NOTE TO READER:

What follows is a sampling of “public intellectual” essays that are in leftish magazines of varying degrees of smallness. If you read just one of these pieces, read the first—an attempt to correct highly imbalanced accounts of the latest IPCC report summarizing the state of climate science.

I chose to include these shorter engagements, rather than a sample of my academic work, because they illustrate a core idea I hope to discuss in the seminar—namely, that climate change connects with already existing debates in struggles in everyday life, in politics, in economics, in culture. The effort is always to show (hopefully in an interesting or surprising way!) that climate change maps onto these debates and struggles in ways that mainstream narratives fail to capture, and that specialist academic literatures are often too focused to notice. I would also appreciate feedback whenever appropriate. I hope to shift more and more of my writing into a public-facing mode, as I complete the more esoteric requirements for tenure. Climate change isn’t something I like thinking about by myself. The one downside of this selection is that, for whatever reason, my public writing has been less about São Paulo than my academic work, though this sample skews more US than my academic work.

In these pieces I also work to emphasize the upshot of an egalitarian, democratic response to climate change, which I argue (with the best social science behind me, I think) can yield fast enough decarbonization to prevent a 21st century that is worse than the 20th. Work on the (social) psychology of climate change finds pretty reliably that many people become emotionally frozen when confronting the enormity of climate change. They can’t bring themselves to think with it in a sustained way. By giving good reasons to see a future that’s not utterly catastrophic, I hope more than anything to open emotional and intellectual space to debate some details around what can be done.

Finally, some scholars—most prominently Mike Hulme—argue that we should reframe climate change, seeing it not as a threat but a resource for becoming more interesting people, and societies more broadly. This strikes me as an outrageous proposition. But the more modest version is compelling. Climate change is also a resource in this way. The point can’t be to understand how to think about it in advance, to determine exactly which theoretical tradition is most adequate. Nor can one settle on the right political attitude before action. I would reformulate Hulme’s argument as follows (at minimum, as a description of my own trajectory): grappling with climate change—in thought and action—is a struggle, and through that struggle we discover what is more and less helpful in our ideas, and revise them accordingly.

Best
Daniel
Apocalyptic Climate Reporting Completely Misses the Point

Recent news commentary ignored the UN climate report’s cautiously optimistic findings.

By Daniel Aldana Cohen

NOVEMBER 2, 2018

Are we doomed? It's the most common thing people ask me when they learn that I study climate politics. Fair enough. The science is grim, as the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has just reminded us with a report on how hard it will be to keep average global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius. But it's the wrong question. Yes, the path we're on is ruinous. It's just as true that other, plausible pathways are not. That's the real, widely ignored, and surprisingly detailed message of the IPCC report. We're only doomed if we change nothing. The IPCC report
makes it clear that if we make the political choice of bankrupting the fossil-fuel industry and sharing the burden of transition fairly, most humans can live in a world better than the one we have now.

And yet doom is what’s being amplified by seemingly every major newspaper and magazine, and the mainstream media more broadly. A standout example was David Wallace-Wells’s hot take on the IPCC report for New York magazine, charmingly titled, “UN Says Climate Genocide Is Coming. It’s Actually Worse Than That.” There’s a lot to say about the emotional texture of this kind of reporting. But the deeper problem is how this coverage fails to capture climate breakdown’s core cause-and-effect dynamic, thus missing how much scope for action there still is.

Reporting on the IPCC, and climate change more broadly, is unbalanced. It’s fixated on the predictions of climate science and the opinions of climate scientists, with cursory gestures to the social, economic, and political causes of the problem. Yet analysis of these causes is as important to climate scholarship as modeling ice-sheet dynamics and sea-level rise. Reductionist climate reporting misses this. Many references to policy are framed in terms of carbon pricing. This endorses the prevailing contempt in establishment circles for people’s capacity to govern themselves beyond the restrictions of market rule. Meanwhile, the IPCC report is overflowing with analyses showing that we can avoid runaway climate change, improve most people’s lives, and prioritize equality through a broad set of interventions.

It remains physically possible to keep global warming at a relatively safe 1.5 degrees Celsius, and certainly a less safe—but not apocalyptic—2 degrees. This would require dramatic changes in economic policy and doubling down on the powers of public planning. Taxing carbon is essential, but is just one of many complementary tools. Using “command and control” regulatory methods, the Clean Air Act cleaned up much of the United States years before “market mechanisms” became famous. Indeed, “command and control” is the centerpiece of the best climate policies in the United States. Take California: There, the state’s regulatory mandates forcing utilities to source more renewable energy are the main reason emissions have gone down. In contrast, the market-mechanism piece of California’s climate policy, a “cap and trade” program, has failed to slash emissions; it may even have facilitated a moderate increase in carbon pollution in the state’s poorest neighborhoods.
Meanwhile, worldwide, a thumping clean-energy revolution is the story of markets fostered by activist government policy. Government research labs and grants, regulation of utilities, subsidies for homeowners to install solar panels, cheap loans for clean energy, and electric-car manufacture are yielding a boom in clean energy. In 2017, global wind energy capacity grew by 10 percent, and solar photovoltaic capacity by 32 percent.

Change is also coming from below. When German environmentalists pushed their government to subsidize clean energy, there was an explosion of community wind farms in their country, and solar-panel manufacturing in China to meet German demand. In the United States, the Sierra Club and its allies have managed to get hundreds of coal plants shut down early, or canceled before they were built. More direct action and harsher government policies will be needed to keep more fossil fuels in the ground. Otherwise, clean energy will merely supplement fossil fuels, rather than replace them.

Despite the framing of most news coverage about it, the latest IPCC report is innovative precisely because it uses new social science to highlight the climate implications of a range of political choices. But you have to read beyond the “Summary for Policymakers” to see it. The IPCC has embraced an approach developed by climate scholars called “Shared Socioeconomic Pathways,” or SSPs. Prior to the latest report, the IPCC projected future scenarios based on skeletal, technocratic models of energy, land use, and climate. They represented climate politics as being like a dashboard with a few dials that engineers could turn—a little more renewable energy here, a touch less deforestation there. In contrast, the SSPs imagine different possible climate futures in terms of realistic clusters of policy decisions, which in turn affect emissions, land use, and how the impacts of extreme weather are felt.

In the current report, there are five SSPs, which illustrate the huge differences between possible paths forward. Each pathway represents a different set of approaches for slashing emissions and coping with climate change. The first three strike me as most plausible. SSP 1, called “Sustainability,” imagines a world where policies increasingly favor sustainability, equity, education, and health care (which all reduces population growth), technological progress, and energy efficiency. This pathway also includes major cuts to fossil-fuel investment, which combined with public policy drive a hard, fast shift to clean energy and increased efficiency.
Compared to this rosy scenario, SSP 3, “Regional rivalry,” is terrifying: It projects low technological progress, few advances in health and education, high energy use, low international cooperation, and a booming population. Thanks to Donald Trump and Brazil’s Jair Bolsonaro, it’s depressingly easy to imagine this world, though we’re not there yet. SSP 2, a “middle of the road” scenario, feels closest to our current reality; it projects only moderate amounts of technological progress, cooperation, and social investment. While SSP 2’s climate implications are also scary—limiting warming to 2 degrees Celsius on this path is hard—the scenario is flexible enough for a turn to 1 or 3, better or worse. SSP 4, “Inequality,” and SSP 5, “Fossil-fuelled development” explore other unsettling options. The next report will have nine of these.

The scenarios do a nice job of tying together disparate social science about drivers of greenhouse-gas emissions beyond crude energy accounting. For instance, women’s improved education, job prospects, and smaller families in SSP 1 are a key reason climate models find that it is the easiest path to limiting warming to 1.5 degrees. Keywan Riahi, one of the architects of this new modeling approach, told me that some of the numbers glossed in the IPCC report’s “Summary for Policymakers” miss crucial takeaways, like the social-impact analysis buried deeper in the report’s third chapter. For instance, at two degrees Celsius warming, in an SSP 3 world, between 750 million and 1.2 billion people would be severely exposed to climate-linked extreme weather, according to a 2018 study discussed in the IPCC report. In contrast, the IPCC reports, under the SSP 1 scenario, well under 100 million people would be hard hit by extreme weather at the same level of warming.

This is a huge finding! The very same cluster of priorities in SSP 1—technology, equality, global cooperation—that do the best job of slashing carbon emissions could also protect about 1 billion people from the climate impacts of 2 degrees Celsius warming. If your only climate policy is carbon pricing, then there’s of course a trade-off between equity and decarbonization. Jacking up gas and electricity prices hurts the poor. But expand your political and policy imagination, and get out your calculator, and you find something else. Lifting hundreds of millions of people out of poverty through feminist public policies, reducing the consumption of the affluent, and pursuing innovation make lives better, safer, and more environmentally friendly. The report is jam-packed with evidence for this.
ut you won't find any of this scholarship, which is the very core of the IPCC's findings, in the melancholy, fatalist reporting of the leading US press outlets. (David Roberts at Vox, who has picked up on the SSPs, is the main exception.) That coverage devoted almost all of its space—and considerable writing talent—to making concrete and visceral potentially terrible outcomes. And almost all discussion of climate change's social causes is linked to one number—how many dollars should we charge per ton of carbon. Meanwhile, the IPCC is screaming, page after page: *For God's sake, pay attention to the damn social system and all the ways it can change!* (I'm paraphrasing.) Why not make that concrete and visceral?

Ah, but SSP 1 is just a fantasy, right? At best, something they're trying in Copenhagen? Actually, no. From the US Department of Energy's battery labs to Washington State's climate politics battles to the solar rooftops of Los Angeles's Boyle Heights, fascinating, passionate people are working their asses off to do the things that these models seek to summarize.

The main mechanisms of SSP 1 are on the ballot in Washington State right now, in the form of a carbon-fee and clean-energy-investment proposal. California also spends a third of its revenue from cap-and-trade specifically on climate-friendly investments in poor, racialized, and polluted communities. In more familiar terms, these kinds of “Green New Deal” policies, increasingly linked to a job-guarantee proposal, are being energetically pursued by nearly all the insurgent young Democrats of 2018, most notably Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. At the federal level, Bernie Sanders campaigned on something similar in 2016. For 2020, all signs point to support for Green New Deal–style policies by most of the leading progressive Democratic presidential contenders.

If one of these beats Trump, it would utterly transform global climate politics. Suddenly, the world's three most powerful—and polluting—economic blocs, the United States, China, and the European Union, which together make up well over half the global economy, could all be committed to huge climate investment. This has never happened before. How the US left integrates climate into its agenda in the next couple of years will shape global climate politics for decades. Meaning there's never been a better time to align our fights for racial justice, economic equality, decent public services, and a safe climate.
The SSPs themselves aren’t framed in terms of conventional political categories, like free-market fundamentalism, social democracy, or eco-socialism. That’s smart. People can draw their own political conclusions. Same goes for hope or pessimism—that’s a mood people can choose on their own. My question is, based on what? Potentially awful climate outcomes, or the social action that could prevent those? Why aren’t we dwelling on the ways that nascent SSP 1 policy-making could expand into a more encompassing global dynamic?

Is an imagined future of equality and sustainability so utterly beyond reach? To most of the mainstream media, just half of the climate equation feels real: its potentially catastrophic effects. This story, artfully told over and over, is resonating with millions. People are terrified. But as the scientists themselves insist, the real action lies on the causal end of the equation: human struggles against old powers that are happening right now. These struggles are actually going pretty well. Call it invention, call it care, call it politics—climate change is the story of people fighting over how to live.

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**Jenny Hval’s Queer Eden**

*In her debut novel, Paradise Rot, the Norwegian musician plays with themes that run throughout her rewarding discography.*

*By Ann-Derrick Gaillot*
Stop Eco-Apartheid: The Left’s Challenge in Bolsonaro’s Brazil

Stop Eco-Apartheid: The Left’s Challenge in Bolsonaro’s Brazil

The horrors threatened by Brazil's new president are compounded by a potential war on the Amazon. It is up to the left to build a coalition capable of overcoming it.

Daniel Aldana Cohen  ▪  November 14, 2018

Members of the Munduruku tribe protest a planned hydroelectric dam on the Tapajos River in the Amazon rainforest, November 2014 (Mario Tama / Getty Images)

The horrors threatened by Jair Bolsonaro, Brazil's new president, are compounded by the global climate stakes of a potential war on the Amazon. Roberto Schaeffer, a leading energy and environment scholar based in Rio de Janeiro, told me over Skype, “It could not be worse. Donald Trump would be a blessing for Brazil right now.” Bolsonaro has promised an orgy of destructive new development in the embattled Amazon rainforest, potentially releasing gigatons of heat-trapping carbon. But the backlash has already begun. Brazilian social movements are mobilizing, and even key pro-Bolsonaro business leaders are telling him to
back off on deforestation. This combined economic and environmental battle isn’t a sideshow—it’s the new center stage.

Nothing will affect the future of the left in the Americas more than climate change, both in its already inevitable effects, and in the Herculean, fifty-year effort we must make to keep those impacts remotely bearable. Every left-wing political party, indigenous nation, labor union, community group, racial and gender and housing justice movement will take part in this. The pan-American left’s chief task is to lead, by aligning its longstanding agenda of social equality with breakneck struggles to decarbonize the economy and cope with extreme weather. This imperative includes building a vast new clean energy sector, overhauling agriculture toward sustainable methods, reversing deforestation, and reorganizing urban life. Such a transformation isn’t on Bolsonaro’s (or Trump’s) agenda, but setting the terms for a transition away from carbon is increasingly a preoccupation for the global economic elite. A massive global investment in climate-related infrastructure is coming. It is through an epic battle over how, and how quickly, the built environment is transformed that the left will rediscover itself. The results of this struggle will be democracy or eco-apartheid.

Under eco-apartheid, longstanding environmental harms and the burdens of the no-carbon transition would be yoked to the necks of poor and racialized workers, while the spoils go to the rich—and especially, in Europe and the Americas, the white. Climate breakdown is certain to unleash unending racialized violence. But climate stabilization could also be achieved under an eco-apartheid scenario, with the affluent maintaining their privileges and hardening inequalities to keep down consumption among the rest, through state-sponsored violence and neocolonial dispossession. For the left, just blocking a new round of climate devastation would be hard enough. But it must do more. It needs to push toward a just transition, taking ownership of the climate agenda that will soon dominate the whole economy.

Bolsonaro’s election points toward eco-apartheid. He’s pronounced the Amazon open for business, pledging to reboot the construction of devastating megadams; neuter environmental police, who combat land grabbers and illegal miners; hack away at indigenous land reserves; and invite cattle barons to slash the forest’s rich canopy and graze their steers in the ashes. One-tenth of the living world’s capacity to absorb carbon from the air is located in Brazil. This “terrestrial carbon sink” is vital to avoiding runaway climate breakdown. Yet the Amazon, responsible for most of this absorption, is in a fragile state. A fifth has been deforested in the past several decades; another fifth is in degraded condition; much of the rainfall has shifted from absorbing greenhouse gases to releasing them into the atmosphere. If the damage gets much worse, the whole region could tip into a savannah state, drying up the flying rivers that feed São Paulo’s water reservoirs and dumping a motherlode of carbon into the sky. This would blow up the world’s chances of keeping global warming at a somewhat safe two degrees Celsius. It won’t help that the soy industry has opened a new frontier in Brazil’s Cerrado biome, a huge tropical savannah that is also a vast carbon sink.

Still, there is much that Brazilians can and will do to prevent the worst. International assistance will be key. Our best hope? For many Brazilian capitalists, shredding the Amazon would be economically ruinous. Several major mining companies and agricultural exporters have the most to lose—their international reputation as responsible stewards of the rainforest has helped them to hold onto international markets. State governments, like that of Pará in the north, may also still battle deforestation—as will, somewhat ironically, Brazil’s office of powerful public prosecutors, longtime champions of environmental protection, who also
helped bring down Lula and the PT on corruption charges. Meanwhile, thanks to years of successful industrial policy, market forces also now buoy the country's clean-energy sector. If deforestation and state violence are held in check, the Brazilian left and its international allies can prevent climate calamity and—hopefully sooner than later—restore a basic level of decency to politics in Brazil.

I want to be clear. Narrowly pragmatic efforts to keep the Amazon alive are justified. Some will seek to work with Bolsonaro's government. The night of the election, Greenpeace Brazil issued a statement calling on the new regime to stick to its Paris pledges and slow deforestation. The tone was constructive. The millions—perhaps billions—of lives at stake demand such short-term tactics. But these engagements are no substitute for a broader progressive strategy of deconstructing and replacing this odious regime by democratic means.

Bolsonaro's election virtually guarantees a bloodbath. He has promised impunity to an already murderous police force. His ally, João Doria, just elected governor of São Paulo state, said upon his election that he would hire the best available lawyers to defend police accused of murder. (In the urban region of São Paulo, police already kill close to a thousand people a year.) In rural regions, in the past three years of declining left fortunes, the assassination of poor peasants in land conflicts has doubled. Bolsonaro has called the Landless Movement (MST) a terrorist organization. At one point in his campaign, he declared: “I want to say to the MST scumbags that we're going to give guns to agribusiness, we're going to give guns to the rural producer, because the welcome mat for a land invader is a bullet, 247 caliber.”

Nothing says fascism like paramilitary violence against leftists and the stigmatized. Afro-Brazilian, indigenous, immigrant, and LGBTQ people are all targets. The only question is: how much violence? And how can international solidarity help?

If Bolsonaro gets his way, blood will also soak the Amazon. Already, the rising murders of indigenous activists—the Amazon’s great defenders—are an index of deforestation, and a testament to the frontier spirit of large segments of agro-industrial capital. (There's a reason Brazilians speak of a “bullets, bible, and beef” coalition of lawmakers, linking ex-army and police officers, evangelicals, and agro-industrialists in one camp.)

Broadly speaking, most of the left’s agenda—which is focused on equality and improved living conditions for the low-consuming majority, in Brazil and elsewhere—is already climate-friendly. But aligning specific climate struggles with short-term efforts to protect vulnerable lives will be hard.

Adding to this challenge, the PT's overall reputation is unjustly ruined. Its failures should not blot out its achievements. This holds for climate. Thanks especially to President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who ruled from 2003 through 2010, Brazil's climate victories won well-earned praise. Three factors led the PT to embrace strong climate policies. The first was a broad political commitment to sustainability and defense of indigenous livelihoods. From early 2003, Lula empowered his environment minister, the indigenous Amazon activist Marina Silva, to lead a broad regulatory overhaul that curbed forest clearance.

The next factor was economic strategy, shared by government and capital. In the 2000s, deforestation was hammering the reputation of Brazil's soy exporters. Global public opinion and consumer pressure matter. In 2006, Greenpeace released a report, Eating Up the
Amazon, on the soy industry’s role in deforestation, highlighting the complicity of McDonald’s and Cargill in particular. The soy industry announced a moratorium on deforestation, and these and other companies later pledged to never buy product from companies that deforested. Subsequent regulations, including a similar attack on deforestation caused by cattle-raising, and aggressive supervision from the country’s public prosecutors and expanded environmental police, were highly effective. Annual deforestation rates in the Amazon plunged, from nearly 10,000 square miles in 2004 to less than 2,000 in 2014. Since deforestation is by far the country’s largest source of emissions, these plunged in this period too, putting Brazil on track to lead the global South in absolute cuts to greenhouse-gas pollution.

Meanwhile, agriculture thrived thanks to a focus on increased productivity on already available land. In recent years, partly due to a weakening of forest law under Lula’s successor—the less environmentally inclined Dilma Rousseff—deforestation rates have started to climb again.

An analogous economic case for clean energy was clear. Under Lula and Dilma, several federal agencies and the government’s energy council and national development bank, BNDES, developed an industrial policy that blended carefully timed low import taxes, low-cost local subsidies, and targeted auctions, among other measures, to foster national wind and solar energy industries. Wind and solar are needed to provide a no-carbon compliment to the country’s main electricity source, hydroelectric dams, especially since climate change will reduce rainfall to the rivers feeding dams. Looming electrification of transportation and cooking will increase electricity demand. Only wind, solar, and sophisticated biofuels can forestall a huge expansion in natural-gas power plants.

Clumsy policy slowed utility and rooftop solar’s early growth. But in the last two years, both have started to grow. The government did better with wind farms, which have expanded fast, especially in the impoverished Northeast. Worldwide, the country ranks roughly eighth in GDP and sixth in installed wind capacity. And Brazil continues to be a leader in biofuels. That sector has a bad reputation in the United States, but in Brazil, sugar-cane derived ethanol helps power the country’s auto fleet, and could shift to powering ships and planes once cars and buses electrify. In the 2018 election, all presidential candidates—including Bolsonaro—pledged to invest lavishly in renewable energy. This, combined with the solid industrial policy developed under PT rule, and longstanding reliance on hydroelectricity, means that clean energy will dominate Brazil’s energy grid even in a worst-case scenario.

A third factor explains all these climate achievements: linking climate politics to inequality. In 2009, Brazil passed an aggressive climate change policy that made it the first large developing country to pledge significant, absolute short-term reductions in its greenhouse-gas emissions. Lula made this happen. A climate scientist close to Lula told me the turning point was Lula’s realization that the poor who would suffer most from climate change—especially in Brazil’s Northeast, where Lula was born, and in sub-Saharan Africa, a focus of his foreign policy. After climate policy stagnated under Dilma, the PT’s 2018 presidential candidate Fernando Haddad ran on very strong climate policies, including a zero-deforestation pledge.

Still, PT governments were far from rejecting fossil fuels outright. Two core problems with the PT era’s climate policies stand out. First, the easiest environmental policies are those that don’t threaten the massive fossil fuel industry—in Brazil, the state oil company—and the auto
sector. Lula's government encouraged both, promising to extract every drop of dangerously deep offshore oil to fund education and health care, and heavily subsidizing car purchases. (At least Brazil's oil is relatively pure. If oil must be burnt for fifteen more years, energy scholar Schaeffer told me, Brazil's would emit less carbon than the sludgier stuff from places like Canada's tar sands.)

The second problem is that capital is a treacherous partner. When both the global economy sours and demobilized workers lose their leverage over companies, business leaders turn on their erstwhile allies. Brazil's business class torpedoed Dilma's PT government, even when she betrayed her own social base in 2015 by appointing a pro-austerity, Chicago School–trained economist as finance minister.

The leading business sectors—manufacturing, agro-industry, finance—supported the judicial coup led by Michel Temer, Dilma's vice-president from a center-right party, with support from the country's traditional center-right PSDB party. But the attempted drone strike became a failed kamikaze mission. The prestigious, ruling wing of the center-right crumbled, with the PSDB faring especially poorly in this year's election. Meanwhile, the business class fell in with Bolsonaro, starting with agro-industry. Later, he wooed the financial sector by appointing as his economic guru an even more fundamentalist Chicago School economist, Paulo Guedes. (Guedes earned his stripes teaching economics in Pinochet's Chile.) The PT was beaten, but survived in decent shape; it still has more seats in the lower house than any of the other thirty-five parties, though a broad coalition of conservative parties now has a large majority, anchored by Bolsonaro's far-right allies.

It is difficult to overstate how contradictory and unstable Bolsonaro's coalition is. Therein lies the left's hope. And the Amazon's. Bolsonaro would be nowhere without the unified support of business. Yet until this year, he was a statist social conservative, against social spending for the poor but in favor of national industry and much of the welfare state, and against the large-scale privatizations that he now supports. Most of the army, another key ally, likewise prefers an interventionist state. It is unclear how much of Bolsonaro's lower-middle-class support, likely less faithful to him than the wealthy, supports about his hard neoliberal agenda. But since Bolsonaro's economic plans amount to deepening of Temer's—the most unpopular president in the country's history—there's reason to suspect his popularity will erode. A deep global economic slump, widely expected in 2019 or 2020, will hurt him.

Bolsonaro could fall fast—it's happened twice before in Brazil to similar presidents. His inner circle could also unleash terror and suspend the country's democracy in order to hold onto power. Only chaos is certain.

The Bolsonaro coalition's fissures could limit the damage he does to the Amazon. New megadams, new small and mid-sized mines, cattle raisers big and small, and politically connected land-grabbers are the big threats. Yet the economic power of these interests isn't overwhelming. Large mining companies that operate in the Amazon, like Vale, have a decent record in helping block deforestation. More important, the technologically advanced soybean industry, Brazil's most important exporter, now leans on its rainforest-friendly reputation to access international markets and major restaurant-chain buyers. Other modern sectors of agriculture are in the same boat. In recent weeks, these interests have broken ranks with business allies and called on Bolsonaro to respect the country’s climate commitments.
Backtracking from recent pledges, Bolsonaro reversed his promise to pull out of the Paris Agreement, and agreed not to merge the environment and agriculture ministries.

It would be naïve to expect that alone, the enlightened self-interest of soy and allied capitalists will automatically defend the Amazon. The soy industry is already slipping. But as the history of successful battles against deforestation in the 2000s shows, Brazilian campaigning combined with concerted international pressure could check deforestation. Even fiercer campaigns are needed against the cattle industry in particular. Ideally, stopping a resurgence in deforestation of the Amazon could also build momentum for protecting the adjacent Cerrado savannah.

Meanwhile, Amazon scholars and activists have been contemplating a new generation of environmental policies in the region that would do even more to reduce its poverty and fund ecologically safe, but economically dynamic, ways of building wealth in the forest. I discussed this at length with Beto Veríssimo, co-founder of the think- and do-tank Imazon, who is experimenting with phrases like a “Marshall Plan for the Amazon.” Led from the region, but aggregating global investments, the idea is to foster a swath of new industries in the mold of the hyper-specialized, so-called “Fourth Industrial Revolution”: genuinely cooperative biotech; harvesting some of the Amazon's hundreds of thousands of mushroom species and berries similar to açai; finding new uses for unusual woods; the list goes on. The common thrust is science- and technology-intensive production that would maintain biodiversity, facilitate reforestation, provide impoverished local residents with work, and link rural production with sophisticated knowledge centers in the Amazon's large and mid-sized cities, where the great majority of the region's inhabitants now live. Breathing new life into the continent's great rainforest could be the achievement of an innovative economic democracy.

Whether such a program could begin in the next four years is doubtful. Now is a good time to plan regardless. There will be international solidarity with locals in defending indigenous and other residents against land-grabbers and other intruders. But defense alone won't revitalize the forest in a way that attacks the region's deep poverty and inequality. As soon as a new regime as possible, a broad coalition should be ready with a plan.

There is an analogy with wind power, whose method of development in Brazil stands to improve substantially. At the macro level, the situation is excellent. As Schaeffer put it to me, state policy was designed to help the infant industry “grow into a big guy, who can walk on his own.” It's succeeding. But a closer look finds trouble. Kathryn Hochstetler, a scholar of Brazilian environmental politics, estimates that a quarter of the wind farm projects in Brazil are opposed by nearby communities. Opposition is concentrated in the poor, windy Northeast. According to reports, and an off-the-record conversation I had with a senior environmentalist, big companies are often bullying poor residents off prime wind-rich land, bringing in their own materials and workers, cutting deals with authoritarian local political bosses, and siting turbines on environmentally delicate plots. This kind of development piles all the costs of the transition onto poor and racialized populations—a step down the road toward eco-apartheid.

More of this top-down infrastructure building will undermine the energy transition in Brazil just as it has all over North America, where hundreds of anti-wind groups have arisen, like Ontario's charmingly named “Mothers Against Wind Turbines.” This isn't inevitable. There are countless examples, especially in northern Europe, of much more participatory and decentralized strategies. In Brazil, where practices of participatory economic planning
abound, the left has a brief window to develop new rules that it could pass in the northeastern states where the PT still rules, and nationally once Bolsonaro’s gone.

Bolsonaro’s regime, on the other hand, could ruin clean energy’s social potential, just as his likely embrace of Amazon biotech development would let multinationals exploit and thief. Yes, it’s easy to imagine Brazil’s new government shredding its climate commitments, exposing its people to yet drier droughts, fiercer landslides, more baking heat. But it’s also possible to imagine the regime fumbling toward a more insidious kind of eco-apartheid, where the worst tendencies of the green economy and extreme-right social policies merge. Indeed, this is a threat all over the world.

Equality and sustainability are beautifully reinforcing. Fascism and decarbonization would make a lurching, bloody partnership—but one that’s equally plausible. This is why the short-term tactics to defend the Amazon must be embedded in a broader social and political project to dismantle Brazil’s fascist experiment and replace destructive capitalism with a new economic model.

Lula’s PT was born in struggles on factories’ shopfloors in São Paulo’s great industrial suburbs. These insurgent workers re-democratized their unions, then founded a Workers’ Party that helped re-democratize the country. Brazil’s economic regime has changed. It retains a diverse industrial base. But most of its big export moneys now come from soybeans, oil, iron ore, beef, chicken, coffee—in short, raw or roughly processed commodities, mostly sold to China, whose companies are buying up Brazil’s infrastructure, with a special focus on its electricity grid. Alongside this primary resource sector, an enormous service sector dominates Brazil’s great cities. Informal stallkeepers hawk pirated soccer jerseys in car-choked streets shadowed by office buildings.

As the PT’s defeated presidential candidate Fernando Haddad said in his election-night concession speech, the great majority of the party’s voters are unorganized. Millions of other poor, working-class, and lower-middle-class voters, suffering a stagnating economy and growing street violence, voted for Bolsonaro to shock a broken system out of its complacency. In cities, suburbs, favelas, farm fields, factories, forests, and mines, the left must reorganize itself, as extreme weather proliferates and bloodshed spreads. Old formulas won’t apply.

There are some worthwhile lessons in the PT’s early climate successes. But the biggest lesson is that they failed to sufficiently align those forest and energy policies with clear, short-term projects to attack inequality. The national PT also failed to truly invest in climate-friendly housing and transit policies in the country’s congested, polluted cities. Now the left must learn to fuse its social and economic agendas with aggressive and egalitarian climate politics. Haddad’s campaign, with its strong climate justice and urban agendas, was a decent start. There are still mistakes to correct. New ideas and organizing to debate and develop. And there is a country—and a continent, and a world—to rebuild.

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Trumcan’t make sunlight expensive or slow the wind. He can’t make walking more polluting than driving, or energy efficiency more expensive than waste. For all the damage that Scott Pruitt and others are doing to the government’s environmental agencies, they can only block so much climate progress. Thanks to a surge of elite and grassroots action throughout the country and to market forces around fracked natural gas, the US economy might still squeak clear of its Paris carbon-reduction targets.

But the terrible thing is that Trump’s plan can succeed even while failing. The Paris targets actually aren’t ambitious enough for the United States to help forestall climate chaos. The big picture is simple: massive, rapid cuts to the emissions of greenhouse gases that cause climate change are needed. (This includes blocking new natural gas infrastructure.) To get there will require wide popular support and energetic mobilization.

Progressives’ and environmentalists’ challenge is to create, in the coming decade, the political conditions under which a broad majority of Americans would support truly aggressive low-carbon policies. Climate advocates need to tie the concepts of climate politics, economic fairness, and overall well-being so tightly together that no one can tell the difference. The danger is that progressives’ and environmentalists’ efforts so far—especially their focus on
technocratic city-level policies that sidestep inequality—could miss the chance to jump-start a left-populist, equitable climate agenda in time for the 2020 election.

You Can Build Efficiency, but They May Not Come
Progressives’ and environmentalists’ boldest strategy so far has been a work-around: with leadership from former New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg and California governor Jerry Brown, states, tribes, corporations, and hundreds of cities are gathering under the “We Are Still In” umbrella to aggregate their greenhouse gas emissions–reduction pledges and collectively meet the country’s Paris climate commitments (this is called “America’s Pledge”). This month, Bloomberg Philanthropies even paid to get the group a pavilion at the COP23 climate summit in Bonn to represent the “real” America. The Sierra Club has also joined the fray with its Ready for 100 campaign, where cities commit to using 100 percent renewable energy by 2050.

Cities have rightly received the most attention. They are many, they’re spread in red states and blue, and they have powerful tools to cut carbon emissions. Today, their most fashionable tactic is making buildings more energy efficient. Can this kind of urban climate politics anchor a compelling new national agenda?

Building energy is responsible for over half of cities’ emissions, based on territorial carbon-accounting methods—of which more below. Making progress here is economically helpful—efficiency!—and resonates with most progressives’ passion for data-driven, targeted, technically sophisticated policies. This is challenging, praise-worthy work. No sane climate-action agenda would dispense with it. But this buildings focus—and the broader idea of urban climate policy that it represents—is deeply worrying.

First, a focus on building regulations is intensely technocratic. It reinforces the false view that you can achieve fast enough progress on climate change through technicians, planners, and financial engineers making uncontroversial improvements to the existing built environment. But far greater changes, demanding more political buy-in, will be needed. Every political psychologist and their mother knows that stories are what move people. To work, those stories must connect to people’s underlying material needs and inspire them at a time when, with housing brutally expensive, health care costs ever rising, and wages stagnating, economic pain is widespread. The climate story must be shorn of every trace of elitism, of the suspicion that it’s a hobby (whether hypocritical or virtuous) for rich people like Bloomberg and Al Gore. Even some of building retrofits’ greatest champions can see how awkwardly that policy fits the need for a broad, compelling message.

At a recent climate policy forum in New York City, an audience member asked Mark Chambers, the city’s director of sustainability programs, what climate-conscious citizens should be doing. His answer revealed a frustrated longing to transcend his elite policy space: “I want you to recognize the fact that you have an obligation to bring more people into this message,” he said. “We cannot keep being this esoteric group of folks that is just tree-huggers and energy wonks that are kind of moving in circles. We have got to recognize that there are millions and millions of people that need us to be able to translate what we’re doing into actionable items.”

Maybe the solution isn’t translating wonkery but embedding it in something bigger, a project that blends moral intuition with shared material needs. “Medicare for All” and “Free College Tuition” are the slogans rallying progressives right now. Climate activists’ best so far is
“Keep It in the Ground,” a story that is clear and compelling, but lacks a forward-looking alternative.

**Follow the Carbon**

Cities do have one big, exciting idea: the counterintuitive claim that prosperous, liberal urban centers are actually low-carbon because their density reduces car use and facilitates big, energy-efficient building design. It follows that, with the best urban planning, we can improve people’s quality of life and slash emissions by increasing the density of our cities and suburbs. As David Owen wrote in *Green Metropolis*, “In a world of nearly 7 billion people and counting, sustainability … will look a lot more like midtown Manhattan than like rural Vermont.”

But Owen forgot that Manhattan’s prosperity depends on polluting activity beyond city limits. My second worry about cities and climate change is that when you follow the carbon, you find that the facile Fox News argument that prosperous, liberal climate advocates are deceitful hypocrites contains a grain of truth.

We’ll start by deconstructing the method used by countries, regions, and cities in their regular greenhouse gas emissions audits: territorial accounting. It works by drawing a border around a jurisdiction and adding up the greenhouse gases emitted within. For cities, we must include emissions from regional power plants. From this perspective, the policies that progressive mayors are championing—more efficient buildings, more rooftop solar, and tweaked power-purchase agreements—will slash emissions.

But what about the carbon emitted to make the goods and services we consume in cities? Take your smart phone. Territorial accounting only tallies the emissions that result from charging it; it ignores emissions from material mining, manufacturing, and international shipping—its “indirect” emissions. The same logic applies to steaks, jeans, and arc lamps—all reliant on polluting activity expelled from the city to operational landscapes far away.

The inconvenient truth is that urban territorial accounting erases affluent city dwellers’ massive ecological responsibilities. Rural coal fields, cattle ranches, industrial parks, logistics complexes, and fracking pads—all outside the urban snow globe and often in red states or developing countries—are the hidden support systems of progressive city dwellers’ prosperity. The happy story of low-carbon cities is based on a cheap accounting trick.

The alternative is consumption-based accounting. Here, the emissions from making and moving iPhones, jeans, burgers, and so on are attributed to the final consumer. When you include overall consumption, big prosperous cities’ carbon footprints increase by two to four times. A study of San Francisco by the Stockholm Environment Institute found that 80 percent of the greenhouse gas emissions caused by in-city consumption and activities were physically emitted beyond city limits.

It’s not just inequality between city and country; there’s also inequality within the city. Take New York, where finer-grained geospatial research by the environmental economist Kevin Ummel follows the carbon to households at the neighborhood level. Ummel and I have published a map visualizing this data. It shows that residents of dense, affluent Manhattan neighborhoods like Midtown, the West Village, and the Upper East Side had the city’s biggest carbon footprints, comparable to some of the country’s most sprawling suburbs. Surprised? Just follow the river of Amazon boxes through city streets or the sound of roller suitcases clattering over sidewalks. The problem is extreme wealth and consumption. It’s counterintuitive to think of urban temples of consumption as low-carbon, because it’s counterfactual.

Yes, urban density is key to lowering carbon emissions. But following the carbon tells a different story about urban climate virtue. The best example of urban sustainability isn’t Manhattan or San Francisco, it’s working- and middle-class neighborhoods with row houses and apartment buildings like much of Brooklyn or South Philadelphia: neighborhoods with good access to public transit, local jobs, and public services, with residents who consume far less than Manhattan’s rich.
These democratic neighborhoods accidentally became the country’s most climate-friendly because for decades, unions, community groups, and motivated citizens fought hard to get parks, libraries, sports facilities (even handball and basketball courts), theaters, decent schools, and other low-carbon public amenities installed. These amenities are what foster all the benefits of social connectedness and community; they allow the exchange of meanings to matter more than the exchange of goods, even while basic needs are met by quality public institutions. (To be clear, it’s not because the poor consume so little; they should consume more. The affluent must consume much less.) What made these communities live was being anchored by dense housing that residents could afford thanks to public policy. As the urbanist Mike Davis argues, “the cornerstone of the low-carbon city, far more than any particular green design or technology, is the priority given to public affluence over private wealth.”

Now, this model of low-carbon urbanism is being threatened by gentrification and displacement. This can shred communities’ public life, strip away affordable housing, and—because it often comes with nicer parks and bike lines—mingle the stories of urban greening and low-carbon urbanism. Gentrification is a huge threat to the low-carbon urban fabric we already have. Now more than ever, urban progressives must cement the alliance between social justice and environmental improvement by vigorously defending affordable housing in dense neighborhoods.

While many urban progressives fetishize raw density in spite of the best carbon data, they often neglect the importance of bringing livable density to suburbs. You already get decent energy efficiency with traditional streetcar or garden suburbs, whose homes are closer together. And urban designers have been coming up with compelling ways to gently densify more sprawling places, building on a feminist tradition of facilitating connectedness and shared care work. There are still more ways that following the carbon and focusing on inequality can reframe the climate story in the next few years.

**Beyond City Limits**

The best social science on attitudes to climate change, like the sociologist Kari Marie Norgaard’s book *Living in Denial*, points to the political-economic underpinnings of people’s thinking about climate change. When people avoid confronting climate change, it’s usually because it threatens their own sense of economic well-being. (In the United States, the Republican Party has perfected the exploitation of this fear.)

For residents of cities who have access to mass transit, have low energy costs for small housing units, and are vulnerable to climate impacts, it’s relatively easy to make the case for strong climate action. It’s also easier to make the case for climate politics to racialized Americans, many of whom live in cities, and who largely get that they bear the disproportionate burden of environmental harms. Polling shows that blacks, and especially Spanish-speaking Latinos, are more worried about climate change than white people are. But it’s not enough to register their support—climate policies must also defend their interests and learn from their leadership.

Meanwhile, the missing member of the broad progressive coalition is a conservative segment of poor and working-class whites, especially in rural areas and in deindustrialized or former fossil-fuel landscapes. These are victims of the fossil-fuel economy. Tragically, they have depended on it most viscerally, making them vulnerable to the fossil lobby’s cynical, deceitful messaging.

For instance, while 55 percent of city dwellers believe global warming is a very serious issue, only 40 percent of rural Americans (overwhelmingly white) report the same. These
numbers must move to enable massive climate action. To bring more white rural workers into a multiracial climate coalition and to deepen the commitment of existing members of that coalition will require fusing climate action with economic fairness.

The federal government has the best tools to do this. It can implement the most comprehensive carbon tax, then spend those revenues on rebating consumers, investing on a large scale to accelerate the clean-energy transition, and funding local resiliency projects. It’s all about investment, and no one can leverage more money than Washington, DC. (There’s no law that limits climate investment to carbon-tax revenue alone.)

As 2020 approaches, bigger states can still step up. Some are trying. Efforts to pass intensely progressive carbon-pricing policies in California and New York gained significant traction despite failing this summer; in each case, policies would have dedicated a third or more of revenues to investing in job-rich clean-energy and resiliency projects in racialized and low-income communities. In both states, urban environmental justice movements were key coalition leaders. There will be time to try again. (California is also leading a push to phase out combustion-engine cars and maintaining a decent cap-and-trade scheme.)

Cities can take action on equitable low-carbon policies that are already on the table, scaling up with federal support later. One example: retrofitting public housing to slash energy use and create skilled local jobs, as projects in Boston, Toronto, and Paris have modeled. Eventually, funding from a revitalized HUD could massively expand this. Another important, already tested idea is developing community solar programs in climate justice communities. A third, long championed by community groups in New York, is building dedicated bus lanes to immediately reduce congestion, carbon emissions, and workers’ commuting times.

These projects model an investment-oriented climate politics that prioritizes creating jobs and improving well-being in low-income, working-class, and racialized communities, with governments collaborating with community organizations and social movements. The country’s environmental justice movement has long been a leader in this approach. Their leadership is more important than ever.

SLASH CARBON WHILE FIGHTING INEQUALITY. WE DON’T NEED TO WAIT.

The already affluent should help foot the bill. There have been some tentative steps in this direction, New York’s mayor, Bill de Blasio, has argued that the city should raise taxes on its wealthiest residents to pay for improvements to the subway system. The labor and community group coalition Align has begun arguing for more: congestion pricing and an extra tax on wealth. (Align is also organizing around what it calls “whole building” retrofits, which do more to bring in social equity.) In support of other public affluence policies, like universal access to preschool, De Blasio has proposed a “mansions tax” and a “millionaires tax.” Each time, New York state’s governor, Andrew Cuomo, who has himself backed a range of clean-energy policies and exemplifies the centrist current in climate policymaking, has slapped down the idea of taxing wealthier New Yorkers.

To build a broader coalition, city-based climate leaders have to leave the city. For instance, as cities commit to sourcing 100 percent of their energy from renewables, those cities’ leaders and social movements can support rural, community-based clean-energy projects that pay good wages. Urban social movements and political leaders are already supporting campaigns against fossil fuels. Now they need to support community-led clean energy. Decarbonizing fast enough to avoid global warming will require massive construction of wind and solar farms and countless miles of new power lines.

There’s much more that progressive urban residents, acting as part of social movements and organizations, can do to support community autonomy and ownership over this new energy economy. In 2012, roughly half of the clean energy produced in Germany came from community-owned clean-energy cooperatives. There’s also the issue of wages. Clean-energy
manufacturing usually isn’t unionized. Blue-collar workers suffer big wage cuts when they shift to clean energy. Will urban liberals join picket lines and pro-union rallies outside the factories that will build the wind turbines and solar panels that will power our cities? (Rural electricity cooperatives serving tens of millions of consumers are another good place to get active.)

None of these ideas is a panacea. But their underlying principle is simple: slash carbon while fighting inequality. We don’t need to wait. To make urban climate politics equitable and to connect to rural workers, progressives and environmentalists should build a common-sense story about climate politics that’s based on the best data, prioritizes economic fairness, and is backed by immediate action. Urban and rural futures can only be made safe and prosperous together.

Featured image: Workers install solar panels along a “solar highway” in Oregon, 2008. Photograph courtesy of Oregon Department of Transportation / Flickr

#CITIES #CLIMATE_CHANGE #CLIMATEJUSTICE #ENERGY #GREENGROWTH #INFRASTRUCTURE #POLITICS #THE_BIG_PICTURE #URBAN_STUDIES

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It Gets Wetter

It Gets Wetter

Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140* refuses the typical binary of climate change fiction, offering hope for a future somewhere in between victory or ruin.

Daniel Aldana Cohen  ▪  Summer 2017

In Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140*, “New York is only half-drowned.” Above, the Manhattan skyline a few days after Hurricane Sandy (Reeve Joliffe / Flickr)

It's a novel scene—New York City, 123 years from now: half-drowned but not out. Still a capital of real estate, still a political powerhouse, still an unequal battleground between finance and housing movements, still a crucible where capitalism and climate politics are smashed, melted, and twisted together. The (true) physical premise is that upper Manhattan is fifty feet higher than lower Manhattan.

With sea levels fifty-eight feet higher than today, after two “pulses” of catastrophic, rapidly rising waters, the island’s bottom half is submerged. The water has climbed three stories. At low tide, there's “a green bathtub ring on every building” in the still inhabited “intertidal” zone. Wall Street, Soho, Chelsea, Madison Square—each is uniquely and dramatically changed. (Some even for the better: the drowned High Line has become an oyster bed.) Many buildings stand tall. Others lean and crumble.
Property rights and values are uncertain. But scrappy New Yorkers are rebuilding in this intertidal realm and some now call it SuperVenice. After years of suffering, things are getting fun again. Pumped by an “Intertidal Property Pricing Index,” a financial bubble is swelling. And shadowy real-estate titans are scheming to buy up the reclaimed community from the residents who fought to restore it. (Sound familiar?)

In the meantime, life rolls on. Commuters speed-walk to work in diagonal and perpendicular skybridges between buildings. A zip line connects downtown Brooklyn to the southern tower of the Brooklyn bridge. In a stretch of midtown along Sixth Avenue, kids “skimboard” on a shallow, rising tide of water, “jockeying for position on the surges, doing spinners if possible, curb turns.”

The banality, thrills, and tensions of wet living aren’t for New York alone. These spaces of geophysical, legal, and financial ambivalence are rippling through the world’s coastal cities (though the narrative sticks to NYC). It’s an image of what’s coming that refuses climate politics’ typical binary between victory or catastrophe, salvation or ruin.

As an image of a climate-changed world, the metaphor of the intertidal, a “zone of uncertainty and doubt, space of risk and reward,” is the great gift of Kim Stanley Robinson’s new novel New York 2140. It’s a hulking 600-page feast of a wounded, stubborn city teeming with broken hearts, young idealists, wizened pros, resilient 1-percenters, scrappy orphans, advanced tech, and revolutionary passion. (Even the epigraphs are epic.) And it’s an eventful feast. After a methodical, satisfying build, the last quarter of the book is tasteful disaster porn woven into a fast-paced political thriller.

This book falls into the emerging genre of “cli-fi”: science fiction about climate change. But for a contribution to this apocalyptic genre, it’s weirdly encouraging. We can lose a lot and still come out ahead, Robinson insists. Really, though?

I’ll guiltily admit that this is my first Kim Stanley Robinson book. I was never a real sci-fi fan. When I fell in love with Star Trek: The Next Generation as a kid in Toronto—where we learned about climate change in grade five—I just wanted more of the same: Star Trek books, other Star Trek series, the model space ships. And I took it seriously: Star Trek wasn’t some fun alternative universe, it was the likely future of this one. Today’s political conundrums tomorrow! But with Klingons and without capitalism.

I still remember when my mother dented my illusion. I was patiently explaining to her how starships would be able to fly far faster than the speed of light thanks to “warp drive,” reciting long passages from my dog-eared Technical Manual (Enterprise D). “Daniel,” she said. “It’s just words.”

That was a hard day.

Now my obsession with all things climate change, and my emancipation from the Trekkie warp bubble, has given me an excuse to get back into sci-fi. But mainly cli-fi. It’s a thrilling genre, a way to explore climate futures, their politics, and their everyday life in a way that’s less dry or restricted than the usual academic and policy grind (my day job). But there’s also a cost to cli-fi’s relentless dissections of the coming disaster.
When I watch even good cli-fi, like *Incorporated* (produced in 2016 by Matt Damon and Ben Affleck) on TV, or the cult hit *Snowpiercer* (2013) in the movie theater, or when I read the inventive and lyrical novel *Gold Fame Citrus* (2015), by Claire Vaye Watkins, I sense an underlying formula: climate change is going to be gruesome. We are, essentially, doomed. But! Fear not. Even while everything falls apart, compelling protagonists will take brave risks for love (or, in *Snowpiercer*, for Lenin). Yay!

Even cli-fi and fantasy writer Paolo Bacigalupi’s brilliant novels *The Windup Girl* (2009) and *The Water Knife* (2015), partly fit the pattern, although his imagined worlds are especially subtle and rich, and their futures less certain. What makes the better stuff better is that it’s stylish and clever: the mash-up of the Monsanto and Apple corporate nightmares in *Incorporated*; the mathematical communism of *Snowpiercer*; the radiation-hot sand-dune mysticism of *Gold Fame Citrus*; Bacigalupi’s blend of charismatic cynicism and socio-political detail.

What’s usually missing is surprise. If ultimately the moral of these stories is, “The climate models are right! Corporations are killing us! Act Now!” it also feels like, “I know, I know. Nice twist, though.”

Fictional dystopias derive their subversive power from revelation. The classics jolted and invigorated readers (or at least they used to) with a frightening image of what lurks around the corner. Now, it’s harder to get a rise. Climate doom is already the numbing common sense of my generation.

Take *Snowpiercer*, beloved for its supposed frankness. Its premise is that, confronted with global warming, governments pumped sulphur into the sky to block some sunlight. But they went too far, freezing the world into a ball of snow and ice. A microcosm of capitalist society survives on a single train traveling on an endless loop. “Yup,” your friend nods. “Tell me something I don’t know.” Sure, it’s eventually revealed that the masses’ protein bars are made up of ground cockroaches. But if you read the news, or even just watch music videos, you can’t pretend to be scandalized. (And today, in the right deli, you can buy one for yourself.)

In contrast, the sort-of subversive, modestly fresh message of *New York 2140* is precisely its inbetweeness, its pretty good cheer. How many times did I smirk while reading it, muttering, “Please, it’s going to be so much worse than that”? (Spoiler: many times.) There’s even a comforting, almost painful lack of glamour in its slow-bore realism. It’s not totally implausible. (The science bears Robinson out: we’re not remotely doomed yet.) The story leaves us space to breathe.

To be clear: I’m no fan of chirpy hope talk. But I can also admit that I prefer some hope to none at all. Giving up sucks. I wake up every morning feeling good about our chances at beating the worst of climate change. It’s just a better way to start the day.

As critic and environmental writer Rebecca Solnit has written, hope doesn’t have to mean self-delusion or blind optimism. It can be a positive, forward-looking take on uncertainty. It’s the kind of hope that refuses both dystopia and utopia. Robinson insists on this, too.

In one scene of *New York 2140*, two lefties, also former financial engineers, are locked up and alone. Jeff is sick. He asks his friend Mutt to tell him “a story I can believe.” To lift Jeff’s spirits,
Mutt starts a tale about a New York of harmonious equals. “Utopia?” Jeff asks. Mutt soldiers on: “Every single element of this land, right down to the bedrock, was a citizen of the community they all made together, and they all had legal standing, and they all made a good living . . . Hey, Jeff? Jeff?” But Jeff was snoring: “The story had put him to sleep. A kind of lullaby . . . a story for children.”

Robinson is more interested in the practical problems of economics and politics. On page five, he lays out the basics: “So look, the problem is capitalism.” Later, characters debate former Federal Reserve Chair Ben Bernanke’s 2008 response to the financial crisis. A celebrity conservationist has a live, on-air epiphany, telling her audience: “[A]ll of you should join the Householders’ Union, like today. Check it out, look into it, and join. Because we need to organize, people.” The plot turns.

New York is only half-drowned. Things could go either way. Politics decides.

It’s not just organizing that sustains hope, though. There’s also good old-fashioned ingenuity, portrayed in a series of straight-face tech references—“graphene skyscrapers,” “diamond spray,” “fauxfascia,” carbon-sequestering building materials, biomimicry, even the de-extinction of woolly mammoths. And Robinson’s right: without a ton of new tech, we truly are doomed. Sorry, Mum: science fiction isn’t all “just words.”

The problem remains capitalism. And so the overall portrait of twenty-second-century New York is a touch less optimistic but a lot more convincing than the ones that think tanks and universities have been painting since Hurricane Sandy. It almost feels real. One night in April, as I finished the book up on a roof in Philadelphia, where I now live, I pulled my head back and it was like I was closing a telescope that I had pointed a little bit north, and twelve decades into the future. It would have felt even more surreal if I’d been reading in Prospect Heights, Brooklyn, where I’d camped with a friend during Hurricane Sandy, after fleeing my flood-zone apartment in Long Island City. Or not surreal enough.

If there’s a problem with New York 2140 as a story about climate change and New York, it’s that the projection is a bit too smooth. Too much past leaks into the future. There are allusions to an intense nightlife in subterranean Chelsea bars in the intertidal zone. Robinson tells us that it’s a space of strange pleasures, perversities, gender fluidity. Then he moves us right along, practically saying, “Nothing to see here.”

Come on. The conventionally straight, cis future of romance, friendship, even just everyday life dramatized in the book is one of its least charming vintage qualities. The novel’s central metaphor is liquidity! Is it so hard to project that sex and selfhood in a semi-apocalyptic, watery New York might get a little freakier?

During the People’s Climate March in New York, a Queers for the Climate group started the hashtag #itgetswetter. Their point: massive, bustling coastal cities (also, resort islands) are where queer cultures have exploded. In your typical dystopia, authorities would clamp down viciously on “deviant” communities. But in Robinson’s wet cosmopolis, I’d expect more freedom and risk.

New York 2140 is also prudish in its treatment of violence, which it mostly relegates to the background. As an unnamed narrator says about the bloody chaos that followed intense
flooding, “We won't go there now, that's pessimistic boo-hooing and giving-upness.” When I think through the geopolitics of fifty-eight feet of sea level rise, I see a lot of streaming blood and steaming ash. Certainly the armies and spy agencies of the world are planning for war.

Maybe I was too hard earlier on most cli-fi's obsession with landscapes of destruction. Climate violence is real and will probably spread. How can we think about it in “intertidal” terms?

You could do worse than watching the Norwegian TV series Occupied. (The first season premiered in 2015 and the second should land in October.) The show doesn't just showcase gorgeous Scandinavian interiors. (In retrospect, it's kind of shocking that the interior decorating in Star Trek's twenty-fourth-century spaceships was so inefficient and drab.) Occupied portrays Russia's creeping, increasingly brutal occupation of Norway after its new government announces it's going zero-carbon. Russia comes to reboot the oil wells, but it starts and builds slowly. Politically and psychologically, the occupation is an ever-shifting space of “uncertainty and doubt . . . risk and reward,” much like Robinson's Lower Manhattan.

The Norwegian characters, confronting the slow takeover of their country, find themselves making life-or-death decisions in this confusing context. The hard moral question becomes, whom should a person kill? The prime minister, fearing massacres and civil war, struggles to accommodate his new Russian “advisors” and flails before hard choices. A handsome young member of his secret service, trained to preserve order, first goes along with his boss, then wobbles between sides. A restaurant owner suspects that the new Russian customers who save her business have also killed her partner. Her teenage son is already revolting. Enough about wind turbines, the show screams. In a warming world, power will keep bursting from the barrel of a gun.

We should also remember the intimate, subtle climate violence that's close to home, that's already started, and that increasingly haunts literary fiction about everyday life in the present. The concerns of cli-fi and culture in general are merging.

I'm thinking in particular about two Jesmyn Ward books that don't seem to be about climate change. They're set in and around De Lisle, Mississippi. Salvage the Bones (2011) is a novel that unfolds in the days before and during Hurricane Katrina. Men We Reaped (2013) is a memoir about the deaths of young black men that Ward grew up with, which alternates between limpid sociological analysis and lush remembrance. Both are stories about black struggle in a beautiful, intertidal corner of the Gulf Coast. It's a claustrophobic space increasingly ravaged by climate change, although not by that name.

As in New York 2140, there's a visceral, in-between quality to Ward's texts. The scene isn't slickly half-drowned, like Robinson's New York, but sticky everywhere. This is what climate change feels like, in good times and bad.

In Ward's prose, sweat is everything. In Salvage the Bones, basketball players' bodies, the protagonist's tank top, a close friend's rag, and another's bald head all drip with sweat. Sweat transmits erotic ambition: “I glanced at his face, the sweat like glaze. My lips were open. Another me would've licked it off, and it would've tasted like salt.” Sweat transmits erotic anguish: “My sweat is making the backs of my thighs slick; I am sliding along the metal like mud gone downhill in a bad rain, coming to a slow sticky stop on Marquise's back.”
In *Men We Reaped*, sweat is mysterious: “His skin was wet: the night was so hot I didn’t know if it was sweat or tears.” Sweat wraps death: “I imagine these White men wearing white shirts and dark pants, their hair lanky and sweaty, their guns cool in their moist hands.” Sweat survives death: as Ward lists the objects her dead friend Demond left behind, she imagines “his Timberland boots, still smelling faintly of the sweat of his feet.” And sweat is joyful: “He laughed, shook his head, sweat streaming down his face, his hair turning wiry and golden at the root, giving him the blond halo Joshua’d had when we were children.”

I read the sweat in Ward’s writing as more than metaphor. It’s the human ooze of our warming world. Heat and sweat are glorious; they’ve always been with us. But their danger will grow more intense. Heat and humidity have already increased markedly across the United States since 1970. More is coming. Take Climate Central’s projections for the city of Gulfport, at the edge of where Ward’s stories unfold. Gulfport will by 2050 see ninety-four more days of 105 degrees Fahrenheit per year—heat plus humidity—than it did in 2000. (The National Weather Service calls this threshold dangerous to human health.)

By 2050, lucky waterside New York will experience just twenty-eight such danger days each year. That’s still more than five times the number in 2000. Heat waves already kill more Americans than any other kind of natural disaster. All kill black and brown people more readily. Ward’s work is a gripping study of how race, class, and gender structure the violence that global warming is magnifying.

Sex, death, and climate change squeeze between our pores. Before the flood, fire.

So yes, the future of *New York 2140* is a bit vanilla as fantasies go. Still, a dash of vanilla can be refreshing. We need to hold on to work on violence and destruction. But we also need access to scientifically and socially plausible stories about our climate future that aren’t Al Gore-cheesy or unrelentingly grim.

We’ll be fighting to prevent runaway climate change for a hundred years, and dealing with its effects for thousands. There’s no struggle for social justice that’s not also a climate struggle. Already. And that’s daunting as hell. Personally, I find it easier to deal when I can visualize victories alongside defeats. Small wins count too.

No matter what the earth system’s tipping points ultimately are, every fraction of a degree of warming that we avoid means saving millions of lives—people who could play in the cities where, we hope, we’ll have killed the patriarchy dead. Every inch of sea level rise that we avert keeps that much more of New York—and Miami, and Shanghai, and Dhaka, and Ho Chi Minh City—from crumbling. Each extra ton of fossil fuel that we keep in the ground means more homes near water’s edge will stay upright. Each unit of energy that we never use, because we organize our cities more fairly and efficiently, buys us time to build smarter infrastructure, cleaner energy. And as we race to stay safe, the fight against racism becomes a fight against eco-apartheid.

Every bit of victory is worth winning. That’s how I see Antonio Gramsci’s “war of position” in the twenty-first-century: carbon trench war. From each dug-in position, the chance for a sudden surge forward. We don’t know when that moment comes. But we fight stubbornly until it does, so that we’re ready. To keep up our spirits, we share stories: about flashes of heroism and about long uncertain living, about liquid dangers and warm pleasures.
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Petro Gotham, People's Gotham

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Cities are contradictions. There’s an argument that living densely with public transit and public amenities is inherently green, the way to have the smallest carbon footprint. But people’s ecological impact includes the full global footprint of their consumption, which isn’t counted by prevailing urban studies. Those miss the fact that affluent New Yorkers fly more, own more homes, consume more imported goods. There’s a directly political dimension too. Take David Koch, the richest man in New York and among the top ten on earth. He’s one of the country’s most devoted climate deniers. He also lives near the headquarters of 350.org, the heroic and effective climate action group. On September 21, 2014, New York hosted the world’s biggest-ever climate march (the green zig-zag on this map). Protestors walked down Central Park West, past millionaires’ homes and Fox News’s climate-denial studios. New York is a global stage for the battle between unchecked capitalism and climate justice. Our map gives a sample of some key protagonists. Housing and labor groups are also low-carbon champions, even if they say little about it. Indeed, our map shows that many of the greenest people in New York City live in public housing. The data, which estimates zip-code-specific, per-capita global carbon footprints using a range of sources and modeling techniques, was kindly provided by the researcher Kevin Ummel, based on his 2014 study “Who Pollutes?” published by the Center for Global Development.
New Yorkers’ smart phones and weave their clothes, and ignores the fumes spewed by planes that ferry New Yorkers around the world.

There are, however, more sophisticated methods for calculating the global carbon footprint of everything that a person (or organization) in a given area is responsible for. This consumption count paints a whole other picture.

Levels of density shape a person’s carbon footprint; so do income and lifestyle. When it comes to the carbon emissions of New York’s individual residents, as calculated in terms of consumption, Manhattan is the worst borough. Because it’s the richest. Crowded but well-to-do West Villagers’ carbon footprints are comparable to sprawling suburbanites all over the country. It is only residents of Manhattan’s less-gentrified neighborhoods who have really low carbon footprints. They reside by the island’s northwest and southeast tips, in zip codes anchored by public housing.

And so, the image of New York City that should inspire the world’s would-be low-carbon urbanists is the combination of towers run by the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) and the outer boroughs’ mosaic of mixed-income, mixed-use neighborhoods. Sometimes beautiful, sometimes plain, from Woodside to Clinton Hill, a still-democratic New York teams with life and ecological promise. This isn’t to suggest celebrating the poorest New Yorkers’ lack of income, their inability to consume. On the contrary, the thing to celebrate is what the radical urbanist Mike Davis in his essay “Who Will Build the Ark?” calls the “cornerstone of the low-carbon city . . . the priority given to public affluence over private wealth.” Public housing, well-stocked libraries, accessible transit, gorgeous parks: these are democratic low-carbon amenities. And they’re the political achievements of working-class New York.

Still, your eyes are narrowing. Surely New York City has more to offer the politics of global warming than a stack of individuals’, even neighborhoods’, moral balance sheets, with pounds of carbon standing in for sins. And you’re right. New York isn’t a political snow globe either. Woven into the city’s local geographies of consumption are global geographies of power. From the United Nations Security Council to Citibank boardrooms to the underventilated activist meeting room on Beaver Street, New York is a city where global political networks are knotted together. Here, people combine resources and symbols; they create stories, projects, and policies. All of this influences the ways that other cities try to organize themselves. And it helps shape the global debate about who matters to the climate and how. What happens here literally remakes the atmosphere—in direct and indirect, obvious and subtle ways.

The stakes are high. The carbon dioxide emissions of the world’s cities make up about half of the world’s total. Between now and 2030, they’re projected to rise 40%, maybe more. That’s over half of the currently recoverable carbon stored in Canada’s tar sands. A lot of carbon. So the question is: What counts as smart? And what can New York contribute to that conversation? Greenwich Village is minuscule. But thanks to the activist and writer Jane Jacobs, the neighborhood became a global template for living well. Then again, Jacobs wasn’t the only New Yorker working to reshape the world all those years ago.

On May 10, 1960, in the New York Plaza Hotel, the petroleum heir and vice chairman of Chase Manhattan Bank, David Rockefeller, gave a speech called “New York: Economic Center of the World.” It was prophetic. With the global economy becoming more complex, Rockefeller said, “there is a growing need for a headquarters city, a focal point for decision-making.” He urged the construction of a downtown World Trade Center to enable the expansion of the city’s already “marvelously varied and skilled facilities.” In other words, an agglomeration of lawyers, advertisers, public relations experts, management consultants, and other professionals—an ecology of skills and talent in support of globe-wrangling financiers.

Rockefeller also insisted that money ruled most effectively when joined to beauty and wisdom. New York’s centrality, he said, required that “cultural and educational facilities [be] so developed that the city would exercise leadership in the arts.” The city needed “new museums and theaters.” For particular praise, he singled out the forthcoming Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts.

We don’t need to give Rockefeller undue credit for what came next. Still, something of his vision was realized. The city that, as he pointed out, was then the world’s largest manufacturing center, has since outsourced most physical production. Rockefeller’s proposed World Trade Center revitalized Wall Street. New York’s capitalists traded mechanical levers for remote controls. The economic elite turned to finance, real estate, knowledge, and culture. In the age of globalization, New York became a machine for converting far-off greenhouse gas emissions—in the form of smokestacks, factory farms, and sprawling suburban development—into local money and glamour. Manhattan’s glitz laundered the distant, dirty combustion of fossil fuels, just as local laundromats and hair salons recycled the moneys of the Mob. And Manhattan did it in style.

Lincoln Center’s main theater opened four years after Rockefeller’s speech, becoming home to the city’s ballet. Today, it bears the name of another oilman, David Koch, who pledged $100 million for its restoration. Koch also gave $65 million to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, to rebuild its four-block public plaza. And thanks to Koch’s donation of $20 million to the American Museum of Natural History, his name adorns two great halls of dinosaur bones. Sometimes you have to look over your shoulder. As climate change hastens the next Great Extinction, there’s an eerie, retrospective futurism to spending oil profits on the veneration of vanished giants.

David Koch is Charles Koch’s brother. Together, they own the second largest privately held corporation in the United States. They fund a vast network of right-wing causes, which the Tea Party is the most famous outcome. Meanwhile, on each side of Central Park, they gild the museums and theaters that are home to the city’s ballet. Today, it bears the name of another oilman, David Koch, who invested in carbon, however. In the summer of 2015, the Street poured on King Coal, slashing direct investments into the sector. Just as interesting is the way that the Street is multiplying its twenty-first-century bets. The Street is directing more money and prestige to all manner of low-carbon and resiliency companies. Gotham isn’t determined to drown
There are so many ways you can look at the People’s Climate March and see Occupy infrastructure throughout it,” said my friend Tammy Shapiro, who was deeply active in both. The march was largely organized through a networked hub system inspired by the cross-country InterOccupy network. Most of the march’s art pieces were built in the Mayday space housed on Starr Street in Bushwick, which is mostly run by former Occupiers. The march’s exclamation point was the next morning’s “Flood Wall Street,” a defiant denunciation of the Street’s global climate-change complicity. Thousands straddled past Zuccotti Park in exuberant rage, then piled up and roiled at the edge of Wall Street. It was a show of confrontation that the march had been polite enough to only whisper.

In a sense, Flood Wall Street realized a concern for climate change long dormant in the Occupy movement. After Hurricane Sandy in 2012, a network of Occupiers sparked the 60,000-strong relief network called Occupy Sandy. Seizing on the instincts of some of the original Occupiers, the network made the atmosphere a central concern. Still—as I learned at a postmortem summit at a waterside bar in Bay Ridge months later—many key activists wished they had done even more to connect local inequalities laid bare by the storm with the imperative to slow global warming everywhere.

Meanwhile, if the People’s Climate March owed a lot to Occupy, it also drew on groups that never flocked to Lower Manhattan to wiggle their fingers. The march started as a partnership—proposed by the climate activist group 350.org and the broader online activist group Avasu—with the Climate Justice Alliance, a national network of organizations, based in poor communities of color, which have borne the greatest brunt of urban regions’ toxic pollution and are now most vulnerable to climate-linked extreme weather.

This was no trivial coalition. “We live in a very segregated society, by class, color, and communities,” Luis Garden Acosta told me after Hurricane Sandy. Acosta is a founding leader of El Puente, an environmental justice group based in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. He continued, “Nowhere is [that segregation] more starkly apparent than in the environmental activist community.” Bridging that gulf, even for the march, took long and painful meetings. Likewise for building partnerships with the city’s powerful big unions. “To change everything, we need everyone,” ran the climate march’s unofficial kicker. It was easier said than done.

Through the summer of 2014, the march’s organizers gathered in midtown, in a grim office near Grand Central. The tall, gray neighborhood that helps coordinate carbon capitalism served the same purpose to that system’s enemies. By day the growing ranks of staffers, seconded by green groups, planned the family-friendly march. By night they combined with the veterans of Occupy to plot the more confrontational Flood Wall Street.

There were immediate results. New York mayor Bill de Blasio, who was elected with rhetoric and political supporters borrowed from Occupy, saw what was coming. He polished up a plan to slash the city’s greenhouse gas emissions by 80 percent by 2050, building on and accelerating the prior administration’s commitments, but this time with more emphasis on affordable housing. De Blasio announced the plan on the eve of the march. Months later, he reframed the city’s “sustainability vision” in terms of social justice.

Will those emissions cuts actually happen, showing the world that urban climate politics can be turbocharged by long-standing social justice campaigners? Can New York divest itself of Petro Gotham, instead prioritizing democratic, low-carbon communities? Can the Occupiers’ irrevocable networks build lasting power with the more stable, rooted community groups of the climate justice movement? What sound like local questions are also global questions. Will a red-green coalition transform New York into a democratic mural that shows other cities how to slash all those gigatons of carbon in an effective, democratic, and egalitarian way? What will it look like if it does?
When I close my eyes and picture a low-carbon People’s Gotham, I don’t start with gleaming office towers certified by cheesy acronyms. I don’t picture broad green bike lanes lining Manhattan’s avenues. At the edge of my mind, kale grows on a rooftop. But that image is out of focus.

Sharper is my vision of the 7 train, just as it is, packed and multicolored. I imagine the boroughs crisscrossed by comfy buses running express. They leave the G train in their dust. I see red-brick NYCHA towers, the city’s venerable affordable housing. Wrapped in new exterior skins and patched up inside, NYCHA’s buildings could undergo what experts call a “deep energy retrofit,” which would massively reduce their energy expenditure. Such a program wouldn’t only create thousands of local jobs. It would serve as a kind of regional innovation and industrial policy, training technicians and improving techniques to apply to other buildings in and beyond New York. An urban green new deal, anchored in working-class New York.

Envision NYCHA as a whole, which houses 400,000 people, cutting energy use by three-quarters (or more) while using the renovation process to clean out mold, seal the cracks and crevices where pests now thrive, and increase leaf canopy. With these and other measures, NYCHA could become the world’s largest—albeit decentralized—green city, an outpost of a far-off future in tomorrow’s New York. I can hear—I can smell—the packed, endless meetings at which residents and designers hash out the specifics.

This vision, with its contrast of detail and grandeur, reminds me of other spaces that I’ve seen, other moments I’ve spent in this emerging People’s Gotham. I recall the haunting, yellow-tinged beauty of the City University of New York’s Lehman College campus in the Bronx, with its carved stones and winter trees, framed by a third-floor classroom’s window as curious undergrads debate the meaning of the urban environment. I recall the great interior hollow of Judson Memorial Church, where in the fall of 2012 the Indian writer and activist Arundhati Roy told Occupiers that they numbered less than a hundredth of the crowds mustered in her home country, but since the world media was watching, it was worth it, so long as the local Occupiers maintained a healthy sense of perspective. I recall the yet vastier interior of a warehouse by the water in Sunset Park in Brooklyn, the site of a youth climate justice summit hosted by the environmental justice organization UPROSE. By the time I get there, late and sweating on my bike, the program is wrapping up, the teenagers eating and jostling each other, flirting.

You can recite a thousand objections to this vision. First and foremost, you can point out that the core of the People’s Gotham, its dense, low-carbon, working-class neighborhoods of color, is under assault—from finance-backed developers and “creative economy” gentrifiers and from the cops who follow them. But those neighborhoods are also fighting back. When I think of a frontline struggle in New York’s climate politics, of accidental low-carbon protagonists, I also think of the Crown Heights Tenant Union—a multiracial, multiclass alliance defending affordable density. Their neighborhood may not be threatened by a hurricane. But it’s on the front lines of New York’s battle to defend, even to expand, the shared character of its affluence.

Here is the bright line linking struggles to defend the democratic fabric of the city, the rights of workers and of the poor who live there, and the possibility of defeating Petro Gotham. The threads that weave everyday consumption and global warming, that weave localized battles for a decent urban life and the great planetary effort to decarbonize prosperity, these are the threads of politics. And a great global city’s politics are more open-ended, more awe-inspiring than the swirl of carbon in the atmosphere. While Wall Street hedges its bet, the People’s Gotham musters to go all in. ☝️
Seize the Hamptons

BY

DANIEL ALDANA COHEN

We should all get the chance to escape the city and enjoy leisure — without the hefty ecological footprint.

Central Park was once the greenest piece of Manhattan. Now environmentalists and politicians trumpet the city’s towers and subway tunnels, emblems of an energy-efficient density, as the island’s greenest assets. With global warming threatening to kill millions a year, and inter-state negotiations stalled, pro-density planning is an increasingly vogue strategy for cutting carbon emissions.

The basic idea is sound. Cluster home, work, and services and you reduce car traffic and improve daily life. Assemble people in large buildings and they’ll use energy more efficiently. Everyone is jumping on board — from big think tanks and international institutes to progressive planners and politicians. Make the suburbs more like Manhattan — or at least Brooklyn — they shout, and we’ll get more livable cities that also mitigate global warming.

The Density Fetish

If the story seems a touch too neat, and a touch too easy on rich New Yorkers, that’s because it is. Density as such really is associated with lower carbon emissions. But as a recent round of peer-reviewed studies shows, including consumption’s global carbon footprint and controlling for class and lifestyle make all the difference. When the people clustered are prosperous professionals, the carbon benefits of density can be cancelled out by the emissions their consumption causes. The smokestacks, of course, are elsewhere.

When the poor and working class live densely, meanwhile, the carbon savings are compounded. As geographer Roger Keil writes, “Density as a site-specific quality is almost meaningless if one doesn’t look at the broader societal context and patterns of use as well.” There is more to the story than a jurisdiction’s ratio of people to square foot.
Living in a dense city doesn’t guarantee a carbon-free lunch. If you’re working class and live in a public-housing tower in Manhattan’s Lower East Side, your carbon footprint is pretty low.

But if you’re a prosperous professional living in a modestly sized apartment in Manhattan’s Upper East Side, you’re part of the problem. You likely don’t drive much and you might live a little lighter on the earth than your McMansion-dwelling in-laws, but you probably spend utility and gas savings on a second home, extra imports produced elsewhere, carbon-rich vacations to Aspen and Aruba, or all of the above.

Money gets spent, and spending in a fossil-fuel-powered economy exacerbates climate change. The richer you are, the worse you probably are for the atmosphere. Meanwhile, with the growing movement to make cities’ peripheries denser, the distinction between core and suburb is softening. The starker tension is between individual and collective consumption. It’s by expanding collective consumption — in housing, transit, services, and leisure — that we can democratize and decarbonize urban life.

The point here isn’t to demonize pathological consumer behavior, or to simply suggest alternative architectural best practices. Increasing collective consumption is about transforming, together, our built environment and social relations.

Planner Arthur Nelson’s projections indicate the scale of what’s possible. By 2030, he reports, $20 trillion in new money will be spent on expanding and repurposing US metropolitan built environments, with over thirty million residential units at stake. The whole urban fabric is changing. But we’re off to a bad start. The density fetish is being used to greenwash the return of mostly white professionals to inner cities. They aren’t just gentrifying and displacing one block at time; they are transforming social logics.

Forget displacement within cities. From 2000 to 2010, Chicago lost a net total of 180,000 blacks, most to suburbs and outlying towns. New York City lost 110,000 black residents. And as inner-city rents climb, immigrants are for the first time settling directly in suburbs. Journalist Alan Ehrenhalt calls this a “demographic inversion.” He predicts that prosperous North American cities will soon resemble late-nineteenth-century European capitals: stylish professionals will dominate the core, while the poor and working class mass in denser suburbs.

For Ehrenhalt and others making similar arguments, that’s not so bad. If yuppies are modeling a low-carbon future for all, we should probably get out of the way, deregulating en route so as to make urban cores even denser. Most housing activists disagree. But many ignore the climate piece altogether, focusing narrowly on strategies to increase or preserve affordable housing in downtown cores, where people already live close to their jobs and to crucial services.

It’s an important fight — but the urban future won’t be made there. As arguments about the fate of city centers rage, we ignore other huge questions: how should suburban life change as it gets denser? What form should this density take? How might Americans live with levels of density most now find appalling?

We could learn from the experts. From Roman senators to nineteenth-century European bourgeois to today’s hedge-fund managers, the rich have swung as they pleased from the crowd’s exhilarating crush to
open space’s swallowing grace. For them, dense cities are defined by culture, the sublime countryside by serenity or adventure. The trick is to get some of each.

Slashing greenhouse-gas emissions doesn’t have to doom the great majority to a joyless clumping into buses and threadbare parks, contemplating a dull horizon clotted by gray towers. Quite the opposite. We should fight shamelessly for an expansive, leisurely urban good life for everyone, lived mostly in and about crowds, but sometimes in gloriously wild, open spaces.

Many have argued persuasively — including in these pages — that a just low-carbon future means that some will earn less, we’ll all work less, and we’ll all live better. This is a vision that can be urbanized. Done right, expanding leisure runs not against, but with, the low-carbon current.

**Performance Urbanism**

Pro-density developers have already begun retooling cities’ edges. To see some of this transformation up close, I spent eight hours in May cruising the suburbs of Toronto, from Mississauga to Markham. Unlike much of the US, where the Tea Party is waging a paranoid war against regional governance schemes that it attributes to United Nations conspiracies, Ontario is ruled by a government of progressive-neoliberal hybrids.

The province has tightened Toronto’s greenbelt, limiting sprawl, and passed a “Places to Grow” plan to press densification. It’s more or less working. Bus rapid transit is expanding, with the showpiece VIVA system building sleek right-of-way stations along Highway 7 and promoting onboard comfort with the peppy hashtag #thenewmetime.

Meanwhile, densification projects span the spectrum, from New Urbanist neighborhoods with too-perfect back alleys, to multistory shopping strips surrounding the Pacific Mall, to clusters of high-rises anchored by big-box mega-malls anchored by Walmarts.

More often than not, high-speed developer-driven densification employs crude instruments. Toronto planner Andrea Friedman deadpans, “It’s not clear that we’re building better places.” In part, this is because the projects are instigated by big developers. No one is building public space, and retail earnings are used to finance development.

As a result, this kind of densification encourages residents to spend free time in malls, shopping for fast fashion and replacement end tables, the manufacture of which is spewing carbon into the atmosphere. According to a study of Seattle’s consumption-driven carbon footprint, clothing purchases cause some of the highest greenhouse gas emissions per dollar spent. North Americans buy more every year.
We'll always need to get things in stores. But we can still do better than anchoring our newly dense neighborhoods with traditional malls. We can organize our lives less around the exchange of objects, and more around the exchange of meanings. It's the flip side of working less and using less stuff.

When we congregate, our leisure needs to be low-carbon. Besides watching Netflix, this means socializing in public space, using our time to do interesting things in energetic ways. That includes sports, picnics, and lounging in parks, learning in schools and libraries. It could also mean a massive expansion of the performing arts everywhere.

Some Broadway-type shows are opulent. But most plays, concerts — even operas — aren't that materially intensive. Shoestring postmodern dance and stand-up comedy are even better. Moreover, the performing arts are vital to a mobilized democracy.

In California, San Quentin’s inmates escaped (or at least critiqued) alienation in their infamous reproductions of Samuel Beckett plays. Harlem’s political culture developed in part on the Apollo Theater’s stage. Brecht reminded us that we need to experiment to properly democratize the performing arts. And so we should, on and off the formal stage — think not Shakespeare in the Park, but Theatre of the Oppressed.

An older Toronto suburb called Brampton suggests another kind of suburban concentration along these lines. Brampton’s central streets are a less white version of Toronto’s hipper neighborhoods. The area’s centerpiece, near rail and express bus stops, is the Rose Theatre. Even with endemic mismanagement, a strike leading to a public battle over a baby grand piano, and electricity problems, the theater has thrived in its first decade, putting on big shows to big crowds and offering space for community arts activities.

Of course, in the age of “creative cities,” critics have good reasons to mock the idea that expanding the performing arts would reset Rust Belt urban economies. Even Richard Florida has admitted that “creative city” policies mainly benefit the already affluent. But all this is beside the point. David Koch doesn’t donate to the Lincoln Center to create jobs in Midtown, but because he enjoys the performances. What’s good enough for the elite is good enough for everyone.

Developers may not appreciate this agenda. The key is to stop trying to convince them on their own terms, and instead to package the arts in a broader movement for a just, democratic urbanism. It was thus that the São Paulo Workers’ Party mayor between 2000 and 2004 both reorganized and consolidated the bus system to help the residents of the periphery get around the city, and established a popular network of multi-dimensional cultural centers in the peripheries themselves.

There’s also a country-sized precedent. In the spring and summer of 1936 in France, over two million workers went on strike. The freshly elected Popular Front government, led by socialist leader Léon Blum, was under pressure from workers and its coalition’s left flank. In early June of that year, it negotiated substantial pay raises with labor and business leaders, then passed laws mandating a forty-hour workweek and two weeks paid vacation. These and other measures revolutionized a popular culture that was feeding the growing labor movements.
The Popular Front funded the construction of mass theaters and financed popular productions — often in partnership with unions, which subsidized access for members. Historian Jessica Wardhaugh has shown how the performing arts were at the core of Popular Front efforts to represent and mobilize a unified people, channelling the arts’ increasingly populist currents.

Before Blum’s election, the socialist playwright Jean-Richard Bloch had dreamed that “Drama will increase from a few thousand spectators to a few million, from a national public to a universal public.” To achieve this in our urban future would require a massive multiplication of performing arts spaces, always used to anchor dense communities geared toward collective consumption.

We might also remember that the most articulate case for clustering homes, work, care, and public culture was made in the last century by left feminists focused on working women’s needs: urban historian Dolores Hayden argues that homeownership and consumerism are flip sides of a unified capitalist and patriarchal coin and advocates models of cooperative living that both abolish the sexual division of care and “maximize real choices for households concerning recreation and sociability.”

### Into the Wild

Still, even the spindliest flâneur needs a break from the crowd. In June of this year, a New York subway advertisement showed a grimacing brunette squished under a man’s armpit in crowded train. Headline: “Stranger’s armpit. Just. Too. Close.” Advertised: a website to book flights, hotels, and cruises.

Global tourism is already one of the world’s biggest industries. But cheap flights aren’t the solution to cramped cities in the age of climate change. Besides the massive carbon footprint of air travel, there’s a deeper question of urban justice.

Imagine a mixed-income building in Queens with poor and prosperous families in small apartments side by side. For the family able to travel to the Hamptons in summer, Aspen in winter, and Caribbean beaches in between, the experience of density differs by degree from the family stuck in the same spot 360 days a year. One New Yorker’s occasional armpit is the other’s existential condition. Parks and swimming pools are glorious — but are they enough?

There are good reasons why working-class New Yorkers have sprung for beachfront property on Staten Island’s flood-prone South Shore. And no wonder Americans like suburbs with yards, even while aspiring for something more Manhattanesque.

In *The Great Inversion*, Ehrenhalt marvels that while 45 percent of twenty-to-thirty-five-year-old Americans wish they could live in New York, almost every densification project proposed in a suburb faces instant resistance. For many suburbanites, an increase in area armpits is the last thing they want.
A fuller vision of urbanizing low-carbon leisure should indulge yearnings to escape, but without burning fossil fuels. That means comfy coach and rail access to open spaces well outside city limits. There must be affordable, well-designed leisure options in the wild, from day-trip getaways to overnight lodges.

Unions and other working-class organizations once tried hard to establish this kind of option for their members. Now we must treat this “rural” imperative as the reverse of the (sub)urban design coin. It doesn’t have to mean nationalizing the Hamptons — but why not?

You might object that elites have no intention of facilitating a massive program to democratize regional leisure for the masses. But they once did, in Europe at various points during the twentieth century. Again, France’s Popular Front provides a stirring precedent.

The summer it legislated two paid weeks off work, the sub-minister of leisure and sport mandated 40 percent discounts on train fares for once-a-year trips. Hundreds of thousands took advantage right away, nearly two million the following year. Many visited the beach for the first time, while others traveled to see relatives or camp in the countryside.

Photographs from the period show workers cramming into train stations, piling dozens of bicycles on rail cars, clustering in the sun amidst small square pavilions at seaside. Blum’s office filled with postcards, most bearing thank-you messages of fraternal simplicity. One read, “Dear President and comrade, some comrades on paid holiday in beautiful Roussillon have charged me with expressing their respectful recognition.”

Blum retained fond memories of that first summer. His biographer writes that he thought his mission was to help “develop the idea that man could find in society a specific place beyond simply that of a peon in the production process, instead developing his body and soul.”

When Blum took the stand during his trial by the Vichy regime in 1942 for his government’s ostensible betrayal of France, he reminisced about the summer of ’36. He recalled workers riding tandem bicycles down Paris’s boulevards in colorful sweaters. He remembered feeling that “the idea of leisure awoke a sort of natural and simple coquettishness” among ordinary people.

His earnestness might read as sentimental now that leisure and flirtation have become the domain of ironic publicists. But he — or at least, his coalition — earned the right to reminisce.

Two million workers in interwar France forced the state to enable leisure in a way it never has in North America. Today French labor law guarantees thirty-one days of paid vacation. The infrastructures that sprung up around the first mass vacations laid the foundation for one of the world’s most successful tourism sectors.

Mixed in with now-conventional consumption, there remain elements of the original spirit of solidarity. Many public-sector unionists still holiday together with colleagues in well-serviced camps. Teachers and arts workers get into museums for free.
Novelist Michel Houellebecq mocks the middlebrow quality of French leisure culture, but in New York, it’s taken years of bitter campaigning just to safeguard every worker’s right to five sick days a year. And anyway, what people do in their low-carbon free time is their own damn business. Who cares if vacationers, like Houellebecq’s autobiographical protagonist in *Platform*, abuse themselves on the beach by masturbating into the pages of the latest John Grisham?

There’s something to be said for left critiques of mass leisure undertakings. When sincere postwar German planners aimed to relieve workplace discontent with magnificent parks fostering social harmony, critics savaged the plans as liberal palliatives for simmering class conflict.

The aughts’ fantastically profitable explosion of Northern European tourism on Southern European shores seemed like an economic and cultural win-win. It turned out to be an environmental and financial disaster, ruining coastal ecologies while inflating a massive property bubble.

And note: British studies found that while the absolute number of low-income air travelers increased very modestly with the rise of ultra-cheap flights, their share of total air trips actually declined, while the upper middle class reaped the rewards. Ryanair is no Robespierre.

But remember, most elites weren’t impressed by mass leisure either. In 1938, British pop intellectual CEM Joad grew horrified that the suburbs relieving London’s congestion also spilled poor people into the countryside, moaning that he found them “wherever there is water, upon sea shores or upon river banks, lying in every attitude of undressed and inelegant squalor, grilling themselves, for all the world as if they were steaks, in the sun.”

A French worker who took his first vacation in 1936 remembers that the rich, on their erstwhile exclusive beach, withdrew in the face of workers’ arrival to an isolated corner of the sand, warning their children to avoid the invading “congés payés” (paid vacations) — as if the law and a living worker were equivalently abstract.

All this still leaves us room to experiment with new options for democratized, open leisure space. We can’t steal everything from the French. Our principles should be fairness (to other people, to non-humans) and fearlessness. Obviously, massive sculpture gardens are great, as are campgrounds, beaches, hiking trails, and so on. If we can’t see the stars every now and then, it’s not our revolution. But we can be even more imaginative. There’s no necessary contradiction between the wilderness and a bold modernity.

British journalist George Monbiot has made a compelling case for re-wilding tracts of land — not restoring, but unleashing them — to relieve us of suffocating ecological boredom. Among the suggestions: restore giant animals where they have been wiped out, and their analogues where the original is extinct; for example, elephants in the Americas where mastodons once roamed.

When I canoed in Northern Ontario as a teenager, I was given the horrifying impression that a mislaid square of toilet paper could spoil acres of pristine boreal forest. This was conservative conservationism at its unscientific, puritanical extreme. If we really commit to buttressing our ecosystems, they’ll be able to
withstand leisurely intrusions. The more we restrict sprawl and densify suburbs, the more space we’ll have to play with.

None of this could go forward without leadership from indigenous nations, who have suffered over and over at the hands of settlers’ dreams of an empty wilderness. Some may prefer other kinds of economic activity. But we can hope that others will embrace and help direct more profound and affecting experiences of the outdoors.

Specific proposals aside, for ordinary people in the twenty-first century to escape urban pits of despair, the most important lesson to learn from France’s interwar working class is that organizing and building coalitions works — and not just to raise wages. Their banner read: “Life belongs to us.” Ours could too.

Too often on the Left, we let the pessimism of our intellect corrode ... well, our intellects. The point isn’t to be willfully optimistic, but intelligently so. Climate change is on the verge of shaking things up: fast, profound shifts to the economy’s material basis are coming.

We should chase what we want, using what we know and already have. It’s good that solar panels are improving. And we need to point out that the wealthy are the chief ecological culprits, even if they live in Manhattan townhouses and applaud Bloomberg’s climate advocacy.

But cursing the rich and cheering cheap renewables won’t be enough to spare the atmosphere — or to get us out of bed in the morning. The shameless, confrontational pursuit of low-carbon leisure, building on the victories of poor and working-class movements around the world, and mixing in the most useful expertise around, could produce democratic, decarbonized cities — not cramped, dull warehouses, but diverse, stimulating metropoles with plentiful access to the wild beyond.

Yes, there will still be tedium and struggle. But we’ll also prowl boulevards in bright sweaters woven by robots powered by windmills.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Is Climate Change Big or Small?

Is Climate Change Big or Small?
Daniel Aldana Cohen  ●  November 13, 2014

Trevor Kluckman as Tom in Buzz (courtesy of Christopher Ash)

Buzz
by Benjamin Kunkel
Directed by Lian Walden
Gemini & Scorpio Loft, Brooklyn, NY

Bodies in mock hazmat suits unpack a faux Gowanus loft apartment in which everything is white, while you sit on a brown couch chatting with a friend. On a particular Wednesday, there are twelve of us sitting on the designated upholstery, with room for six or seven more. “This makes me nervous about bed bugs,” my friend says as a hazmat crawls by. I pretend not to be.

The hazmats leave and a pregnant woman called Sasha walks on in a cream slip. A few lines in, she says, “I don't really know if it was unusually bad in here. May be getting worse everywhere... Or maybe when you're expecting it changes your perception.” A man in white boxer briefs and a three-quarter-length wool coat—Tom—walks on stage and takes off his coat. Soon dinner guests, also wearing white underwear, join the leads. We learn that the hazmats were trying (unsuccessfully) to exterminate the apartment's flies, which global warming has rendered ubiquitous.

Welcome to Buzz, Benjamin Kunkel's new play about climate change.

It does feel strange to write about the play's ideas when Kunkel has already issued the Cliff's Notes in the New Yorker. Maybe Kunkel worried that the marginality of theater invoked by the lead, Tom—a playwright!—was a little too true to life. Or maybe, having told an interviewer from New York magazine that Buzz “sounds like the worst French existentialist play of all time,” Kunkel wanted to reestablish its credibility.
I saw Buzz before reading Kunkel’s essay, where I was surprised to find him argue that the play is a comedy and the funniest thing he has written. Sure, there are funny scenes. But the play’s basic conceit, as I understood it, was both interesting and un-funny.

Climate change, we are told over and over, is big. Just glance at the titles of some of the movies, novels, plays, and non-fiction on the subject—The Day After Tomorrow, Odds Against Tomorrow, The Great Immensity, A Vast Machine, The Global Risk Society, This Changes Everything. And on it goes. Even more modestly framed efforts like Snowpiercer—where all that remains of humanity inhabits a single train—deploy allegorical compression to grandiose effect.

Granted, social psychologists of climate change have been quietly parsing the psyches of ordinary people confronting the phenomenon in everyday life. But the research poses more questions than it answers. There is a huge opportunity here for literature to intervene.

And that’s exactly what Buzz achieves. It’s true, an allegorical play for a tiny audience in a cramped loft, about characters struggling with omnipresent little bugs, seems a curious approach to the temporal and spatial enormities of climate change. But this is precisely Kunkel’s point. The paradox of climate change is that the very thing that should planetize us, making us all global cosmopolitans under the hot sun of philosophical reckoning, instead drives us back into the cave—ideally, to a dark and isolated nook—even as ghosts of the blinding light dance on our retinas. Climate change is so big that we shudder and shrink.

“I want a home that’s not the same as the world,” the pregnant Sasha pleads in exhaustion. It doesn’t help that her partner Tom, a gloomy fellow, is despondent that they’re having a child: “Our darling little children will live in a casualized labor market in a precarious ecological situation,” he intones half-sarcastically. “Their jobs won’t be secure even if they’re good ones, the climate won’t be reliable.”

Tom is the cerebral misanthrope, unable to ignore the omnipresent, buzzing flies with which the others make a troubled peace. Perhaps he would rather walk back out into the sun, lie down, and bake. But can an honesty that saps one’s vitality be heroic? In the intellectual traditions of existentialism and the theater of the absurd, whose themes saturate Buzz, writers celebrated brooding resistance to conformist post-war optimism. But even Jean-Paul Sartre grew bored of his own boredom. Kunkel, too, clearly wants to insist that we can survive in the sunshine, harsh as it is. But how?

I was disappointed to see Buzz associate the passion for life with having children, as Tom’s defiantly peppy partner Sasha insists on doing. “I want the baby to not even think about the parts per million,” she says. “I want the baby to die in peace as an old man with a big white beard by the side of a river that still runs the temperature God intended.”

Fertility against extinction; childhood against cynicism. These are old themes. You’ll find the pregnancy-vitality circuit everywhere in discussions of climate change, from op-eds to Naomi Klein’s This Changes Everything to the more opaquely allegorical Children of Men. There’s an unfortunate gender dynamic at play here. And we’ve all encountered enough stories and arguments that enlist the vulnerable child trope for too-easy emotional effect. In Canada, the last volley of anti-gay marriage ads demanded, “What about the children?” Yes, yes, yes, our grandchildren will suffer more from global warming than we will—not to mention the children overseas, in more vulnerable locales. The more difficult and interesting problem is: how should we, living, self-conscious beings, balance freedom, pleasure, and responsibility in our own selves, right now?

From this perspective, Sasha’s opening double-entendre—“maybe when you’re expecting it changes your perception”—is a disturbing conflation. It takes our own challenge—how to fuel our vitality in the face of climate chaos and its attendant despair—and yokes it to those who will succeed us, just as a disappointed father demands that his child achieve the success he never did. In each case, the present cares for the future. But who’s caring for the present?

Buzz is good to think with, though as theater, it is sometimes clunky. A failed dinner party, a moving flashback scene, and a metaphor-transcending conclusion are well done. But when the charismatic Sasha vanishes for most of the play’s final third, leaving Tom to stutter self-consciously before an attractive (and only apparently naive) woman college journalist, Buzz loses its edge. At some level, the journalist’s plucky
insistence on carrying on seems to offer a third way between Tom's despair and Sasha's maternal drive. But her character is too roughly drawn.

Still, Tom makes a clever point during their exchange. Twentieth-century theater's long-standing contribution, he says, was to document the miseries of conventional, bourgeois family life. And so, paradoxically, the theater is an amusing distraction for the very social class whose dysfunction it exposes. It soothes the yearning for a big life within the confines of a small one.

Does Buzz escape the claustrophobic circuit of self-sustaining self-criticism that its protagonist laments? I can't decide. Like its actors' white underwear, Buzz draws attention to a more naked radicalism without going all the way. But of course, the restrictive stage directions only apply to the stage.


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