

# Interview

## Ashley Dawson

by Jonny Gordon-Farleigh

Illustration by Ioana Harasim

Your book *Extreme Cities* explores the “global convergence of climate change and urbanisation.” Could you explain why the world’s cities are ground zero for climate change?

There is the brute demographic fact that most human beings live in cities. So when you start to think about how anthropogenic climate change is going to affect masses of people, especially with cities increasingly concentrated in coastal regions, it’s connected to how globalisation has unfolded over the past half century. People have poured into coastal regions around the world as rural communities have been evicted from their land in the Global South. Many of these displaced people end up in precisely the coastal cities most threatened by rising sea levels today.

Then there are the specific characteristics of cities in terms of their infrastructure. In cities you have masses of people concentrated in relatively small areas, dependent on a highly elaborate infrastructure for the provision of basic needs, such as sewage and transportation. All of this infrastructure can be easily knocked out by a large storm, or slower moving disaster, such as sea level rise. So there are the demographic factors I mentioned and then there are the ways in which political or material changes like the starvation of public infrastructure as a result of neoliberalism can affect cities.

Cities are also both major drivers of climate change, as well as its principal victims. So in addition to be extremely vulnerable, most carbon emissions are emitted from cities, which is not to say that agriculture and other forms of production are not important contributors. But the built infrastructure and urban fabric of cities are significant drivers of climate change, so they are both perpetrators and victims.

You also argue that we need to shift our thinking around climate change from rural areas to cities. Could you elaborate?

Absolutely. There is a long intellectual tradition that presents nature and culture as opposites. This plays out in how we think about cities. Raymond Williams, the great British cultural critic, wrote *The Country and the City*, a book which outlines the way that urban and country life were presented as antithetical – as opposites to one another – across the centuries. I think this attitude still shapes how major environmental organisations in the US, such as the Sierra Club or the Natural Resources Defense Council, were established to conserve “wilderness.” Firstly, this concept is racist. What has been described as wilderness, and where there have been conservation strategies, has been home to First Nation communities for centuries. Once this process started, we developed this cultural idea that the city was outside nature. So most of those in the environmental movement are not thinking about cities as sites where natural processes are taking place, or as somewhere affected by climate change.

This approach has to be challenged and it will require a real shift in the environmental movement. We really need to put frontline communities in the foreground, which includes rural-based First Nation communities, as well as the long-standing struggles by communities of colour and the working class in our cities. As climate change gets worse, it will tend to be these same communities that are the most vulnerable, as they are often on the most easily flooded low-lying land, as we saw with Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, with Hurricane Sandy in New York City, and most recently with Hurricane Harvey in Houston. It was working class neighbourhoods and communities of colour that were most devastated by these so-called natural disasters.

Ashley Dawson is Professor of English at the Graduate Center/CUNY and the College of Staten Island. He is the author of two recent books on topics relating to the environmental humanities, including *Extreme Cities: The Peril and Promise of Urban Life in the Age of Climate Change* (Verso, 2017).