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## Book review

International Studies

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**Matt McDonald, *Ecological Security: Climate Change and the Construction of Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 240 pp., US\$ 99, ISBN: 978-1-3165-1961-5 (Hardcover).**

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change published its Sixth Assessment Report in August 2021. Summarizing the state of scientific understanding about the role of human influence on climate change and possible climate futures, it provided the starkest warning yet of the bleak future that awaits the planet and its inhabitants should humanity not change its fossil-fuel habits. As UN Secretary-General António Guterres put it, the report sounds a ‘code red for humanity’ (BBC, 2021). Coming on the back of a summer punctuated with extreme weather events worldwide, the report was met with fewer sceptical voices than earlier iterations. Yet, agreement over the nature of the problem is the easy part, the difficulty remains in deciding who should do what and when. In other words, tough distributional choices lie ahead, as the growing climate justice movement underlines.

It is against this backdrop that Matt McDonald publishes *Ecological Security: Climate Change and the Construction of Security*. This book provides a radical and unusually comprehensive normative framework—an ‘ecological security’ approach—for guiding efforts to mitigate and adapt to climate change; one that McDonald argues, provides a morally superior approach to those currently employed within the climate-security policy agenda. Following Andrew Linklater’s (1998) classic description of Critical Theory, the book moves in three steps: (a) it conducts a sociological analysis of the dominant climate security discourses and their deficiencies, (b) lays out an ethical case for ecological security and (c) undertakes a praxeological analysis of the ‘immanent possibilities’ within existing institutions for advancing ecological security (p. 12). At each step, McDonald draws upon an eclectic array of critical scholarship—feminism, political ecology, green state theory, among others—and spends considerable space engaging in good faith with would-be sceptics. Indeed, McDonald’s book offers a tour de force and model for combining classic *critique* of the status quo with a positive normative vision and most unusually, a sustained analysis of how to practically bring it about.

The book’s introduction begins from the classic constructivist premise and swiftly shows how linking climate to security was certainly not inevitable—there

are several alternative framings available and many good reasons not to yoke security and climate together. Yet, as McDonald explains, catalysed by Western think-tanks, national security establishments were quick to recognize the threat of climate change, or as some would have it, cynically see the opportunity that 'climate security' provided for buttressing military budgets. Regardless of motivations, policy traction has since snowballed among states and international organizations and has led to climate security becoming a regular feature of the UNSC agenda (Conca, 2019). Meanwhile, academia now has a well-established research field striving to identify statistical relationships between climate—or more unkindly 'weather'—and conflict (von Uexkull & Buhaug, 2021).

While critical scholars have long lined up to question the empirical grounds for linking climate and security and lament what they call the 'neo-Malthusian' overtones of the policy agenda, McDonald's critique of this new status quo is precise and more reflexive. He contends that it is precisely *how* climate is constructed as a security issue that determines the ethicality of any specific 'discourse of climate security' (p. 5). In other words, not all climate security discourses are equally bad, and it is quite possible to construct a morally defensible one. Thus, the first casualty of McDonald's book is a critical scholarship that has rejected *in toto* and sometimes *a priori* climate security as an idea.

The first of the five substantive chapters conducts a discourse analysis of the climate security policy and research agenda. Those familiar with McDonald's oeuvre will recognize its basis in his (2013) article 'Discourses of Environmental Security'. This chapter is a well-executed, ground-clearing exercise that identifies the ethical shortcomings of the status quo. Here, borrowing from securitization theory but broadening its analytical scope, McDonald systematically categorizes climate security discourses by their foundational ethical principles, referent objects, agents, means and the nature of the threats themselves. This leads to identifying three major analytically and ethically distinct climate security discourses contesting the international policy agenda: those that privilege national, international and human security (see p. 91 for the typology that results). Predictably, but probably correctly, McDonald suggests the national security variant of climate security fares worst because it focuses on the symptoms of climate change rather than the causes, cannot contend with global, interconnected nature of the problem, and insofar as it treats societies as afflicted with climate change as threats, risks harming those most vulnerable to climate change's effects. By McDonald's reckoning, climate security discourses that aim to secure international society and human security offer *relative* moral improvements but have ethically dubious implications that leave some groups vulnerable.

Having established that the dominant discourses of climate security in circulation are ethically lacking, the rest of the book is dedicated to piecing together and justifying an *ecological security* approach to climate security and assessing the obstacles and immanent possibilities of shifting policy practice in this direction. This is controversial for several reasons. Not least, for those schooled in Foucault, to make such a positive case for discourse is to risk

producing and endorsing a totalizing discourse of one's own. Hence, for the most part, those doing discourse analysis either stop pointing out the problematic consequences of existing discourses and/or relegate their reflections on what might be better to a few cursory paragraphs in conclusion. While there have long been calls among critical scholars to go beyond 'the politics of the anti' (Ferguson, 2009, p. 171), scholars seldom follow through to the extent that McDonald does here.

Moreover, the specific substance of his ecological security approach is likely to cause a stir. The embrace of the term security in the first place will strike many critical scholars as problematic given its association with military means and the politics of exception. Yet, as chapter two shows, not all security discourses are of the same feather. As the rest of the book documents, it is quite possible to construct a discourse of ecological security that aligns with progressive values out of critical scholarship. For many, resilience is a concept that embodies neoliberal logic that emphasizes individuals' adaptation rather than structural causes. McDonald's response, echoing his reply to critics of treating climate as a security issue, is that it is not resilience or per se, that is the problem but how fostering resilience is understood and undertaken (p. 119). Here McDonald contends that critiques of resilience discourses referring to individuals or societies should not be conflated with efforts to ensure resilience in ecosystems (p. 119).

Moreover, McDonald argues that treating ecosystems as the referent for a security discourse has several interrelated positives. First of all, climate security becomes a concern with a *direct* threat of increased temperatures for the 'functionality of ecosystems' and the protection of their inhabitants, present and future, rather than an indirect threat to humans via conflict or food security (p. 112). Thus, it improves on other environmental security discourses, which treat human societies as 'separate from the ecological conditions of their existence' (p. 43–44). Making the ecosystem the referent, argues McDonald, embeds humans within the natural world without falling prey to ecocentrism or anthropocentrism. Thus, this approach militates against the possibility that measures taken to mitigate or adapt to climate do not harm ecosystems and biodiversity. A second advantage of making the referent ecosystems is that it can better account for and pay heed to vulnerable populations who lack a voice in contemporary climate security policy agenda: future generations and non-humans (p. 112).

Finally, McDonald contends that making ecosystems resilient, the referent for climate security can address the issue of scale that others have argued have hindered efforts to securitize the planet (von Lucke et al., 2015). Instead, because ecosystems are interdependent and operating across scales, 'agency is located at multiple and interrelated levels too' (p. 147). Hence, global, regional, national, local and individuals have a part to play in realizing ecological security. Indeed, for McDonald, if one is 'able to engage in conscious action that contributes to climate change or its amelioration,' they have at least some degree of responsibility for serving as an agent of ecological security' (p. 146). In other words, unless you are an animal or not yet born, you are not off the hook. However, McDonald also

insists that ecological security practice must recognize the ‘differentiation of responsibility related to capability’ (p. 147) and thus, those with most ability must be assigned the highest responsibility.

Relatedly, and perhaps most optimistically, McDonald envisions ecosystem securing should not be undertaken without first assessing how it affects vulnerable populations, whether marginalized groups in the present or future and even non-humans. Thus, while McDonald’s ecological security discourse is at heart consequentialist (p. 140), dialogue, reflexivity and humility are specified as core ethical principles that should animate any ecosystem practice. Here, the goal is to avoid some of the well-documented risks of overzealous green policy (e.g., Bergius et al., 2020).

Ecological security is certainly an improvement on the status quo in the abstract, but in practice, it may prove harder to mobilize behind than what McDonald allows, though he does admit it is difficult. For instance, the book glosses over the technical challenges of stewardship of ecosystems. Even bracketing the question of the politics, ocean-ecosystem management is the exceptionally challenging and successful management of ‘key functions’ may well be beyond human’s existing technical capabilities. Meanwhile, as Wilson Rowe (2021) outlines, reorganizing politics around ecosystems may produce systematic and perhaps unwanted side effects, which McDonald does not adequately consider.

Perhaps the biggest practical weakness in McDonald’s framework stems from its major ethical strength: its emphasis on avoiding harm to an exhaustive range of vulnerable populations. Yet, the notion of negating all harm to these groups elides how to do so while still managing to ensure the resilience of the ecosystems. In other words, drastically expanding the peoples and living things that need to be taken into account comes with the practical cost of limiting the measures available to do so.

This issue becomes salient when he sets out his surprisingly humble policy goal: moving climate security discourse *towards* one consistent with an ecological security sensibility (p. 188). Yet, this begs the question of time, or rather time *limits*, for this process. How fast must this process move to stand a hope of success? As climate scientists, especially environmental activists attest, it is precisely time that is the essence. While McDonald is not oblivious to the obstacles (he gives them extending discussion), were he to dwell more on the time-pressure facing change, he may be less optimistic about the immanent opportunities within the status-quo.

Ultimately, McDonald’s book is essential reading for any scholar wishing to handle what is at stake in the climate security debate. Additionally, graduate students would be wise to use it as a model of undertaking sustained discourse analysis that goes *beyond critique*. Indeed, the book offers an unusually earnest attempt to speak to audiences beyond academia: activists and policymakers alike. Yes, the book is relentlessly abstract, but it is also exceptionally clear. McDonald makes an effort to avoid jargon and ensure that his red-line is visible throughout

(another way budding critical scholars could learn from this book). While there are some doubts about whether McDonald's rendering of ecological security discourse can become dominant, applied consistently or soon enough, ecological security is a certainly a utopia worth striving for.

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