Book Review

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An "extreme city," Ashley Dawson explains, is "not a city of a certain size, like the megacity or metacity," but rather "an urban space of stark economic inequality, the defining urban characteristic of our time, and one of the greatest threats to the sustainability of urban existence" (6). He contends that the successes and/or failures to address "race, class, and gender" inequalities within cities will determine how society will contend with "the storms that are bearing down upon humanity" (6-7). Thus, cities, and everything that transpires in relation to them, remain at the center of "the coming climate chaos" (5).

Dawson, a professor of English at the CUNY Graduate Center, has conducted extensive research in relation to postcolonialism, environmental humanities, and the political economy of the global system. In his previous book, *Extinction: A Radical History*, he examined how the restless expansion of the capitalist system is decimating the global commons and driving the sixth extinction. In *Extreme Cities: The Peril and Promise of Urban Life in the Age of Climate Change*, Dawson assesses the critical intersection between cities and ecological crisis in the Anthropocene. He stresses that too often cities receive little attention in regard to climate assessments and environmental discussions. He points out that cities are a defining aspect of the twenty-first century, as the majority of humanity resides within them, the anthropogenic activities within urban

centers generate massive amounts of carbon dioxide, they are sites of extreme ecological transformations, and many cities--especially those along coasts--are extremely vulnerable to the consequences of climate change. Modern cities, and urban growth and development in particular, are intimately driven by capitalism, as sites of production and consumption, as well as reinvestment of surplus—all of which intensify the demands placed upon the larger biophysical world. Thus, cities are "dependent upon nature, but they also structure our increasingly chaotic world" (9). From this point of tension, Dawson investigates the current state and the future of the "extreme city" in the face of climate change. To a large extent, he focuses his analysis on cities located near seas, oceans, or rivers, locations where large human populations will be most affected by rising water levels as a result of climate change.

Surveying the various proposals and projects from different cities, Dawson notes that these urban spaces contain divergent social, political, economic, and environmental realities. Nevertheless, these centers are shaped by a global economic system predicated on constant growth and expansion, which creates vast social inequalities. These conditions and those who benefit from the system influence mitigation and adaptation strategies. 'Smart' urbanism and good infrastructure are frequently proposed as so-called solutions to create more resilient cities. Some of these plans involve relocating specific populations out of high-risk zones, but there is often a hitch as far as how this is done and who benefits. Dawson indicates that these approaches, under current conditions, generally fail to address equity and justice concerns. In fact, many of the projects exacerbate rather than diminish social inequalities.

Dawson draws upon Mike Davis (2006, 2010), who explains that urbanization under capitalism generates unsustainable practices. Speculators and developers in general dictate urban plans, prioritizing economic growth, and contributing to the polarization that characterizes extreme cities. For example, former New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg and real estate developers--who are heavily invested in the current (and future) physical space of these extreme cities--emphasize the need for more infrastructure that will create defensive space around their cities (and properties). They are more interested in creating walls and barriers--hard, inflexible borders--to shield against rising water levels. Dawson argues that these plans are under-scoped, haphazardly designed, and do not consider the social injustices that will result from such projects. As part of the "city [as] a growth machine," "speculative real estate development" serves as "a sink for surplus capital," in order to further private accumulation (35). Under these conditions, relocation projects and community buyout plans, proposed to address climate concerns, are suspect. Developers and government leaders often use these agreements to further their own private interests. Developers raze neighborhoods in flood prone areas, displacing poor people, only to develop luxury, high-end living accommodations. Dawson effectively highlights that these projects for creating defensive infrastructure are often not real solutions for addressing climate change. Instead, they entrench class and racial divisions within society, creating the conditions for devastating social disasters associated with flooding and other climate events.

The elite care more about their return on investment than they do about the people who call these cities their homes. This misanthropic, elitist view, Dawson reveals, is deeply embedded in

current plans to 'green' major cities worldwide. Therefore, he encourages readers to be more discerning and skeptical of urban planning 'solutions' that seek to solve the problem of climate change simply through design and engineering, while supporting the existing socioeconomic system. This commitment to endless growth, Henri Lefèbvre (1974: 256) contended, creates "a crisis of civilisation, a crisis of society, a crisis of space, what I call the urban crisis." During this dangerous historical moment, capitalists exploit the crisis to usher in even more draconian neoliberal policies, to increase profit margins, and to intensify the robbery of earth (Klein 2007, 2014).

To counter this "age of disaster," Dawson argues that "disaster communism" is needed, as "there is no green exit from the extreme city" given that "capitalism is founded on the principle of 'grow or die'" (9, 237-238). A radical, revolutionary change in the system of production and in political power can increase the chances of mitigating climate chaos in a humane manner. He notes that navigating the challenges ahead requires social planning, which involves social and community-oriented solutions, and large-scale redistribution of human populations, away from regions that will be inundated. Such a retreat must be organized and done through public participation. These actions also serve as the means to address social inequalities to facilitate further systemic change. Such social planning, of course, runs counter to the existing socioeconomic system and is not what contemporary city, regional, and national leaders desire.

For Dawson, such actions and social change are necessary given the reality of the historical moment. He states, "It is becoming increasingly clear that nations such as the United States may have to consider retreat not just from portions of the coastline but from entire cities and regions" (280). Furthermore, "[t]he question the world faces is not whether partial or even total retreat from coastal and riverine zones threatened with inundation will take place. It is under what conditions this retreat will unfold: Will we plan now for socially just policies of adaptation and retreat, when climate chaos is still in an incipient phase and our collective resources to cope are relatively great, or will such changes take place under conditions in which the most powerful save themselves alone and exploit the vulnerable?" (285). In contrast to the social and ecological irrationality that governs business-as-usual policies and the techno-fixes that fail to address the root of these problems, Dawson strives to offer practical and realistic approaches, which include a coordinated retreat and community solidarity. Historically marginalized populations cannot be ignored and left behind. They must be part of planning and creating urban spaces that are focused on ensuring that human needs are met while protecting the conditions of life. Such actions and approaches must be fostered now, accompanied by forethought and planning, instead of following the established pattern of reacting later after the next 'natural' disaster.

Dawson stresses that grassroots movements must facilitate the changes needed. He presents several historical instances where movements were extremely effective at providing services to citizens, particularly following 'natural' disasters such as Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Sandy. By focusing attention on these groups that were built out of such movements as Occupy Wall Street, Dawson shifts attention away from governmental legislation and other elite-managed approaches. He explains that small groups and efforts have been very effective at addressing the

specific needs of people in diverse settings. Dawson's intent, it seems, is to show how strong community networks already exist within extreme cities and to suggest that these smaller, bureaucratic organizations can empower citizens. These community groups may also be more responsive in times of need, especially under the current power structure.

While much of the future of extreme cities currently rests in the hands of governments and the elites, Dawson insists that community groups are an important part of challenging capital and facing climate chaos and disaster. In concluding *Extreme Cities*, Dawson states, "Human survival—and the survival of many of our fellow creatures on Earth—demands that we imagine new forms of collective flourishing. The ideal of the good city in a time of climate crisis offers a paradigm for the kinds of human connection upon which our collective survival depends. Liberated from the imperative of incessant economic growth and the bankrupt culture of consumption that it fosters, denizens of the good cities of the future may discover new forms of human plentitude while helping one another weather the coming storms" (306). Moving away from carbon capitalism is of utmost importance for the diversity of plant and animal species to survive and persist in the future. To do this, we must forge a new productive relationship with each other and the larger world, which prioritizes sustaining life in the long run, rather than the needs of capital.

With *Extreme Cities*, Dawson makes an important contribution to critical scholarship, assessing the human dimensions of environmental change. He insightfully presents how the organization of cities and their operation remain a major part of this history, which has contributed to ongoing ecological crisis. The extreme city is a product of a distinct history, comprised of concrete decisions and policies, operating within the influence of the capitalist system. While the future is in the balance, it is open. Thus, it is possible to forge a new productive system, social relations, and urban conditions, in order to ensure a more just, equitable, and healthy world for all life to flourish. The stakes are extremely high, and the need for action is urgent.

References

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