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INHABITING REGIONAL GEOGRAPHICAL PRACTICE IN A CLIMATE-CHANGING WORLD

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ABSTRACT

Reflecting on the limits of the sovereign-state centrality of mainstream contemporary climate action, Peter Taylor calls for new forms of regional geographical analysis and intervention. What might these aims and ambitions look and feel like for geographers? With this commentary, I take up Taylor's propositions through personal reflection on the work of "doing regional geography" in this current juncture of transnational climate action and transformation. I engage with the analytical challenges associated with regional climate research today – in my case, by way of financialized climate governance puzzles in Florida and the Netherlands. I also discuss how deconstructive and reconstructive approaches to knowledge production enliven my regional geographical engagement, but also generate new personal and disciplinary dilemmas. With this brief note, I hope to reinforce continued reflection on how geographers might take up – or inhabit – timely calls for regional analysis and intervention in climate-changing regions.

Key words: Regional geography; climate change; knowledge production; Florida; The Netherlands; financialization

How are regional climate adaptation plans shaping, and shaped by, coastal housing market dynamics in the U.S. state of Florida? This was the primary question guiding my first return to Florida, my home, in the guise of doctoral researcher, now nearly a decade ago. What I had envisioned as a study on regional politicians, planning experts, property developers, and real estate agents contending with climate risks was rather quickly derailed by questions regarding the role of transnational finance and capital in mediating Florida urban futures. Property insurers and their insurers, or reinsurers, would be central power brokers in a climate-changing Florida, I was told by interlocutors. An executive at the regional branch of a well-known international design and construction services company expressed this view succinctly: "You can have all the politics and all the plans you want, but this private sector will eventually have to come to the table. If they come to the marketplace too quickly, they'll destroy value in the

market, which is not the value of a resilience program." Many individuals, nested in various positions of power and influence, echoed similar statements about re/insurance over the course of my year in Tampa and Miami. Yet few could articulate how or why this came to be, or how it might pose challenges for regional resilience in years to come. And so, with time, my field sites shifted from real estate officers in stucco strip-malls in places with names like Treasure Island and Palma Ceia, to those of risk capital traders housed in cool glass-and-steel office towers in London and Singapore.

With this shift in venue, so too came new analytical dilemmas. In Tampa, Miami, and in many other places, the 'regional' dynamics of climate adaptation are increasingly extended to, and contoured by, transnational forms and flows of finance. So too is finance at the very top of international climate action agendas, discourse, and debate today. Calls for more expansive – but also just and reparative – flows

and forms of climate finance were heard loudly at COP27 in Sharm el-Sheikh, as but one example. At the same time, financial institutions are taking up questions of climate risk and resilience through a number of networks and initiatives – many self-initiated – such as the Network of Central Banks and Supervisors for Greening of the Financial System (NGFS) and the United Nations Environment Programme Finance Initiative (UNEP FI). This parallel centering – of ‘finance’ within the realm of climate action, and ‘climate’ in the domain of finance – presents no shortage of threads to unravel and reweave, no less for a regional geographer.

This takes me to Peter Taylor’s essay, which begins by reflecting on the limits of the sovereign state-centricity of contemporary mainstream approaches to organizing institutional climate action. For Taylor, “(a)n obvious starting point is to highlight a simple disjuncture: anthropogenic climate change is no respecter of human-made political boundaries. Enter the field of study that is Geography.” Taylor turns to longstanding concepts in regional studies – that of formal and functional regions, and their mixity – to pinpoint ways to “confront” and “tackle” what he calls this “geographical ontology dilemma.” Taylor’s essay is explicitly interventionist, outlining how regionalism affords us with analytical and synthetic tools – and an overarching opportunity and imperative – to think through and re/imagine climate response.

But what might Taylor’s interventionist ambitions, timely and constructive though they may be, look, and feel like for a geographer? With this response, I want to inhabit Taylor’s propositions by way of reflection on my academic practice, with the hope of enriching dialogue about what the work of “doing regional geography” in a climate-changing world might entail across the many distinctive geographies in which we, as academics, find ourselves embedded. I do so from my position as an early career scholar who has been asked, and has chosen, to occupy a hybrid (and sometimes seemingly impossible) position: as a geographer incognito at an engineering-dominated university, but also someone tasked with co-constructing a transdisciplinary knowledge institute straddling three universities that, in

turn, explicitly seeks to produce climate resilience “solutions” for the urbanized Dutch delta region. Here, in these shifting terrains, I find myself confronted with timely and vital demands for hybrid knowledges, unexpected collaborations, and highly embedded forms of intervention. Such demands cast questions of research practice and discipline (and self-identification therein) into an uncertain and open-ended terrain of knowledge production. It is from this position that I hope to invite more reflection about the many ways in which we might inhabit the geographical dilemma laid out by Taylor, by way of our regional geographical entanglements.

Much of my ongoing academic work seeks to reconcile the transnational (if always uneven situated) practices of climate risk finance with regional and urban geographies of climate risk governance. Reconciliation is a key word here: I believe in the power of geographical thinking to help make sense of the world, but also to re-interpret and reconstruct it in ways which tend to the disjunctures, contradictions, and conflicts often revealed by geographical analysis. In my work, this entails studying how climate risk finance produces new or deepened patterns of uneven spatial restructuring in ‘risky’ places, and translating this for planners, activists, and other stakeholders tasked with retrofitting places in adaptive, durable, and quitable ways. Increasingly this also entails a move towards sustained and purposeful engagement in these same changing regions, increasingly through collaborative work beyond my discipline and the university. I experience this as an unfinished double manoeuvre, a constant toggling between *deconstructive* and *reconstructive* engagement with regional dynamics.

To explain what I mean by the former, I wish to return to the dilemma I introduced at the start of this essay. Early in my doctoral research, I found the logics and prospects for regional climate adaptation in Florida coastal regions to be remarkably and asymmetrically contingent on the sustained workings of the transnational property re/insurance system. As I have argued previously (e.g., Taylor 2020), this is a function of how and where coastal Florida, and much of the U.S. more broadly, urbanized in relation to environmental hazards, and more specifically about how we built institutions to

manage the entwined physical and financial risks associated with this mode of development. Enter the re/insurance system, which coordinates the exchange of many hundreds of billions of dollars of 'risk capital' annual, in the forms and flows of policyholder premiums, claims payments, and increasingly liquid capital market investment. This system underpins a particular regional political economy of housing and development, and in turn, contours, local and regional climate risk and resilience governance dynamics (see, e.g., Elliott 2019; Shi & Varuzzo 2020; Cox 2022). And this system is also produced through its own regional geographies, of networked relations of firms and individuals based in places like London and Singapore, dominant yet competitive and entrepreneurial 'command and control' nodes in a risk capital architecture (Taylor 2022). Re/insurance flows shape, and are shaped by, these entwined regions in transformation. Other forms of institutional and transnational capital – for example, pension fund investments in municipal bonds or real estate funds – are also increasingly implicated in their own logics of trans-regional transformation. So too does geographical knowledge produce these worlds by, as one crucial example, feeding the design of the actuarial models needed to marketize risk with knowledge about environmental hazards (Taylor & Weinkle 2020). And so can geography offer many ways to interpret these dynamics. Seminal concepts from geographical political economy, regional studies, and other sub-fields have helped me to make generative links between real estate finance, regional climate governance, and processes like climate gentrification (Taylor & Aalbers 2022).

Presently, I work in the Netherlands, in a remarkable moment marked by growing collective concern about the vulnerability of this low-lying, densely urbanized delta region to rising seas, land subsidence, and other climate risks. One of the many sets of questions being debated today relates to the durability of the Dutch delta's well-known, expansive physical infrastructure system, and how and when to best adapt it to contend with a changing climate. A second set has to do with ambitious plans to build hundreds of thousands of new homes, in response to an enduring housing affordability crisis. These two dynamics are

on a collision course: a highly financialized, high-value, and expanding property market sets many of the spatial and temporal terms of the spatial adaptation puzzle, even in its most narrow and infrastructural framing. In particular Dutch fashion, engineers, designers, and planners increasingly embrace this conjoined challenge through exploratory studies and frequent debate, much of which plays out in highly visible public venues. Science, too, has been called upon to develop a broad and integrated, 'transdisciplinary' knowledge agenda to support long-term transition planning that unpacks these, and other, interdependencies and contradictions. With this call have come a series of substantial investments in new programmes, initiatives, funding schemes, and ways of working within and between universities, and with external public and private partners.

This takes me to the notion of reconstructive engagement. Continuing with the theme of real estate finance, an ongoing focus of my work entails building a large team of scientific and non-academic partners, with an aim to co-create integrated real estate and infrastructure climate risk governance strategies for the Dutch delta (Daamen & Taylor 2022). Colleagues and I continuously convene interactions with, and learn from, dozens of scientists, government actors, and private sector interests, largely from real estate finance institutions – think pension funds, asset managers, developers, and insurers. This has meant devising scientific research strategies to facilitate long-term regional transitions – say, shifting an investment and building regime with the country's novel new 'water and soil leading' policy. With this comes a need to be highly intentional about modes of collaboration across disciplines and sectors. The multifaceted character of the topic necessitates the inclusion of knowledges from a vast array of perspectives, that, in turn, need to be put into some sort of generative and synthetic dialogue that we hope can, eventually, help to shift the understandings needed to reconcile something as profound as, say, the conjoined housing-finance and climate adaptation challenge in the Netherlands.

Here, colleagues and I continue an active, open-ended dialogue about how to draw generative entanglements between disciplines and

interests, in ways which tend to – and hopefully at times trouble – the rough and quick edges of an emergent intersection between finance, building, engineering, planning and other domains. How does this play out? By way of example, a few months ago we hosted our first consortium-wide symposium with several dozen stakeholders in Valkenburg, a town in the southeast of the Netherlands that was profoundly unsettled by serious flooding in the summer of 2021 (Van Den Bragt & Daamen 2022). The day was first and foremost meant to be an introduction for consortium members, both to each other – given that the programme was largely devised over an eighteen-month stretch of lockdowns – and specifically to foreground current practices in real estate finance with regards to climate risk, which are in many ways black-boxed to non-insiders. Panel presentations from Dutch financial institutions – the central bank, a leading insurer, a pension fund, and so on – gave way to a presentation from Marjolijn Haasnoot, a research collaborator and IPCC author, who offered a challenging message about the scale and uncertainty of the adaptation task ahead of the Netherlands.

What started as what can be described as a ‘centred’ confidence from representatives from the real estate finance sector seemed to gradually unravel over the course of the day. Propositions from one corner – like adding ‘risk labels’ to risky properties or increasing the costs of mortgages for housing in vulnerable areas – were quickly troubled from another part of the room. At one remarkable moment, at the end of the afternoon, a colleague from the financial sector raised their hand to add to the discussion. They stood up, and rather unexpectedly, acknowledged their discomfort with the uncertainty and complexity that had been injected into the dialogue. In this moment, for at least one person, the long work of taking apart and reconstructing a sense of collective climate response began.

Alongside this reconstructive approach come many related dilemmas, alluded to in the anecdote in the last paragraph. Beyond disciplinary recognition by peers or well-established hierarchies within academic institutions, questions of academic independence are challenged. New languages and ‘translation

techniques’ must be continuously crafted to facilitate understanding between disciplines, or beyond the academic realm. Political considerations of many kinds infuse daily knowledge creation practice, raising stakes and signalling conflicts within and between individuals, institutions, sectors, and farther afield. Layers of uncertainty and contingency permeate both our research and encounters with stakeholders. Horizons of thinking, and the prospect of personally experiencing tangible transformation, stretch far into the future. All of this can land uncomfortably as one inhabits the work of thinking through and engaging with transition. Communities of care, solidarity, imagination – both within and beyond our discipline and ‘academic’ lives – are vital for processing these tensions, and sustaining our personal and collective engagements for the long haul. Building modes and spaces of collective and supportive knowledge production are now, perhaps more than ever, crucial – despite persistent and individualizing academic norms and conventions.

With this brief reflective note, I hope to have sparked generative reflection about how we might seriously take up Peter Taylor’s call for renewed forms of regional geographical thinking, both “analytic and synthetic”, in our engagements with climate change. Regional traditions can sit next to other vital insights from our fields in powerful ways. I cannot imagine approaching regional transformation, without tools from urban and financial geography and insights from physical geography, nor can I conceive of thoughtful and collaborative intervention without wisdom imparted from feminist geography, for example. And regional thinking can continue to help us to locate and embed our academic practices in settings – disciplinary and beyond, academic and beyond – that enable us to respond to the many urgent challenges raised by a dynamic and climate-changing world in transformation. Taylor’s call, I hope, is one that many of us will (continue to) inhabit through our work.

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