

Some feminist strands and their potential for the performativity of climate regulations: A review

By

Orthodoxia Kyriacou

Middlesex University

Faculty of Business and Law

The Burroughs

London NW4 4BT

o.kyriacou@mdx.ac.uk

Abstract

This piece engages with some strands from the literature on the ‘everyday’ [8,9], and also McGregor’s [10] point that climate change impacts can be recorded and victims can be counted. Its key contributions are to present some of the main strands in the literature by way of critique and to suggest some (re)positioning of these ideas as we move into the future. The notion of ‘performativity’ as developed by Butler [11,12,13], is explored. I offer insights into utilising the notion of acknowledging experience [18] and its connection with giving voice to the silenced in the climate debate. The current debate focuses on the language of risk and calculability [19]. I explore how this might be shifted to focus more positively on opportunities rather than risk [20]. Finally, the notions of futures [21,22], anticipation [23] and agency [24], which might advance and enhance our understanding by being reflective and reflexive with regard to climate change are presented.

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Feminist perspectives on the potential performativity of climate regulations

Climate change and its implications for our world have been much debated in recent years [1,2]. Climate change is clearly a serious concern for many reasons, and its reach and consequences can neither be easily determined nor underestimated [3]. It has long been argued that we are living in a world characterised by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity – a ‘VUCA world’ [4], and that humanity is facing a ‘brave new world’ [5]. Numerous calls have been made for global humanity to be agile in challenging and ever-changing climate environments, in the hope of both slowing down climate change and adhering to climate regulations [6,7].

In this review, I aim to explore some feminist perspectives on the potential performativity of climate regulations. This piece engages with some strands from the literature on the ‘everyday’ [8,9], and also McGregor’s [10] point that climate change impacts can be recorded and measured and victims can be counted. Its key contributions are to present some of the main strands in the literature by way of critique and to suggest some (re)positioning of these ideas as we move into the future. As a starting point, I sketch out the notion of ‘performativity’ as developed by Butler [11,12,13], which ‘challenged categorical understandings of gender, suggesting that gender is constituted (and reconstituted) through ritualized performances of gender norms’ [14:157]. Butler’s work also offers potentialities for individual subversion and collective action [14]. In this vein, I offer some insights into aspects which may be of relevance such as the important notion of acknowledging experience [18] and its connection with giving voice to the silenced in the climate debate. I then highlight the importance of language, in which the current debate focuses heavily on risk and calculability [19]. I explore how this might be shifted to focus more positively on opportunities rather than risk [20]. Finally, I present the notions of futures [21,22], anticipation [23] and agency [24], which might advance and enhance our understanding by being reflective and reflexive with regard to climate change.

Performativity, vulnerability and its relevance

Since its publication, Butler’s seminal work on gender and performativity has received considerable attention in terms of application, critique and misinterpretation [14]. The notion of ‘performativity’ has often been confused with that of ‘performance’, whereby a person’s actions may be changed at will [14:162]. Performativity, on the other hand, invokes a ‘continual resignification of gender’ [14:159]. Butler emphasised that *how* performativity is repeated may enable the individual’s agency to be mobilised by displacing ‘the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself’ [13,14:159]. Therefore, for Butler, the notion of undertaking repetitive acts and behaviours that challenge prevailing assumptions may enable and reinforce new approaches to ‘doing gender’. We have often heard that women are vulnerable’, and this idea has often been connected with climate change [15]. There is a longstanding notion that ‘all women are poor and that the poor are always more vulnerable’

[15:746]. Arora-Jonsson [15] goes further to explain that there is not always a direct correlation between poverty and vulnerability, and that some of these claims are 'dubious'. She explains that this is due to women being treated as a homogeneous group as far as the developing world is concerned, making all women vulnerable. Thus, these utterances [12] about women in society being vulnerable become performative [16]. It would appear that other factors are at play that need to be explored, such as class and ethnicity, so we should not make such generalisations about women being vulnerable [15:749]. Arora-Jonsson argues that the issue lies in the area of gender and power inequalities in decision making in environmental management and that these inequalities must be questioned [15]. Therefore, women's vulnerability is not a given, as some of the literature may suggest.

Beginning to be brave: Listening to experiences of the everyday

Climate change is undoubtedly being experienced by everyone worldwide [1,2]. However, the assumption appears to be that climate change affects everyone in the same way(s), and that our experiences of it are in some sense homogeneous around the world [15,25]. Also, importantly, experiences of the everyday are ignored [8]. Recent studies have shown that this is clearly not the case [21]. Both developed and developing nations are experiencing climate change in multidimensional ways, with many factors at play [3]. One important factor is geographical location [26]; and as mentioned above gender [27]. The literature highlights that climate politics are rooted in '*masculine discourses prioritising technological advance and economic growth*' [28:1087]. Some studies call for exploration of intersections, along the lines of gender, ethnicity/race, ability and sexuality, with regard to acknowledging the invisible which is the embodiment of action in labour markets [28]. Focusing on the everyday through a feminist lens may reveal contradictions in the current framing of climate change problems and policy interventions [8:2] Resurrección [17:33] reminds us that 'Women are once again being singled out as climate victims' and are 'powerful agents of change'.

Individual experiences are important and must take priority, as prioritising the everyday may provide space to pay attention to 'how social relations are shaped by power and how responsibility and action are placed on differently and unequally situated bodies' [8:5]. Examining and acknowledging difference in everyday experiences provides the capacity to understand how 'gendered relations of power shape women's capacity to adapt to climate change' [8:5]. As a collective, individuals can challenge and eradicate discrimination in the 'entrenched inequalities of climate change' [8,29,30,31]. If we are unaware of or lack insight into how climate change affects individuals in other parts of the world, how can we devise appropriate climate change regulations? We need to listen to the voices of the silenced.

Historically, the silenced have been those in developing countries whose voices have been silenced by developed countries. The latter devise rules and regulations in pursuit of climate agendas that appear relevant to and inclusive of only their own experiences [32], and are exclusionary because they do not necessarily reflect the experiences of developing nations. Feminist perspectives acknowledge diversity in championing the inclusion of different voices, and give a platform to the marginalised and silenced by listening to and disseminating their experiences [33]. Listening to the diversity of experiences of the 'everyday' [8] would engage

our agency for action to pursue issues central to climate change. Our conscience needs to be awakened [34]. At the heart of action is individuals' willingness to engage with issues of conscience, or '*internal standards or personal norms*' [34:3]. As has been widely reported, Greta Thunberg has been a champion for the voice of climate change [35], but has endured personal attacks by anti-environmentalists and anti-feminists who represent her in negative ways for challenging large organisations and governments on their climate actions [36,37].

Regarding experiences, emergent literature indicates that men and women are experiencing climate change in different ways [33]. Some aspects of the literature suggest that women around the world tend to be those suffering the consequences of global warming [38,39]. In developing nations, women often work in largely agricultural settings, usually under harsh conditions, and suffer economically as warmer weather and water deprivation reduce crop yields [10,40,41]. However, as mentioned above, women are not homogeneous, and therefore their experiences differ owing to a number of factors such as intersectionality [15]. These disparities along the intersections of cultural and geographical backgrounds mean that climate change is experienced in diverse ways. It is often suggested that those largely responsible for climate change are the 'polluter elite', or developed nations that are rich in resources [42,32]. They have been responsible for increases in emissions arising from their technologies and industrial operations [43]. Studies also find that many climate change solutions that involve technology are 'expensive' and beyond reach, other than to those with abundant financial means, resulting in people feeling 'disempowered' and 'disengaged' [32]. This disempowerment is extended and reflected in the fields of science and engineering [32]. Although these fields are at the forefront in developing solutions to climate change, they are dominated by elite and privileged individuals. Therefore, '*other kinds of expertise, experiences, and perspectives*' must be included [32:6].

Potentialities in shifting our language

The second strand I explore concerns language, and how the climate change debate focuses heavily on risk and calculability [19]. This echoes McGregor's point that climate change impacts can be recorded and measured in quasi-rational ways and victims can be counted [9]. It is worth considering how this debate can be shifted to focus more positively on opportunities rather than risk, which might foster inclusion amongst various previously excluded groups.

Climate change is often discussed narrowly '*as an isolated threat that is separate from other issues*' [32], and climate change experts' focus on abstract scientific concepts, such as carbon reduction and greenhouse gas emissions, has served to exclude individuals who are not part of the discourse [20]. In focusing on 'fixing' issues using technology, the subjective element of humanity is ignored. This approach has given rise to carbon accounting as a technological fix, rendering individuals and their experiences invisible [32]. Accounting is often used in the climate debate as a tool to justify and monitor, and as a method of surveillance to capture financial reality and account for uncertainty in monetary values [44–46]. Too often, calculations based on historical information are used to predict the future and account for the present. Accounting focuses on calculating risk, in order to reduce future uncertainty by

managing exposure to that risk. However, *'Language is far richer in that each word summons-up culturally important concepts'* [47:497]. Corporations have developed frames such as 'regulatory risk', market risk, reputational risk and physical risk, in order to codify risks into 'calculable entities' [48:618–619]. These risk frames enable corporations to demonstrate that they are involved in the debate and are actively adjusting their practices by calculating their exposure to climate change. Technologies and accounting language built on calculability and rationality reflect the masculine [49]. Furthermore, in capitalist societies, organisations see climate change largely as an external issue that is happening *to* them rather than *'being created by them'* [47:502].

However, because climate change is not static and is ever-shifting, it is perhaps more useful to the debate to consider the term 'climate changing', which emphasises the transformation of current climate conditions. Using the gerund ('changing') signals movement and brings the concept alive [50]. These calculations are in a state of flux and movement; they can never fully reflect the reality that they set out to capture and record, but only a partial (social) reality [51]. This focus on risk and uncertainty currently has negative connotations that may cause fear and worry for individuals as we move toward an uncertain future dominated by a constantly changing climate. It has been argued that our current approach illuminates our vulnerabilities and fears [52,53], and that we perhaps need to shift the debate to the present conditions and the opportunities they create for humanity [21]. In other words, climate change has happened and is happening, and therefore we need to live with what is presented. The fundamental issue is to shift the conversation to one of opportunity and creating opportunities. In order to do this, our mindset needs to shift to embrace the multiplicity of possibilities [22,54].

Futures, anticipation and agency

My last strand of exploration is on the notions of futures, anticipation and agency, and how this vast field might advance and enhance our understanding by being reflective and reflexive about climate change. Individuals' actions are always anticipatory with regard to the future [23]. This is because the future is regarded as being some time away from the present moment, and therefore we need to use methods to define how we 'know the future'. We need to engage in the capacity to aspire [55], or *'to imagine and strive toward a life society different from one's own present situation'* [23:2]. Thus, central to this argument is the notion of imagination [56,57]. Bringing together individuals who are able to imagine different kinds of futures and a multiplicity of futures will enable co-creation and collaboration in order to meet climate change regulations. This extends to collaboration and cooperation between developing and developed nations. If we utilise *'approaches which are experimental and critical then these may lead to injecting reflexivity into the debate about the future'* [23:6]. Reflexivity will allow our assumptions to be questioned in ways that connect our thoughts with our actions and agency. Thus, the field of futures or futures literacy will enable exploration of how we, as individuals, relate to the environment and climate change

[21,58,59]. The following questions are useful for developing reflexive practices, and particularly our engagement with climate change [23:8]:

- *'What assumptions, values and worldviews underlie our relationships with the later-than-now?'*
- *What approaches exist to make sense of the future? How and when are they used? How and when should they be used?'*
- *How can we understand and evaluate how futures approaches change relationships with the later-than-now?'*
- *How can predominant ideas about and conceptions of the later-than-now be challenged? By whom, how, where, and when?'*

These questions are insightful because they will help us to think differently about the climate change debate and seek other ways of moving forward. Beginning to question our assumptions, values and current approaches will perhaps enable us to let go of some of our more 'traditional' ways of approaching climate change, such as carbon accounting, and seek new and innovative ways of dealing with the present and the opportunities it might bring. This might go hand-in-hand with opportunities created by shifting our language for dealing with risk, uncertainty and vulnerability to focus on potential opportunities.

Conclusions for now

This discussion piece has highlighted three strands central to feminist perspectives that might be further developed to facilitate the performativity of climate regulations. Listening to experiences is a fundamental aspect that is almost invisible in the literature and in current work on climate change. This is important, as it will enable previously silenced voices to be heard in the debate. In the context of climate change, these have tended to be the voices of developing nations and women who have been relegated to the category of the 'vulnerable', as they have tended to be treated homogeneously. The more we hear that women are vulnerable, the more performative it appears to become. The climate change debate has been led by developed nations, offering solutions and fixes, such as carbon accounting, that aim to track projects to reduce emissions in specific sectors. However, these technologies are usually associated with the masculine, and thus have worked to exclude not only women, but also others who are not part of the discourse, such as developing nations. The notion of masculinity also appears to be replicated both in the technology used to monitor climate change, and in the language of risk, codification and calculations that dominates this technology. Furthermore, the term 'climate change' needs to be shifted and reshaped to capture our current reality of 'climate changing'. Finally, the notions of futures, anticipation and agency are central to the climate change debate, because they allow us to consider our relationships with the multiplicity of futures that lie ahead. A fundamental assumption is that everyone must take part in the climate debate, including all nations. This will encourage collaboration and co-creation in an uncertain world through our attempts to imagine different kinds of futures and a multiplicity of futures, in order to meet climate change regulations. A key aspect of futures literacy is the importance it attaches to reflexivity. How can we learn to

anticipate and question our assumptions in the climate change debate, which will lead us into thinking and action? Clearly, we need to be ready to adapt to the changing environments that now dominate our VUCA world.

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