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Reframing adaptation: The political nature of climate change adaptation

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ABSTRACT

This paper is motivated by a concern that adaptation and vulnerability research suffer from an under-theorization of the political mechanisms of social change and the processes that serve to reproduce vulnerability over time and space. We argue that adaptation is a socio-political process that mediates how individuals and collectives deal with multiple and concurrent environmental and social changes. We propose that applying concepts of subjectivity, knowledges and authority to the analysis of adaptation focuses attention on this socio-political process. Drawing from vulnerability, adaptation, political ecology and social theory literatures, we explain how power is reproduced or contested in adaptation practice through these three concepts. We assert that climate change adaptation processes have the potential to constitute as well as contest authority, subjectivity and knowledge, thereby opening up or closing down space for transformational adaptation. We expand on this assertion through four key propositions about how adaptation processes can be understood and outline an emergent empirical research agenda, which aims to explicitly examine these propositions in specific social and environmental contexts. We describe how the articles in this special issue are contributing to this nascent research agenda, providing an empirical basis from which to theorize the politics of adaptation. The final section concludes by describing the need for a reframing of adaptation policy, practice and analysis to engage with multiple adaptation knowledges, to question subjectivities inherent in discourses and problem understandings, and to identify how emancipatory subjectivities – and thus the potential for transformational adaptation – can be supported.

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1. Introduction

Climate change is introducing new risks and increasing fluctuations in resources across time and space, exacerbating existing vulnerability (IPCC, 2014). At the same time, the science of climate change itself influences how we recognise and understand these changes (Hulme, 2011; Mahony, 2014; Swyngedouw, 2010). As a result, climate change requires people to adjust ('adapt') not only to new hazards and changing resources, but also to new regimes of knowledge, as well as to changes in access to and control over resources. Consequently, there is an increasing debate over who is considered to have the responsibilities for and abilities to manage these changes (Bulkeley, 2012; Wolf et al., 2013). While this debate is encouraging, our paper is motivated by concerns that

present conceptualizations of climate change adaptation – justified in the name of urgency (Forsyth, 2014) – have by-passed critical analytical lessons learned in relation to other society-environment issues. At the core of our argument is a conceptualisation of adaptation as political 'all the way through'. Rather than politics being something that affects adaptation outcomes, we offer a conceptual framework to capture how politics are embedded in society's management of change. This framework includes how individuals, communities, governments and various other organisations interact in adaptation problem framing, the response options considered and whose interests and voices are able to influence such debates. We argue that what counts as 'adaptive' is always political and contested. What is seen as positive adaptation to one group of people may be seen as mal-adaptation to another, and political processes determine which view is considered more important at different scales and to different constituencies. We therefore propose a reframing of adaptation that focuses explicitly on its political nature, in order to speak directly to how changing vulnerability patterns intersect with contestations over who is

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expected to adapt to climate change and who ought to plan and guide those processes.

Until recently within the climate change literature, adaptation was largely conceived as a formal policy intervention or a planned single action that moderates harm or capitalizes upon benefits (Klein et al., 2007), essentially a linear and implicitly politically neutral response to actual or expected bio-physical changes (Smit and Pilifosova, 2001). We build from more recent advances in the literature addressing the complex social and individual processes that mediate responses to biophysical change, which draw our attention to power and politics (Eakin and Lemos, 2006; Eriksen et al., 2011; Eriksen and Lind, 2009; Manuel-Navarrete, 2010; O'Brien et al., 2007). This literature makes it clear that too narrow a focus on policy-making and planning in response to climatic stressors runs the risk of characterizing adaptation decision-making processes as exclusively beneficial and primarily technical or managerial, bounded only by economic and technical capacities as well as scientific uncertainty.

Closely connected to debates over adaptation responses, the debate on climate vulnerability is also changing to take more account of unequal vulnerability to multiple socio-environmental stressors. Here, the literature addresses the differential impacts of economic globalisation, conflict and climate change within and across populations (Eakin, 2005; Leichenko and O'Brien, 2008; Ziervogel et al., 2006). This more nuanced perspective on vulnerability is evident, for example, in how the social context of vulnerability is treated between the fourth and fifth assessment reports of the IPCC (2007, 2014). Yet, much research on climate change vulnerability continues to situate vulnerability within analyses of *climate*, rather than in *societies* and *political economies*. In doing so, this research masks the social-political causes of risk and vulnerability (Ribot, 2011), as well as the *socio-environmental processes* (Nightingale, 2015) that mediate responses to climate change and that have been central to how humans have always responded to environmental variability. We follow Taylor and others in “emphasiz[ing] the need to conceptualize the relational dynamics of vulnerability, where the relative security of some social groups is achieved through the production of insecurity among others” (2013, p. 318). In short, despite the recent shift away from linear, biophysical explanations, we see in most scientific writing and policy responses a reluctance to deal with the politics of adaptation head-on. This reluctance is underscored by the lack of a coherent conceptual framework to facilitate addressing this challenge. The consequence has been a lack of empirical research focusing explicitly on the social-political domains within which a fuller understanding of adaptation processes for long-term change can emerge (Shove, 2010) and a need for more theoretical innovation to help guide such studies.

To address this challenge, we argue that adaptation should be conceptualized explicitly as a contested social-political process that mediates how individuals and collectives deal with multiple types of simultaneously occurring environmental and social changes. Our conceptualization builds on perspectives that view adaptation not as a single decision or measure, but as a social process wherein social and political relations shape the simultaneous management of diverse changes, many of which are not driven directly or consciously by climate change (Pelling, 2011). As such, climate change should not be separated from other kinds of change to which societies respond, nor should adaptation to uncertainty and change be considered as something new that only emerged with climate change.

Rather, adaptation must be seen as part of the dynamics of societies rather than simply being a technical adjustment to biophysical change *by* society. This framing recognizes the important contributions made by social scientists for understanding inequality and social justice issues within adaptation and

transformation debates, much of which has been synthesized in the recent IPCC report (Adger et al., 2014; Denton et al., 2014; Mimura et al., 2014; Olsson et al., 2014). In parallel, this literature reflects increasing recognition that vulnerability cannot be addressed through adjustments to maintain the current system (incremental adaptation (Pelling, 2011)) alone, but that there is a need for adaptation measures to address how vulnerability is produced. The call for transformational adaptation attempts to address the roots of vulnerability through action “that changes the fundamental attributes of a system in response to climate and its effects” (Agard et al., 2014, p. 1758). We support this call, but argue additionally that both the production of vulnerability and efforts to address this vulnerability through adaptation – transformational or otherwise – must be conceptualized as political and contested, with outcomes that are not likely to be the same across different populations.

Issues of power in adaptation processes and empowerment of vulnerable groups are rising on the agenda (Manuel-Navarrete, 2013; Moser, 2013; Schipper et al., 2014). Nevertheless, there are few conceptual tools to understand how power operates in the adaptation process. All adaptation actions will influence social relations, governance and distribution of resources in any given population or place. Yet not all these changes are desirable to everyone. Whether and how adaptation addresses social injustice and fundamental inequities in resource distribution will always be disputed, and dependent on specific knowledge, authorities, and subjectivities. As the literature in Science and Technology studies (STS) has long argued, science is thoroughly social and how knowledge is produced and for what purposes is significantly contextual and contested across different cultural and historical contexts (Haraway, 1991; Jasanoff, 2005; Longino, 1990). As such, taking seriously the political nature of adaptation precludes the development of clear models of what transformational adaptation looks like since such models are always products of one worldview. Rather, we argue for more empirical and analytical attention on the contexts within which authorities, knowledges and subjectivities come together to shape what counts as adaptation and for whom. We propose that a reflexive and critical interrogation of the politics of adaptation itself may provide opportunities for a more fundamental change in system attributes.

When understood in this sense, we argue for reframing adaptation to take account of how the exercise of power is always present within climate change responses. Our concern is to provide analytical insights into why pathways towards ‘transformational adaptation’ are so difficult to conceive and promote, and to hold in view how any transformational adaptation pathway will inevitably be plagued by contradictory outcomes. To do so, we focus on authority, knowledges, and the way that individuals and groups are positioned in relation to adaptation (‘subjectivities’) to capture multi-scalar politicised relationships that extend between households to the global scale. We argue that it is these political dynamics that are most important in shaping adaptation processes and outcomes and that help us to link climate related adaptation efforts to broader processes of socio-environmental change.

We use the term politics in its broadest sense, namely, the processes through which individuals and collectives cooperate and collude to order and govern everyday affairs. Drawing from social theory contributions to the understanding of power and politics, we mobilize authority, knowledges and subjectivities as theoretical lenses to more precisely conceptualize the effects of power as they pertain to environmental governance. Authority captures how the operation of power manifests in the competition for influence and the ability to exert agendas by one individual or institution over another within environmental governance and adaptation processes (Fairhead et al., 2012; Nightingale and Ojha, 2013; Sikor and Lund, 2009). Struggles for authority are manifest at all scales,

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