

Resilient Cities:

Building Community Control in a Shifting Climate

By Movement Generation

Oil is the life-blood of globalization. Along with its sister coal, it has made industrial capitalism hum at a feverish pace for the past 200 years. Globalization is the force that is pushing our ecological and economic systems to the brink. Should we choose to stay the current course, the planet's health will face some serious and catastrophic tipping points.

The most common face of the crisis is climate chaos, but this is only one of several interconnected and mutually reinforcing problems: Toxic waste poisons our land, air, and water; a shortage of fresh water has left growing numbers of humanity without access to clean potable water; a food and agriculture crisis has resulted from land being industrially consumed and depleted to produce export crops; biological and cultural diversity are facing extraordinary rates of extinction; and indigenous communities are facing cultural and physical genocide. It's apparent that our addiction to fossil fuels and a fixation on market-based 'economic growth' have placed the planet's life-systems in a precarious situation.

"Reclaiming democratic control over our food and water and our ecological survival is the necessary project for our freedom," says Vandana Shiva, the celebrated author and physicist. To meet this challenge we need a well prepared and forward-thinking social justice movement that can help envision and build a post-globalized world based on local living democracies—deeply rooted in a sense of ecological place and centered on meeting its residents' needs in an equitable way. "A global economy which takes ecological limits into account must necessarily localize production to reduce wasting both natural resources and people," she writes.¹

Modern industrial society's failure to recognize this has led us to an untenable situation. As journalist George Monbiot points out, "If our economy grows at three percent between now and 2040, we will

consume in that period economic resources equivalent to all those consumed since humans first stood on two legs."²

Critical Political Opportunity for Urban Centers

From a grassroots perspective, building community resilience and higher degrees of material self-sufficiency will be critical towards ensuring that communities of color weather coming ecological transitions. The basic needs of urban communities of color—such as access to potable water, healthy food, and mass transit—will otherwise be at stake in an era of heightened ecological stress.

"The key to truly addressing ecological crisis [is not] buying more hybrid cars but collective action towards systemic change," says Claire Tran, the national organizer at Right To The City Alliance. "That's what's needed if we want to achieve community resilience in this period of ecological transition."

A useful bellwether for the future of urban centers in the United States may be the current situation in Detroit, Mich. Responding to decades of deindustrialization, capital flight, and governmental neglect, an intergenerational grassroots movement known as Detroit Summer has taken self-reliance to heart and built a citywide network of over 700 community gardens. As legendary civil rights activist Grace Lee Boggs recently wrote, "Detroit's local foods movement has been a catalyst in the [r]evolution that is rebirthing Detroit as a city of Hope... The city's early devastation by deindustrialization provided us

with the space to start anew... it challenged us to make a paradigm shift in our thinking about social justice.”³

This paradigm shift has intertwined the concepts of community control and sustainable agriculture and is crafting an innovative path for other urban communities of color to emulate across the country. Adrienne Maree Brown, director of the Ruckus Society points out that, “It’s not young, white activists doing the gardening in Detroit [but] 30-, 40-, 50-year old black men coming out of prison, who are gardening and farming. And it’s no longer about getting a job and being a cog in someone else’s system. It’s about liberated work where you are actually playing a useful role in your community... Out of necessity, people have started sharing food and thinking of food as a central way to be in community with each other.” (See interview below.)

A New Kind of Positive Regionalism

The creation of local community resilience will require us to have a reflective and responsive relationship to our ecosystem. We must first learn to read a place if we are to establish a sustainable relationship to it. In turn, the creation of such resiliency will hinge upon the establishment of democratic control over decisions that affect our daily life and the places we live in. The primary function of renewed local and regional place-based economies will be the shared, equitable management of common resources—namely air, water, land, food, energy and labor—for the benefit of all. But in order to re-position rights to shared resources, we must first decommodify the resources or, as in the case of the right to pollute the atmosphere, refuse to commodify at all.

So, the chief arenas of struggle for the implementation of climate justice will increasingly be local and

not just young folks getting excited about these ideas and trying to implement revolutions. It’s the 30- to 50-year-old black men coming out of prison or unemployed, gardening and farming. It’s not about getting a job and being a cog in someone else’s system. It’s about liberated work, where you are playing a useful role in your community.

Watching “The Greening of Cuba” reminds me of Detroit. Detroit has had an economic crisis for decades. The auto companies have divested, now it’s this urban rural city. Detroit’s population is less than half what it was. Out of necessity, people have had to start community gardens and urban farming. Music and food are being used to organize people. Potlucks provide a communal place to talk about issues and eat together.

Detroit has the highest statistics in terms of crime, unemployment, and drop out rates. Those are the symptoms of an unhealthy society. Those negative aspects can create a real darkness and depression. But that darkness can be the womb from

which our new societies are born, where we can create the world we want to see.

Detroit is full of ‘midwives.’ They say, ‘We’re birthing it. We have to do love. We have to transform ourselves.’ In all of our cities, we have to begin to live the world we want to see. Our actions have to be towards the world we want. We need to be guerilla gardening and turning people’s heat and water on. We need to be the guerillas putting up solar panels in the hood. That’s what Detroit has taught me, and what I’m trying to bring into my leadership in Ruckus.

How is Ruckus integrating climate justice with its work?

The over-arching vision of Ruckus is that all communities achieve self-determination and sustainability. We prioritize directly impacted communities—folks who are impacted by economic and environmental injustice and are angry about their situation. We help them determine how to strategically take action, so they can reorient themselves to the long-term vision of self-determination and sustainability.



Adrienne Maree Brown

What inspires you to work for change?

My number one inspiration right now is not an organization or a person or an event, it’s the city of Detroit. I first went there a couple of years ago to do organizational development, and later for direct action trainings with Detroit Summer, which was founded by Grace Lee Boggs and her partner Jimmy Boggs. Their key lesson is, ‘Transform yourself to transform the world. It’s time to grow our soul’s capacity to deal with the world we’re living in.’

The tangible solutions that are now coming out of Detroit blow my mind. It’s

regional zoning boards and land-use policies, regional transportation policies, and regional water boards, to name a few. Understanding and managing 'regional' foodsheds, watersheds, smart growth plans, and transportation plans are key to implementing a vision for urban racial justice that is rooted in ecological place.

In San Francisco, for example, a community organization called POWER (People Organizing to Win Employment Rights) has initiated a partnership with the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD)—the largest landholder in the city—to create community gardens, farmers markets, and flea markets on idle school district land. The use of these properties for free or at low cost supports community resiliency and self-reliance through the low-cost production of food and the creation of barter networks within the community. Such a collaboration also advances the concept of a public commons: idle land



previously considered 'private property' and beyond the community's control, is now treated as public property to be used for the common good.

Alicia Garza, the co-director of POWER, connects this campaign to a climate justice lens in the following way: "Community control has always been at the center of our political work as community organizers, but it's become that much more important in this new period of global ecological transition... In this

People often try isolated organizing. It's regular for a community group to tell us, 'We really need help to stop this coal fire power plant from being built,' or 'We need help to stop water contamination.' But we have to start seeing isolated issues in the larger context of ecological justice for all. There are many false solutions out there. For example, carbon trading—a long-term, comprehensive lens shows that that's not a compromise we can make. We don't want to perform an action as a compromise, or a reaction. We want action taken towards a real solution.

How are you organizing?

At Ruckus, we train people in non-violent direct action and civil disobedience. All of the circumstances relating to the ecological crisis—waste and toxins, food and agriculture, water—are changing the quality of life for communities today. We provide training and support to groups facing these problems. And at our camps we often

see folks working on several of those issues and learning together. From our work within the Indigenous People's Power Project, and now learning with Movement Generation, it's clear that those issues naturally intersect. They are all community resiliency issues. We prioritize communities with long-term visions to build community strength.

How does direct action fit into your view of how social movements make change?

As a non-negotiable component for success. Direct action is where escalation happens, where people can play an active role in advancing a negotiation, where we see and feel each other's solidarity. At its best, direct action is where we advance the front-line of our movement work by visualizing the change we seek. Direct action is how we first saw images of blacks and whites at lunch counters together in the south. Today, guerilla gardens are one example of a way to show that we know how to live more

sustainably and we will push our leaders to catch up with us.

It's about framing the issue in a way that inspires people to act, not just react. I think the key need of our movements today is visionary voices and actors who are living a viable future and making it accessible to our communities.

What sort of organizing and consciousness raising do you see as crucial to building an effective international movement that is rooted in local concerns?

I think we need movements where folks practice what they preach. We need movements that aren't centered on what the powers that be can grant us, but rather on what we can build and practice together. We need urban-rural relationships that are based on shared water and food sources. We need movements that show that everyone must change—not just policies, or rich folks or poor folks or middle class folks.

Photo:

Flowers and vegetables are planted and tended by neighborhood residents in a Detroit community garden.

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What's the difference between liberated work and green market economy?

The green jobs frame seems to be shifting people from low-income jobs that aren't environmentally focused to jobs that are "sustainable." It's great to train folks to install solar panels, but if those solar panels are not going to be in Bayview or West Oakland, if those solar panels are going to be in the wealthier parts of San

Francisco, in Marin, and in places outside of their communities, what is really changing in the long run? The essential inequalities of a market-driven society aren't challenged.

Liberated work is when we are practicing solutions that benefit and liberate all communities. A 'green economy' doesn't mean we are liberated from the concept of jobs where we toil for the benefit of others. Let us use our minds and our hearts and exist as human beings, not fit into someone's assembly line and make things for the class above us. To be liberated is to be free to work for our own communities, to thrive, to be in symbiotic relationships based on our needs and our dreams.

In terms of sustainability, I don't believe we can have a green future or any future, unless we understand that we have to change the power dynamics

based on race, class, and gender. We have to invert the power structure. We must pour our resources and relations into those who are the most impacted and have the most need—that means our children, our elders, those who are sick and dying. They should become the recipients of our energy. That's where our wisdom comes from; and our future. A truly sustainable society takes care of itself. You may be driving a Prius but if you don't know how to talk to your family or connect with your community and land, it's not going to be sustainable no matter how much you call it green. ■

This interview was conducted by RP&E via email and is based in part on a video recording made at a Movement Generation retreat in August, 2009. Thanks to Khanh Pham from the National Radio Project and Mateo Nube at Movement Generation. Photos courtesy of ruckus.org.

context, resilience—adapting to climate change from a grassroots perspective—must mean taking control of what this transition is going to look like in our communities. We are standing at the threshold of a new political moment.”

Community-Based Solutions

Building community food security and designing equitable, healthy regional “foodsheds” may mean different things to different regions as each has distinct watersheds, agricultural surroundings, climate patterns, as well as distinct power dynamics at play. But the concept of “community resiliency” opens up incredible opportunities for organizers to generate innovative strategies for linking our intrinsic rights to natural resources (that have been historically denied), to creative, participatory projects and campaigns that build community power. Done right, the process can dramatically lower carbon footprints at the local and regional level, rebuild the health of local and regional ecosystems, and institute new systems of governance

rooted in equity, justice, and self-determination.

Furthermore, as we build our capacity for self-governance by asserting ourselves in existing political arenas where policy is set, we must also build the transcendent institutions that we will need to better manage our commons. Democratic worker cooperatives, urban food security projects, regional exchanges, local micro-lending systems, publicly run water management entities, decentralized energy systems—all of these will be necessary in a socially just post-carbon society.

As the examples from Detroit and San Francisco illustrate, elegant solutions are waiting for our implementation. “I feel extremely empowered and extremely hopeful with the emergence of these new movements shaping a new ecological paradigm and a new earth democracy,” says Vandana Shiva. ■

Endnotes

1. Shiva, Vandana. *Earth Democracy*, South End Press, 2005, pg. 5.
2. Monbiot, George, *The Guardian*, December 4, 2007.
3. Boggs, Grace Lee. “Detroit's 'Quiet Revolution,’” *The Nation*, September 2009.

Mateo Nube, the lead author of this article, is also the director of the Movement Generation (MG) Justice and Ecology Project, which provides in-depth analysis and information about the global ecological crisis and facilitates strategic planning for action among leading Bay Area organizers working for economic and racial justice in communities of color. www.movementgeneration.org.

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This issue is dedicated to Luke W. Cole (1962-2009)

Founding co-editor of the journal *Race Poverty & the Environment* and founder of the Center for Race, Poverty and the Environment.



Photos: (Above) Montage from the Luke Cole memorial booklet published October 25, 2009. Courtesy of Nancy Shelby.

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(Inside Front) Richmond refinery. ©2008 Scott Braley. (Inside Back) Urban garden in Havana Cuba. © John and Faith Morgan / www.powerofcommunity.com.

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