

Romain Felli, *La Grande Adaptation: Climat, capitalisme et catastrophe*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2016. ISBN: 9782021288940 (paper); ISBN: 9782021288964 (ebook)

Readers of *Antipode* might be familiar with some of Romain Felli's work on the politics of climate change. The Swiss scholar has published several scholarly articles in English, many of which bring a fresh perspective to the problem of class and climate politics (e.g. Felli 2014). Harder to access, however, is some of his work in French, the most important of which is his recent book *La Grande Adaptation: Climat, capitalisme et catastrophe*.

The subtitle "climate, capitalism and catastrophe" might suggest a focus on the present and future, an orientation characteristic of most studies of climate change. But *La Grande Adaptation* covers largely historical terrain. Felli's inspiration (the tribute is in the title) is Karl Polanyi's (2001) *The Great Transformation*. Like Polanyi, Felli is interested in the forgotten or underappreciated historical foundations of our current condition—foundations that were in no way laid "accidentally" or without political struggle. And yet *La Grande Adaptation* is not just a riff on Polanyi, and in important ways its goal is very different. Felli's principal objective is to demonstrate the ways that the discourse of "adaptation" to climate change, and the transformations capitalist elites and political economy have demanded in the name of adaptation, are not new phenomena. He traces the argument for adaptation—explicit and implicit—much farther back, and in more powerful circles, than I (at least) was previously aware: climate change, and the challenge it poses to capitalism, has been a significant concern for some elites for more than half a century.

Moreover, *La Grande Adaptation* not only demonstrates this through extensive research, it goes further. It argues (thoroughly convincingly) that these discourses have not merely been important to how capitalism confronts the specific challenges posed by climate change. Instead, Felli shows that they have been essential to the reproduction of the entire edifice of global capitalist social relations since the late 1960s, and have today come to constitute essential discursive/ideological dynamics. As he put it in a recent

interview in the French newspaper *Libération*, we must examine “the means by which the effects of climate change are rendered acceptable. Rather than being an obstacle for capital, climate change has allowed it to expand into new sectors” (Felli 2016).¹

These dynamics originate in Euro-American (but especially American and US-dominated international institutions’) fears that environmental crisis and “overpopulation” will make adaptation impossible, and have evolved to a point at which (in Felli’s words) the idea of adaptation has become an important way to “enable the extension of market relations into all domains for life”, because it tells us that the solution to the problem of making society “more flexible, more reactive, more adaptable to climate change is the market”. Citing Jason Moore’s (2015) *Capitalism in the Web of Life*, Felli argues that the politics of adaptation has become a dominant means of organizing nature. Polanyi remarked that “*laissez-faire* was planned”; so too, it would seem, was a “free market” approach to the calamity of climate change. Today we confront the catastrophic failure of both these “planning” exercises.

Most of the book deals with the period from the 1970s to the 1990s, and the construction of climate-scientific-capitalist reason and institutions that could abet not only the persistence of liberal capitalism, but the production of a market in adaptation, i.e. an opportunity for yield. Throughout, Felli shows that in the realm of climate change, science and politics have always been entangled and inseparable. There is no “neutral” scientific knowledge that has been examined and “politicized” by “interest groups” external to it. Instead, many realms of knowledge—scientific, political, strategic, moral, social-scientific, governmental, administrative, and so forth—have contributed to the construction of a conception of the world in which uncertainty and change, and appropriate ways to deal with them, have been captured by the market. And, among Felli’s most important claims, the problem and problematization of climate change has not been confronted as anything “special” or distinctive demanding a new approach. On the contrary, for decades, the problem and problematization of climate change has been a

¹ Translations throughout are mine.

central mode through which neoliberal capitalism has achieved and held on to power: “The attack on ‘rigid’ state institutions, coupled with a more or less open apology, in the name of environmental constraints, for the market as a mode of organization, constituted a [key] site of the development of neoliberalism in the 1970s and 1980s. And the question of climate was central to this process.”

This argument is laid out in admirably clear, energetic language. Felli has a knack for explaining scholarly or academic concepts in a way that is unintimidating without being long-winded. It is not a long book, either—five chapters which build the case in chronological fashion, moving through some fascinating terrain, and revealing important networks of knowledge and power. For example, in an original (if occasionally over-exhaustive) analysis, Felli digs deep into the political and scientific debates of 1970s neo-Malthusianism, uncovering the extremely close relations between the origins of climate science and post-Golden Age fears of capitalist collapse and Cold War geopolitics. Later, he develops a devastating critique of microfinance as a neoliberal extension of individualizing adaptation, before turning to other credit questions, and insurance-as-market-based-solution to “vulnerability”. All are framed as ways in which the answers to the problems of poverty and ecological degradation are constrained to those already determined by capitalism, and hence as means to undermine the emergence of Polanyian counter-movements for climate justice and other social justice efforts.

Unsurprisingly, Felli also turns his attention to what he calls “the gospel of flexibility”, to elaborate the way in which flexibility *qua* adaptability (and now, “resilience”) became an essential discursive resource in the organization of a society well-placed to exploit (in the capitalist sense) a changing environment, and thus central to the theory and practice of an emergent neoliberalism. Orthodox freshwater economics (Naomi Klein’s Chicago Boys) are important to this story, but in a way Klein does not address. At something like the intersection of her books *The Shock Doctrine* (2008) and *This Changes Everything* (2014), Felli makes another novel contribution, chronicling the direct and central contribution of many leading lights of neoliberal macroeconomics to

the US and international climate management scene in the 1980s.

If *La Grande Adaptation* has one structural flaw, it lies in its rather abrupt and somewhat disjointed conclusion. Indeed, as it stands there is no “conclusion” in any meaningful sense. Instead, the book ends with a powerful, but virtually stand-alone, chapter: “Climate Migrants: From Security Threat to Business Opportunity” (*Les migrants climatiques: de la menace sécuritaire à l'instrumentalisation entrepreneuriale*). Felli argues that the increasingly influential spectre of the “climate migrant” is the product of a false or inadequate understanding of global ecology and political economy. Working with the fundamental claims of contemporary (mostly North American) political ecology (not to be confused with, and in fact quite different from, the French tradition of *écologie politique*) he attacks the idea that “climate migrants”—increasingly evoked (in Felli’s accurate wording) as a “new barbarian invasion”—are a product of specifically “environmental” crises. Instead, recalling in some ways Mike Davis’ (2001) classic *Late Victorian Holocausts*, he argues that the climate refugee is a product of colonial history, and especially of modern American imperialism and its functionalist “scientific” infrastructure.

And there it ends. While Felli makes a few useful connections between previous chapters and the discourse of climate migration as operated by liberal apologists like Thomas Homer-Dixon and multilateral institutions like the World Bank, he does not take the opportunity to tie the threads together. As much as I want to concede that not everything can be knotted off at the end of a project that is deeply engaged in an unfolding present, it still felt like a very abrupt stop—one all the more glaring in that the questions raised in the final chapter seem to demand further *immediate* thought.

Nevertheless, this is an excellent and very important book. I am not aware of another that covers the terrain of *La Grande Adaptation*. I have been told an English translation is in the works, and I hope it appears soon. It will make an original contribution to the literature in English, not least because, unlike a lot of the work on climate change in French, it is deeply engaged with a lot of work in English, both

scholarly and popular, that is often missing from radical European discussions; Michael Watts (2015), for example, is crucial to Felli's thinking.

There are, of course, a growing number of historical and political accounts of climate change, climate science, and environmental crises more broadly. There are also a growing number of works trying to address the existential or political-economic crises posed by climate change, some with an explicitly radical or critical bent, some without, like Dale Jamieson's (2014) *Reason in a Dark Time*. Among the former, *La Grande Adaptation* is different from the vast majority in important ways. Felli's is not a world-historical or "structural" account, although he makes his sympathies with Moore's *Capitalism and the Web of Life* very clear. Neither is it a conspiratorial exposé of the rulers of the world—as Klein's work can sometimes seem. It is more subtle, laying out the crucial links between climate politics and science and other key sites of neoliberalism that we do not think about as "environmental" (like microfinance, for example). Making climate change not an instance of neoliberalism, but rather a key site of its construction, is really a new and very different kind of project on climate change than any of which I am aware.

In keeping with its substantially historical focus, Felli's book is not "prognosticative", which distinguishes it from many other contributions, like *Climate Leviathan: A Political Theory of Our Planetary Future* (by Joel Wainwright and I, which will appear with Verso in early 2018; also see Wainwright and Mann 2013) or Jamieson's *Reason in a Dark Time*, which is subtitled *Why the Struggle Against Climate Change Failed and What It Means for the Future*. The vast majority of *La Grande Adaptation* is a history of the present, illuminating histories and connections that were often entirely new to me, and I am (or at least I think I am supposed to be) somewhat knowledgeable in this area. I encourage others—whether or not they are (or are supposed to be) somewhat knowledgeable—to engage with *La Grande Adaptation*, whether they wait for an English translation, or dive into the available French edition.

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