

**The worthy, vulnerable: distributive norms of adaptation governance**  
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**Introduction**

In 1876-1877, India experienced famine on a massive scale. Over 58 million people were affected. As Mike Davis popularized in his 2001 book, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World*, these famines were caused by a combination of El Niño-related droughts and British imperial policy. To deal with famines that had been hitting the population over the past few decades, the British government developed the Famine Codes, which set up systems for classifying famine and providing relief. As other authors have explained, the formation of these codes was tied up in notions of how free markets should function and who was responsible for the care of the poor (Ambirajan 1976; Besley and Burgess 2002; Hall-Mathews 1996).

I want to draw your attention to India's 1870s famines and the subsequent relief mechanisms to point to an historical development that has linked climate, governance, vulnerability, markets, responsibility, and deservingness in shifting paradigms for hundreds of years. For the remainder of this brief essay, I am going to focus on present mechanisms for climate change adaptation funding. I do not intend to argue that these have emerged directly from India's Famine Codes or from any other singular piece of policy. Instead I argue for a conceptualization of relief mechanisms that attends to liberalism's strange career in the management of inequality and the ways in which it bounds and is at times exceeded by what Sywngendouw (2010) names "the politics of the possible." In an ongoing environment of change, this mechanism of judgment for the dispersal of aid is what I want to call climate

worthiness. My aim in this paper is to conceive of adaptation funding as a governance mechanism. At stake in this claim is an analytical perspective that sees adaptation funding not as something summarily deployed through a simple calculation of responsibility and need, but rather as a site of contention, where subjects are produced and enrolled and where knowledge and power come together in such a way that certain forms of life are fostered and others are disallowed.

### **Adaptation funding as a liberal mechanism**

I conceive of adaptation funding as a liberal mechanism. The significance of locating it within a liberal framework is two-fold. First, following Foucault (2010), liberal logic privileges the market as the site where governance is tested for excess. The assumption that follows is that any governance is already too much. However, and this is the second point, liberalism does not always adhere strictly to a market logic. Rather, an ambiguous and at times agnostic morality is at work, which results in uneven distributions of responsibility, sympathy, and aid for very the subjects of similar market functions. For example, a quick study of the US welfare system shows the poor in North America to be caught up in discourses of personal responsibility and moral decline while the poor in the global South are seen either as “behind” in the development trajectory or as victims of structural disadvantage. Finally, and most important for my argument, a number of authors recognize that the carbon market does not operate based on a value-free open market system, but rather “these decisions and actions are fundamentally characterized by an ethical and moral grounding of what is ‘right,’ ‘good’ and ‘better’ in terms of what to do about climate change [...]” (Goodman and Boyd 2011: 103). Therefore, morality and the market are the two driving points of my argument here.

While adaptation funding displays many nascent qualities of a market, it is perhaps more useful to conceive of it at this juncture as an apparatus that functions as a corollary to the carbon market. As Agamben (2009) points out, a Foucauldian apparatus has a number of broad yet distinct characteristics, three of which are particularly relevant to my argument in relation to adaptation funding. First, apparatuses emerge as a formation in response to a matter of urgency. Second, apparatuses are always comprised of power relations with strategic goals. Finally, apparatuses materialize at the intersection of power and knowledge (Agamben 2009). The apparatus of adaptation funding emerges from the delayed-apocalyptic urgency of the problem of climate change (Farbotko 2010; Swyngedouw 2010). At the nexus of much political jostling on a nearly global field of interaction, the adaptation funding apparatus creates and is created by truths about populations and environments, which form the basis for configurations and reconfigurations of finance and political power.

### **About adaptation funding**

The Copenhagen summit in 2009 failed to result in binding emissions reductions requirements, but was successful in establishing a UNFCCC Adaptation Fund, along with numerous other funding bodies, which are all financed by pledges from developed countries. These pledges are posited toward an overall commitment of \$US 30 billion (called “fast track funding”) for the 2010-2012 period and a goal of \$US 100 billion each year thereafter. Of course, this represents only a small part of the potential cost of adaptation, which the World Bank estimates at \$US 75 to 100 billion per year between 2010 and 2050<sup>1</sup> (World Bank 2009, cited in Dimitrov 2010: 802). (How the World Bank arrives at these numbers would be a worthy

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<sup>1</sup> This does not include the costs of mitigation, estimated at \$US 140-175 billion per year over the next 20 years for developing countries (World Bank 2009, cited in Dimitrov 2010: 802).

topic for another study). While it is true that these funds are ‘donated’ by developed countries, just how they should be secured remains up for debate. Under the Kyoto Protocol, an Adaptation Fund was financed by a 2% tax on transactions under the Clean Development Mechanism; the source of additional funds was also under debate in Copenhagen, with developed countries predictably proposing market mechanisms and private investment, while developing countries advocated public funding (Dimitrov 2010).

In any case, climate change adaptation funds are no small change. However, soliciting them is only part of the problem – they also have proven to be challenging to access, causing particular frustration for Pacific island countries that are already strongly experiencing the effects of climate change (Maclellan 2011). Adaptation funding mechanisms are veritably miasmatic, with “over forty international and regional mechanisms” (Maclellan 2011: 3). These include the Special Climate Change Fund (administered by the Global Environment Facility), the Strategic Climate Fund, implemented by the World Bank and other multilateral banks, the Adaptation Fund administered through the Kyoto Protocol mechanisms, and the Climate Investment Funds administered by the World Bank. The details of the implementation of these various funding mechanisms are highly complex; here it will suffice to draw attention to additional two points that are already evidenced.

First, climate change adaptation financing is caught up in transnational (neo)liberal capital structures. Second, the same structures that are responsible for allocating massive amounts of climate change adaptation funding are the same that manage poverty in traditional development practice (Roy 2010). Therefore adaptation funding mechanisms can be analyzed as more closely aligned with market-based liberal strategies than with, for example, humanitarian aid practices (though aid arguably also has a distinct neoliberal character). However, not only do

adaptation resources constitute a new influx of money, but it also cannot be reduced to development aid, as projects have to prove that they go beyond “business as usual” (also known as “additionality”) (Adaptation Fund 2009).

### **Bureaucratic framings**

It is important to keep in mind that it is rarely the potential recipients themselves that are responsible for producing these discourses; rather, the truth mechanisms that follow on from development tradition mandate that such framings are produced through endless strings of consultancies and NGO involvement (Cupples 2011). These framings themselves “function as a kind of biopower [...] as a force through which particular technologies and forms of expertise defines, controls and regulates the life of populations in both oppressive and life-enhancing ways” (Cupples 2011: 3).

Projects and programmes under the Adaptation fund must gain approval from the national governments of the countries in which they would be located. They also must go through multilateral or national implementing agencies. These implementing agencies are familiar actors: UNDP, UNEP, GEF, etc. It is possible for new implementing agencies to be nominated but they must prove their fiduciary responsibility, resulting in another process that stands in the way of accessing funds. Here I want to turn to a few of the principle ways that these framings “capture” populations of the global South, using the strategies and priorities of the Kyoto Protocol’s Adaptation Fund as a relatively representative case.

### **Proving vulnerability**

Proving vulnerability is the first and most important step to attaining adaptation funding. Priority in funding is dedicated to those considered the most vulnerable to the effects of climate change, and in particular those for whom vulnerability constitutes an urgency (Adaptation Fund

2009). If, as Foucault states, apparatuses support and are supported by particular kinds of knowledge, then knowledge of vulnerability is perhaps the most important pillar of the adaptation funding apparatus. Furthermore if, as some have well argued, vulnerability emerges from highly politicized networks of scientists, consultants, NGO offices, and others, it can be understood as a vital intersection of power and knowledge (Yamane 2009). These confluences are the conditions of possibility for the type of apparatus that Foucault names (Agamben 2009).

Vulnerability has been widely theorized in climate change and disaster scholarship and is seen as due to a combination of biophysical and social, political, and economic factors. However, the difficulty of objectively proving vulnerability, let alone quantifying it such that a vulnerability index could be created, is increasingly recognized (Klein 2009; Klein and Mohner 2011). Furthermore, Tschakert (2007) explains that vulnerability assessments often fail to take into account the lived experiences of the so-called “vulnerable” as they are based on sector-by-sector approaches and geared toward technological solutions. Yamane (2009) argues convincingly that rather than representing an inherent essence of a place or population, vulnerability is constructed by assemblages of human and nonhuman elements. In this way, vulnerability takes on a performative characteristic whereby these assemblages are instrumentalized for particular audiences, with the result that certain “truths” are created; certain knowledges that are supported by the adaptation funding apparatus.

In order to access funding, Southern subjects must prove that they have the right kind of vulnerability, that they have been the victims of structural inequities or a delayed development trajectory. Southern populations further prove their worthiness for adaptation aid by proving that they are continuing to work towards and with the goals of a liberal political system based on market logic, and that they are willing to continuously comply with the interlinked United

Nations and World Bank governance structures. In this way forms of life that are receptive to economic development are fostered, while those that would rebel in any meaningful way are disallowed.

Furthermore, the vulnerability that Southern subjects must demonstrate in order to attain adaptation funding must be calculable by development agencies, comparable against the vulnerability of others, and ultimately reducible such that funding can prove successful. The IPCC and related authors further understand vulnerability as a function of exposure and sensitivity to environmental stressors, countered by the ability to cope through adaptation (Adger, 2006). Climate change science therefore codifies vulnerability as an equation:  $(\text{exposure} \times \text{sensitivity}) / \text{adaptive capacity}$ . This view of vulnerability is at odds with recent contributions to social theory that understand vulnerability as a condition common to living on the planet, and as one that cannot be willed, cultivated, or known, but rather always exists in excess of human agency (Butler, Harrison). These alternative views of vulnerability may be more difficult to apply to distribution of climate change resources, but attending to them carefully may lead to process of subjectification that offer alternatives to the disempowering and market-oriented mechanisms that I have detailed above.

### **Resisting vulnerability**

One example of efforts to disrupt common vulnerability paradigms comes from the governments and populations of small island states. These nations have repeatedly articulated the imperative of effective mitigation rather than focusing on vulnerability and relief mechanisms (McNamara and Gibson 2009). This serves to tie the extreme vulnerability of Pacific islanders to the actions and imperatives of the West. Furthermore it articulates Pacific islanders as actors in the political sphere rather than supplicant victims.

Second, a practice of political engagement around climate has emerged that Stacy Alaimo (2009) characterizes as trans-corporeal. In theorizing trans-corporeality with regards to climate change vulnerability, Alaimo (2009) draws inspiration from protestors who disrobe, sometimes in highly inhospitable environments (for example, on icebergs). For Alaimo, through these actions protestors position humanity as “always materially connected to planetary processes as they emerge in particular places (2009: 23-24). Alaimo sees these protests as not only powerful but also hopeful. She asserts that such actions perform what she calls “insurgent vulnerability” as it compels ethical and political action (2009: 24). She draws on these protestors’ abilities to connect the materiality of their own bodies in relation to the Earth with the experiences of those living more daily experiences of vulnerability. Therefore, Alaimo asserts that it is possible to perform vulnerability as situated in global networks of power as well as material experience.

### **Conclusion: adaptation politics in a post-political world?**

The two examples of reconfiguring or refusing vulnerable subjectivity that I mention above may seem disconnected from the adaptation funding mechanism that I described earlier. However, they may act on the governance of adaptation and its crucial funding mechanisms in highly influential ways. By calling standard conceptions of vulnerability into question, the criteria on which adaptation funding is predicated may be called into question. Moreover, attending to practices of resistance to subjectification as supplicant vulnerable subjects shows the ways that vulnerability might actually be conceived as an area for political engagement and as a challenge to the presuppositions of liberal morality, although the structures that constrain it, such as international development discourses, loom large.

While he does not dispute that ethical conversations around carbon occur, Swyngedouw (2010) argues that apocalyptic, techno-managerial, and populist discourses of climate change



constitute a sort of post-political governance. The post-political, for Swyngedouw, eschews radical disagreement and the ability to imagine drastically different futures in favor of all-encompassing market logic which externalizes meaningful opposition and silences “politics of the possible” (2010: 228). However, this characterization risks further marginalizing to the point of dismissal the real acts of opposition that are enacted by protestors and governments of ‘most vulnerable’ nations, among others (for examples, see Alaimo 2009; McNamara and Gibson 2009).

Furthermore, I find it important and in the end potentially liberating to attend to the moral ambiguity of liberal mechanisms, for two significant reasons. First, this ambiguity, which might also be described as agnosticism, allows for logics apart from a strictly market-based logic to operate. This creates the potential for logics that are more immediately just, transparent, and flexible to address adaptation, while simultaneously creating a space for alternatives to capitalism to emerge from the interior of the relationship between governance and climate change. The second and related reason for optimism is that liberalism’s moral ambiguity means that liberalism does not simply enlist subjects into a cohesive and pre-formed project. Rather, liberalism has been “something that was worked out as moral struggle, in which its *agnostic* qualities explain something of its subtlety and continuity, but also as something worked out *in* struggle with the ambiguous morality of politics” (Joyce 2003: 15). It is through this struggle that perhaps even the vulnerable subjects of climate change adaptation can actively influence the norms of funding distribution.

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