, its institutional politics is no less interesting than those more spectacular cases. This is because the 2013 London heat wave occurred in an era of scientific consensus on catastrophic climate change: a stretch of human history in which future-oriented anticipatory governance has become key to the organisation of human and non-human relations through concepts such as adaptation to climate change. Thus, exploring the management and experience of the 2013 London heat wave offers a lens through which we can investigate the tensions

between the discourse and practices of climate change adaptation and everyday experiences of so-called hazards such as the heat, but more importantly for this paper, this new focus on heat waves provides a way to highlight the temporal tensions at the heart of hazards management. This temporal interest leads the paper to argue that the 2013 London heat wave was more than a hot air mass that put the life of the elderly at risk. It was also a heuristic capable of capturing the wider politics of time making (the differentiated production, embodiment and mobilisation of movement) that animates and contests the accelerated dynamics of climate change adaptation discourse and practices. Exploring the politics of time involves opening up the production of various temporal modalities and durations that shape time awareness and that allow temporal experiences to be recognised ontologically.

Before going further in exploring the politics of time making, central concepts allowing us to identify how its formation occurs need to be unpacked. For the sake of clarity, this paper conceptualises time as pure change and differences (see Deleuze, 1968), and draws on the work of Henri Bergson (1927, 1939) to define and understand durations. For Bergson, durations (although he uses the singular as *la durée* in French) become the ultimate experience of time. Thus, durations (i.e. the multiple experiences of *la durée*) do not only refer here to the contractions or extensions of intersubjective time; they also refer to the

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phenomenological expressions of time that make some events survive in the flow of the now and hence they acquire a certain singularity in the movement of life more generally (Bergson, 1939, see also Whitehead, 1964, 1967). They are dynamic and should be seen as “change, [as] a passage or [as] a becoming” that are constantly actualising the now, but that are also multiple, heterogeneous and successive (see Deleuze, 1966: 29–40). What becomes interesting with Bergson’s take on duration is the fusion of the past and the present together, making the present the most contracted level of the past and leaving the future to a state of actualisation of the extended past that is seen as being in perpetual movement (Bergson, 1927, 1941; Deleuze, 1966). This conceptualisation of durations connects the paper with what Alfred North Whitehead (1967: 187–188) has defined as the *percipient event*, which is similar to what Bergson calls the *actual* – a reference event – which takes place “in our observational present which we distinguish as being in some peculiar way our standpoint for perception”. By adding to Whitehead’s work, we see events as the junctions where abrupt change in the rhythmic order of time takes place. Their emergence is linked to the breaking points of the unpredicted, which are reconfiguring time flow by opening up new constellations of temporal relations and experiences (see Das, 1995; Maldiney, 2007: 183). As we are going to see in the next sections, the ontological substance of time as forward looking, embedded in and carried by the concept of adaptation to climate change and extreme weather events has overshadowed the significance of the percipient event involved in shaping what counts as the actual and that ends up actualising what counts as *here* and *now*.

By building on those concepts, the paper argues that intellectual and political lenses serving the analysis of adaptation to climate change-related risks and disasters have led us to a state of temporal friction whereby the belief in a need to, and the urge to, embrace the fast-forward and accelerating futures of climate change have separated us from other temporal experiences/relations that shape and affect our relationships to hazards and risks (Hassan, 2009; Rosa, 2010, 2013). One of those experiences/relations consists of what Martin Heidegger (1986) calls “temporal disjuncture” (*Unfung* in German), which bluntly refers to the feeling of a persisting *actual* that distorts its own transitivity in time flow, a sort of everlasting moment occurring in temporal duration (Haar, 1989: 128). It is further argued that these temporal disjunctures are translating the multiplicity of durations occurring in time formation that is too often ignored, and yet, so central in influencing decisions made before, during and after hazards such as heat waves, and important to recognise in thinking our relationship to risk and hazards.

Following the introduction, this argument unfolds in four inter-related sections. The first section defines the methodology we have used for this study. The second section looks at how time and temporalities have been discussed by the geography of risk and disasters, which has led both critics and proponents of adaptation to climate change to pay less attention to the processes of time formation (such as durations) in the production of hazards and how they are experienced. Drawing on the 2013 London’s heat wave, the third section exposes how the discourse and practices of adaptation to climate change have worked to frame heat wave temporality through processes of synchronisation that have prioritised accelerated clock-time futures and urgency as the dominant temporal experiences of heat waves’ management. More specifically, this section looks at the anticipatory logic animating the heat wave risk management for London and emphasises the paradoxical effects of prioritising long-term and open futures on other temporal experiences such as durations. The fourth section then investigates how the experience of heat unfolds a variety of durations that take shape in the percipient event of the elderly and give sense to the actual. By investigating below the surface of what the elderly define as “day by day planning”, “common sense” and what we call “the lingering effect”, the paper uncovers temporal disjunctures taking place between the elderly and heat wave management advice. Fifthly, the paper concludes that both the discourse and the criticism of adaptation to date have played

an important role in drawing attention to the processes of acceleration, rather than to uncovering how durations are manifested in the formation of temporal awareness and experiences that help us to question the catastrophic framings of climate change and the categories of risk, vulnerability and extreme events. By bringing together the concepts of temporal disjunctures and durations, the paper contributes not only to the geography of risk and hazards but also to the wider research investigating time and temporality in human geography environmental humanity as well as in the social sciences more generally.

## 2. Exploring the formation of durations and temporal disjunctures

Methodologically, this paper draws on a set of 30 semi-structured interviews with independent elderly people (68–95 years old) and carers in the London Boroughs of Islington, Waltham Forest and the City of London during and after the 2013 heat wave. First-hand observations and analysis of policy documents from institutions involved in framing heat wave management in England and climate-related risk worldwide have been used to triangulate the interview data. The interviews focussed on how the elderly population experienced and dealt with the heat, whilst documenting the temporal nature of human experience and time awareness: of the temporal contours and boundaries of the extreme weather and how this influenced their experience of the heat wave. All interviews were systematically coded and analysed.

Although the older community was not studied as an object of social gerontology or medical research, and the aim of the research was not to contribute to the geography of ageing (see Harper and Laws, 1995; Skinner et al., 2015), some of the findings exposed in this paper could contribute to an understanding of the temporalities of ageing in late modernity (e.g. Paiva, 2016). Rather, the aim was to document how those defined as the most vulnerable to heat wave risk (see WHO, 2004; IPCC, 2012, 2014) challenge assumptions about adaptive futures by producing a politics of time that takes place through differential durations and experiences of time. This empirical focus on the politics of time allows us to diversify what counts as temporal experiences of hazards and to highlight what kind of time emerges from the elderly’s relationships to the heat and climate-related hazards; a time situated outside the category of the future. In turn, this qualitative interest makes it possible to open a window on the formation of durations and temporal disjunctures that are part of everyday life.

## 3. Time and the geography of risk and hazards

Unlike floods, forest fires, hurricanes or typhoons, heat waves’ temporality moves us in the experience and existence of slowness and standstill, where the urgency of climate change adaptation is confronted with the sluggish movement of life that is too often overlooked by hypermodernity proponents and critics. Yet, geographers interested in risk and disasters have not commonly engaged with these temporal dimensions of hazards, reflecting the wider enthusiasm for the discipline in conceptualising ‘space’ in space-time (e.g. Harvey, 1989, 1996; Massey, 2005). Most of the academic work on risk and disasters has rather sought to edify geography as *the* discipline capable of providing the political responses needed to react to the challenges posed by climate-related hazards. The result has been often to reduce time to a simple arrow at the bottom of a graph, meaning that its ontological dimension becomes less central to geographers interested in risk and disasters. Thus, the ways in which heat waves have been engaged with in human geography have been mainly influenced by what we can perhaps simplistically divide into two broad intellectual streams. The first of those streams, which is also highly influential on the ways in which geography has positioned itself as the ‘champion’ of climate-related questions, is linked to structural functionalism and environmental social science (ESS). This intellectual stream builds on a realist ontology of climate change and risks and is epistemologically grounded in climate science, epidemiology, social psychology and neoclassical

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