

Title: “Adaptation, inequality and the world system: A research agenda”

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David Ciplet (University of Colorado Boulder, david.ciplet@colorado.edu)

World systems theory offers a framework to understand and explain enduring global conditions of inequality between states. The global ‘periphery’ is seen in a losing role in relation to the ‘core’ from which wealthy countries draw resources and cheap labor to appropriate the surplus value of the whole world economy (Wallerstein 1974: 401). Peripheral states are ‘structurally constrained to experience developmental processes that reproduce their subordinate status’ (Chase-Dunn 1995: 389). Semi-peripheral countries fall in the middle of the world division of labor (Arrighi and Drangel 1985), often facilitating the exploitation of countries in their regions. Importantly, the world system hierarchy and unequal global division of labor is sustained by domestic forms of inequality and unequal global governance structures.

Numerous works have built upon this conception of the world system to identify a process of ecologically unequal exchange, whereby pollution and other environmental ‘bads’ are concentrated in the poorest countries, and flows of environmental ‘goods’ are appropriated by core countries, as part of structurally unequal trade and production relations in the world system (Rice 2007; Jorgenson and Clark 2009; Shandra et al. 2009). This perspective holds that the global economy, including relations of production, trade, consumption and disposal, is rigged to ensure that value, including ecological goods, are expropriated from the global South to benefit the global North.

Such historically bound conditions of inequality also play a critical role of in shaping power relations in the negotiation of global environmental governance (Roberts and Parks 2007, 2009). As applied to the issue of climate change mitigation, proponents argue that a ‘climate debt’ is owed as the result of disproportionate polluting of the global atmosphere, resulting in heightened vulnerability to climate change of states and actors least responsible for the causing the problem (Bond 2010, 2012; Klein 2010; Roberts and Parks 2007, 2009; Martinez Alier 2003).

As for climate change adaptation, as Arch Bishop Desmond Tutu put it in 2008, a system of “adaptation apartheid” is already developing in the form of increasing investments in protections against climate-related disasters in industrial countries, while efforts in the most vulnerable countries are grossly underfunded. Similarly, scholars have begun to shed light on how adaptation politics can be analyzed through the lens of world systems theory. Roberts and Parks (2007) document how historic insertion into the world system largely conditions contemporary state vulnerability to climate change. Ciplet (2015) argues that the promise of adaptation finance within the UNFCCC from core to peripheral states served as a mechanism to “negotiate the consent” of these actors to unequal international environmental governance structures. Ciplet, Roberts and Khan (2013) point to structural inhibitors to advancing justice in adaptation finance and its governance that are specific to the international power relations. Despite these contributions, overall, scholarship on adaptation has tended to have a technical or “problem-solving” orientation (see Cox 1992), with limited attention to how adaptation politics exist within broader historical relations of inequality and political economic structures of the world system.

Broadly, this brief asks: what would analysis of climate change adaptation through the lens of world systems theory reveal about the ways in which global inequality is being reproduced and resisted in a warming world? Such a lens points to at least five considerations for a research agenda: *First*, how have ‘neoliberal’ governance forms adopted within the UNFCCC (Ciplet and Roberts n.d.), and a fragmenting hegemonic world order (Roberts 2011), conditioned the ability of peripheral states to extract concessions for adaptation from core and semi-peripheral states in the negotiations? *Second*, in what ways does adaptation finance reproduce, or generate new international relationships of debt and dependency between core and peripheral states, and semi-peripheral and peripheral states? What are the implications of these debt relationships for peripheral state dependence or autonomy within the world system? *Third*, in what ways has adaptation empowered new transnational configurations of capital and what are the implications for local autonomy, democracy and inequality in peripheral states? Moreover, in what ways is an accumulation logic shaping the techniques of adaptation and its governance, including forms of

dispossession? *Fourth*, in what ways are adaptation projects and their governance shaped by domestic relationships of inequality, and in what ways do adaptation projects mitigate, reproduce or deepen these divides? *Fifth*, what forms and techniques of resistance have emerged around unequal adaptation projects and finance? Are such forms of resistance purely localized or are there transnational dimensions?

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