

Advocacy, Planning, and Land

How Climate Justice Changes Everything

Tom Angotti

IT IS AN HONOR to speak at this conference dedicated to Justice and the City, but I must confess my discomfort with planning education today, which is at an impasse when it comes to the issues of racial and economic justice. The string of recent police murders of Black and Brown people from Staten Island, New York to Ferguson, Missouri, in cities and suburbs, tells us that progress on racial justice is overrated. Too often discussions in planning education about racial justice skip over these stories of today's violence and end in abstractions about justice. In our mostly white world of planning education we suffer from a systemic color blindness. And even when race is considered, we only look back at advocacy planning, the 1960s and the great civil rights movement. Or we dwell on only small local fixes. And we don't act.

Let's be honest. Efforts to open up the white suburbs and redevelop central cities through pluralistic planning are stalled before the roadblocks of institutional racism, segregation and market-driven gentrification. Race still matters, a lot. Forty-seven years after the Fair Housing Act, segregation reigns, a symptom of the wider system of racialized exploitation and violence. So what are planning educators who want progressive change to do?

I would like to make a giant leap and connect today's struggles for Black lives with global climate change. Let me propose that focusing on *global climate justice* can help us rethink our views on racial and economic jus-

stice in the US. We can follow Paul Davidoff and start by linking land use planning with advocacy in the US, but now more than ever we have to address the question of economic and racial justice at the global scale. Today climate change poses an existential threat to all humanity, especially the poor and oppressed who suffer the worst consequences of environmental degradation. Focusing on the big issue of global climate justice is consistent with the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr., who understood that opposition to US foreign policy and the War in Vietnam was connected to the struggle to end the violence against Black people at home.

An appropriate starting point for this focus is Naomi Klein's claim that, in her recent book by the same title, *This Changes Everything*. She places economic and social justice at the center of the climate debate. This is not just a theoretical discussion but reflects a global movement seeking climate justice. *Climate justice* forces us to re-think *everything* at a global scale, far beyond the objectives of adaptation and conversion to renewable energy.

Here's an example of what I mean. Most of the world's largest metropolitan regions are along coastlines and face the certainties of sea level rise. This has been a wake up call, but our urban resiliency plans will do nothing for the Pacific Islanders who are now being forced to abandon their homes. Indigenous people around the world are being displaced by invasive mining and drilling, which leaves the landscape barren and degraded. Global land grabbing is replacing ecologically sound and productive stewardship of the land with unhealthy and polluting monocultures in agriculture. But perhaps the most visible evidence for us of climate injustice is in our own cities where it is disproportionately



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poor people and people of color who die during heat waves, can't afford flood insurance, and live in the most vulnerable and polluted environments, victims of the new urban epidemics – diabetes, obesity and violence.

As cities and nations deal with sea-level rise and climate change, the most powerful trend in planning is problematic: it would protect the most privileged urban and rural enclaves against the changing climate, as in post-Katrina New Orleans and New York City after Sandy, and sacrifice the rest of the world, which is left to adapt on its own, literally in “sacrifice zones.” *This is the problem at the heart of climate justice.*

Land Beyond “Land Use”

What does this have to do with advocacy and planning in the US?

If nothing else, planning is about land. The global movement for climate justice forces us to question the relationship of humans to land – both urban and rural. The majority of the world's population lives in cities, which produce 70% of greenhouse gases and occupy only 2% of the earth's surface. They are consumption machines and giant generators of waste. Rural areas have instead become voids with factory farms producing monocultures, extractive mining, and wilderness enclaves serving the urban world. The city isn't the problem, the countryside isn't the problem, nor is it the amount of land being used. The problem is the relationship of people to land, both urban and rural, and the systems of exploitation of both land and people.

Bringing home the questions of land and climate justice, Ta-Nehisi Coates, in his brilliant book, *Between the World and Me*, reminds us how the use of land is related to violence against people of color in the US and throughout the world. This country, he says:

. . . acquired the land through murder and tamed it under slavery . . . whose armies fanned out across the world to extend their dominion.

He hits on the connection between racial injustice here and global climate justice:

. . . the Dreamers [for Coates, a vaguely defined white America] have improved themselves, and the damming of seas for voltage, the extraction of coal, the transmuting of oil into food, have enabled an expansion in plunder with no known precedent. And this revolution has freed the Dreamers to plunder not just the bodies of humans but the body of the Earth itself.

For Coates, the global plunder parallels our *urban* history:

It is the flight from us [Blacks] that sent them sprawling into the subdivided woods. And the method of transport through these new subdivisions, across the sprawl, is the automobile, the noose around the neck of the earth, and ultimately, the Dreamers themselves.

The question of land has always been at the center of the civil rights and social justice movements in the US. Slaves could not own property; they were property. Blacks and other minorities have been redlined, foreclosed, and displaced from the land by numerous forms of “urban renewal.” Native Americans were chased off land which they understood, as so many indigenous nations do, as a set of relations not only among humans but incorporating all of nature, as opposed to our culture and profession which treat land as a “thing.” This, surely, is related to climate justice.

In the 21st century it is time for planners to stop talking about “*land use*,” an anthropocentric and racially charged concept. This nation's expansion through displacement created the idea that land was a *thing* to be taken, bought and sold, consumed and then disposed of when it no longer yields a profit. Confronting climate justice requires a fundamental shift in our understanding of land and the relationship of humans to land.

Advocacy Planning Today

Surely most urban planners understand the link between urban land and climate change. But in practice they tend to look for, or sell, technological fixes that fail to take into consideration economic and racial justice.

In his encyclical *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis, sounding very much like Naomi Klein, states:

Technology, connected to finance capital, pretends to be the only solution to problems. In fact, it is incapable of seeing the multiple relations that exist between things, which is why it sometimes resolves problems by creating new ones.

Urban planners all over the world sell technological fixes and best practices, instant recipes for green infrastructure, sustainable communities, citizen participation and – yes – social justice. They advance formulas for urban density and diversity and the cosmopolitan society, and sell popular brands like Smart Growth and the New Urbanism.

Local sustainability and resiliency plans *seem* good because they attempt to go beyond the fashionable fixes and narrow reductionist science, towards a holistic, ecological approach to the city. However, unless local plans place the fundamental inequalities across the land at the *center* of their work, they will instead turn our cities into fortified enclaves for the privileged while the rest of the planet faces the catastrophic effects of climate change. Therefore, the challenge is not just adaptation or resilience but *climate justice*, which means asking the question, *resilience for whom?*

Climate Justice and the City

In sum, the fundamental problem is how we, the human species, relate to land, urban and rural, at local and global scales, in an integrated way. One of the least quoted parts of the Pope's Encyclical says:

... a truly ecological approach must become a social approach, that should integrate justice in the discussions about the environment, to listen to both the cry of the land and the cry of the poor.

Francis talks about “the ecology of daily life,” the defense of public space, acknowledgment of “the

other,” and the need to prioritize public transportation, among other public services – *but* beware the technological fix and be an advocate along with those in greatest need. He opposes the privatization of natural resources and echoes Naomi Klein's critique of extractive and neoliberal capitalism. *Both* the Pope and Klein call for *defending the commons* as public land is plundered through public-private partnerships in which the private partner dominates.

If we take off the orientalist blinders of Western urban planning we can learn from some of the more recent breakthroughs that seek to change the way we deal with land, construct new common spaces and develop strong relationships between urban and rural areas. These include, for example, the establishment of the rights of nature in the Bolivian constitution, the alliances between rural and urban workers in the Brazilian Landless Peoples' Movement (MST) and Via Campesina, urban agriculture in Cuba, and an increasingly expansive view of the Right to the City which includes the rights of those who do not live in cities, and the Slow City movement, which questions the benefits of shrinking time-space differences that was made possible by global technology.

Orientalist planning sees global urban problems through the lens of the wealthy and powerful. It has brought us to the brink of a climate catastrophe. It has fostered white privilege and blindness to systemic racial injustice at home. In response, we must struggle for a truly democratic and ecological approach to land in which the primary agency belongs to those who are stewards of the land and respect the ecological integrity of all life on earth, and those who struggle for racial and economic justice. We must be advocates, with them, for they bear an unrecognized wisdom about how we humans can live *with* the earth and not just *on* the earth. We must be activists, with Davidoff, Coates, Klein and the Pope. *This can change everything.* **P²**

BOOKS CITED:

Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*. NY: Spiegel & Grau, 2015.

Papa Francesco, *Laudato Si'*. Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane 2015. [Translations by T. Angotti]