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Encountering COP26 as a security event: a short walking ethnography

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ABSTRACT

This paper represents a short ethnographic encounter with the site of the COP26 Climate Conference in Glasgow in 2021. It communicates an experiential picturing of the site as it was assembled and disassembled, as this was recorded in notes, conversations, via phone footage and in a short talk afterwards with human geography colleagues at the University of Glasgow. The paper seeks to make sense of this short experiential encounter by drawing from scholarship on ethnography, security and events of emergency assemblage. The paper concludes by reflection on the ordinary purpose of walking sites of climate security and emergency.

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Introduction: Walking the (extra)ordinary

Shortly before the COP26 site in the city of Glasgow was closed off to members of the public, my friend Sharon and I undertook a very informal and short ‘walking ethnography’ of the emerging site depicted in [Figure 1](#), as part of a collective ‘Human Geography Research Group’ (HGRG) initiative to encounter this global meeting on our doorsteps, as explained in the introduction to this theme section. Our focus was on the materiality of the site and how it was assembled and disassembled before and after the climate conference. It could be framed as a provisional attempt to chart something of the experience of a ‘securityscape’ (Noxolo, 2014) that accompanied COP26 into Glasgow, although in very particular terms and embodied by white, able-bodied women.

In retrospect, rather than through foresight, this experience brought me to consider work by Anderson and Gordon (2017) and others on ways of understanding the assemblage of events, and specifically on how we might think about the relationship between government, event and the significance of ‘emergency’: in this case the proximate possible emergency relating to the security of COP26 delegates and others, but also the longer-term emergency of the climate crisis of planet Earth. My use of this work is both playful but also problematic, not least because I am considering what was a very ordinary event that lasted only two weeks, but also one that itself felt apocalyptic

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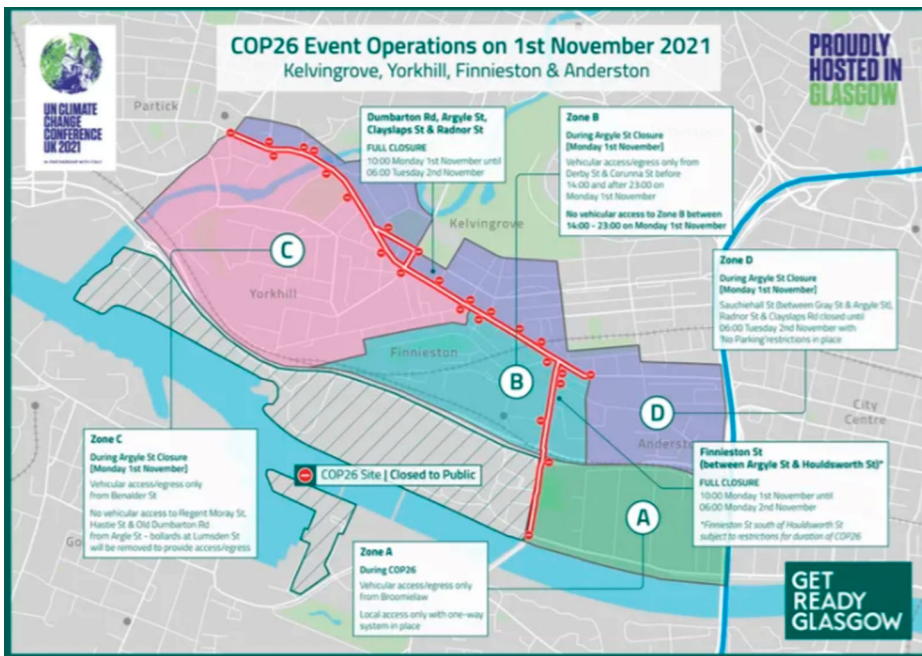


Figure 1. COP16 event operations. (Source: Get Ready Glasgow.)

(step-changing, a ‘tipping point’) or way of preventing the apocalyptic (damaging climate change). Helpfully, Anderson and Gordon (2017, p.165) use a variety of thinkers to communicate different registers of event, including Berlant’s (2011, p. 5) account of ‘situation’, where “[s]ituation” is a genre of the emerging event, not of the “event” as impact’. Although it is extreme shorthand, and while possibly not quite precise enough to adopt as a theoretical context for my short communication, this picturing is still useful for my halting attempt to engage with the conjoint ordinary and extraordinary affective assemblage that was (and is still) COP26:

Event theorizers use extreme and melodramatic anti-foundational languages of nothingness, shattering, cleavage, and so on to describe impact, disregarding what about the event is at the same time ordinary, forgettable, charming, boring, inconsequential, or subtle. (Berlant, 2011, p. 278, note 17)

The walking discussed in this paper was an attempt to encounter and assess something of the ordinary situation of COP26 as an emerging conference space, growing up in prefabricated buildings and temporary tents placed on a pot-holed car park. Upon this ordinary landscape was laid a conflicting set of extraordinary hopes and fears as these related to multiple planetary ecosystems by different global actors. COP26 was at once an ordinary, even boring, material infrastructure (although see McCormack, 2006, p. 331, for comment on the ‘moving force of... pipes and cables’), as well as something highly unusual and potentially ‘shattering’.

It might be argued that understanding the ordinary, forgettable, boring or subtle is well suited to walking as a mode of encounter. Indeed, there has been a wealth of scholarship in human geography and elsewhere on the merits of walking in terms of research

methods and ways of encountering urban and rural environments (Lee & Ingold, 2006; Lorimer & Lund, 2008; Mason, 2020; Middleton, 2009; O'Neill & Roberts, 2020; Spinney, 2015). To walk COP26 as a (largely) perimeter exercise and not as part of a march or protest, unlike what is reported by both Moreau and Sutherland (this issue), was a means intended to enable me to open-up to the affective resonance of the assembling and disassembling of the site as a material event. With a sense of the awesome global significance of COP26, but also an ordinary curiosity about the building of the site that was down the road, my friend Sharon and I chose a Friday night and the following weekends to explore the changing security arrangements and emerging COP infrastructures by the River Clyde in Glasgow. Inspired too by a range of writers, including Mason (2020), on the value of relational attention between walking and infrastructures of the state, I was interested – as non-delegate and local resident – in the changing material assemblage of objects, people, security of COP26 and the generative affects of these elements across the weeks of the event. Realizing these aims took place via a series of visits on foot and bike throughout both the build-up and the build-down of this global event.

Before COP26: assembling security

As we walked to the COP26 site around 7pm that first Friday night, my friend was excited but nervous. A mile out from the site, she saw a large sports bag leaned against a bin. 'Do you think we should report that?', she asked me. I laughed, 'I don't think it's a bomb'. But she was not so sure. As we passed the first security guard, half a mile from the site, my friend reported it to him. He looked blank and said, 'I don't know about that'. We shuffled off, shrugging and waving, 'Ok thanks, no worries'. The event of COP26 had already affected my friend's sense of security and clearly she was alert to material objects in and out-of-place as we walked to the venue.

Nearing the main site, walking by the River Clyde, we dipped in an out of the security fence which we were surprised to find was still open and accessible. Security personnel were sparse, but present, emerging from shadows, checking boundaries. Testing the security of site boundaries, we entered a gap in the fence to the main site and I was amazed to be able to take photos of what was to become the ministerial entrance and scanning machines, unchallenged by security with three days to go until opening (see [Figure 2](#)). I wondered if I was being profiled on CCTV. Eventually a guard stopped us and pointed out the site was closed, but was friendly in redirecting us.

Returning in daylight just before the event, I took snaps of police gathered in vans, engaged on manoeuvres. There were also site staff visibly marching rather than just walking (see [Figure 3](#)), while wire gates, concrete blocks and the assembling of high-security temporary infrastructure meant that the Clyde cycle path seemed very different. I no longer felt it was possible to loiter for extended periods, although I was still taking photos unchallenged. My security imagination meant I thought it possible that the bridge was bugged as I was taking footage, and that security services were listening to my conversations and even seeing the photos I was taking, as well as profiling my face. This was an exaggerated security anxiety, to be sure, but one invited by the assembling infrastructure which, although (or because) it was happening so very close to the opening of COP26, held a distinct rhythm and discomfiting affect.



Figure 2. Taking pictures of security infrastructure before COP26. (Source: Author's own photograph.)

The media reported that the city area was policed by 10,000 officers, although the site itself became 'UN territory' – an exceptional space for temporary global purpose, which meant that police had no direct access to it without invitation. This is worthy of comment, as Lythgoe (2021) points out: the status of COP26 as a physical territory was confusing to some media and state agencies, since it was legally constituted simultaneously as 'international territory', 'UN-territory', 'a space subject to the jurisdiction of Scots law', 'UK sovereign soil', and 'private space'. The security agreements between the UN and UK form the basis of this complex geographical relationship:

The Scottish Events Campus (or other venue, as agreed in accordance with Article 11bis of this Agreement), including any area immediately outside it that will be under the direct supervision and control of the United Nations Department of Safety and Security (hereinafter referred to as 'the UNDSS') as agreed with the security authorities of the UK, shall collectively constitute the Conference premises (hereinafter referred to as 'the Conference premises'). (Article 1, Para. 2, Draft Agreement, Treaty Series 16, 2021)

Security within the Conference premises shall be the responsibility of the UNDSS, which shall work with the secretariat and in close collaboration with the security authorities of the UK. Security outside the Conference premises shall be the responsibility of the UK. The boundaries of the two security zones and the modalities of cooperation shall be clearly defined by the UK and the secretariat in a separate memorandum of understanding



Figure 3. Marching security staff as part of a rhythmic assembling. (Source: Author's own photograph.)

before the premises are handed over to the secretariat. (Article 9, Para. 2, Draft Agreement, Treaty Series 16, 2021)

Lythgoe (2021) states ‘the bundle of rights to exercise powers and prerogatives of control, in this sense, one might say, has not so much been “taken away” from the UK state as reassembled between a different combination of state and non-state actors’, emphasizing that the securitization of COP26 was a complicated spatial event but with banal confusions about the legal administrative frames crucial for anticipated operations. Lythgoe cites the Police Assistant Chief Constable who stated in a Justice Sub-Committee on Policing, 12th March 2020, for the Scottish Parliament that:

The simplest way that I can put it, from an operational perspective, is that we are, in effect, treating the zone as private space. When Police Scotland deals with any matter in private space, we can enter only at the request of the owner of the property, under warrant or, in extremis, when there is a threat to life. That will be the basis on which we will police the blue zone. (<https://archive2021.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/report.aspx?r=12581>)

Publics were repeatedly told about the 24/7 security efforts around the site and along the river. Critical commentaries reported on the ‘atmosphere of fear and aggression’ (Brooks, 2021). The police reported that the public were supportive of these security efforts, while activists condemned policing tactics. There are public and less public experiences of security of COP26, itself an event in which:

territory [was] a space ... constantly produced and reproduced through the practices of actors exercising authority. The territory of one actor may be temporally bound by a three-week period. It may overlap the same physical geography as the territory of another actor that controls a different bundle of rights, powers, and prerogatives. (Lythgoe, 2021)

COP26 as a site, a territory in which multiple operations of an event took place, was therefore complicated, even confused. Such machinations were not fully apparent in walking ethnographies, but the late securing of fencing, together with fluid public access just hours before the start of the conference, may suggest that *where* and *how* COPs ‘take place’ might be important (and see mapping of COP operations and activist geographies in Copenhagen: Chatterton et al., 2013).

After Cop26: disassembling security

Returning to the Clyde site in the days after COP26, I walked in awe. The traces of the event were larger than I had expected and unsettling in their remains. I was reminded of the scale of the meeting and aware not only of its infrastructural dismantling, but also of what the event itself might have ‘built’ globally. My intention to remain fixated with the concrete, material and the physically present was a flawed project haunted by the emotive resonance of hundreds of people gathering to discuss the future of climate change. As I walked around the site which had returned to the jurisdiction of Scots Law, I recalled watching the agreement take place in real time but via a TV screen, the palpable emotion leaking out of the formal proceedings (Figure 4), but, for me, also leaving a mark on my encounter with the physical remains of the event.

What remained of COP26 in the weeks after its staging was a gradually un-done physical infrastructure (tents, pipes, ventilation machines, metal fencing, gates, barriers), but

also lingering but provocative questions about how it mattered. One attempt to think about the *matter* of the event is the walking ethnography that took place, attentive to the material objects and materiality of security. The walking ethnography was an affective mobile geography, touched by a sensing of security, as well as geographical imaginations of what security is and can do, and a more conscious emotive response to the purpose of the event and the scale of its challenge. [Figure 5](#) shows an upturned concrete barrier, which invited my touch, as I was involuntarily moved to press my hand on it, signalling something of its awesome size and the less material affect bound to its presence in this momentous temporary territory.

Thinking with COP26 I

My fleeting engagement with the site of COP26 drew me to reflect on our spatial experience of security infrastructures and their affects (Anderson, 2021). Walking a COP26 site before and after might be just one ‘way in’ to understanding the material assemblage of the special sites that exist/will exist in an unfolding global climate emergency that requires special kinds of state apparatus:

States govern events or situations as emergencies because, in some way, they threaten harm, loss, damage or suffering to ‘something’ the state values and recognises (whether that ‘something’ be an infrastructure, people, living beings, or an atmosphere of control and continuity). The claim by the state is that harm and damage is happening and/or is imminent, but an ‘interval’ ... of time remains for action. Nevertheless, in an emergency something that appears to be outside of the state, some kind of excess, disrupts and threatens to break and end its capacities to act and secure life. (Anderson, 2021, p. 1360)

COP26 as an event is not an emergency situation in quite the way Anderson writes about them (and see other commentaries on the ‘exceptional’ state: Minca (2007), Springer (2012)), but there are points of connection with how we might understand the extraordinary securitisation and state-shifting power enacted via the material assemblage of COP and the wider planetary purpose of the COP event series: namely, mitigating climate change. Anderson (2021, p. 1361) speaks to how ‘emergency states are constantly being disassembled but also reassembled in relation to excess’, and, adapting Anderson



COP26: Alok Sharma fights back tears as Glasgow Climate Pact agreed

Figure 4. BBC screen shot. (Source: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-59276651>.)



Figure 5. Upturned concrete barrier after COP26. (Source: Author's own photograph.)

here, we might understand COPs as one exemplar – at once material, immaterial, local, global – and ‘where “the state” is at once a material, imaginative, and affective formation’ (Anderson, 2021, p. 1360). We might also question what precedent is set here in how states might govern, police and respond to future climate emergencies and climate excess that are event-ful but via different temporalities – not just ‘now’ or ‘before 2050’ or ‘in the future’ – noting too that:

... the excess of events is imaginatively and affectively present through verbal and written statements about future events and future states. The excess of events is present through practices which create future presents of damage and destruction that challenge the credibility of the promise of the neutral and/or capable state. (Anderson, 2021, p. 1362)

In walking around the assembling and disassembling COP26 site in Glasgow, I was experiencing and conceptualizing the material assemblage that was emerging as an anticipatory event-space – anticipating the global state actors and others who would arrive, anticipating possible terrorisms that might be enacted, and anticipating the managing of a two-week event that needed to be seated, catered, directed, ventilated, as well as policed. The assemblage that I experienced was ‘awesome’ in the affects of marching feet, big fences, concrete barriers, big tubes and ministerial signs, considering the situation of climate change. I was also aware that much of the assemblage was hidden; the unknown local and international security operations, the labour on and off the site, the activist networks, the distributed planetary materialities, and more; and I wondered about their relationships to the chronic event of climate change under discussion by the elites in Glasgow. Walking prompted inconclusive thinking about the situation of the site, its event-ness as a material object and the scales of its impact.

Thinking with COP26 II

Using walking to encounter the material event of COP26 and the climate situation (after Berlant, 2011) also prompts thinking about ethnographies of security. At the start of this

paper, I made reference to walking scholarships which think critically about this mode of affective encounter. There are also related examples that demonstrate how ethnographic open-ended enquiry opens up new avenues through which to examine political architectures and technologies generative of critical situations in everyday life. A study by Griffiths and Repo (2018) on Palestinian Checkpoint 300 between Bethlehem and Jerusalem is an exemplar of ethnography sensitive to modes of mobility and stillness, to the disciplinary functionality of political architecture, and to varied bodies-and-object assemblages by offering a ‘focus on the Checkpoint’s physical design that disciplines the flow and form of movement: the control of time, pace and direction; what individuals can move with (e.g. wheelchairs, pushchairs, walking aids) or carry (work tools)’ (Griffiths & Repo, 2018, p. 18) in order to advance a critical encounter with the ‘racist logic of Israeli settler colonialism’. In crossing Checkpoint 300 more than 20 times, and ‘during each crossing we took photographs, made voice memos and, after crossing the Checkpoint, wrote field notes’, these mobile ethnographers probed ‘political security architecture more broadly by examining how the checkpoint is not just exclusionary, but organises and renders bodies and their affective capacities useful for the settler colonial project both in and outside the checkpoint’ (Griffiths & Repo, 2018, p. 18 & p. 19).

Such a study is an example where there is clear value in ‘thinking with’ sites of security both with reference to their micro-geographical and micro-social specificity, but also in ways that allow wider contributions about affective emergency sites and states together with the work they do. Checkpoint 300 emerges here as a ‘complex space’, and we might take away some ethnographic lessons for walking/moving through security sites as one way of understanding their excess power, their situation and their event-ness. In this case, the ongoing assembling of (part of) a securityscape is foregrounded – digging deeply into how it is constantly made and remade each day, enacted and occasionally resisted – but with little sense of how it might at some point be disassembled. My COP26 example does open windows on both assembling and disassembling, although questions relating to planetary dimensions of the Anthropogenic securityscape – of how the planet is secured against climate change, or rather how the planet is secured against the dissident forces demanding change to geo-political-economic orders – still remain.

Conclusion: Thinking the (extra)ordinary

Security is not only about spectacular conflicts or strategic concepts but is also engaged with and experienced through mundane and ordinary social life. (Konopinski, 2009, p. 284)

Emergency and the response to an emergency emerge together, both becoming with the tangle of scenes, trajectories, objects and other things that compose people’s everyday lives. (Anderson, 2017, p. 471)

This paper has considered COP26 through an ordinary and short walking ethnography. This ethnography affectively encountered the material site of an actual event, and an imagined, distributed present-future, one that might be akin to a ‘slow emergency’ (Grove et al., 2021). The extraordinary steps taken to secure a temporary UN territory on the banks of the River Clyde in Glasgow are discussed, but in light of a really quite banal securing of space made visible by gates, fences, personnel and concrete blocks. Walking the assembling and disassembling site was cast as a way of thinking with

COP26 as both mundane event and emergency situation (after Berlant, 2011), in which a slow future was rendered imminent. This present-future was apparent in screened moments from the hall nearby where I walked and felt through the remains of the temporary building blocks securing the site.

Such a material and yet ultimately abstract encounter (as it is rendered here) belies ‘massively distributed problems [of] climate change’ (Anderson, 2016, p. 16) and its uneven ‘racial, gender, and class *impacts*’ (Grove et al., 2021, p. 8), all of which are hidden in this site-specific ethnography. So, what can walking sites, events, situations like COP26 actually *do*? This brief paper suggests there is value in encountering global events in particular ordinary places and considering their affects, geographies and temporalities, particularly when concerned with slow planetary emergencies. We may all remember Glasgow COP26 for yet unknown, but widely anticipated reasons, and walking its presence/present by the River Clyde was one way in which to *think with* the situation and the ‘ordinary, forgettable, charming, boring, inconsequential, or subtle’ (Berlant, 2011, p. 278). This may be a small (mobile) step towards addressing the claim from Anderson and Gordon (2017, p. 175) that ‘attuning to events has become one way for social and cultural geography to sense and disclose forms of non-linear change’.

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