

ANALYTICAL ESSAY

Emergency: A Vernacular Contextual Approach

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Security scholars have traditionally viewed emergency as a state of exception that triggers a struggle for survival, justifying the breaking of rules and excesses of state power. While there have been attempts to decouple security from its survivalist logic, emergency has remained an analytical blind spot in security studies. The dominance of an elite-centric, exceptionalist paradigm in the study of emergency has foreclosed the possibility of alternative conceptions of emergency and neglected the voices of structurally disempowered agents. This paper advances a vernacular contextual research agenda that is sensitive to the empirical diversity of emergency meanings and practices while foregrounding emergency claims made by non-elite actors. Challenging the idea of emergency as a form of “anti-politics,” the paper contends that emergency should be understood as an intrinsic part of politics. It then recovers an alternative, “emancipatory” conception of emergency as an extraordinary moment of spontaneous beginnings that can activate the collective agency of marginalized actors. The final section establishes conceptual foundations for actor-centered, grounded empirical research into emergency politics and suggests avenues for future research. Contextualizing emergency and attuning to the voices and experiences of everyday actors are crucial to remove the key variable that ties security to the logic of survival and exception.

Los académicos que se dedican al estudio de la seguridad han considerado, tradicionalmente, las emergencias como un estado de excepción que desencadena una lucha por la supervivencia, que justifica la ruptura de las normas y los excesos del poder por parte del Estado. Si bien ha habido intentos de desvincular la seguridad de su lógica de supervivencia, las emergencias siguen siendo un punto ciego analítico de los estudios en materia de seguridad. El predominio de un paradigma excepcionalista y centrado en las élites en el estudio de las emergencias ha excluido la posibilidad de concepciones alternativas de las mismas y ha dejado de lado las voces de los agentes estructuralmente no empoderados. Este artículo propone una agenda de investigación contextual vernácula que es sensible a la diversidad empírica de los significados y las prácticas de emergencia, al tiempo que pone en primer plano las reclamaciones de emergencia realizadas por actores no elitistas. Desafiando la idea de las emergencias como una forma de «antipolítica», el artículo sostiene que las emergencias deben

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entenderse como una parte intrínseca de la política. A continuación, recupera una concepción alternativa y «emancipadora» de las emergencias como momentos extraordinarios de comienzos espontáneos que pueden activar la acción colectiva de los actores marginados. La última sección establece las bases conceptuales para una investigación empírica fundamentada, centrada en los actores, sobre la política de emergencia y sugiere vías para futuras investigaciones. Contextualizar las emergencias y sintonizar con las voces y experiencias de los actores cotidianos es fundamental para eliminar la variable clave que vincula la seguridad a la lógica de la supervivencia y la excepción.

Traditionnellement, les chercheur·euses spécialisé·es sur les questions de sécurité considèrent l'urgence comme un état d'exception, générant une lutte pour la survie et justifiant le non-respect des règles et l'abus de pouvoir étatique. S'il y a bien eu des tentatives pour dissocier la notion de sécurité de cette logique survivaliste, l'urgence demeure un angle mort analytique dans les travaux de recherche. Il est certain que la prédominance d'un paradigme exceptionnaliste, centré sur le point de vue d'une élite, a entravé toute possibilité de proposer des conceptions alternatives de l'urgence, et a négligé les voix d'individus structurellement tenus à l'écart du pouvoir. Cet article propose un programme de recherche contextuel et vernaculaire, attentif à la diversité empirique des perceptions et pratiques associées à la notion d'urgence, mettant en avant les positions d'individus situés en dehors des cercles d'élite. Contestant la perception de l'urgence comme un état « anti-politique », cet article défend au contraire sa nature intrinsèquement politique. Il propose une conception alternative et émancipatrice de l'urgence en tant que moment extraordinaire, générateur de mouvements spontanés capables d'activer la capacité d'action collective d'acteur·ices marginalisé·es. La dernière section définit des bases conceptuelles pour une recherche empirique, axée sur le terrain et ses acteur·ices, et propose des pistes pour de futurs travaux sur les politiques sécuritaires. La contextualisation de l'urgence et l'attention portée aux voix et expériences des personnes impliquées au quotidien sont essentielles pour dépasser la tendance prédominante consistant à associer la notion de sécurité à une logique de survie et d'exception.

Keywords: contextualism, emergency, vernacular security

Palabras clave: contextualismo, emergencia, seguridad vernácula

Mots clés: contextualisme, urgence, sécurité vernaculaire

Introduction

“We won’t get back to normal because normal was the problem”—this message was projected onto a wall of an apartment block in Santiago, Chile, during the 2019–2020 demonstrations over rising living costs and income inequality (Reddit 2019). The same slogan repeatedly resounds around the world during moments of civil society mobilization in response to major crises—from the recent Hong Kong protests to the recent calls for a more sustainable post-COVID-19 future. In such cases, emergency often signifies a moment of change that offers an opportunity to bring about a different type of “normal,” effect a systemic transformation, and recalibrate the very idea of security (Pantuliano 2020). Nevertheless, the emergency claims of “ordinary” citizens and other everyday actors are seldom heard by international relations (IR) and security scholars. For them, the importance of studying emergency typically hinges on its ability to empower governments and international organizations to suspend the legal order and act outside of the rules of “normal” politics. The dominant, elite-centric approach to the study of emergency politics

fails to attune to the re-articulations of emergency in local contexts. To fill this void, this paper is an effort to develop a vernacular contextual approach that is sensitive to the contextual heterogeneity of the meanings and practices of emergency while foregrounding the emergency claims made by non-elite agents.

The brief genealogy of emergency shows that it can have both positive and negative meanings. “Emergency” refers to an unforeseen occurrence or “a state of things unexpectedly arising and urgently demanding immediate action” ([Oxford English Dictionary 2020a](#)). It is a temporary situation that is presumed to have an end, and “where action is demanded and promises to make a difference” ([Anderson and Adey 2012](#), 26). The etymological roots of the term lie in the word “emergence,” which means “the process of coming forth, issuing from concealment, obscurity, or confinement” ([Oxford English Dictionary 2020b](#)). As well as implying an arising problem or difficulty, the verb “to emerge” can equally mean “to rise,” “to become recognized,” or “to come to the end of a difficult period or experience” ([Cambridge Dictionary 2020](#)). Emergency is, indeed, about dealing with a threatening situation, but it also bears the hope of bringing it to an end. It may also imply a process of coming into existence: when something old ends and something new springs forth.

In security studies and IR, however, the negative connotation of emergency with danger, harm, and lawlessness has prevailed. Emergency has been conflated with the notion of “exception” or the idea that extraordinary times call for exceptional measures ([Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998](#); [Aradau 2004](#)). For example, [Neocleous \(2008, 72\)](#) defines emergency as “a condition close to war, in which the normal constitution might be suspended.” Security scholars see emergency as the point that triggers security politics to return to its bare condition of a struggle for survival, despite the recent efforts to decouple security from its survivalist logic ([Neal 2019](#)). This paper begins by presenting a critique of the notion of exception as the dominant paradigm for the study of emergency, which fails to account for the latter’s contextual specificity. The essentialist assumption of a fixed, exclusionary, or violent logic of emergency forecloses alternative understandings and practices of emergency.

The second section disentangles the relationship between emergency, security, and politics. I contend that there is a need to reassess emergency as something that ties security to the logic of survival. Security and emergency do not always come together, but when they do, security logic can metamorphose into numerous directions depending on the discourses of security and emergency at stake in a given context. Moreover, the dichotomy between emergency and politics should likewise be problematized. The paper asserts the need to rethink the idea of emergency as a form of “anti-politics” and, instead, proposes that emergency should be understood as an intrinsic part of politics. By undoing these closures in the understanding of emergency, scholars can better grasp how “emergency” might operate differently and potentially positively.

The third section recovers what I call an “emancipatory” conception of emergency, which merits consideration because it captures the perspective of marginalized groups making emergency claims. As such, what kind of emergency might be enacted by environmental activists, the Black Lives Matter movement, or Ukrainian civil society groups in the context of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine? The section reconceptualizes emergency as an extraordinary moment of spontaneous beginnings that can rupture sedimented power structures and activate the concerted power of citizens. From a condition of breakdown or the onset of existential threats that warrant extraordinary measures, the emphasis shifts toward the generative capacity of emergency to give birth to something new. Rather than substituting one overdetermined notion of emergency for another, I aim to illuminate the diverse possibilities that emergency holds.

The final section outlines a vernacular contextual research agenda that emphasizes conceptual variation and the participation of non-elite security actors in the

politics of emergency. The paper builds on the contextual (Ciută 2009, 2016) and vernacular (Bubandt 2005; Jarvis 2019) “turns” in security studies. My central argument is that emergency—its meanings, practices, and ethical consequences—changes depending on circumstances, taking different forms for different actors. To counterbalance the traditional focus on the speech acts of top decision-makers, it is crucial to explore how emergency is understood, constructed, and experienced by citizens in local contexts. I outline several directions for a more concrete research agenda, suggesting several considerations that future research should keep in mind when embarking on a vernacular contextual study of emergency politics.

The result initiates a redefinition of emergency to account for the “view from below,” addressing the limitations of the “top-down,” elitist approach. By widening and deepening the study of emergency, previously marginalized voices come to the fore. As opposed to the widespread tendency to view citizens as a passive object that is acted upon by political and security elites, the analysis helps to decenter emergency politics. Furthermore, a vernacular contextual reading of emergency offers a new perspective for existing endeavors that seek to de-essentialize the concept of security. By opening emergency to different meanings, actors, and practices, we can remove the ultimate variable that ties security to the logic of survival, exception, and anti-politics. On top of this, the notion of emergency as an extraordinary moment of spontaneous beginnings would be of special interest to theorists from the “Welsh School” of critical security studies. It could provide the necessary vocabulary for explaining what emergency might mean within the framework of security as emancipation, as both are concerned with the liberation of the most vulnerable from contingent structural oppressions (Booth 2007; Nunes 2012). Ultimately, therefore, a broadened concept of emergency can contribute to a more positive rendering of security, as it shows that emergency can be invoked to preserve the conditions furthering human flourishing of some form.

Emergency in Security Studies

Traditionally, security scholars have viewed the logic of emergency to be in-built in security (Neocleous 2008). Apart from several scholars who have argued that security can exist without emergency (Ciută 2009; Floyd 2016; Neal 2019), conventional wisdom postulates that, with the onset of an emergency, security politics rejoices. As Walt (1991, 212) said, “the main focus of security studies [. . .] is the phenomenon of war”—the archetypical emergency, the very possibility of which valorizes security as a “special” domain above politics. Emergency has remained in the lexicon of security scholars since the dominance of the (neo)realist approach, in which security was synonymous with the struggle for survival. The tendency to view the relationship between security and emergency as inseparable has transpired into the poststructuralist security scholarship. A prime example of this is securitization theory, which explicitly endorses the (neo)realist understanding of security as “survival in the face of existential threats” (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998, 27). The articulation of security threat is claimed to rely on the rhetoric of emergency, calling for the priority of action “because if not handled now it will be too late, and we will not exist to remedy our failure” (Buzan 1997, 14). Consequently, security politics has become equated with emergency politics.

The close relationship between emergency and security can be traced to the ostensible conceptual similarities between the two. The modern conception of emergency tends to be associated with several features, which have also been ingrained into our thinking about security. These features can be found in White’s (2020, 22–26) conceptual work on emergency, which entangles the following subconcepts: extreme circumstances, necessity, urgency, and the singularity of moment. Not coincidentally, these same characteristics have become embedded into the “grammar of security” (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998, 33). This is best illustrated by

securitization theory, which Neal (2019, 7) correctly calls “the archetypal expression of security as an anti-politics.” It is through the formulation of emergency as an “exceptional” situation that security is understood “either as a special kind of politics or as above politics” (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998, 23). Security is considered to invoke time pressure and speed because it allegedly deals with emergencies that threaten normal politics in “a particularly rapid or dramatic fashion” (Wæver 1995, 54). Ultimately, it is under the influence of emergency thinking that scholars believe that security works through executive secrecy and prerogative, the narrowing of choice, and the shift away from democratic control into smaller circles of decision-making. As Wæver (2011, 478) said, “the concept of security is Schmittian, because it defines security in terms of exception, emergency and a decision.”

This suggests that our perception of security has been considerably influenced by how we make sense of emergency. Therefore, the way we conceptualize emergency has the power to impose limits on our knowledge of security, which is why it is crucial to interrogate the dominant paradigm for understanding emergency.

Emergency as Exception

Notwithstanding its centrality, there are strikingly few reflections on the concept of emergency in critical security studies in distinction to the measures its declaration can justify. Most focus has fallen on the problem of “exceptionalism” (Huysmans 2004; Agamben 2005; Biswas and Nair 2009; Doty 2009; Neal 2010; Hanrieder and Kreuder-Sonnen 2014; Best 2017). Exceptionalism denotes the practice and discourse of designating certain situations “as ‘exceptional’ in order to legitimate exceptional policies, practices, executive measures, and laws” (Neal 2010, 31). The ostensible exceptionality of emergency lies in permitting the breaking free of rules, whereby either usual rules cease to apply or new, otherwise unacceptable rules are introduced (Scheppele 2004; Ní Aoláin 2020). The rules and norms that tend to be transgressed include both the rights of individuals and “systemic aspects such as the separation of powers, the procedures of democracy, and the sovereignty of states” (Heupel et al. 2021, 1961). The idea of exceptionalism was brought to the limelight by Agamben’s (2005) famous assertion that the state of exception is the dominant paradigm of government in contemporary international politics. Accordingly, the distinction between emergency and normality has been blurred, occasioning the extension of executive authority and extralegal violence even in the most stable of democracies (Agamben 2005). Such claims emerged and were particularly pertinent in the context of the War on Terror and the numerous cases of individuals being imprisoned without charge or trial and subjected to torture at Guantanamo Bay or Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq (Johns 2005; Aradau 2007; Neal 2010).

The preoccupation with exceptionalism has led “emergency” and “exception” to be used interchangeably. An assumption has appeared that emergency is de facto undemocratic, serving to institutionalize a “decisionist government, which reduces the exercise of political power to decisions *ex nihilo*” (Huysmans 2004, 329). Emergency presumably always heralds “strong executive rule” and is predicated on the “suspension of the law and thus the discretion to suspend key liberties and rights” (Neocleous 2008, 71–72). For some, there seems to be no way to preserve democratic politics other than infinitely averting the construction of emergency and security threats (Aradau 2004). According to Aradau (2004, 392), in the initial stages of emergency while securitization still depends on audience acceptance, the democratic politics of accountability, contestation, and checks and balances remains present. However, emergency inevitably invokes a state of exception by suspending “judicial review or other modalities of public influence upon bureaucratic or executive decisions” (Aradau 2004, 392). The “exceptionalist” paradigm presupposes a hierarchy of agency in emergency politics, whereby citizens are thought to be disempowered, and their voices marginalized (Jabri 2006; Neocleous 2008;

Kreuder-Sonnen 2019; White 2020; Heupel et al. 2021). White (2020, 130, 147–66) speaks of the “disavowal” of collective agency from below unless it is an act of civil disobedience aimed at desecuritization.

The tendency to frame emergency in exceptionalist terms can be traced back to Carl Schmitt, whose theory remains the conceptual center of emergency in security studies. Schmitt (2005) conflates emergency with exception in his attempt to argue the necessity of unlimited exceptional sovereign decisions in response to existentially threatening contingencies. As he writes, there “exists no rule that is applicable to chaos. For a legal order to make sense, a normal situation must exist, and he is sovereign who definitely decides whether this normal situation actually exists” (Schmitt 2005, 13). For him, it is existentially and ethically imperative that the state “suspends the law in the exception on the basis of its right to self-preservation” (Schmitt 2005, 12). Schmitt’s concept of exception is distinctive in that it presupposes not only the sovereign “imperative to respond to the exception but the prerogative to decide whether an exception exists” (Neal 2010, 99). “Exceptional sovereign power comes both first, as declaration, and last, as response,” eclipsing the event of emergency itself (Neal 2010, 102). Succinctly put, emergency necessarily trumps the norm, for emergency times are exceptional times. Critical security studies (including, but not limited to, securitization theory) have followed Schmitt in failing to separate the emergency *event* from the *response* to it. Consequently, emergency has been seen to carry a prior determination to turn into the practices of exceptionalism.

Critique of the Exceptionalist Paradigm

Exception as the dominant analytical lens for studying emergency is flawed in many respects. First, it is based on problematic assimilation of emergency to exception. Yet, does emergency always entail the suspension of legal rules and democratic norms? Doty (2007, 116) rightly notices that, by advocating emergency measures, the securitizing actor may actually “seek to invigorate or re-enforce the law or change the law in such a way so as to preserve a particular understanding of ‘the social order’.” Furthermore, do the changes made to the rule of law always imply exceptionalism? According to Roe (2012, 258), whether something is exceptional depends on the outcome rather than the process. Floyd (2010, 4) also suggests that, for example, “the reduction of human wretchedness” could have a stronger moral value than the preservation of ordinary procedures. Ultimately, the meaning of exceptionalism is far from clear in practice. Rather than assuming that emergency is always an exceptionalist project, one must investigate what counts as an exception for the specific actors in a given context (Kirk 2020). As Ciută (2009, 313) argues, “conditions of exceptionality (and normality) are highly contextual.” The notions of emergency and exception require disentangling to see where context and agency step in to define the relationship between the two.

The general idea of the all-pervasive rule by emergency is overdetermined, propounding a totalizing logic of emergency politics. Scholars, such as Neocleous (2008, 67), assume that “the pattern is almost always the same,” where the occurrence of an event leads to the imposition of extreme security measures, which are then gradually “stretched” beyond their original context and transformed “into the ordinary criminal law.” But how does one know that emergency politics works in this way and not another? Arguing that emergency institutionalizes more coercive forms of rule and weakens democratic authority, White (2020, 4) bases his analysis on what he sees as the crystallized, long-term tendencies of governing emergencies that appear across different issue areas. For him, the “emergency rule” constitutes a specific “governing mode” that is “independent of the specifics of a particular context” and “hard to localize in time” (White 2020, 4). On the one hand, there is no doubt that there is a wealth of continuity in emergency politics with a persistent

pattern of exceptionalism. [Agostinis et al. \(2021, 326\)](#) show how the exceptionalist logic of emergency politics has worked in the COVID-19 context: the virus has been “portrayed as an enemy of the state to justify a national security response where an emergency can be declared, individual rights can be rolled back, and state machineries and resources can be mobilized to safeguard the sovereignty of the state.”

On the other hand, in its insensitivity to context, the exceptionalist paradigm keeps out of sight other logics of emergency and other sets of relationships entangled in its construction. As [Adey, Anderson, and Graham \(2015, 4\)](#) elucidate, exceptionalism constitutes “only one way of governing emergencies” and cannot be applied to all instances of emergency politics. The essentialist assumption of a fixed, exclusionary, or violent logic of emergency creates a moment of closure. It forecloses the acknowledgment of emergency claims that may, in fact, seek to challenge this logic and contest established power structures. The problem additionally stems from the prevalence of a top-down, elite-centric approach to emergency politics that privileges the discourses and actions of politicians, governments, international organizations, and other elite actors. Given that the study of emergency is inevitably political, scholarly discourses that frame emergencies as always exceptionalist “play into the hands of agents, groups, authorities, and organizations that long for a vigorous, yet more authoritarian response” ([Heupel et al. 2021, 1965](#)). This is what [Nunes \(2012, 350\)](#) calls “imbalanced politicization,” whereby scholars normalize a particular view of emergency, presenting it as inevitable. The focus only on the negative view of emergency further silences voices articulating alternative notions of emergency. Indeed, [Heupel et al. \(2021, 1983\)](#) recently highlighted important “counter-tendencies” to the dominant, exceptionalist patterns of emergency politics that seek to initiate a resetting of priorities in accordance with the interests of the most vulnerable in global politics.

To say that exceptionalism is not inherent in emergency politics is not to deny the frequent convergence of the two in practice. Nevertheless, their convergence should be researched rather than assumed. As such, the elite bias of securitization theory has dramatically limited the exploration of the question “whose exceptionalism?” The assumption that exceptionalism translates into “an empowerment of the executive in the political system” has occluded the idea that practices of exceptionalism are often a joint endeavor between different actors ([Hanrieder and Kreuder-Sonnen 2014, 335](#)). In her analysis of unauthorized civilian patrolling of US borders, [Doty \(2007, 113\)](#) observes that exceptionalism originated “in numerous locales,” being carried out “by seemingly insignificant agents.” The question is how to make sense of situations when exceptionalism slips from the control of the state or powerful institutions. How does the nature of exception change when, for instance, the breaking of rules is initiated by grassroots agents against the will of the state officials? There is a need for a conception of emergency that is not reduced to the notion of exception, as well as for a conception of exceptionalism that is not reduced to the agency of state actors.

The failure to acknowledge civil society groups, activists, social movements, and other non-state actors as full-fledged participants in emergency politics is rooted in a restrictive view of the kind of empowerment that is possible in emergency politics. Empowerment is narrowly understood as the obtainment of “decisionist political authority to determine the existence of an emergency situation and to define the measures required to counter the threat without being constrained by law” ([Hanrieder and Kreuder-Sonnen 2014, 334](#)). The exceptionalist paradigm hinges on the conception of power as domination, removing other forms of power from consideration. For instance, [Mattei \(2010, 62\)](#) depicts emergency as “a project of domination of the powerful few over the powerless many.” As [Beckett \(2013, 92\)](#) put it, “Agamben and others leave no room for any action in an emergency that does not ultimately lead to or support war, tyranny and total domination.” Opening up the discussion of emergency to more consensual and positive-sum notions

of power is necessary to capture instances of emergency politics that arise from below. To second the question asked by [Adey, Anderson, and Graham \(2015, 15\)](#): “What alternatives to forms of power open up in emergency, how are forms of power contested, negotiated and reworked, and how do new ways of being and living happen in emergency settings?”

Later in the paper, I will elaborate an alternative conception of emergency, which not only does not foreclose but also can foster collective agency from below. To permit the possibility of emergency politics from the ground up, however, it is first vital to rethink the relation between emergency, security, and politics.

Emergency, Security, and Politics

Earlier, the paper established that emergency has been entrenched into the study of security through the prevailing meaning of security as survival in the face of existential threats. Security has until recently been believed to operate according to the logic of emergency—or more correctly, according to a particular, exceptionalist logic of emergency. Through the underlying conflation of emergency with exception, security itself has become seen as a special realm “above politics,” in which state actors use the declarations of emergency to legitimize controversial security policies ([Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998, 23](#)). Below, I will argue for the need to undo the existing closures in the relationship between emergency, security, and politics that prevent scholars from identifying important changes or “counter-tendencies” in emergency politics.

Security and Politics

Let us start with the first subdivision in this relationship, which has already been explored by security scholars but is essential to provide a background for our understanding of the other two sets of concepts.

In his book *Security as Politics: Beyond the State of Exception*, [Neal \(2019\)](#) attempts to rethink the separation of “normal politics” and “exceptional security” present in critical security studies, most notably securitization theory. He challenges the view of security as a kind of “anti-politics”—as an exception to democratic and law-based politics, a “black box” of secret intelligence, or simply a “pathology of politics” ([Neal 2019, 33](#)). Instead, [Neal \(2012, 2019\)](#) proposes to reconsider security from the perspective of politics as practiced by politicians in democratic institutions, such as parliaments. He contends that security has become part of “normal” professional political activity. In his words, “the relationship of security to politics can no longer be understood as pathological and exceptional. Security is no longer an anti-politics. It is politics” ([Neal 2019, 2](#)). This means that security is “subject to any number of debates, votes, hearings, inquiries, reports, questions, and struggles” ([Neal 2019, 2](#)). It has institutionalized routines, rules, and hierarchies, being part of public policy and the ordinary bargaining processes of the political sphere. “More security,” [Neal \(2019, 269\)](#) maintains, means that security comprises more areas of social, political, and economic life and that more actors beyond the central government can practice security. Security increasingly implies more contestation of security policy, more ways in which people mobilize around security issues, a more diverse security discourse, and the sheer breadth of security activities beyond exceptionalism.

Neal’s observation is congruent with the contextual approach, which views the understanding and practice of security to be dependent on context and amenable to change ([Ciută 2009](#)). The assumption that security imperatives trump the standard procedures and principles of democratic politics embodies a historically situated, sedimented view of security. As [Neal \(2019, 11\)](#) remarks, it was a persuasive description of security politics back in the mid-1990s and in the aftermath of 9/11, when the executive branch of several governments curtailed politics

by expanding emergency powers and repressing democratic deliberation. Since then, the relationship between security and politics has evolved, with most of the security activity migrating into normal policy processes. Similarly, Huysmans (2011, 371) argues that security is an increasingly everyday practice that consists of “little security nothings,” such as programming algorithms and routine collections of data. Therefore, the view of security as exceptional and anti-political “should be dated to a particular time and place” (Neal 2019, 11).

The changing relationship between security and politics reflects a more fundamental departure from the orthodox academic definition of security as survival in the face of existential peril. In Neal’s (2019) example of professional politics, at stake is not existential survival but the political survival of the life of a government or one’s political career, which merely means surviving the vicissitudes of political life. From a critical security studies perspective, Booth (2007, 102) also notices that security scholars have focused on the existential condition of survival—which “means continuing to exist”—at the expense of the political and social meanings of security. He understands security as “survival-plus,” implying not just mere existence but also the ability to exercise choice and “the opportunity to develop more fully as human beings” (Booth 2007, 103). Security enables people “to establish the conditions of existence with some expectations of constructing a human life beyond the merely animal. Survival is being alive; security is living” (Booth 2007, 107). In her study of the Polish pro-choice movement, Kurylo (2022, 277–80) also demonstrates that women’s rights groups reconceptualized security in the language of “livable life,” emphasizing the need to minimize precariousness in an everyday context and maximize the flourishing of life. Thus, opening up the meaning of security is important for grasping more ordinary forms of insecurity and broader security needs that different agents might have but that do not activate exceptional politics.

Security and Emergency

In the attempts to rescue security from the logic of survival, there appeared a problematic assumption that this simultaneously means moving security away from emergency, which is seen to activate the struggle for survival in the first place (Neal 2012; Williams 2015). Differently said, if security might not always be defined by the politics of survival and exception, then emergency most certainly is. Emergency thereby occupies the position of an analytical blind spot in the understanding of the relationship between security and politics. It is akin to a “twilight zone,” entering which inevitably leads security politics to turn into an existential realm of executive prerogative. Consequently, what calling emergency appears to do is to reduce security to its basic meaning of survival. Importantly, if scholars continue to focus on the survivalist logic of security, they might fail to spot more subtle and localized kinds of emergency. Thus, there is a need for a vernacular contextual conceptual framework of emergency that captures logics other than the survivalist or the exceptional.

From a vernacular contextual perspective, emergency claims can be present within different logics of security, the difference in which impacts the meaning and form emergency takes in a particular setting. For instance, the concept of emergency as exception may fit security as survival but not security as emancipation (McSweeney 1999; Booth 2007). Here, emergency would not be just about the presence of a life-threatening situation but could additionally signify actors’ efforts to reassert the right to have a better life and gain access to the “conditions furthering active human ‘flourishing’ of some kind” (Nyman 2016, 826). Emergency claims could, thus, aim at the “advanc[ement] towards some state of the good in which one has the means for active fulfilment,” rather than simply indicating the presence of an existential threat (Nyman 2016, 826). That is to say, emergency can operate with a wider understanding of security, which is more about the favorable conditions of living rather than merely surviving.

Developing the notion of positive security, [McSweeney \(1999, 14\)](#) also notices that the adjective “secure” can be interpreted to mean “enabling, making something possible.” As said before, the word “emergency” has a similar positive connotation of “coming into being” or “starting something anew.” Therefore, like security, emergency has no inherent normative value: whether a particular emergency construct is a negative and positive development can only be decided by situating it in context.

As an illustration of emergency that is distinct from exception, the concept of “slow emergency” helps to sensitize us to the emergency claims made by people who see themselves as living in the conditions of insecurity that are inseparable from ordinariness ([Anderson et al. 2020](#)). The concept describes a type of emergency that does not emerge from a single, distinct event but results from a protracted situation of harm. Slow emergencies are characterized by forms of impact and damage that take gradual and invisible forms. The examples might include repeated acts of police brutality against marginalized groups, the gradual disappearance of indigenous peoples, honor killings, and living in postnuclear disaster localities. Slow emergencies tend to be imperceptible as events “because the intense, dramatic vocabulary of emergency often does not fit with how people live through slow emergencies at the interface of stalled and disastrous time in a durative present” ([Anderson et al. 2020, 631](#)). Slow emergency claims also tend to be rejected or ignored because of who makes them. As the Black Lives Matter movement exemplifies, the main emergency claimants appear to be those who lack the authority of traditional security actors—activists, artists, and affected communities. The idea of slow emergency shows that emergency can take different forms and points to the need to understand what emergency means to those enduring it.

The shape of emergency can also change when intertwined, for example, with the logic of risk. In the risk paradigm, the construction of emergency does not necessarily entail the depictions of a threat of immediate and violent death or the recourse to extraordinary executive powers ([Aradau 2015](#); [Simon and de Goede 2015](#)). The definition of emergency expands, becoming less spatially and temporally contained and being brought into a space of present intervention ([Amoore and de Goede 2008a, 2008b](#); [Larner 2008](#)). There is no longer a distinction between a “normal” life and time-limited, “abnormal” events, as emergencies are governed by numerous nonsignificant agents in advance of their occurrence ([de Goede 2008](#)). Rather than triggering friend–enemy thinking and militarization against acute threats, the management of this kind of emergencies necessitates new security technologies, including preemption ([de Goede, Simon, and Hoijtink 2014](#)) and resilience ([Kaufmann 2013](#)). In empirical contexts, however, emergency is likely to take more hybrid forms and can be exceptionalist to a degree, for exceptionalism itself is a gradational and context-dependent concept ([Kirk 2020](#)). In their analysis of security politics in the conditions of COVID-19 in New Zealand, [Kirk and McDonald \(2021\)](#) show that the framing of emergency through the language of risk can equally sanction extreme measures even in the absence of the narratives of war and existential peril. Hence, there is a need to explore how emergency interacts with different logics of security, appearing at different ends of the exceptionalist spectrum.

The relationship between security and emergency is, thus, varied and co-constitutive. By opening emergency to different security concepts, we can discover an array of new emergency meanings and practices used by actors on the ground. At one and the same time, by conceptualizing emergency as contextual and amenable to change, we can remove the critical variable that ties security to the logic of survival and exception. While some emergencies may indeed take the form of life-and-death situations, most emergencies are rarely about ticking bomb scenarios. The fluidity of emergency—which possesses the “quality to be otherwise, to be more or less than itself”—permits a co-existence between multiple meanings of emergency

and, more broadly, between multiple meanings of security (Adey, Anderson, and Graham 2015, 6). Therefore, it is necessary to take emergency out of its exceptionalist straitjacket and explore how it relates to and recasts different logics of security.

Emergency and Politics

The paper has now argued for the need to contextualize and de-exceptionalize the relation between security and politics as well as emergency and security. The final relationship in this series—that between emergency and politics—is perhaps the hardest one to disentangle. The concept of emergency as exception has been entrenched into the study of security so profoundly that the scholarship continues to operate with a restricted view of emergency as antithetical to politics. Yet, to what extent does the dichotomy between politics and emergency still hold? Williams (2015, 118) rightly points out that we need to understand “how the extraordinary can be connected to normal politics without either falling prey to unconstrained understandings of each (the decisionistic exceptionalism or de-politicized neutralization of ‘normal’ politics).” Revealingly little attention has been said about how emergency can function positively within politics as scholars fail to attune to those emergencies that differ from the traditional trope of exceptionality. Yet, there are noticeable countertendencies to the dominant patterns of emergency politics that the literature has thus far described. For example, in their analysis of the European Union emergency politics in times of COVID-19, Truchlewski, Schelkle, and Ganderon (2021, 1353) even find that emergencies may actually stimulate deliberation and compromise.

At this juncture, it is important to zoom into the work of Neal (2019) who helps to address the long-overdue need to rethink the separation of security and politics. There is a little caveat, however, since his analysis applies to security politics insofar as it is *not* in the wake of perceived emergencies. For example, Neal (2019, 6) states that “with 9/11 receding into history, the logic of emergency has faded.” For him, the fact that security has ceased to be defined by the logic of emergency means that it no longer embodies a form of anti-politics, hinders democratic politics, or expands governmental powers. In other words, security is politics, and emergency is anti-politics. But precisely which logic of emergency does Neal cite? Perhaps it is a particular, exceptionalist logic that is fading, for emergency is still very much part of world politics. Unsurprisingly, *Oxford Dictionaries* declared “climate emergency” to be the word of the year for 2019.

In his earlier research on counterterrorist lawmaking, Neal (2012, 111) also associates emergency politics with uncritical and unreflective actions of state actors: “at times of perceived emergency, there is a lack of open reflection by politicians on their own engagement in the activity and practice of security politics.” He contrasts this image of emergency to “normal” politics, in which security is “more critical, deliberative and reflexive” (Neal 2012, 111). Although Neal does much to make the study of security more inclusive toward a broader range of political activities beyond executive decisionism, his overall argument inadvertently perpetuates the idea that it is emergency that makes security politics unruly, undemocratic, and unlawful. Emergency thereby appears as confined to a “black box” of military decision-making, war-like situations, and executive prerogative. This description may apply to the context of elite-level politics but is less relevant, for instance, to emergency when viewed from the perspective of civil society groups.

To fill this gap, and while building on Neal’s argument about security, this paper contends that emergency needs to be considered as an intrinsic part of politics. “Politics” is not used here in the narrow sense of “an institutional site of professional political practice” (Neal 2019, 10). Nor is it a pure, positive idea of democratic deliberation undisturbed by contradictions, inequalities, and exclusions. Politics here refers to an activity that takes place in formal and informal public spaces,

in which actors intersubjectively construct shared political meanings, identities, practices, values, norms, and institutions while being placed within the limitations imposed on them by political structures and power relations. To foreground politics in the study of emergency means to attend to the sheer breadth of political activity relating to emergency as different actors mobilize and organize around events and issues, contest policies, and make emergency claims that do not simply defer to the survivalist discourse of security. The view of emergency as a break from politics because of its existential importance has concealed non-exceptionalist security logics that may guide the engagement of nontraditional security actors. It also fails to account for non-exceptionalist emergencies, such as the slow violence of poverty or sexual minority rights claims. In contrast, taking the *politics* of emergency seriously is a final step on the path toward opening emergency to manifold non-exceptional security meanings, practices, and actors.

Conceiving of emergency as part of politics changes its understanding from a “special” or an existential event to one of “politically important events” that become articulated as emergencies (Neal 2012, 114). This exposes emergency as a contingent formation, whose meaning is not “objectively contained in the events themselves” (Neal 2012, 116). Emergency can be seen as a particular “mode of eventfulness”—one way of making sense of the impact of events and dealing with contingency, coexisting with other modes such as incident, crisis, disaster, apocalypse, and nonevent (Berlant 2011). As Calhoun (2004, 375) elucidates, emergency is merely one “way of grasping problematic events, a way of imagining them that emphasizes their apparent unpredictability, abnormality, and brevity, and that carries the corollary that response—intervention—is necessary.” To take the example of COVID-19, that people die from a disease is nothing new nor does it necessarily become an emergency or security issue. Deciding on which forms of death are a matter of emergency, and which are merely a private matter, is an essentially political practice. A related political question is the deaths of which categories of people will raise the most concern, and whose and what types of suffering will go unseen. After all, emergency is defined not by existential necessity but by how difficult and significant a particular situation is perceived to be in relation to certain valued things that vary among different actors.

Viewing emergency to be in the fabric of politics means that it can be continuous with “normal” politics in the sense of politics that is underpinned by legal norms and democratic institutions. At this point, it is important to consider Lazar’s (2006, 2009) critique of the conflated use of emergency/exception, and the dichotomy between emergencies and a norm-based polity. She argues that emergency powers are justified so long as the institutions and principles underlying a given political system maintain their power (Lazar 2009, 5). Lazar (2009, 5) goes further to assert that “mitigating the rule of law is not exceptional” insofar as “the rule of law is instrumental to more fundamental values,” and emergency measures do “not preclude furthering those values.” She provides an example of the value of order, which functions as a value beyond emergency circumstances, and the preservation of which is fundamental to the existence of other values (Lazar 2006, 267). If upholding order can coexist with principles such as human rights on an everyday basis, “these varying kinds of values can coexist in emergencies too” (Lazar 2006, 267). Defining emergency as beyond the law implies that it can be removed entirely from the purview of different kinds of norms. This ignores the myriad possible means of constraint, particularly legal frameworks such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. In contrast, acknowledging that emergency powers are not “exceptions” from norms is a precondition for holding governments to the same standards of accountability as in ordinary times.

Seeing emergencies as inseparable from the continuity of politics is also necessary to understand how they are inevitably conditioned by “normal” politics. According to Honig (2009, 9), the focus on the exception “tends to make us feel like

everything is justifiable, and there can be no cause for regret when our survival is at stake.” This tends to privilege the moment of the decision and obscure its aftermath. However, emergencies rarely occur in the form of entirely unpredictable and hermetic events that are sealed off from ordinary life (Sterling-Folker et al. 2021, 1103–104). Honig (2009, 10) elucidates that “emergencies are usually the contingent crystallizations of prior events and relationships, in which many are deeply implicated.” For instance, the impact of COVID-19 could have been lessened had governments increased funding for disease control and prevention programs, and had they allocated more resources for raising social awareness and preparedness for pandemic management (Khamisi 2020). Agostinis et al. (2021, 306) also rightly point out that emergencies tend to “take root in the social, political, and economic structures and inequalities of our societies,” being caused by them as well as further entrenching them. Put otherwise, we “need to own up to our implication in the histories by which we, at any particular moment, may feel unfairly assaulted” (Honig 2009, 10). The awareness that every emergency is continuous with normal politics fosters a commitment to deal with emergencies by political means and tackle their root causes beyond the immediate aftermath of their occurrence.

By destabilizing the relationship between emergency, security, and politics, the analysis has paved the way for the discovery of alternative notions and practices of emergency. The next section gives expression to what I term as an “emancipatory” conception of emergency that has long been neglected by the security studies literature, yet which is better able to capture the voices of previously marginalized groups seeking to make emergency claims.

Emancipatory Emergency

Walter Benjamin (2003a, 392) once said that “the tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the “state of emergency” in which we live is not the exception but the rule.” Benjamin’s words have found much resonance among scholars who argue that contemporary world politics is defined by a state of permanent emergency and an abandonment of the rule of law (Agamben 2005). Nevertheless, what tends to be omitted is that Benjamin had a more sophisticated understanding of emergency than the one in which emergency is simply a tool of oppressive regimes from which nothing can be gained. He simultaneously urged his readers to bring about a “real” state of emergency that would allow a revolutionary politics to “brush history against the grain” and “leap into the open air” (Benjamin 2003a, 392, 295). This conception of emergency is distinct from the exceptional condition that scholars claim to be the rule today. It has the power to expose the fragility of sovereign power and undo its grip. Receiving much less attention, this strand of literature writes about the emancipatory potential of emergency, as opposed to the emphasis on the “rule by emergency” and its undemocratic consequences in the contemporary treatment of emergency (Bandt 2009; Honig 2009; Kalyvas 2010). It is essential to investigate this conception of emergency because of its potential to elucidate how emergency can be empowering for marginalized actors in security politics.

Developing this alternative understanding of emergency, Bandt (2009) distinguishes the “real” state of emergency from a virtual one. According to him, “if the virtual state of emergency maintains the structure of sovereignty – by declaring the exceptional situation so as to maintain power – the real state of emergency deposes or destroys it” (Bandt 2009, 25). The real state of emergency comes from below and has subjects other than the state. This reminds us that, contrary to emergency being merely a technique of rule, we also need to pay attention to other active agents that enunciate emergency claims as a challenge to the *status quo* (Curato 2019). Integral to any emergency is the creative agency of “people who refused to accept ‘business’ as usual” (Bandt 2009, 18). From the perspective of climate change activism, Bandt seeks to reinvigorate the concept of emergency to unleash its capacity

to bring about a new political subject that is democratic and nonviolent. We must be careful, however, not to attribute grandiose emancipatory projects to emergency. It is neither the result of a sovereign decision paving the way for unrestrained power of the executive nor a moment of liberation from all constraints (Bermeo 2003). The point is not only to paint a picture of a “true” emergency, but rather to attend more to the multiplicity of active subjects that are already engaged in reclaiming emergency, yet whose voices are not being represented by the established conception of emergency.

Maintaining this caution, it is necessary to explore the possibility of emergency helping to unlock security politics to previously sidelined actors. Several scholars have envisaged emergency to be a force of democratization. As a theorist of radical democracy, Honig (2009) finds in every emergency an opportunity for democratic renewal. Her aim is to “diagnose the sense of stuckness that emergency produces in its subjects and to identify remaining promising opportunities for democratizing and generating new sites of power even in emergency settings” (Honig 2009, 10). In his work on “extraordinary politics,” Kalyvas (2010) also expounds on the significance of radical beginnings for democracy. His idea of the democratic politics of the extraordinary embodies “those infrequent and unusual moments when the citizenry, overflowing the formal borders of institutionalized politics, reflectively aims at the modification of the central political, symbolic and constitutional principles and at the redefinition of the content and ends of a community” (Kalyvas 2010, 7). Extraordinary politics is characterized by high levels of collective mobilization and the self-institution of citizen groups that call into question nondemocratic institutions and the prevailing *status quo*. In these rare moments, Kalyvas (2010, 7) argues, “politics opens up to make room for conscious popular participation and extra-institutional, spontaneous collective intervention.”

In the “emancipatory” conception of emergency, the focus switches from its prevailing definition as the onset of existential threats to emergency as the emergence from a challenging situation that can, nonetheless, be a productive force that creates new possibilities. Emergency can signify “a spontaneous, extraordinary event that erupts in the midst of the ordinary and the everyday,” overturning “the expected course of history by opening up new possibilities not determined from antecedent causes” (Kalyvas 2010, 202). Emergency is also activating in the sense that it calls for immediate action and generates new demands. It presupposes the idea of the “emergent,” which means that when something old is ruptured, space opens for human agency to institute something new. According to Anderson (2016), invested in emergency action is hope: hope that action can still make a difference to the emergent event, even if there can be no certainty that calamity could be ended. He argues that emergency opens up an interval of action that has an effect of interrupting, however momentarily, the experience of insecurity by switching the focus to the possibilities of change. Emergency bestows hope that a different future is possible. And indeed, in an emergency, the future is indeterminate. In contrast to linked terms of disaster and catastrophe, “in emergency, the outcome remains uncertain, and action still promises to make a difference” (Adey, Anderson, and Graham 2015, 5).

The idea of emergency as an extraordinary moment of spontaneous beginnings can be traced back to Hannah Arendt, to whose works Kalyvas and Honig are both heavily indebted. Arendt (1958) sought for ways to show that acts of founding can occur within “normal” constitutional politics, without falling into violent exceptionalism. For her, unpredictable events are important because they are moments of innovation and transformation. Arendt (1958, 247) speaks of rupture as a miracle, which has the power to inaugurate new beginnings and bring something new into life. In her words, the new “always appears in the guise of a miracle” (Arendt 1958, 178). However, this rupture does not necessarily suspend the existing order in a way that exception does nor does it endow actors with the decisionist authority

to act outside the law. The rupturing power of emergency gives rise to a different conception of the political. Contrary to the friend–enemy division and norm-less exception associated with Schmittian politics, emergency can reconfigure politics on the basis of collective agency and solidarity. [Arendt \(1958, 197\)](#) suggests that ordinary practices might transform into extraordinary heroic acts when performed under emergency circumstances. The example of this could be the numerous ways through which local mutual aid groups have supported infected people, the elderly, and other vulnerable populations throughout the COVID-19 outbreak ([Menon 2021](#); [Chevéé 2022](#)). These ordinary practices are the opposite of the invocations of a “quasi-miraculous political response” with which emergency is typically associated ([Heupel et al. 2021, 1965](#)).

This leads us to a conceptualization of emergency from an “emancipatory” perspective—that is, from the perspective of situated agents that lead the construction of emergency, despite traditionally being isolated from the “power center” of security politics. The characteristics of this conception of emergency can be summarized in the following way. First, the scope of actors who can utter emergency claims and have them recognized is much broader than in the exceptionalist paradigm. Second, calling emergency can create a rupture in the established state of affairs and reactivate the self-assertion of structurally disempowered actors. Third, emergency is not associated with an irredeemably negative meaning of security from which nothing can be gained, for it can also inaugurate a new, more equal politics of security. Fourth, emergency stops being an obstacle to collective agency and, in fact, encourages it. Finally, and logically stemming from the last point, the form of power activated in an emergency can be not only domination but also “concerted power,” *à la* Arendt, defined as a collective capacity that springs up between people as they act together. It is the explosive and invigorating power of collective action, solidarity, and cooperation that could be let loose in an emergency when its construction happens from below.

In its “emancipatory” conception, emergency could act as a platform for citizens’ collective remaking of security. It can serve as a “lucky break” that allows action to break through the everydayness of life, which for some subjects translates into a permanent state of insecurity ([Honig 2009, 140](#)). Such breaks are significant because they cast into sharp relief issues that have been overlooked in normal politics ([Honig 2009, 140](#)). Emergency merely aggravates and accentuates these issues, providing a window of opportunity for actors’ mobilization ([della Porta 2021, 209–10](#)). In the words of [Chenoweth et al. \(2020b\)](#), emergencies can “prove to be the forge in which new ideas and opportunities are hammered out.” It must be remembered, however, that emergency is not external to the processes of the empowerment of disempowered subjects in security politics. Rather, emergency is constructed in the process as these groups seek to redefine themselves from ostensibly passive, apolitical entities into political and security actors through uttering emergency claims. Otherwise put, groups actively construct the emergency to which they claim to react. The risen power “to act in concert” then becomes latent in “normal” politics but maintains the potential of mobilization ([Arendt 1970, 44](#)).

The possibility of a more “positive” rendering of emergency calls for a conceptual framework of emergency that would sensitize scholars to the diversity of its forms in various settings. The following section, therefore, proposes a vernacular contextual approach to emergency and highlights new research avenues.

Toward a Vernacular Contextual Study of Emergency

What does it mean to approach the study of emergency from a vernacular contextual perspective? This conceptual framework consolidates two concordant approaches to security that have until now been employed separately from one another—the so-called contextual and vernacular security “turns.” The contextual

approach is associated with the work of Ciută (2009, 2016) and rests on the premise that the meanings and practices of security are always context-bound and should be studied according to how actors “on the ground” understand them. Contextualism represents “an epistemological and methodological perspective that, while privileging the actors’ definition of security [. . .] constantly engages the contradictions and normative consequences of contextual definitions of security” (Ciută 2009, 314). While likewise emphasizing the situatedness of security, the vernacular approach has a more explicit focus on the understandings of security among “ordinary” people in local settings (Bubandt 2005; Jarvis 2019). Vernacular security scholars seek to understand non-elite knowledge and experience, making “a commitment to access the ‘security speak’ of those voices otherwise excluded from mainstream analyses” (Croft and Vaughan-Williams 2017, 24). When employed in the study of emergency, a vernacular contextual approach accounts for the contextual diversity of the meanings and practices of emergency while foregrounding the emergency claims made by non-elite actors in security politics. Below, I outline several directions for a more concrete research agenda, suggesting several considerations that should be taken into account when incorporating a vernacular contextual approach in the study of emergency.

The first, and most basic, consideration is that, as the performance of emergency is an essentially political activity, there is a need to foreground politics in the study of emergency. Since “no situation is objectively an emergency,” events/conditions are turned into actionable emergencies through acts of emergency claim-making (Rubenstein 2015; Heupel et al. 2021, 1969). Like with security claims, emergency claims of some actors may go unheard or dismissed, and certain events and situations may be more perceptible and actionable than others (Hansen 2000). The politics of emergency refers to this broader field of action where many different actors compete for the right to decide on what counts as an emergency, who should be secured, and what should be done. Importantly, in order to grasp the power dynamics inherent in the construction of emergency, one must avoid viewing emergency as simply the result of a securitizing speech act. Paying attention to the politics of emergency implies giving primacy to the heterogeneous actors, practices, and concerns that make up an emergency at a given point in time (Salter et al. 2019, 15–16). Reflecting on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on IR scholarship, Agostinis et al. (2021, 305) make a valid point that “security frameworks and logics cannot account for the inequalities, vulnerabilities, and systemic violence that have intersected with and become co-constitutive of the virus.” Therefore, we should think beyond securitization and security more generally to unravel all the power struggles that render people differently exposed to harm and insecurity in turbulent times (Agostinis et al. 2021, 312–16; Avlijaš 2021, 227–28; Azmanova 2021, 250).

The constructed nature of emergency brings us to the next consideration that pertains to the importance of contextualized, conceptually open and empirically focused examinations of emergency politics. There is a need to resist the temptation to apply a pre-given conceptual framework of emergency to an empirical context and identify a singular, timeless logic by which emergency politics operates. Contextualization grounded in detailed empirical case studies is crucial to de-exceptionalize and reimagine the relation between emergency, security, and politics, which is likely to take different forms in different places. Before making judgments about the exceptional nature of a given instance of emergency politics, one must investigate how emergency is constructed, negotiated, and experienced by actors in a local sociopolitical setting. To understand how specific emergency discourses come to the fore, it is essential to examine the conditions underlying the construction of emergency, including local identities, histories, and related events (Ciută 2009). Moreover, security scholars could explore the potential of emergency to work with more “positive” notions of security that encompass something more than (physical) survival (Booth 2007; Roe 2012). Depending on

the concepts of emergency and security at play and the actors that deploy them, the nature and practice of emergency politics can change. Any context has numerous voices speaking—hence, researchers might discover a contradictory coexistence of multiple discourses of emergency, each producing different effects (Ciută 2016). Ultimately, vernacular imaginaries of emergency may or may not be commensurate with the hegemonic ones, bringing the possibility of conceptual transformation, diversity, and counter-discourses.

Another important avenue for future research is to explore how citizens can function as active participants in producing the meaning and practices of emergency. The knowledge, experiences, and practices of “ordinary” people should be treated as equally valuable for our understanding of emergency politics as those of elite actors (Jarvis 2019). A bottom-up, actor-oriented methodology is a helpful corrective to the tendency within Security studies to focus on the speech acts of top decision-makers. As Luckham (2017, 112) put it, vernacular security studies does not simply adopt “the viewpoint of the people who are secured” but recognizes citizens as active agents who “define, experience, and try to ensure their own security.” Thus far, however, vernacular security scholars have largely conceptualized the subject of security in individualized terms, centering the experiences of “ordinary” *individuals* and their perceptions of personal (in)security (Jarvis and Lister 2013, 172; Khomeriki 2020, 1). Unsurprisingly, “the most common referent object of security” appears to be “the individual and his or her family” (Vaughan-Williams and Stevens 2016, 47). The focus on citizens as isolated members of society occludes the understanding of how they might organize and act in concert in response to perceived emergencies. The possibility of an “emancipatory” emergency described earlier compels us to attend to the role that local civil society groups and social movements play in the politics of emergency. Therefore, in seeking to recover citizens’ agency, contexts should be revealed where emergency is collectively enacted by citizen groups.

The fourth consideration is that, before embarking on a vernacular contextual study of emergency, there is a need to rethink the perceived tension between the “everydayness” of vernacular security and the “extraordinariness” of emergency. There has been a lack of engagement with emergency within vernacular security studies, with scholars often drawing sharp distinctions between emergency and the everyday. Nonetheless, this fact must not preclude the analytical and political significance of such an endeavor. Here, the concept of “the everyday” should not be treated as describing a distinct kind of quality (ordinary *versus* extraordinary) or temporality (emergency *versus* normality). Guillaume and Huysmans (2019, 280) elucidate that the everyday is “a distinct mode of thought, one that does not refer to a specific set of realities but that engages any reality in a distinct way.” It is not only possible but also vital to view emergency through a vernacular lens in order to analyze the lived experiences of emergencies and the situated understandings of security among ordinary people in local settings. From the speech acts of top decision-makers, the focus should shift to how emergency is enacted by everyday people, through their everyday discourses and practices and in everyday spaces (Schepers-Hughes 2008; Solnit 2010; Beck 2012). Overall, future research must problematize the dichotomy between emergency and the everyday to understand how the extraordinary and the ordinary may be commonly at play in the politics of emergency.

Further to this, the contextual specificity of emergency makes it vital to avoid prejudging the normative value of emergency and encourages us to see it as contingent and unfixed. There has been a tendency to associate emergency politics with a logic of war, undemocratic politics, and violence. A vernacular contextual approach views emergency neither as a somehow normatively desirable phenomenon nor as a normatively “negative” phenomenon that is best avoided. Instead, it assesses the value of emergency in a given case by analyzing the consequences of situated discourses and practices (Nyman 2016). As such, contrary to justifying undemocratic procedures and use of violence, social movements may make emergency claims precisely

in the attempts to preserve democracy and seek emancipation from oppressive political regimes (della Porta 2020). At the same time, by approaching local actors in their heterogeneity, a vernacular contextual agenda can also assist in revealing the emergency imaginaries of the so-called uncivil elements and practices within civil society, including vigilantism (Jarvis 2019). Hence, in ethical terms, a bottom-up emergency is not necessarily “better” than a top-down one. In addition, a vernacular contextual approach to emergency necessitates critical engagement with the role of the analyst in the research process. As Ciută (2009) elucidates, researchers cannot avoid normative judgment when analyzing emergency politics. Thus, reflexivity and positionality are imperative to shift the focus of critical emergency studies from fixed normative commitments to normative awareness about the preconceptions that the analyst might have about the concept and value of emergency.

The final pathway for future research to be raised here concerns the kind of politics that is at stake in emergency politics in various contexts. Implicit in the mainstream assumption about the exceptional nature of emergency is the adherence to a fixed standard of what politics constitutes. Indicating the presence of a “Westphalian straitjacket,” this standard typically rests on the idea of “procedural democracy” characteristic of (Western) liberal democratic states (Wilkinson 2007, 5; Roe 2012, 251). Behnke (2006) even wonders whether the political against which emergency is defined is anything more than merely a de-politicized neutralization of contestations existing in society. While some scholars assume that emergency begets the closure of the political, others believe that emergency presupposes a Schmittian concept of the political that is characterized by an intense friend–enemy antagonism. The question worth researching is whether emergency politics could be founded on other types of the political, such as the Arendtian one, whereby power is never “captured” and “politics happens *among* people” (Wæver 2011, 468). To borrow Williams’s (2015, 118) words, is it possible for emergency politics to “function positively within democratic politics without falling into violent exceptionalism?” More research is needed to explore how new sites of solidarity can be built on a grassroots level as citizens mobilize vulnerability in concert in emergency situations. Scholars looking to implement a vernacular contextual approach can begin by opening up the discussion of what kind of power is exercised in emergency politics, paying attention to more cooperative and non-conflictual forms of power.

Conclusion

The paper has shown that it is conceptually and practically inadequate to reduce emergency to exception. Scholars can inadvertently marginalize the role of civil society and other non-state actors, even when trying to counter the exceptionalist politics of emergency. Any a priori diagnoses of the politics of emergency fail to capture the diverse ways through which emergency is constructed, negotiated, and experienced by actors in local contexts. A vernacular contextual approach instead prompts us to identify emergency via the discourses and practices of situated, non-elite actors rather than a set of unchanging qualities (exceptionality, necessity, existential survival, etc.). Empirical research should seek to track empirically the very politics of emergency: the actors making emergency claims; the meanings of security and emergency with which they operate; the power dynamics inherent in the construction of emergency; the advocated measures; and their ethical and political consequences.

The paper has also tried to undo the closures in the relation between emergency, security, and politics. I have argued that the relationship between emergency and security is not predicated on a fixed logic of survival, as emergency can mesh with different meanings of security, forming new logics. Nor does emergency signify a break from politics; rather, it should be viewed as an integral part of politics. Emergency is, in essence, a politically important event, issue, or process that becomes

articulated as an emergency. It has no intrinsic quality of its own that leads politics to turn existential or undemocratic. By contextualizing and de-exceptionalizing emergency, we can remove the critical variable that ties security to the logic of survival and exception.

Rather than trying to de-exceptionalize emergency, one might wonder why not jettison the discourse of emergency altogether. However, emergency still has a part to play in world politics because sometimes “the normal” itself may be the problem. For example, Booth (2007) is keen to preserve the extraordinariness of security. He warns against the recourse to desecuritization, which can disempower groups and individuals, whose insecurity is already embedded in “ordinary” politics. According to him, “ordinary” politics is not of much “help in extraordinary circumstances; indeed, treating extraordinary issues as ordinary politics is a problem, not a solution” (Booth 2007, 168). The prospect of returning to normal politics may not always be an option, particularly when, as Benjamin (2003b, 184) said, it is the case “that things are ‘status quo’ *is* the catastrophe.” Precisely for this reason, it is imperative for future research to investigate how actors can claim emergency to press for change, with emergencies proving to be the platform for change in security politics.

To this end, the paper has reinstated a different conception of emergency as an extraordinary moment of spontaneous beginnings, which is better suited to convey the perspective of structurally disempowered actors that make emergency claims. Here, emergency signifies the emergence from a problematic situation through concerted action, which can create a rupture in the existing state of affairs. Such “emancipatory” kind of emergency has the potential to ignite collective action and empower marginalized groups, improving their capacity for impact and transformation. Importantly, it is not my intent to substitute one overdetermined conception of emergency for another. Instead, I have sought to emphasize that emergency holds diverse potentialities and to open up the concept for re-articulation by contextual agents.

Approaching emergency from the perspective of emergent collective solidarities from below promises to shed new light on the concrete instances of emergency politics today. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, it could make scholars more attentive to the different ways through which citizens around the world have engaged in acts of solidarity, claim-making, and resistance related to health governance. Chenoweth et al. (2020a, 2020b) have already documented over 140 strategies of collective action and nonviolent methods of dissent specifically related to COVID-19. Likewise, the “emancipatory” conception of emergency elaborated here could be used to analyze the role of civil society in emergency politics in the context of the ongoing Russo–Ukrainian war. The war has given rise to a robust Ukrainian volunteer movement and numerous grassroots initiatives aimed at supporting the army and defense forces, providing humanitarian assistance for people fleeing or living in the warzone, and countering information warfare (Worschech 2017). The existence of such spontaneous voluntary associations urges scholars to redirect the analysis of how and where emergency is produced to the forms of agency from below that are at once mundane and yet extraordinary.

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