

Extended Abstract

**It's the Collective Consumption, Stupid: Re-theorizing urban climate justice  
and the composition of frontline communities**

*Daniel Aldana Cohen*

Department of Sociology, New York University  
aldanacohen@nyu.edu  
July 1st, 2015

By the end of this century, under a low greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions scenario, only 555 U.S. coastal municipalities would be threatened by sea level rise; higher emissions would threaten 900 more (Strauss 2013). Climate catastrophes in cities are a dependent variable. Urban governance actors will have to adapt to inevitable ecological crises. They will also act to reduce the (GHG) emissions causing climate change. Even if self-conscious climate politics proper do not presently dominate urban politics, our challenge in understanding the present and future of urban politics is the following: We must find a way to think about the intersection of capitalist urbanization and both cities' increasingly serious efforts to curtail GHG emissions (plus undertaking other, related sustainability measures, from waste to water management), and their reactions to increasing extreme weather.

In this paper, I argue that a re-invigorated, socio-ecological concept of collective consumption, especially attentive to carbon, can provide a simple and encompassing framework for studying urban politics that a) takes account of projected ecological crises and the imperative that urban politics address these, b) builds on key contributions from critical urban studies to our understanding of urban politics in a global context; and, c) provides a new basis for understanding the link between climate and urban justice. I will synthesize my proposed framework with a conceptual grid that I hope can connect messy, concrete political struggles to a level of abstraction commensurate with the planetary geographies of capitalism and climate change. The grid distinguishes green from grey ecologies on one axis, and luxury from democratic ecologies on a second, perpendicular axis. The latter distinction is intuitive, the former less so. Green ecologies refer to projects and developments that look and feel like nature, or direct responses to nature, and which

have to do with mediating the *impact* of pollution (or other ecological harms, like flash-flooding) on city residents. Green ecologies are green by virtue of reducing *the impact* of ecological harms. They are the familiar referents of urban ecological politics. Discussions of environmental justice focus almost exclusively on the need to increase green ecological projects and developments to protect the poor and vulnerable from ecological crises. Grey ecologies, on the other hand, refer to projects and developments that are energy (or more broadly resource) *efficient*, and hence reduce the production of pollution, like carbon, or the use of scarce resources, like water. Grey ecologies are ecological by virtue of reducing *the production* of ecological harms. In other words, grey ecologies tend to yield *indirect* ecological benefits and often look nothing like an “environmental” feature of the city. But whether grey ecologies’ ecological virtues are understood or not, they have also become increasingly attractive to city residents worldwide. Grey ecologies possess precisely the qualities of (potential or achieved) walkability, transit connectivity, proximity of services and commerce, and so on, that have long been associated with gentrification. Indeed, my proposed framework argues that the overlooked crux of the new socio-ecological politics lies in warring pro-density projects and developments—or put more simply, the contest over land use.

In theorizing collective consumption I draw on Manuel Castells’ (1979, 1983) early work, but also the recent revision of his theory by Andy Merryfield (2014) and the work on land use by David Harvey (1973, 2012). I also seek to situate urban politics in their contemporary context of “planetary urbanization” (Brenner 2014). I seek to integrate core insights from this critical theory tradition with those from a wide range of literatures focusing on eco-social dynamics in contemporary cities. These includes focused literatures on ecological gentrification (Checker 2011; Dooling 2009); the climate gap (Shonkoff et al. 2011); social resiliency (Hajer and Dassen 2014); urban climate governance (Bulkeley 2010); the differential contributions to global carbon footprints of dense versus sprawling settlement patterns, or different constellations of wealth and lifestyle (Heinonen and Junnila 2011; Stanton 2011); as well as an open, substantial, and thriving literature on urban political ecology (UPE), with its own extensive and unruly eco-system of concepts and methods (Keil 2005; Swyngedouw and Kaika 2014). But in order to spotlight the

relationship between local consumption in cities and the often distant production of material goods, I also follow a particular set of approaches that seem especially suited to grasping urban consumption in the contemporary moment, namely literatures on unequal ecological exchange (Jorgenson and Rice 2012), the treadmill of production (Gould, Pellow, and Schnaiberg 2008), and consumption and sustainability studies (Gorz 1994; Jackson 2009; Schor 2011). What these approaches have in common is an argument that localized consumption should be understood as one end of the sometimes faraway production of goods and services. The distance in question is a historical product of the increasing global division of labor—or simply, globalization. There is a crucial difference between the question of distant *resource extraction*, and resource flows, an old feature of historical capitalism (cf Mitchell 2011), and of distant *commodity production*, with carbon and water effectively *embedded* in a vast range of globally circulating goods and services, a related development that has recently intensified in a significant way (Bergmann 2013; Davis and Caldeira 2010; Hoekstra 2013; Peters et al. 2011).

I argue that the pursuit of democratic grey ecologies is the least recognized, but most capacious and potentially most effective, existing mode of climate justice politics in cities. In particular, drawing on fieldwork in São Paulo, I demonstrate that poor people’s housing movements have acted as low-carbon protagonists, whether or not their neighborhoods are vulnerable to extreme weather, both through the development of an idiosyncratic notion of a dense, low-carbon city for the poor, focused on affordable housing downtown; *and* by successfully resisting a government-led, climate policy-linked compact city project that would have gentrified the area. Still, for the most part, existing scholarly and activist discourses lack a vocabulary to articulate the conjuncture of egalitarian collective consumption struggles and egalitarian urban climate policies. We could be missing powerful conceptual weapons in the struggle against eco-apartheid.

I conclude by arguing that we should expand the climate justice movement’s notion of “frontline” communities (Klein 2014; Moore and Russell 2011), namely those most vulnerable to extreme weather, to include those battling over land use and for democratic grey ecologies (effectively, housing and transit justice). In this way, the “right to the city”

concept of urban justice (Brenner, Marcuse, and Mayer 2012) and the “frontline” community figure of climate justice, would effectively overlap.

**Works Cited:**

- Bergmann, Luke. 2013. “Bound by Chains of Carbon: Ecological–Economic Geographies of Globalization.” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 103(6):1348–70.
- Brenner, Neil, ed. 2014. *Implosions/Explosions: Towards a Study of Planetary Urbanization*. Berlin: Jovis.
- Brenner, Neil, Peter Marcuse, and Margit Mayer, eds. 2012. *Cities for People, Not for Profit: Critical Urban Theory and the Right to the City*. Abingdon, Oxon and New York: Routledge.
- Bulkeley, Harriet. 2010. “Cities and the Governing of Climate Change.” *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 35(1):229–53.
- Castells, Manuel. 1979. *The Urban Question: A Marxist Approach*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.
- Castells, Manuel. 1983. *The City and the Grassroots: A Cross-Cultural Theory of Urban Social Movements*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Checker, Melissa. 2011. “Wiped Out by the ‘Greenwave’: Environmental Gentrification and the Paradoxical Politics of Urban Sustainability.” *City & Society* 23:210–29.
- Davis, Steven J., and Ken Caldeira. 2010. “Consumption-Based Accounting of CO2 Emissions.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 107(12):5687–92.
- Dooling, Sarah. 2009. “Ecological Gentrification: A Research Agenda Exploring Justice in the City.” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 33(3):621–39.
- Gorz, Andre. 1994. *Capitalism, Socialism, Ecology*. New York: Verso Books.
- Gould, Kenneth A., David N. Pellow, and Allan Schnaiberg. 2008. *The Treadmill of Production: Injustice and Unsustainability in the Global Economy (The Sociological Imagination)*. Paradigm Publishers.
- Hajer, Maarten, and Ton Dassen. 2014. *Smart About Cities: Visualizing the Challenge for 21st Century Urbanism*. Rotterdam: nai010 and PBL Publishers.
- Harvey, David. 1973. *Social Justice and the City*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press.
- Harvey, David. 2012. “The Urban Roots of Financial Crises: Reclaiming the City for Anti-Capitalist Struggle.” *Socialist Register* (1):1–35.
- Heinonen, Jukka, and Seppo Junnila. 2011. “Implications of Urban Structure on Carbon Consumption in Metropolitan Areas.” *Environmental Research Letters* 6:014018.
- Hoekstra, Arjen Y. 2013. *The Water Footprint of Modern Consumer Society*. Oxon: Routledge.

- Jackson, Tim. 2009. *Prosperity without Growth: Economics for a Finite Planet*. London and Sterling, VA: Earthscan.
- Jorgenson, Andrew K., and James Rice. 2012. "The Sociology of Ecologically Unequal Exchange in Comparative Perspective." Pp. 431–39 in *Routledge International Handbook of World-Systems Analysis*, edited by Salvatore Babones and Christopher Chase-Dunn. New York: Routledge.
- Keil, Roger. 2005. "Progress Report—Urban Political Ecology." *Urban Geography* 26(7):640–51.
- Klein, Naomi. 2014. *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Merrifield, Andy. 2014. *The New Urban Question*. London: Pluto Press.
- Mitchell, Timothy. 2011. *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil*. New York and London: Verso.
- Moore, Hilary, and Joshua Kahn Russell. 2011. *Organizing Cools the Planet*. Oakland: PM Press.
- Peters, Glen P., Jan C. Minx, Christopher L. Weber, and Ottmar Edenhofer. 2011. "Growth in Emission Transfers via International Trade from 1990 to 2008." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 108(21):8903–8.
- Schor, Juliet B. 2011. *True Wealth: How and Why Millions of Americans Are Creating a Time-Rich, Ecologically Light, Small-Scale, High-Satisfaction Economy*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Shonkoff, Seth B., Rachel Morello-Frosch, Manuel Pastor, and James Sadd. 2011. "The Climate Gap: Environmental Health and Equity Implications of Climate Change and Mitigation Policies in California—a Review of the Literature." *Climatic Change* 109(S1):S485–503.
- Stanton, Elizabeth a. 2011. "Consumption-Based Emissions Inventory For San Francisco Consumption-Based Emissions Inventory For San Francisco." (May).
- Strauss, Benjamin H. 2013. "Rapid Accumulation of Committed Sea-Level Rise from Global Warming." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 110(34):13699–700.
- Swyngedouw, Erik, and Maria Kaika. 2014. "Urban Political Ecology. Great Promises, Deadlock... and New Beginnings?" *Documents d'Anàlisi Geogràfica* 60(3):459–81.