This is a response to Response to Ben Orlove,  Heather Lazrus, Grete K. Hovelsrud, Alessandra Giannini. 2014. “Recognitions and Responsibilities: On the Origins and Consequences of the Uneven Attention to Climate Change around the World” *Current Anthropology*, 55(3), pp. 249-75. Scroll down to my comment.

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Jesse Ribot Forthcoming in 2014

**Politics of Misrecognition – Framing out Liability under a Changing Sky**

There are districts in which the position of the rural population is that of a man [sic.] standing permanently up to his neck in water, so that even a ripple is sufficient to drown him.

R.H. Tawney 1966 Quoted by Scott (1976)

The brilliance of this article is in its identification and explanation of skewed global geographic attention to climate risk and social vulnerability. It lays the groundwork for a direly needed recalibration. Through histories of place the authors show how visible Arctic and Island climate-change effect are iconized in iceberg-bound polar bears and islands swallowed by a rising sea; whereas the complex risks faced by mountain and desert peoples are disturbingly framed as matters of *their own* sustainability. They outline the political and institutional paths that shape this selective inclusion and occlusion of place, problem and cause.

Vulnerability is always rooted in social relations. Yet the social framing as sustainable development turns responsibility back on the victims. This framing gives climate change a clean slate, limiting responsibility for redress. For example, 90 percent of the world’s drylands fall in developing countries, they cover over 40 percent of the earth’s surface, house 34 percent of the world’s population, and are home to almost half of the world’s poor (UNCCD 2011:6,14). Drylands’ poor are already deeply vulnerable in the face of ordinary climate variability *and* change. But by calling their problems social – a matter of sustainable development – risk is naturalized as a pre-existing condition. With this slight of framing, the emitting nations absolve themselves of responsibility for redress for the vast majority of the earth’s vulnerable. Is this an accident of institutional histories or the slight of images? Is it part of a well-crafted politics of selective attention?

The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) has set up an adaptation fund that further formalizes the exclusion of the vulnerable – those with pre-existing conditions need not apply. Adaptation funds from emitting nations are earmarked to redress only the damages of the *additional stress* that climate change might cause. This additionality stance implicitly acknowledges that climate change is anthropogenic and that the responsible parties should fund adaptation (Khan and Roberts 2013:182). But additionality also implies a turn away from responsibility for the preexisting precarity of those at risk – most of whom were vulnerable in the face of climate stress well before climate change met the horizon. UNFCC is laying down a cut-off for vulnerability redress. The convention only acknowledges the increment of suffering associated with added stress – pre-existing precarity, the very condition that turns any climate stress into disaster, is framed out.

The targeting of adaptation funds toward the anthropogenic increment accepts that nature has been cultured, but, paradoxically, requires that the chronic misery of precarity be naturalized – as background. The setting of this increment and the cordoning off of liability for vulnerability is a carefully debated absolution. It is not an accident that vulnerability – which is socially produced within a larger set of national and global forces (*a la* Rodney 1973, Wallerstein 1974; Wolf 1981; Watts and Bohle 1993) – is occluded, naturalized, made blameless. In explaining the balance of attention across regions, I think it would be fruitful to extend the analysis into a broader politics of cause and blame. Why is it that UNFCCC is willing only to restore people to their state of pre-change misery? Why do they cordon off liability and obscure the root causes of the very problem they are charged with solving? Where is the broader responsibility for pre-existing vulnerabilities equally produced in the crucible of global relations? Like the increment, the Artic and small islands seem easier to focus on – less daunting liabilities.

I am concerned with the focus that the anthropocene brings to climate while turning attention away from suffering. Were suffering the center of analysis, climate (and climate change) would be one important stressor among many embedded in a set of social, political and economic processes that produce and maintain marginality and precarity. With rigorous causal analysis, responsibility for suffering and attention among regions would be rebalanced. The climate community is focusing too intently on the tip of the iceberg of causal histories. It has long been clear that the best solution to climate-related vulnerability is to reduce vulnerabilities of those who are already at risk (e.g. Drèze and Sen 1989:60; IPCC 2012:76; European Commission 2013:5). Yet despite that the poor live precarious lives and that redressing their current precarity would reduce future risk, we seem to be much more horrified by images of future disasters than the present ongoing crisis. Attention needs to be recalibrated. This article is a brilliant start to that rebalancing process. Nobody in 2013, in the world’s wealthiest generation in history, should be left up to their neck awaiting the wave that will drown them.

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