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Daniel Aldana Cohen

University of Pennsylvania, dacoh@sas.upenn.edu

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Abstract

About half the planet's carbon dioxide emissions originate in urban areas: the cities and suburbs where a growing majority of humanity lives. To survive this century, we'll have to live together in new ways. Few issues are as fundamental to climate politics as this one. And few are as visceral: the urban is rapidly becoming one of the chief terrains of twenty-first century struggle.

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The Urban Green Wars

Struggling for working-class control of cities is crucial to bringing down carbon emissions.

by Daniel Aldana Cohen



Public housing in Paris. Laurent Kronental

This article is part of a *Jacobin* [symposium](#) on Naomi Klein's *This Changes Everything*.

About half the planet's carbon dioxide emissions originate in urban areas: the cities and suburbs where a growing majority of humanity lives. To survive this century, we'll have to live together in new ways. Few issues are as fundamental to climate politics as this one. And few are as visceral: the urban is rapidly becoming one of the chief terrains of twenty-first-century struggle.

But the politics of slashing urban emissions and transforming urban regions are one of the great question marks of the current climate debate, especially on the Left. Peppy technocrats dominate discussion of cities and carbon, while leftists struggle to articulate the link between climate and already-existing urban politics.

Naomi Klein's bestselling book *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs the Climate* (*TCE*) is no exception. The tome details the joint threats of climate change and capitalism and argues that only a wide-ranging coalition of grassroots movements can tackle them both.

But what is the role of cities and of urban movements in tackling the climate crisis? How can the kind of far-reaching carbon analytic that she brings to global trade and commodity chains be extended into the urban fabric? How should we connect volatile, mobilized city politics to the climate crisis?

To be sure, the urban appears throughout *TCE*. In Klein's various summaries of the basic changes needed for a just and livable low-carbon future, the urban dominates. So too in her list of "comprehensive policies and programs that make low-carbon choices easy and convenient for everyone." She cites public transit; "affordable, energy-efficient housing along those transit lines," smart density, bike lines, the clustering of urban services, and pro-pedestrian reforms.

It's "no mystery," Klein writes in another section, that transit systems, citywide composting, and "urban redesigns" must be the focus of public spending. She cites Canadian unionist Sam Gindin's assertion that "urban infrastructure will have to be reinvented," and calls on the climate movement to complete the unfinished twentieth-century battle for "basic public services that work, for decent housing," citing at once Scandinavia's exemplary social democracy and Stockholm's "visionary urban design."

But while Klein clearly recognizes that overhauling cities and broader processes of urbanization are central, she doesn't detail the politics of these imperatives.

Of course, even a book about everything has to make choices. No one can actually cover everything. And yet, for Klein's broader purposes, the omissions of urban climate politics feels like a missed opportunity. A left urban climate politics would extend and deepen two of Klein's overarching arguments — that the fight to reduce greenhouse gas emissions needs to be integrated with a broader suite of social justice demands, and that a focus on “non-reformist reforms” could strategically link urgent short-term campaigns with a long-term transformative strategy.

Why Cities Matter

The numbers on cities' central role in climate change are clear. And urban planning can slash these emissions as part of a bold program of non-reformist reforms.

Start with the carbon. The New Urbanist planner Peter Calthorpe calculates that the United States, through a combined program of energy conservation and pro-density planning, could achieve half of the emissions reductions needed for the country to do its share in keeping global warming at 2 degrees Celsius. Against planners' estimates that \$20 trillion will be invested in the country's urban fabric in the next two decades, this kind of urban transformation is no idle fantasy.

The same logic holds for the world as a whole. A thorough 2014 study by the Cities Center at the London School of Economics found that if 724 of the biggest cities worldwide engaged in more compact planning, they could cut emissions by an average of nearly a third by 2030. That would save a cumulative 14.4 gigatons of carbon. That's equivalent to three-fifths of the carbon stored in presently retrievable reserves in the Alberta tar sands. And a 30 percent reduction is a timid, conservative goal — deeper cuts are possible with more money and political energy.

Meanwhile, the more aggressively urban emissions are slashed, the less energy needs to be wired into cities to keep them running, reducing the burden on the renewable energy sector to meet all our energy demand at a level that keeps growing.

Klein cites a few studies that claim we could meet those needs with renewables by 2030 just by building them out aggressively. But this is more of a placeholder idea than a plan. Most energy experts doubt our ability to meet projected energy demands with renewables alone, at least on that time scale. We need to use energy far, far more efficiently. And that is precisely what smart densification in cities and suburbs could achieve.

At this level, the relationship between cities and carbon might seem abstract and bloodless. No wonder low-carbon policy is dominated by technocrats, eco-modernists, apolitical urban planners, faceless global institutes, and even oil majors. Yes, Shell Oil has a project on the low-carbon virtues of urban densification.

But socially and politically, everything is up for grabs when it comes to transforming the urban form and urban social relations. One way or another, there will be a whole new landscape for our everyday lives, from getting to work to chasing dates to mounting a massive protest to buying bread and sneakers.

And these big changes are coming fast. As Klein points out, the window for gradually decarbonizing our economy is already shut. Countries and companies should have started earlier, but in the era of neoliberal restructuring, they didn't.

As we saw in Greece, when rulers decide that it's necessary to keep the system running, they're perfectly capable of squeezing the consumption of basics by the many while leaving untouched the luxury consumption of the few.

Klein is of course aware of this. She made a version of this argument in her previous book, *The Shock Doctrine*, which documents a vast array of cases in which elites chose to grind down the economy to reset power relations. No one should assume that elites are unwilling to pause economic growth when it suits their interest.

The question is how rich countries, and their urban regions, can cut their consumption in a democratic and egalitarian way. Klein's argument — shared with thinkers like Juliet Schor, Gus Speth, and Tim Jackson — is that we need to expand those areas of social life, like care work and leisure, that improve our quality of life. All this while more materially intensive, but less socially useful, sectors are wound down.

It's a persuasive argument. Rich people's consumption of useless crap needs to be dramatically curtailed while the consumption standards of those at the bottom need to be raised. The only sustainable way for poor people to consume more is for the wealthy to consume less. (No small task given our success so far in taxing the 0.1 percent's wealth.)

But we don't live (and produce and consume) in the numeric space of income and expenditures; we live amidst bricks and bridges. It's in urban regions that, for most people in the world, everyday life needs to get better for a transformative climate politics to win widespread support. Transforming urban life is both a method for slashing emissions and the prize for getting it right.

Right to the City

This brings us to the gritty politics of low-carbon urbanism. Klein notes in passing that the protestors in Rio de Janeiro demanding lower bus fares might not think of themselves as low-carbon protagonists, but they are anyway. She's right. But why stop at bus protests?

We need to go further. Movements that advocate decent affordable housing near jobs or services — these are also accidental low-carbon protagonists. The carbon argument is that public or tightly regulated housing that is low-cost or free, and that is near the stores and services that residents need and use, is the most energy-efficient arrangement that you can have in a city. Every urbanist and their iPad knows that intelligent densification reduces energy use by virtue of larger, more efficient buildings. And reduced travel distances diminish car use, whether in favor of walking, cycling, or bussing.

What's usually forgotten is that, historically, the movements battling for this kind of urban arrangement have been movements of the poor and working class. And in the present, these movements remain the most dedicated champions not just of raw residential density, but of pairing that density with the kinds of public institutions — from libraries to basketball courts — that make shared urban space into an accessible, enjoyable, and unpredictable exchange of meanings, and not just material goods. Planners write books about walkable neighborhoods. Working-class communities take to the streets for them.

And the struggles in pursuit of that agenda, while rarely waged in terms of carbon or climate change, are some of the most vibrant of this century. All across the world, housing-focused movements have served as anchors for a global right-to-the-city movement that's been raging in electoral contests, in public debates, and in the public squares to make daily life more bearable — and more democratic.

These twenty-first century urban revolts — from Durban to Istanbul — are crystallizing these demands and defying the finance-real estate nexus. They have convulsed urban areas worldwide.

This isn't an empty leftist boast. In 2013, the *Economist Intelligence Unit* wrote that this wave of urban protest was systematically diminishing the livability of the world's great cities. To paraphrase the former Greek finance minister Yanis Varoufakis, urban social movements should wear that magazine's loathing as a badge of honor.

Put another way, these movements' urban banners, always anchored by housing, are at once short- and long-termist. The "right to the city" battle, as so many movements describe it, is for "non-reformist reforms" that yield immediate improvements to the quality of life, while challenging the rule of capital by fighting to raise wages, take land and housing off the market, and expand public services. This is precisely the kind of social justice agenda that Klein broadly supports.

So why is the link between housing-anchored struggles, slashing carbon, and rebalancing the economy missing from *TCE*?

Perhaps one reason is that although housing struggles' victories would deliver a major climate payoff, the relationship is indirect. Taken in aggregate, the cutting edge of carbon footprint research on cities supports the claims that I'm making here. Careful, technically sophisticated consumption-based studies of urban carbon footprints show that density is better than sprawl; they also show that high levels of consumer spending associated with the professional class dilute the benefits of density. Mixed-use, democratic neighborhoods with jobs and services nearby are the low-carbon gold standard.

In New York, for instance, the best balance of low-emissions and livability are found in dense, multi-class neighborhoods anchored by affordable housing, much of it public. (I'll be publishing a map organizing this data next fall in an Atlas of New York.) By focusing on cultural amenities and access to the wild beyond, we can bring a version of these virtues to suburbs.

We also know that by trimming work hours, we can expand the pursuit of low-carbon leisure — namely, having fun without eating huge steaks, buying \$5 shirts that won't last a week, or getting in a car. A dollar spent on a movie ticket yields far fewer carbon emissions than a dollar spent on clothing or automobile transportation.

The most intuitive and elegant articulation of these findings can be found in a 2010 essay by radical urbanist Mike Davis called “Who Will Build the Ark?”. Davis argues that “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.” Namely, public housing, public plazas, public transit, public handball courts, and so on — amenities made public both by physical design and collective, energetic social use.

But again, we lack the carefully tailored studies, and the beautifully rendered infographics, to quantify and dramatize the relationships described above in clear and simple terms. It has been easier for more technocratic planning types to follow the carbon in more quantitatively complex but socially limited ways, fetishizing density and walkability without exploring their politics.

Meanwhile, climate justice activists focus on fossil fuel infrastructures beyond cities, or racialized, poor communities vulnerable to extreme weather within city limits. Within cities, the overlap between greening and gentrification, and between “revitalization” and mass displacement, has understandably caused enormous suspicion among housing advocates of any low-carbon agenda.

After all, the confluence of various forms of greening and the increasing polarization of land and housing markets isn't exactly a coincidence. The finance-real estate nexus of cities like New York has sought to attract highly educated workers by turning much of the urban terrain into quasi-exclusive, ecologically themed arenas for conspicuous, feel-good consumption. Most of what is labeled “sustainable” in these settings isn't.

For capital, the stakes of aligning the interests of sustainability (as brand if not fact), land use, and the productivity of elite workers is high. There are huge profits to be won by real estate interests and their financial partners — if, that is, ecological virtues remain privatized. As David Harvey argues, the politics of housing are fought over a terrain of primary strategic importance to global capital. There's a reason why social movements struggle to win big there, and why multi-class alliances are needed to beat back the great power of finance and real estate.

There's another barrier to the broad embrace of an affordable housing—anchored low-carbon urban politics. Precisely because luxury city policies have at once corrupted and promoted the idea of collective consumption — in which well-heeled professionals take up cycling, walking, local economic vitality, and so on — it can be hard to disentangle and replant the kernels of progressivism from those discourses and practices. A left agenda of collective consumption reads for many as uncomfortably close to the lifestyle politics of those who are ruining cities.

Thus, the call to focus on collectivizing consumption in cities seems like a slippery slope toward comparing the carbon footprints of Italian eggplants and rooftop bell peppers while forgetting all about wages and health care. Isn't the call to confront the micro-politics of neighborhoods, and the carbon counts of particular lifestyles, precisely the kind of downward spiral that grown-up leftist politics are meant to avoid?

Yes and no. The perils (and promises) of hipsterism are well-known. Many of those who are sincerely worried about climate change and eco-apartheid should be considered potential allies, even if their way of talking about the environment has been alienating so far. It's simply inconceivable that in the decades ahead, as extreme weather devastates more and more of the earth's surface, that climate action will keep stalling.

Thus, emissions will be cut, energy used more efficiently . The urban spaces that are the concrete terrains of everyday life will change. The question is who will bear the burdens of compressed consumption. So it matters who takes charge and what visions are mobilized. Alliance-building around climate justice to transform cities presents an opportunity that the Left can't afford to squander.

The Left needs to take some of the creativity and alliance-building behind coalitions like the 350.org “Cowboys and Indians Alliance” in Nebraska and put it to work in cities and suburbs. Articulating a connection between older and newer working-class campaigns can start with broad demands for better-located, cheaper apartments, shorter work days, better public services.

From the start, these demands implicate the transformation of the city. Such measures are a socially and politically direct route to improving workers' lives — both in the immediate and obvious sense, and also in the long term by protecting them from extreme weather.

Of course, building multi-class coalitions around improving urban life will take hard work. We've tried this before. After decades of gentrification battles, the trenches of urban warfare are stubbornly deep. There are no easy solutions. And middle-class environmentalists in particular bear a major burden. They need to show that they really care about people who don't talk or consume like them and organize outside their comfort zones. But these environmentalists also need to keep organizing at home, as it were: they need to bring their middle-class communities with them into a broad coalition.

Meanwhile, as tricky as transforming urban cores will be, analogous efforts will be even harder in North American suburbs, where for the most part opposition to pro-density developments is instinctive and vicious.

Most of the world's city dwellers actually live in suburbs. And it's painfully clear from the way suburbs are being densified in North America (and Europe) that density alone is not a sufficient metric for success. The dominant form of densification in North America simply renders the least sustainable forms of urbanism a bit more efficient. Walmarts are dropped near a train or bus station and then surrounded by condo towers.

That's the same old private wealth, just more tightly packed. Boredom-driven hyper-consumption won't slash carbon emissions. We need to apply the lessons of great urban centers' appeal beyond their borders.

Denser suburbs need to be imagined and pursued with the same attention to local democracy, community self-care, and cultural vitality — advocated, for example, by feminist urban historian Dolores Hayden — that are found in debates and struggles around urban cores.

Finally, it's important to recognize that changing suburban landscapes is thorny stuff in practice. For decades in the United States, white supremacist suburban governments kept new affordable housing projects out of their communities.

This past summer, the Supreme Court finally ruled against many such practices, and the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development recommitted to developing more affordable housing projects, often serving people of color, in predominantly white, affluent suburbs. The reaction from those communities has been predictably swift and vicious. But committed coalitions could overcome that resistance.

The alternative to integration, densification, and democratization is eco-apartheid. Again, in line with the broader message of *TCE*, wherever you follow the carbon, you find contemporary capitalism's most intense social and political fault lines. There can be no just low-carbon urbanism in the broader American urban landscape without racial justice. Ultimately, the agenda of the Black Lives Matter movement in places like Ferguson is as integral to climate justice as the struggles over affordable housing in gentrifying urban cores.

There can be no climate justice in poor, racialized communities where money is raised off jaywalking fines and driving tickets, where public life by people of color is under constant threat from a militarized police. (In black suburbs they ticket you for jaywalking, while in Manhattan they repaint roads to encourage white people to walk wherever they please.)

Only social movements can force governments to raise funds by taxing income and wealth, and using those funds not to buy guns and batons, but rather to pay for public transit and high-quality public amenities that hire local people. There is no separating the issues of energy efficiency, repairing the urban fabric, ensuring a livable everyday life, and the affirmation that black lives matter. All these struggles are connected.

The Struggle for Public Affluence

One benefit of drilling in on these urban climate politics is that they help to pinpoint a central tension in Klein's *TCE*.

On the one hand, the book is framed in terms of carbon. As Klein and Bill McKibben love to point out, movements can change social or economic arrangements, but they can't change the laws of physics. Thus, all our politics need to be organized around reducing the atmosphere's carbon content to a safe level. And for both moral and practical reasons, this should be done in a socially and economically egalitarian way. Fair enough.

But *TCE* also wields a cultural argument, a kind of localism blended with a sweeping notion of indigenous values and a less extractive idea about nature. The centrality of this cultural framework in Klein's analysis is questionable.

Sure, in many cases, local is better. The atmosphere isn't a garbage dump, and if you can make the point in a spiritually resonant way all the better. Moreover, as Klein is right to emphasize, indigenous movements defending their ancestral lands against the extraction of fossil fuels have played a massive and critical role in leading the climate justice movement. The cultural dimensions of these struggles must be recognized. We can learn a great deal from them.

But we also have to keep following the carbon, as it is embodied in goods and services, and as it's emitted in urban areas via car engines and energy-sucking buildings. *TCE* doesn't block that kind of analysis. But in the book, the emphasis placed on struggles beyond city limits, in spaces traditionally associated with nature, leading to a kind of conflation — rhetorical if not analytic — between a particular cultural outlook and the broader climate justice project. In the process, Klein's book skates over a lot of urban climate politics.

The result is that we miss an opportunity to join up the environmental movement's increasing concern for broader issues of social justice and already existing poor and working-class people's struggles to shape, and to access, high-quality, dense urban environments. Ecological and social urban struggles remain conceptually distinct from each other despite their strong overlaps.

The issues that tend to dominate social justice discussions of urban environments are those of the disproportionate pollution, toxicity, and vulnerability to extreme weather that racialized, poor, and working-class neighborhoods face. Communities facing these dangers have traditionally been the core of the environmental justice movement and are now the urban cohort of the *climate* justice movement.

These issues, and the struggles facing off against them, are vitally important. They are rightly framed as “frontline” struggles in the battle for climate justice, in analogy with poor, often racialized communities outside cities who are paying the immediate price for resource extraction. Klein gives these urban, frontline struggles prominence in *TCE*.

I want to draw attention, however, to the equally important but far less discussed issue of how urban struggles relate to carbon emissions — the root cause of extreme weather.

The anti-gentrification battles against displacement in relatively dense areas, and fights to build new public housing close to mass transit, jobs, and services — these are struggles whose very core is a battle for climate justice. Whether those waging that struggle speak, or even think, in terms of climate change or carbon is not the issue.

New York's Crown Heights Tenant Union — a diverse, cross-class movement of the type Klein wants to celebrate — is a good example of an implicit and impressive low-carbon urban actor. Crown Heights is a part of New York that isn't remotely vulnerable to rising waters and is not particularly polluted.

But the tenant union, in defending the affordable density of a culturally rich, dense, well-connected neighborhood against gentrification, is also defending an affordable, small carbon footprint and building the organizational muscle of a working-class, urban social movement.

In this way the struggle of the tenant union is a combined climate and social justice endeavor, and its pursuit of non-reformist reforms puts both immediate gains, and long-term transformations, on the agenda. It's the best kind of battle for public affluence.

And yet, neither the tenant union nor many other housing movements in the US and globally share Klein's emphasis on the need to live more harmoniously with nature. But there's nothing wrong with that — we don't need to insist that movements and communities develop a back-to-nature worldview.

TCE's broader goal is to mobilize broad, social justice-oriented coalitions and organizing for fast, quality of life improvements that build toward replacing the capitalist social, ecological, and economic system. It's the right goal.

But — as I suspect Klein would ultimately agree — to reach that goal doesn't require getting your hands dirty by kneading the soil; battling for climate justice doesn't require that you know the names of more than two tree species; you don't need to care about polar bears or pine beetles. Michel Foucault's adventures in the dungeon are as exemplary of low-carbon leisure as John Muir walking in the woods.

The city-dweller's fight for a cheap, decent room, and urban movements' struggles for affordable, decent housing close to the people we love and the things we need — these are frontline battles in the pursuit of climate justice. To defend a livable home for humanity, we need to build decent homes for workers.

The new issue of *Jacobin*, centering on development and the Global South, is out now. To celebrate its release, new subscriptions start at only \$14.95.

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Daniel Aldana Cohen is a doctoral candidate in sociology at New York University.