



## Global Climate Crisis and the City: An Interview with Ashley Dawson

Ashley Dawson and Maura McGee

*An interview with Ashley Dawson, professor of English at the College of Staten Island and the Graduate Center, CUNY, about his most recent book *Extreme Cities: The Peril and Promise of Urban Life in the Age of Climate Change*. He talks with Maura McGee about the global convergence of urbanization and climate change, strategies to confront climate chaos, and how communities and social movements can act.*

Cities are the defining social and ecological form of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They are home to the majority of humanity: 55% of the world's population lives in urban areas today, and that proportion is expected to grow to 68% by 2050, with much of this increase taking place in Asia and Africa (UN DESA 2018). Cities are also the biggest contributors of carbon to the atmosphere, emitting as much as 60–70% of the world's total anthropogenic greenhouse gases (Dawson 2017, p. 36). And given the geographical positioning of cities along waterways—nearly all of the world's megacities are port cities, a history of habitation that can be traced to the development of capitalism—they are among the world's most vulnerable sites to sea-level rise and climate chaos. This intersection of planetary urbanization and climate change is what Ashley Dawson, in his 2017 book *Extreme Cities: The Peril and Promise of Urban Life in the Age of Climate Change*, calls “the urban climax”: “the collision of an urbanizing humanity and the increasingly extreme forms of weather unleashed by climate change” (p. 123).

Dawson defines the extreme city as an unequal city: “an urban space of stark economic inequality, the defining urban characteristic of our time, and one of the greatest threats to the sustainability of urban existence.” It is in the extreme city, then, that humans struggle for survival: “How a city copes with stratifications of race, class, and gender (or how such inequalities are left to fester) has everything to do with how well it will weather the storms that are bearing down upon humanity” (p. 7).

Ashley Dawson is professor of English at the College of Staten Island, City University of New York (CUNY), and the CUNY Graduate Center. He works in the fields of environmental humanities and ecocriticism, and is also the author of *Extinct: A Radical History*. I interviewed Dawson about *Extreme Cities*, presented in a condensed version below.

**Maura McGee:** *You identify a problem of scale in how we frame climate-change issues. Climate change is often framed in global terms, rather than at the scale of the city. What is the danger in this framing?*

**Ashley Dawson:** Scientific analysis adopts certain scales that we need to be critical of. Carbon emissions are evaluated on a global level, in terms of global atmospheric concentrations. When measurements are taken of rising temperatures in cities, they are often adjusted down to meet national or global means. Cities are rendered invisible by the dominant scientific discourses. When we talk about individual carbon footprints, it tends to be per capita within a national boundary; we

don't think about the scale of the city. That's a problem because cities are responsible for the lion's share of carbon emissions. That's not to say that agriculture isn't an important source of emissions, but it's important to take what is often not included in analysis and make it more apparent. There's a contradiction there because we don't tend to think about cities and their culpability for emissions. And yet, because of their highly developed infrastructures, cities and mass urban populations are particularly vulnerable to climate change-related impacts, both in its slower form, such as sea-level rise, and in the form of "natural disasters" like typhoons or hurricanes.

*MM: Could you speak about what we call "natural disasters" and how we might approach such disasters as not always "natural" events but anthropogenic disruptions that have unequal consequences?*

**AD:** I'm not saying that nature is just a projection of humanity, or that we're totally responsible for the natural world. But the increasing anthropogenic impact of carbon emissions is shaping forms of weather that impact urban locations that are highly vulnerable because of the ways in which a dysfunctional capitalist system has led them to develop. New York City, for example, is located in a tidal estuary and has a huge amount of wetlands that were really important for wildlife, but these wetlands have also served an essential function in absorbing storm surges. That land has now been almost entirely developed and plowed over. In New Orleans, the development of coastal areas, particularly by the petroleum industry, which has made canals in order to get to oil and gas reserves, has eroded a lot of the floodplains that served as a buffer to hurricanes coming in off the gulf. Similar things have happened in Dhaka in Bangladesh. The idea that you can treat nature in a Taylorist fashion—break it up into different pieces and control just the pieces that you want to control, and that that's not going to create feedback effects of various different kinds—reflects an ideology of modernity and science that is problematic. Increasingly ferocious forms of extreme weather that have some anthropogenic causes impact populations that are living in places in which they really shouldn't be living as a result of the development of cities in ways that don't make sense and are driven by various forms of capital accumulation.

*MM: You write that climate change is the ultimate form of slow violence. What do you mean by that?*

**AD:** We live in a hyper-capitalist, sped-up temporality, yet there are many ways in which violence plays itself out in a slower form, which tends not to be visible. We live in a society that loves spectacle: there's nothing better than a news reporter being buffeted by hurricane winds to grab the attention of people, but an urban heat wave is harder to get a sense of, and yet far more people die as a result of urban heat waves. And how do we deal with slow-onset flooding, which is a more quotidian affair? I pay attention to issues of environmental justice, climate justice, and gender justice. How do people of color in cities get exposed to disproportionate amounts of pollution because of social injustices? How does climate change intensify all of that?

*MM: What role do architecture and design play in dealing with climate chaos?*

**AD:** Architecture and design are kind of a culture industry: they exist in relation to a set of other institutions like big museums, like MoMA, and foundations, like the Rockefeller Foundation, that are making these disciplines prominent as one of the main ways to address urban-based anthropogenic climate change. For example, Rebuild by Design was a Rockefeller Foundation-sponsored initiative, a contest to have architecture, design, and engineering firms come up with solutions for communities in New York City that were particularly affected by Hurricane Sandy. I'm critical of architecture's tendency to focus on a narrowly delimited scale—just on the project, or on a building and its immediate environs. The Rebuild by Design project that won the most money is the one that's easiest to be critical about: "The Big U," a big berm that surrounds lower Manhattan.

Communities in economically marginalized neighborhoods like Chinatown and the Lower East Side fought to get accommodations, like parkland, put into the berm so it would be wide enough to have public amenities, but the city recently announced that they were scrapping the plans and they're going to dump 10 feet [3 meters] of landfill on East River Park to stop storm surges. But meanwhile they're burying these parks and preventing people from having access to them for at least a decade. Resilience was supposed to have a social component, and social resilience was supposed to be part of infrastructural resilience, because after 9/11 the Lower East Side and Chinatown didn't get any development money—it all went to the area around Wall Street. I think the communities feel betrayed.

MoMA has done notable programming around rising tides—design efforts to make communities around the New York City harbor more resilient to the rising tides. But unless there is an analysis of neoliberal capitalism and how that militates against any kind of just transition and just adaptation, “resilience” can become just another hollow set of modish discourses for the 1%.

*MM: Can you talk about climate change–induced displacement and the concept of “climate apartheid” you develop in your book?*

**AD:** While climate change continues to displace people around the world, the vast majority of people are struggling to remain in their cities or nations, particularly in the Global South. I'm critical of how the environmental movement uses the discourse of “climate refugees” as a threat to get wealthy nations to cut their carbon emissions. In the US and Western Europe, the argument was that if we don't cut carbon emissions significantly, millions of black and brown people will “flood” across borders. Behind that argument was the virtuous goal of having genuine mitigation take place and cutting carbon emissions in historical perpetrators like the United States and Britain, but the discourse was racist because it used the idea of people from the Global South as a threat. In fact, the vast majority of people stay within their nation states and, if anything, climate change is increasing urbanization in Global South countries. I use the term “climate apartheid” because some of the discourses around climate change have been inspired by racist ideas about keeping the Global North insulated from the Global South. We need to think about reparations, particularly in terms of energy transition. Cities are important because they're often more radical than nation states, many of which have been seized by this right-wing surge. Initiatives that think about cities as important sites for adaptation have to include a sense of creating harbor for people from other parts of the world who may become displaced by this combination of long histories of imperialism and climate change.

*MM: How can communities respond? You show that disasters can strengthen capitalism, and even recovery efforts can exacerbate existing inequalities. But they can also lead to new forms of solidarity, or “disaster communism,” that work to overcome oppressive conditions.*

**AD:** Disaster communism is incredibly important. Occupy Sandy is an example of the flexibility, speed, and power of mutual aid. But that approach is limited, and we need to make claims on the state and fight to bend the state away from working to cement the interests of elites into working for masses of people. That's a big ask, particularly in New York City, which has been ruled by real-estate elites and has been a site of unadulterated capital accumulation since the 1970s. And yet there are important social movements on the ground, and opportunity for pushback and for organizing. It's not just about mutual aid in the moment, but about forward-thinking models of holistic community response to mitigate and adapt to climate change that includes not just making green buildings, but dealing with the longstanding economic marginalization of the community and the lack of access to land and gentrification and all these other things which the Rebuild by Design Process often ignored.

**MM:** Are you optimistic that communities and mass mobilization from below can force capitalist states and elites to do the right thing?

**AD:** People are increasingly angry with elites, so they're turning either to a neofascist figure like Trump, or towards socialist alternatives like Bernie and the DSA [Democratic Socialists of America] within the United States. The odds have been stacked against progressive solutions to these crises, but the crises are deepening and will intensify. Either we go down the fascist route to blame marginalized communities for the systemic crisis of capital, whether it's communities of color, women, queer people, or immigrants, or we come up with solutions that work for everybody, and have a utopian aspiration to plan better futures. I don't know how far the Green New Deal will get, but the fact that it's gained so much attention over the past five months gives me hope. We've moved from fighting a rearguard action to resist austerity and racist, sexist, and homophobic attacks being produced by the right wing towards actually proposing bold solutions. The Green New Deal needs to think about ultimate mass population shifts within this country and how to cope with that. Given the climate change we've got baked into the system, it's going to happen. The question ultimately is: how do we plan for it to make sure it happens in an equitable way?

### **Bibliography**

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