

Kasia Paprocki. 2021. *Threatening dystopias: The global politics of climate change adaptation in Bangladesh*. New York: Cornell University Press. ISBN 9781501759161. \$30.95.

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Threatening Dystopias is a theoretically innovative and empirically rich critique of climate change adaptation. This book comes out in a timely moment. On the one hand, adaptation to climate change has spread globally as a form of governance transforming landscapes and peoples. Institutions and actors operating at different scales, funds, knowledges, infrastructures, and technologies have mobilized to produce the material and social conditions to tackle the current and future disturbing effects of climate change. On the other hand, in the vast and growing literature about climate change adaptation, scholars and policy makers embrace—and even take for granted—adaptation as a necessary action. Through the case of Bangladesh, Kasia Paprocki invites us to critically rethink climate change adaptation not to discard it as a possibility, but to situate it in a broader history of development and capitalism in which it is deeply embedded, and to carefully examine how it operates in specific places and communities where it intertwines with power relations and political ecologies.

This book suggests the concept of "adaptation regime" as a novel analytical framework to undertake such critique. The adaptation regime is "a socially and historically specific configuration of power that governs the landscape of possible intervention in the face of climate change" (p. 7). This conceptualization is predicated on the premise that: (1) both climate change impacts and the possibilities of adaptation are distributed unequally within and between communities (2) this distribution does not occur naturally, but under the sway of power structures and ideologies and (3) that these inequalities and power dynamics, as well as the ecologies they shape and upon which they unfold, are historically configured. In this sense, the adaptation regime operates through three processes: imagination, experimentation, and dispossession. Through imagination, different actors manufacture ideas of present and future crises that in turn inform visions of, for instance, how different places should or should not be inhabited. Experimentation refers to the ways in which imagination materializes in development interventions. These interventions are aimed at producing specific livelihoods and landscapes seen as potentially prepared to face climate change and functional to economic growth. By transforming social relations of production and people-landscape relationships, experimentation produces dispossession. In the adaptation regime, narratives about the inevitability of climate crises are deeply amalgamated with discourses on development and economic growth. It is in this context when certain practices and livelihoods are deemed as inviable, thus justifying dispossession.

Kasia Paprocki's book can be framed as an intellectual contribution to three terrains of academic debate: the political ecology of climate change, agrarian studies, and critical approaches to water and fluvial environments.

First, it is a book on the political ecology of climate change. One of the main arguments of the book is that to understand the impacts of climate change and the possibilities for adaptation, we need to pay attention to historically specific contexts. From a political ecology perspective, this involves considering multiscale processes. *Threatening Dystopias* connects scales and processes occurring globally and locally, and situates the present as shaped by the past and as a site to imagine the future. For instance, to show the persistent patterns of development in Bangladesh, the book demonstrates how since colonial times this part of the world has been seen as a potential terrain for economic growth as well as a dystopian place. Colonial administrators, however, faced the difficulties of establishing property rights and expanding areas under cultivation in a changing geography where rivers and wetlands constantly move. Imaginations about these wetlands as wastelands, as well as the construction of embankments to reclaim land, helped colonial powers transform the area for the purposes of crop production and land control. Yet failure in the maintenance of these infrastructures, together with the environmental impacts of land reclamation, contributed to the current climate vulnerability of the region. Today, the adaptation regime in Bangladesh gives continuity to these global imaginaries of development and growth, as well as their ecological and geographical consequences. This is the case of the conversion from rice cultivation to shrimp aquaculture as a response to climate threats, which has involved rural-urban migration, dispossession, and the deterioration of livelihoods.

This book is also a contribution to agrarian studies. The analysis of the adaptation regime in Bangladesh is an examination of the political economy of agrarian change. The discourse and practices of climate adaptation

have involved the transformation of relations of production, agrarian landscapes, and the dynamics of rural differentiation. In other words, the adaptation regime has become a form of governance of rural life. A key contribution along this line is the problematization of the narratives about climate migration in Bangladesh. These narratives argue that rural out-migration is a consequence of climate change. However, Paprocki argues that understanding migration in this way obscures the processes of dispossession and ecological transformation produced under the forms of adaptation and past development regimes that have undermined peasant livelihoods. The expansion of shrimp aquaculture, for instance, has implied the decay of rice production and the dispossession of people from land. This process reflects a longer history of development and agrarian capitalism in which theories of economic growth saw the rural-urban migration of poor peasants as a precondition for the production of wealth in the countryside. Despite these adverse processes, peasants are not portrayed as passive subjects. Rather, *Threatening Dystopias* offers a detailed account of how peasants resist and contest the adaptation regime to imagine a different future. Through social mobilization and interventions in embankments, peasants have been able to reproduce rural life and even bring back rice production in specific places.

In addition to its explicit contribution to political ecology and agrarian studies, I consider *Threatening Dystopias* as a relevant reference for those interested in critical approaches to water and fluvial environments in the social sciences. The rural and environmental history of Bangladesh is deeply shaped by the ways in which its rivers, wetlands, and *chars* (alluvial sedimented deposits) mediate social and political relations. In fact, since colonial times the particular configuration of waterscapes in Bangladesh has posed significant challenges to those who seek to control the region and create economic growth. While outsiders bring with them static notions of property relations over land, the reality of rivers and wetlands in this part of the world is one of constant change and recurrent movement. Intimate and dynamic relations between land and water are precisely at the center of current concerns about vulnerability to climate change in Bangladesh. For example, flooding, waterlogging, and the changing interstices between fresh and saltwater have played a central role in the transformation of rural livelihoods and the way scientists, development practitioners, and policymakers have imagined this region as in need of climate interventions. The presence of embankments materializes this history of dissimilar and conflicting notions of water and land, not merely in terms of the imposition of engineering schemes but also as sites of resistance. *Threatening Dystopias* describes how people in their everyday life have dismantled embankments to restore hydrological connectivity and transform their relationship with water and land.

This book is a key resource for research and teaching in political ecology, agrarian studies, and critical water and fluvial environment studies. *Threatening Dystopias* is highly relevant for people trained in applied approaches to development and climate change, as this book exposes the type of contradictions that keep reproducing around the world. As an academic book, it is an interesting example of how to successfully bring together different spatial and temporal scales, archival and ethnographic sources, and the perspectives of actors situated in different hierarchical and epistemological positions. It is a well-organized book that carefully weaves its arguments into a coherent and clear narrative—although this narrative is sometimes interrupted by endnotes containing information that could have been incorporated in the main text. However, after reading this book, I was curious about the place of electoral politics in the operation of the adaptation regime in Bangladesh, as well as the everyday encounters between development practitioners and the peasants. In sum, *Threatening Dystopias* is a much-needed critique of climate change adaptation: one of the most powerful narratives in the global environmental governance of our current times.

Reference

Paprocki, K. (2021). *Threatening dystopias: The global politics of climate change adaptation in Bangladesh*. Cornell University Press.

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