

Extreme Cities: The Peril and Promise of Urban Life in the Age of Climate Change

By Ashley Dawson

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Extreme Cities begins, appropriately enough, in the midst of Superstorm Sandy's devastation of much of the New York metropolitan area in 2012. One of the pivotal environmental events in the twenty-first-century United States, this storm revealed to millions the fragility and tenuity of urban life, even in the richest city in the world. If where the storm inflicted the most damage was initially determined by purely geological factors—the areas in flood zones were hit hardest—it quickly exposed how the gaping chasm between the haves and have-nots would impact relief efforts. Downtown Manhattan was pummeled, but life returned to relative normalcy there within a few days. In similarly low-lying but significantly less wealthy neighborhoods, such as Red Hook in Brooklyn or the Rockaways in Queens, relief efforts were spearheaded by Occupy Wall Street activists and largely ignored by official relief agencies. People remained without power for weeks, and many were left homeless, or stranded in high-rise public housing buildings without access to running water or electricity.

“Cities,” Dawson argues “are the defining social and ecological phenomenon of the twenty-first century” (p. 5). As both the main contributor to climate change and the sites most vulnerable to its effects, cities are central to the climate crisis. However, much of the urbanization literature promotes an optimistic outlook on cities, as places of condensed populations that allow for a lower ecological footprint, geared toward the development of climate-resistant technologies and architecture that will serve as resilient safe spaces from the coming effects of climate change. Further, cities are largely ignored in much of the environmentalist movement. This contradiction—between, on the one hand, cities as the driving force behind climate change and the sites of greatest vulnerability to its effects, and on the other, the absence of cities in much of environmentalism and the climate justice movement, coupled with the rosy prognoses of city life by many urban scholars—is a central theme of Dawson's *Extreme Cities*.

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In the chapter titled “Sea Change,” Dawson wages a polemical rebuttal at whom he calls “the citerati,” contemporary urban scholars “who frame planetary urbanization as a relatively unmitigated good” (p. 136). Urbanization, according to the so-called citerati, is both ecologically and economically beneficial, as cities concentrate people, thus allowing for greener living, and concentrate resources, generating entrepreneurial opportunities for the world’s poor and raising the global standard of living. This argument, however, ignores the fact that cities are the greatest contributor to climate change, and that what drives much global urbanization is not the “pull” factors of urban opportunity, but the “push” factors of rural dispossession, and changes in the agricultural economy that drive peasants off the land and into the cities.

Dawson also critically examines the concept of “resiliency,” which has been imported from the ecological sciences to describe social systems by everyone from policy-makers and urban scholars, to sociologists and economists. While the use of resilience in mainstream urban studies is a welcome departure from the antiquated view of cities as an aggregation of atomized buildings and objects, toward an integrated perspective of cities as ecosystems, its application has significant shortcomings. As Dawson argues, the jargon of resiliency tends to ignore the political-economic conditions that make urban spaces in need of resilient development in the first place. In doing so, resiliency discourse tends to naturalize globalization, climate change, capitalism, and social inequality. In this way, there is a “snug fit between the concept of resilience and contemporary neoliberalism” (p. 175).

In the chapter titled “Disaster Communism,” Dawson returns to Superstorm Sandy, and provides a critical overview of the horizontalist, anarchist-inspired mutual aid approaches to dealing with environmental crises in cities, including the experience of Occupy Sandy (OS). Especially in the crucial first few days following the storm, activists who were previously involved in Occupy Wall Street were the main relief force mobilized in the less affluent parts of New York. While large-scale relief organizations, such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and Red Cross, were rendered inert by their top-down bureaucratic structure and size, OS activists fanned out throughout the city, setting up relief hubs in the most hard-hit and underserved neighborhoods. OS was animated by principles of mutual aid, which include “individual ingenuity ... spontaneous response to a need,” and the construction of “survivors as capable and willing to help themselves and their neighbors” (pp. 244–245). Further, they also saw existing inequalities as exacerbating the effects of the storm, and envisaged relief efforts as encompassing the tackling of these inequalities, along with the more immediate problems.

In spite of OS’s immediate organizational capacities and focus on systemic inequalities along with solving pressing post-Sandy relief needs, Dawson argues that “for a neoliberal state ... the bootstrapping ingenuity of Occupy Sandy was actually a boon,” demonstrated in part by the Department of Homeland Security’s

official praise of OS efforts (p. 253). This is because OS served to fill the gaps left by neoliberalism's gutting of the public sector, and philosophy of self-reliance and privatization. While OS may have been concerned about the oppressive nature of the interlocking systems of capitalism and racism, they were organizationally and strategically unequipped to tackle these larger issues in any meaningful way. OS was disembedded from the communities they served, and organized according to decentralized and horizontalist political philosophies, which prevented it from withstanding attacks from both the state (once it stopped serving its purpose) and from local community organizers, some of whom saw OS activists as "outside agitators." Such localized, horizontalist movements on the Left do not offer long-term, viable solutions to capitalism and climate change. Instead, Dawson argues that "the movement for climate justice ... will have to confront many of the dilemmas central to the communist tradition," such as internationalism, widespread collective action, working-class solidarity, and the role of state power in marshalling the level of resources and collaborative action necessary to tackle a set of problems on the scale of the climate crisis (p. 239).

One of Dawson's key arguments, to which he returns in the conclusion of *Extreme Cities*, is that we must begin now to seriously grapple with the question of retreating from the coastal regions most in jeopardy. The question is not *whether* to retreat from coastal cities that are sinking and threatened by both sea level rise and increased storm activity, but *when* and *under what conditions*. Part of a just, radical transition away from a carbon-intensive economy must include systemic adaptive measures that take into account the changing climatic and geographic conditions brought on by global warming. A majority of the global population lives within 120 miles of the coastline, and most of the world's megacities are on the coast (p. 5). If retreat began today, it could potentially be planned, phased, organized, and socially just. If not, retreat will occur all the same, but it will likely be chaotic, reactive, and leave the most vulnerable to fend for themselves.

Resistance to a just retreat comes from many quarters. Dawson contends that the concept of "retreat" is in conflict with "the broader cultural zeitgeist of imperial masculinity" that sees retreat as a form of military defeat, or surrender (p. 278). This reaction to retreat can be seen in Mayor Mike Bloomberg's post-Sandy "Build It Back" plan, which committed to redeveloping the coastal communities devastated by the storm. Retreat is perhaps a politically unpopular position, and contradicts the short-term, election cycle-dictated logic of political leaders. But more fundamentally, retreat contradicts the logic of capital accumulation. Not only are cities the global centers of capital, but beachfront coastal properties often command some of the highest returns in the real estate industry. The anarchic, profit-driven logic of capitalism compels continued development in Miami Beach and Long Beach, Long Island, even if these developments will inevitably be destroyed in the not-too-distant future.

Capitalism is incapable of the kind of coordinated, long-term planning required to both stop construction on vulnerable coastlines and transition away from living in precarious, low-lying regions that will be completely uninhabitable within a few decades. It has also proved itself incapable of stopping the profligate consumption of fossil fuels which drives the need for such monumental coastal retreat in the first place. Dawson expertly demonstrates this point throughout *Extreme Cities*, critiquing a number of half-measures along the way such as programs of “urban resilience;” localized and horizontalist reform efforts; as well as “green” urban development that ignores systemic inequality and leads to a type of “green gentrification.”

However, while Dawson deftly analyzes these social ills, and critiques programs that fall short of addressing these ills, he does so without presenting much of an adequate alternative, beyond very broad strokes. Diagnosis without prognosis is still important, of course, but this becomes a problem when scholars in fact attempt to present solutions but do so in only vague, limited ways. The chapter entitled “Disaster Communism,” for example, elicits the promise of a “communist horizon, the sense that the oppressive conditions of the present can be overcome and new forms of solidarity discovered” (p. 236). It is here where Dawson makes his pointed critique of OS’s limitations, of where it falls short of “disaster communism.” However, it is unclear what, exactly, distinguishes disaster communism as a unique political idea. Dawson defines it as “communal solidarities forged in the teeth of calamity ... [where] people begin to organize themselves to meet one another’s basic needs and collectively survive” (p. 236). He notes that under such circumstances these forms of solidarity *may* lead to more long-term, ecologically, and socially just forms of human organization, but it is unclear what criteria must be met in order for them to do so. His apt critique of OS’s leaderless, horizontal approach to organizing is clearly meant to demarcate mere mutual aid from disaster communism—or at least as a limited form of it, as he states that disaster communism “on purely a local scale ... does not actually constitute an inherent threat to the capitalist social order” (p. 253)—but does so without clarifying what distinguishes the latter. Thus, while an intriguing concept that opens vistas beyond “the kinds of localized, horizontalist experiments in radical democracy that much of the Left currently favors” (p. 238), there is much left to be fleshed out here by future scholars and activists.

Extreme Cities is an important contribution to the critical urban studies literature, and crucially brings the climate justice movement to the cities. It centers cities as both the main drivers and the main victims of climate change, and explores a plethora of proposals and experiments in green urban design while maintaining a critical perspective that recognizes the pitfalls of purely technical solutions to the climate crisis. It is a clarion call—for both climate justice activists to recognize cities as the frontlines of the climate crisis, and for urban scholars to focus on the ways in which cities are embedded in and inextricably linked to the natural environment.

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