

The Great Climate Change Market

By Lucile Maertens

Climate change has fueled scientific, economic, and political debates for over fifty years. Romain Felli offers an economic history of the idea of adapting to climate change and denounces the way it has been instrumentalized by market principles at the expense of society's most vulnerable citizens.

Reviewed : Romain Felli, *La grande adaptation. Climat, capitalisme et catastrophe* (The Great Adaptation: Climate, Capitalism, and Catastrophe). Paris, Seuil, 2016, 292 p.

This book explains how the idea of adapting to climate change has been invoked—and implemented—since the 1970s to allow the market's extension into every domain of life (p. 9).

These brief words stated in the essay's introduction perfectly summarize the thesis of an important new work on climate change. Romain Felli, a geographer and political scientist at the University of Geneva, proposes a clear and well supported argument, which alternates between a description of long-term trends and analysis. Drawing on Marxism, critical geography, and political ecology, all of which emphasize the structural socio-economic causes of environmental inequality and vulnerability to climate change, Felli proves two points. First, he shows that the idea that society must adapt to environmental change has, since the 1960s, established itself as the default answer to global warming—despite the fact that the international negotiations occurring between 1992 and 2009 emphasized the reduction of carbon emissions. Second, he denounces the instrumentalization of this idea by neoliberal policies that seek to expand markets by denying the structural causes of climate change and the vulnerabilities it creates.

While the second point evokes the increasingly abundant literature on green capitalism¹—that is, the commercialization of nature and the use of market mechanisms to ensure environmental protection in ways that are consistent with the profit motive—the first, which is based on previously untapped archival material, is more innovative, as it challenges the widespread view that the concept of adaptation did not emerge in climate debates until the late 2000s.

A Counter-History of Adaptation

After an introduction that presents his argument's more conceptual aspects, which he encourages readers who are less interested in the analysis' theoretical foundations to skip, Felli makes his case in four steps.

The climate crisis is a crisis of the way in which capitalism organizes natures. (p. 15)

In the first chapter, the author sets out to contextualize the emergence of the idea of adapting to environmental change. After recalling the triumph among postwar ecologists (1945-1975) of neo-Malthusian theories, which held that human overpopulation was the primary cause of environmental problems, he shows how, in the United States, capitalism's legitimacy crisis overlapped with anxieties about the planet's survival. The language of overpopulation and resource depletion—notably with the celebrated Meadows report, *The Limits to Growth*, commissioned in 1972 by the Club of Rome—was part of a broader concern about the “proper management of natural resources,” which was deemed “necessary to capitalism” (p. 34). The drought and famine afflicting the Sahel in the 1970s were perceived at the time as confirming neo-Malthusian theories which maintained that agricultural collapse was caused by climate fluctuations. Adaptation proved to be a compelling argument for the modernization of agriculture, which meant expanding the use of chemical fertilizers, land seizures, and increased dependency of developing countries on multinational corporations. Climatology thus placed itself at the service of American agribusiness. Until Reagan's inauguration in 1981, the United States positioned itself at the cutting edge of climate change research, while also internationalizing the only solution considered to be realistic, namely “societal adaptation.” Changes were seen as beyond society's control. Consequently, it was necessary to stress “voluntary adaptation” and “resilience.”

This book's argument is that far from being peripheral to the neoliberal project, environmental questions and the climate question in particular have been important for redefining a capitalist conception of nature. (p. 20).

¹ See, for example, Peter Newell and Matthew Paterson, *Climate Capitalism: Global Warming and the Transformation of the Global Economy*, Cambridge University Press, 2010; Daniel Tanuro, *L'impossible capitalisme vert*, La Découverte, 2010.

The second chapter traces the long history of this “great adaptation” which, in the 1980s, addressed “the climate crisis by expanding the market rather than restricting it” (p. 17). Because reducing fossil fuel usage was considered irresponsible, neoliberals took hold of the debate. Presenting environmental protection as an economic choice, they sought fewer regulations and climate policies based on market principles, notably “the capacity of economic agents to pay” (p. 72). To this end, they emphasized the costs associated with reductions and the benefits of adaptation, insisting that climate policies were prone to uncertainty (due to imperfect knowledge, climate variability, and so on). From this inability to make predictions about the world it followed that planning was impossible, thus justifying minimal levels of intervention, which were limited to price incentives.

Adaptation was thus presented as an adjustment to natural risks. Yet, according to Felli, “[b]y seeking to act on the ability to adapt, [the functionalist vision of adaptation] rendered invisible the social relationships, and particularly the economic relationships, that, at a structural level, exposed certain segments of the population to vulnerability.” (p. 83). Thus he re-examines the work of Rolando Garcia who, in 1981, had proposed a fundamentally different analysis of famine, which he saw as the consequence of socio-economic vulnerability rather than climate fluctuations. Yet his research, along with social analyses of famine (as seen in the work of Amartya Sen and Michael Watts), was marginalized, despite being on the rise in the 1980s, in favor of a more global and deterministic approach. At the same time, developing countries proved unable to mount successful opposition to flexibility. The concept of resilience was transposed from biology to the social world, while ecology positioned itself as a science of flexibility. By focusing on the example of water and the way the idea of adaptation was instrumentalized to justify its commercialization, Felli demonstrates the centrality of the climate question to neoliberalism’s rise. Adaptation was then “forgotten” between 1992 and 2009, as international negotiations concentrated on efforts to reduce carbon emissions. While the author unfortunately does not go into the reasons for this forgetting, referring the reader instead to the literature on climate negotiations, he skillfully shows that its reemergence in the late 2000s relied once again on the language of uncertainty and flexibility.

[T]he global warming shock was used to expand market mechanisms and to increase the integration of marginal populations into the world market. (p. 119).

At a time when microfinancing was growing, microcredit appeared, in the South, as the first tool for adapting to climate change. It was premised on the idea that poverty was caused by exclusion from markets. Drawing on the example of an Indian province, the author clearly shows the limits of this principle: by requiring actors to constantly increase productivity while neglecting subsistence farming, microcredit increased market dependency, leading to indebtedness and bankruptcy among small farmers. Aspiring to mitigate uncertainty and to mutualize risk, micro-insurance projects run by multinational corporations also sought to profit from poverty; it was in their interest not to reduce vulnerability, but to perpetuate it. A pilot program conducted in Ethiopia demonstrated the

conditions required for such an approach to succeed: specifically, government subsidies and NGO work designed to ensure community appropriation of such programs. Yet the author notes that in order to be profitable, the system must abandon either the features that make it function locally or the subsidies that allow the poor to participate and local negotiations to occur, thus enhancing the vulnerability of the poorest populations to price variations when they are forced to market what they produce. For these reasons, Felli concludes that disregard for the economic and social conditions that make the poorest vulnerable have resulted in new forms of vulnerability.

In fact, migratory decisions relating to environmental transformations depend on a complex power structure, access to resources, norms, and institutions that shape the differentiated vulnerability of populations confronted with climate change. (p. 173).

Based on instances of climate migration, the final chapter discusses the implementation of the instrumentalization of adaptation. The question of “environmental refugees,” which was internationalized in the 1980s, was first used to draw attention to climate change, at the expense of the rights of migrants, who were presented as national security threats. Along the same lines, studies identifying climate change as a threat multiplier challenged the sovereignty of southern states, which were viewed as lacking the “ingenuity” required to adapt to climate change.

By focusing on the example of Darfur, Felli shows that “by designating climate change as the trigger of the conflict,” one silences the conflict’s socio-economic causes:

Colonial and postcolonial histories, violent land seizures, the subjugation of entire populations to extractive labor regimes, neoliberal structural adjustment policies, the behavior of multinational corporations, local power struggles—all of this was forgotten. If global warming caused poverty, population displacements, or even war, then human institutions, political conflict, and social and economic inequality became, relatively speaking, less important (p. 160-161).

Turning a threat into an opportunity and getting beyond discourses of victimization, migration was ultimately sold as a form of adaptation. When it came to demonstrating the economic advantages of a mobile labor force, no serious consideration was given to open borders, Felli emphasizes, but only to “managing migration.” Thus adapting to climate change was instrumentalized to justify outsourcing plans or keeping workers in a state of precariousness, as seen in the case of farm workers in Turkey. The urgency of the situation made it possible to sidestep consultation procedures and civil society’s participation.

The Stakes of (De)politicization

This partisan book thus places itself at odds with studies of adaptation by denouncing its supposed novelty and neoliberal implications. Felli speaks not of “maladaptation” but rather of the way in which adaptation has been constantly instrumentalized to advance the market and deny the structural reasons for vulnerability to climate change. In his view, the goal should not be to refuse adaptation, but to emphasize reduction and fight the consequences of global warming through “a counter-movement to protect society” (p. 202). Put differently, the point should be to re-politicize the climate issue.

The stakes of de-politicization lie at the heart of his argument. Whether it takes the form of the neglect (be it voluntary or naïve) of the political causes of poverty, migration, or conflict, or manifests itself in the technical mechanisms found in adaptation plans, it represents the flipside of neoliberal instrumentalization. Felli brilliantly shows how adaptation preserves a status quo founded on social misery and absolves political and economic actors of any sense of responsibility:

When global warming “produces” wars or migration—in Darfur or elsewhere—the people who are truly responsible for these atrocities disappear from the analysis, along with the practical means for fighting global warming’s effects. (p. 195-196).

In an analysis that lies at the crossroads of the sociology of science and that of elites, Felli also offers a very lucid illustration of the stakes involved in the co-production of science and politics through institutional practices—notably the financing of research—and key individual actors, though it is unfortunate that, towards the end of the book, the argument becomes somewhat less focused on agency. In this way, one begins to discern a permanent tension between environmental questions and the climate problem. One wishes that the author had grappled more directly with this question and its consequences for the way the environment is currently conceived.

At times, however, Felli presents a simplified picture of actors’ intentions. Throughout the book, he claims to explain the neoliberal goals of the scientists, economists, industrialists, politicians, and “naïve humanists” (p. 181) he presents, but his analysis does not really provide insight into the actors’ intentions or how they succumbed to the discourse of adaptation, other than a desire to expand markets. It is also a shame that the book avoids offering an alternative solution, one that would combine reducing vulnerability and social emancipation, which are very briefly discussed in the conclusion. The issue of how the proposals discussed might be realistically implemented deserves some mention, since a number of partisans of the environmental cause rallied the dominant neoliberal discourse out of pragmatism.

Even so, thanks to its solid argumentation and the quality of its writing, this extremely well documented book offers a judicious interpretation at a time when it is essential to ensure that the solutions to serious problems do not, in turn, become problems in their own right.

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