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New York City as ‘fortress of solitude’ after Hurricane Sandy: a relational sociology of extreme weather’s relationship to climate politics

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ABSTRACT


How did New York City’s climate politics change after Hurricane Sandy, and why? Prevailing accounts of extreme weather’s impact on climate politics draw on survey data and characterize climate policy in vague terms. However, weather does not do the work of politics; the specifics of climate policy matter. I develop a relational sociological approach focused on mobilized actors, political economy, and event theory. Drawing on interviews and document analysis, I show how senior disaster officials, New York’s Mayor Bloomberg and his Office of Long-Term Planning and Sustainability, community groups and Occupy Sandy activists responded to Hurricane Sandy. Actors maintained outlooks and practices consistent with their position in the city’s power relations. This selective continuity shifted New York’s climate policy from decarbonization-focused tentative cosmopolitanism to adaptation-focused defensive parochialism. I term this convergent prioritization of adaptation a ‘fortress of solitude’ social logic. Only subsequent events explain New York’s 2019 low-carbon legislation.

KEYWORDS Extreme weather; climate politics; relational sociology; disaster; New York City; urban planning

Introduction

In late October 2012, Hurricane Sandy ravaged the liberal, prosperous, and aspiring sustainability beacon, New York City. *Bloomberg Businessweek* crystallized the mainstream media coverage with its cover story, ‘It’s Global Warming, Stupid,’ declaring: ‘The only responsible first step is to put climate change back on the table for discussion’ (Barrett 2012). Former Vice-President Al Gore compared Sandy to a ‘nature hike through the Book of Revelation;’ he added that, ‘People are now connecting the dots’ (Kim 2013), echoing a widespread view among climate campaigners that extreme weather events were ‘teachable moments’ about humans’ responsibility for global warming, thus prompting low-carbon policymaking (Weber 2006,

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Leiserowitz *et al.* 2013). This perspective is if anything more prominent today. In *The New York Times*, political scientist Leah Stokes (2018) has urged greater public communication of attribution science, which quantifies how much anthropogenic climate change worsens a given disaster (eg, Diffenbaugh *et al.* 2017). In early 2019, the *New York Times* reported, ‘As battle lines harden between supporters and opponents of climate action, both are increasingly using bouts of extreme weather as a weapon to try to win people to their side’ (Plumer 2019).

Should we accept the assumption that recognizing climate disasters as human-caused will automatically lead to particular climate policies? Furthermore, should we accept the linked, common idea that disaster-stricken cities in particular are ideal low-carbon leaders (Angelo and Wachsmuth 2019)? New York’s climate politics are a famous reference point; it is imperative to clarify what happened and why. What *kind* of climate policy action was prioritized in New York after Sandy? Which factors steered the specifics of how climate concern was guided into particular policy responses? What if local political actors’ responses to the very phenomenon expected to deepen and broaden the effort to slash greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions had the opposite result? New York’s politics are unique, but the real estate-driven ‘growth machine’ that dominates its economy – and shapes its politics – is common worldwide.

New York’s climate politics certainly gained prominence after Hurricane Sandy (Rosenzweig and Solecki 2014). In April 2019, the city passed the country’s most aggressive low-carbon buildings bill (DiChristopher 2019). As I show below, however, the battle to pass that bill did *not* begin in Sandy’s aftermath, but nearly two years later, spurred by distinct events. Moreover, other similarly destructive hurricanes, like the 2017 Hurricanes Harvey (Houston), Irma (South Florida), and Maria (Puerto Rico) had mixed climate policy results. A review of Houston’s post-disaster, adaptation-focused climate policy never mentions GHG emissions (McCormick 2018).

I ask three empirical questions to crack open the black box of post-disaster climate politics. How did senior disaster responders interpret Sandy’s climate policy implications? How did Mayor Bloomberg’s and his Office of Long-Term Planning and Responsibility’s climate policy priorities change in the wake of the storm? Finally, how did community groups and activists respond as they addressed social inequities in the recovery and rebuilding process?

I also develop a relational sociological approach to extreme weather’s impact on climate politics, focusing on eventfulness and inequality. This contrasts with prevailing research on climate disasters’ political impact, which is largely grounded in public opinion surveys, often assuming that weather plays an independent political role. A case study of one city cannot be generalized, but it can reveal causal mechanisms and pathways linked to

dynamics common to other cities (George and Bennett 2005). Further research along these lines would enable multi-city analyses.

My study mainly examines the 14 months of Sandy's immediate aftermath, while Michael Bloomberg remained Mayor, enabling a tight focus on post-disaster politics and the political framework of Bloomberg's mayoralty. I also summarize a subsequent shift in the city's climate politics, a return to low-carbon policy-making. I show that these were not on the public radar post-Sandy, but gained prominence after later events.

I examine local actors, leaving aside the federal government. Nevertheless, federal actions in Sandy's aftermath ran parallel to New York City's. Its principal intervention in the region was the Hurricane Sandy Rebuilding Task Force, led by the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, and launched on 7 December 2012. This Task Force created the Rebuild by Design competition, which focused on 'resiliency' – a term that typically means adaptation; its meaning *sometimes* includes decarbonization, but the projects arising from this post-Sandy process mainly involved adaptation. The State of New York likewise focused in Sandy's aftermath on resiliency.

Overall, I find that New York City's key local political actors reacted to the storm by shifting the city's climate politics from a tentative cosmopolitanism emphasizing decarbonization to a defensive parochialism emphasizing adaptation. I document how, for senior disaster responders and policymakers, direct contact with extreme weather translated into the prioritization of adaptation; how the Mayor and his sustainability office shifted emphasis to localized adaptation; and how community groups and activists mostly accepted (but sometimes contested) these top-down framings to focus on social inequities. I use the term 'fortress of solitude' to name the emergent social logic underpinning the city's post-Sandy defensive parochialism, where adaptation took priority over decarbonization, and climate politics' responsibility to future *New Yorkers* came before responsibilities to the *global* community.¹

Extreme weather events will increase in frequency and severity. We need to better understand how mobilized political actors respond. If urban climate politics can tilt toward defensive parochialism in New York under a globe-trotting mayor known for climate leadership, the same can happen anywhere.

The next section explains my relational sociological approach and contextualizes New York's 21st century climate politics. Next, I outline my data and methods. I then answer my three empirical questions, and theorize the post-Sandy 'fortress of solitude' social logic and the prospects for escaping it.

A relational sociology approach

The existing literature on extreme weather and climate politics, grounded in survey research, needs the insights of relational sociology. Surveys find at best

only moderate evidence that extreme weather prompts greater belief in anthropogenic global warming, and at best mildly increased support for vaguely defined climate policy. Attitudes are intensely mediated by pre-existing political commitments (Brulle *et al.* 2012, Howe and Leiserowitz 2013, Hamilton *et al.* 2015, Egan and Mullin 2017, Sisco *et al.* 2017, Bergquist and Warshaw 2019). These trends are exemplified by opinion research following Hurricane Sandy, which found no significant impact on attitudes to global warming (Quinnipiac University 2012, Siena Research Institute 2012). After Sandy, while New Jersey residents told pollsters they supported climate action, they registered little support for contributing to it financially (Greenberg *et al.* 2014).

Norgaard's (2011) ethnographic study of climate complacency in a Norwegian ski town, where a warm winter ravaged the economy, suggests a more subtle and multi-sided approach. Brulle and Norgaard (2019) have further elaborated this theoretical model in terms of social trauma. Their arguments speak to climate *inaction*, however, not the specificities of climate policy *reaction*.

Overall, Brulle *et al.* (2012) persuasively argue that mobilized political projects are what decisively shape people's climate politics. Extreme weather cannot do the work of politics.

To deepen our understanding of political change after disasters, I turn to relational sociology, building on the insights of disaster and urban sociology. I interrogate how extreme weather events transform policy projects, which I understand as a mix of prevailing orientations and practices. 'Relational sociology' crystallizes several longstanding intellectual traditions that focus on uneven processes and bundles of social relations (Emirbayer 1997). Desmond (2014, p. 554) summarizes relational approaches as 'giv[ing] ontological primacy, not to groups or places, but to *configurations of relations* (my emphasis),' such that relational fieldwork 'focus[es] on dynamics that emerge between groups or agencies qualitatively different from, yet oriented toward and enmeshed with, one another.'

Sociologists with relational dispositions have argued that, during events, stable political situations are transformed by agents re-coding newly unstable structures, expectations, and norms – a process that is inherently self-reflective, norm-laden, and experimental (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, Baiocchi 2005, Sewell 2005, Calhoun 2012, Itzigsohn and Brown 2020). For Sewell (2005, p. 219),

the fundamental mechanism of structural change [is] the necessary but risky application of existing cultural categories to novel circumstances ... that transforms the meanings of the cultural markers and thereby reorients the possibilities of human social action.

Sewell continues that 'the "conjunctures" we call events are characterized by emergent regularities or logics; in this they are "structured" in spite of their

novelty' (*Ibid*, p. 221). In other words, structural change involves *selective* continuity. The key issue is which *outlooks* and *practices* (my usage) are preserved, in what form, and how these cluster into an emergent logic, like the 'fortress of solitude' I describe below. Sewell's event theory directs attention to how political actors adjust outlooks and practices, and thus the substance of their political projects.

My relational sociology framework complements theories of 'focusing events' in political science and policy scholarship (Repetto 2006, Baumgartner *et al.* 2014), which demonstrate how unusual events – like weather disasters – enable sharp policy changes as politicians respond to disruption with new policies. I share one of the literature's substantive findings: American post-disaster policy has focused narrowly on reconstruction, while broader 'mitigation ... has taken a back seat' (Birkland 2006, p. 103). Much of the classic 'focusing events' research concerns formal political institutions, from the U.S. Congress to national news media. I contribute a complementary approach that emphasizes local political economy, community dynamics, and social movements.

Urban and disaster sociologists find that, after crises, elites pursue new strategies to preserve prior power arrangements, prioritizing a 'growth machine' form of urban governance that puts short-term recovery and (unequal) economic development before long-term ecological concerns (Logan and Molotch 2007, Freudenburg *et al.* 2009, Gotham and Greenberg 2014, Graham *et al.* 2016). Meanwhile, low-income and racialized city residents are disproportionately exposed to ecological crises and their aftermaths; (re)building poor communities' social infrastructure is the priority for grassroots groups (Klinenberg 2002, Superstorm Research Lab 2013). My approach should expand the focusing events paradigm's understanding of *which kind* of policies arise after a particular disaster.

Finally, cities' climate politics have a global context, including their governments' self-positioning – in New York's case, as a global leader. Following London, New York was the second global city to champion low-carbon policies. Its landmark *PlaNYC* report promised that New York would lead the world in slashing carbon emissions: New York could not 'afford to wait while others take the lead,' but needed to 'rise to the definitive challenge of the 21st century' (City of New York 2007, p. 9). *PlaNYC* trumpeted New York's already energy-efficient density. Leadership meant doing even better: assisting other large cities in the C40 Cities network, a global climate policy organization, to adopt and assess policies with a data-driven approach (Acuto 2013). *PlaNYC*'s adaptation measures were less ambitious.

PlaNYC's low-carbon emphasis conformed with global climate politics' notion of common but differentiated responsibilities, satisfying sociologist Ulrich Beck's (2006, p. 7) first principle of cosmopolitanism: 'the awareness of interdependence and the resulting "civilizational community of fate"'

induced by global risks and crises, which overcomes the boundaries between ... us and them.’ What made Bloomberg’s climate policies global and cosmopolitan was their emphasis on decarbonizing for the sake of everyone on the planet, while helping other large cities to likewise cut GHG emissions.²

Data and methods

I analyse several data sources. Researchers in the Superstorm Research Lab (2013), of which I am a founding co-principal investigator, interviewed 75 New Yorkers, grouped in four categories: (a) 18 senior government actors at the municipal and state level, including consultants, active in response and rebuilding; (b) 10 senior officials in civil society groups active in disaster response; (c) 37 volunteer responders, predominantly associated with Occupy Sandy; and, (d) 17 people directly affected by the storm. Some respondents belonged in multiple categories. Because of government officials’ sensitive position, we include no information that would suggest their identity. Our interview protocol varied by respondent category; we coded transcripts with the online, collaborative software Dedoose. We supplemented interview data with ethnographic observation of meetings and events.

I also analyse media, scholarly, and policy documents to assess changes in the climate policymaking of the Bloomberg regime, especially the key policy documents released by the Mayor’s Offices of Long-Term Planning and Sustainability, and Recovery and Resiliency (City of New York 2007, 2013a, 2013b). I lean on seven more recent interviews with civil society actors to summarize the mid-2010s shift to a low-carbon buildings campaign.

Results

Improving the city’s disaster response

First, I ask whether Hurricane Sandy transformed attitudes about how to respond to climate change among senior New York City and New York State officials and consultants. In Sandy’s aftermath, climate scientist James Hansen wrote in *The Guardian* that Sandy was ‘a stark illustration of the power that climate change can deliver – today – to our doorsteps.’ He continued:

Ask the local governments struggling weeks later to turn on power to their cold, darkened towns and cities. Ask the entire north-east coast ... (Hansen 2012).

It was plainly time, he added, to address root causes: ‘The answer is a price on carbon’ (*Ibid.*)

Hansen's argument exemplified the widespread view that direct contact with extreme weather would clarify the urgency of climate politics, strengthening low-carbon policies. However, what if those actors in closest contact with Sandy's devastation had a different reaction?

Leading disaster responders did not react as Hansen predicted. Nearly all 18 senior officials or consultants working in official disaster response that we spoke to viewed Sandy as resulting from, or exemplifying, anthropogenic climate change. While most felt strongly that it was necessary to defend against future storms, fewer spoke of GHG emissions. Only six of 18 respondents stated that New York City should work hard to reduce emissions going forward; of those, just one expressed confidence that it would.

The analytic upshot of semi-structured interviews comes less from counting responses than exploring actors' complex attitudes – in this case, how they worked to maximize continuities of outlook and practice. For those who accepted the new adaptation focus, it followed directly from experiencing Sandy. These officials saw investing in adaptation efforts as a far-sighted vision that was difficult to pursue in light of city residents' short-term troubles. One respondent said, 'When it comes to the money that we are getting ... [it is] to make it actually, to help the city essentially adapt and be smarter about this the next time it happens.' After all, the respondent continued, 'when it comes to a hurricane ... it's not again about sort of climate change with capital C, it's like, how do I make sure my ass doesn't get flooded at like the next hurricane Those are two very different conversations.' This respondent also brushed decarbonization aside, saying, 'We're a green city by default, not through any efforts of our own ... tall buildings and all that crap.'

Another respondent expressed similar views, but this time clarified their role as emergency manager:

[H]ave we begun to see weather have impact and effects which have not happened in the last 50 to 100 years? Absolutely. [...] So is there such a thing as climate change? There probably is. Do I know the impact that it has on my city? Yes, I see it physically. But what does it mean to me as an emergency manager? I'm from the old school. And so until someone can tell me that this thing climate is actually – it's real and how do I incorporate that into my plans I don't look at it that way. My job is to deal with the facts that are in front of me and prepare for whatever emergency that's going to hit the city.

Had this respondent answered an opinion poll, the resulting data point would have missed every interesting aspect of their thinking.

One senior official said, 'Larger questions about cause and climate science, that's for somebody else to worry about. We're worried about what climate science says is going to happen to our system and how we can protect it.' A further senior official argued that the concept of resiliency was bridging adaptation and decarbonization in promising ways, but only gave examples of adaptation policies.

The most optimistic official, already experienced with clean energy policy, framed the adaptation-decarbonization overlap with tentative optimism: ‘Specifically, like, we’re at least considering – I’m not sure where we’re going to come out on it – but we’re at least considering the role that solar, you know, might play.’

Overall, I found little evidence for Hansen’s expectation that disaster officials confronting a climate disaster would disrupt institutional logics in favor of decarbonization. Rather, the interviews suggested that disaster reinforced longstanding logics of fortification, to free up psychological and operational space to focus on recovery work with a view to even worse disasters later on. An exchange with a senior disaster management consultant, who was also a volunteer disaster respondent, exemplified this practical, selective continuity:

Superstorm Research Lab: So how much does the discussion of climate change filter into the kind of work that you are doing?

Respondent: None.

Superstorm Research Lab: None.

Respondent: Sorry.

Superstorm Research Lab: No, that’s fine.

Respondent: Yeah. It’s like sitting around a station as a paramedic asking people about French fries and smoking. I don’t smoke but, you know, the fact that I hang out with some paramedics in this world who smoke, I just – really? Cool. I’ll be doing this on you later, man. So no. The things that annoy me – you know, I can’t fix climate. But I can get you to manage your paperwork better. I can get you to plan better. I can get you to follow your plans.

For those intimately involved in recovery, as these 18 respondents were, the big-picture version of disaster relief was not attacking climate change’s root causes; rather, it was improving the city’s defences against the next storm.

Pace Hansen, direct experience of extreme weather can restrict the climate policy outlook. Political leadership from those *not* mired in disaster response would likely be necessary to move from mere fortification to a blend of adaptation and decarbonization.

Indeed, one might expect that political actors with a long-term sustainability focus, and the outlooks and practices of low-carbon policy-making, would more naturally channel some of the energies of disaster response into attacking root causes – carbon. In New York’s case, this would be Mayor Bloomberg and his administration’s agency tasked with sustainability, the Mayor’s Office of Long-Term Planning and Responsibility.

From tentative cosmopolitanism to defensive parochialism

Since 2007, Bloomberg and the Office of Long-Term Planning and Sustainability had advocated reducing GHG emissions. How did they respond to the storm? How did their response compare to earlier climate policymaking? Lacking interview data with the key players, I rely on public documents.

Bloomberg's tentative climate cosmopolitanism was anchored in the city's 2007 *PlaNYC* sustainability plan, which blended a powerful sustainability vision with a 'luxury city' economic strategy to attract investment and high-skilled, professional workers (Brash 2011, Checker 2011, Greenberg 2015). *PlaNYC* argued that pro-density planning could combine economic growth, real estate development and GHG reductions (Bagley and Gallucci 2013).

On *PlaNYC*'s release, Bloomberg sought state approval for a congestion charge for Manhattan's business districts, with the revenues going to public transit (Schaller 2010). The city's financial industry was a leading supporter. This was Bloomberg's most high-profile climate policy fight, and he framed it in egalitarian terms – global leadership based on a local win-win-win for slashing emissions, cutting business-stymying congestion, and improving air quality. But Bloomberg failed to secure support from the state legislative assembly, as most of the city's residents and politicians believed the revenues from congestion pricing would be wasted (*Ibid.*). Bloomberg kept seeking emissions cuts by improving the public transit system. He campaigned in 2009 on a pledge to make cross-town buses free, but recanted the promise after his re-election (Grynbaum 2009). Bloomberg also sought to increase large buildings' energy efficiency through aggressive legislation. Nevertheless, he backed down and adopted a much more modest plan in the face of the real estate sector's opposition (Navarro 2009).

Between 2007 and 2009, the city's tentatively cosmopolitan, low-carbon policies were framed in global terms and advanced at home and through the C40 policy network. Most of this effort was undertaken under President George W. Bush, who was hostile to climate action. From late 2009 onward, in part because of the financial crisis, Bloomberg gave less emphasis to his stagnating climate agenda. Sandy's devastation in late 2012 offered an opportunity to reinvigorate it.

Bloomberg seized the moment, signalling a return to climate policies five weeks after the storm:

Over the past five years ... we've reduced the City's carbon footprint by 16 percent, and we're well on our way of meeting our goal of a 30 percent reduction by 2030 ... The biggest challenge that we face is adapting our city to risks associated with climate change (Bloomberg 2012).

Bloomberg opened and closed the speech with discussions of the city's campaign to help property owners paint building roofs white (to reduce summer heat and energy use for air conditioning) as the emblem of his administration's low-carbon efforts. The remainder of the speech focused on adaptation. He did not mention public transit, the most contentious and equity-oriented climate policy that he had previously advocated. Meanwhile, the 16% GHG emissions reduction figure that Bloomberg cited was misleading.

The contemporaneous December 2012 City of New York audit of GHG emissions found that reductions mostly resulted from developments beyond City Hall's control, especially milder weather and the substitution of natural gas for coal in power plants feeding the city (Dickinson *et al.* 2012). The emissions associated with vehicle transit remained near 2007 levels. By the city's own reckoning, municipal policies had yielded emissions reductions of approximately 7%, largely thanks to the phase-out of inefficient, highly polluting heating oil (*Ibid.*).

Meanwhile, the Bloomberg regime's pivot to adaptation outlasted the storm's immediate aftermath. On 11 June 2013, nearly nine months after Sandy, the administration released the 400-plus page planning document, *A Stronger, More Resilient New York*, better known as the Special Initiative on Resiliency and Rebuilding (SIRR) report (City of New York 2013b). This was Bloomberg's climate policy legacy. The ubiquitous focus on adaptation crowded out decarbonization. The 2007 *PlaNYC* notion of leadership remained, but its scope had shrunk to city limits:

Let others endlessly debate the causes . . . of climate change. New York City has chosen, once again, to act . . . taking decisive and comprehensive steps to prepare and adapt . . . If we take action now, we will make New York City stronger, safer, and more resilient – not only for our own benefit, but for the benefit of future generations of New Yorkers (City of New York 2013b, p. 8).

No longer accountable to the world, New York was now narrowly responsible to its own grandchildren – implicitly reinscribing a boundary between 'us and them,' contra Beck's cosmopolitanism. The rise of resiliency discourse followed these cues.

Debate on New York's climate boundaries around the SIRR report focused on material substance – oyster beds versus marshlands versus sea walls. All sides implicitly accepted that climate politics' geographic boundaries were now local. Where social questions were raised about political responsibility, financial precarity and unequal social displacement in the storm's wake, these largely concerned storm victims residing on Staten Island and the Jersey Shore (Koslov 2016) – or, at their most distant, Caribbean victims of Sandy's damages. The Bloomberg regime and its civil society partners did seek to spread lessons learned about adaptation to other

cities, a material form of global solidarity. But in the context of the extremely high carbon footprints of affluent people in prosperous cities like New York (Cohen 2016, Rice *et al.* 2020), global adaptation leadership represented a diminished concept of solidarity.

The data demonstrating the shift in New York's climate politics from tentative cosmopolitanism to defensive parochialism do not explain it. Understanding this shift requires inference. On my reading of the documentary evidence, Bloomberg and his Office of Long-Term Planning and Sustainability chose the path of least political resistance. Selective continuity meant declining to revisit earlier decarbonization policy stalemates, while channelling a reactive public opinion to support new adaptation policies. Meanwhile, the shift *preserved* the administration's commitment to marrying ecological policy with the real estate and financial industries' prosperity. A renewed focus on decarbonizing large buildings, and a fresh look at local consumption's global emissions, might threaten the city's prosperity. Indeed, the post-Sandy focus on fortification and redevelopment, modelled on the revitalization of Wall Street after the September 11th, 2001 terror attacks, solidified a new synthesis between sustainability discourse and climate leadership (now re-framed around adaptation), and the city's real estate and financial sectors (Gotham and Greenberg 2014). The Bloomberg regime maintained selective continuity by developing an adaptation-focused climate policy that preserved its political economic coalition with wealthy local interests, at the cost of low-carbon action.

Nevertheless, elements of *PlaNYC*'s low-carbon vision quietly survived the shift in marginalized form. City officials continued to pursue low-carbon building retrofit measures with minimal public notice. Without fanfare, on the last day of Bloomberg's administration (31 December 2013), the Mayor's Office of Long-Term Planning and Responsibility uploaded a report titled 'New York City's Pathways to Deep Carbon Reductions' (City of New York 2013a). It outlined an 80% cut in GHG emissions by 2050, a significant acceleration of the original *PlaNYC*'s target, largely through increased building retrofits. Overall, proposed measures would create thousands of jobs, slash energy bills, and 'integrate carbon reduction and climate resiliency objectives' (*Ibid*, p. 12). The report recalled *PlaNYC*'s original cosmopolitan ethos. Even if New York missed its targets, the report argued, it could demonstrate 'global leadership' and become a 'living laboratory' for low-carbon urbanism (*Ibid*, pp. 10, 12–13).

The fortress of solitude

How did justice-oriented civil society groups react to the Bloomberg regime's top-down reframing of climate politics around adaptation? Mostly, community organization leaders, union leaders, and volunteer responders argued in

interviews with the Superstorm Research Lab that Sandy had disproportionately affected poor, disempowered and vulnerable populations – and resiliency policies and rebuilding efforts should acknowledge and redress these inequalities.

Of ten community and labor leaders we interviewed, only two spoke strongly about the need for New York City to keep pursuing GHG emissions reductions. Nearly all focused on equity and vulnerability. One community organizer working in the devastated Red Hook neighbourhood emphasized the difficulty of recovery logistics, then continued ‘and the climate change questions obviously are beyond us,’ before laughing nervously. No one in this group voiced disagreement with the new, exclusive adaptation focus.

As elaborated below, I characterize New York City’s overarching climate politics after Sandy, its ‘emergent regularities or logics’ (Sewell 2005, p. 221), in terms of the metaphor of a fortress of solitude.

For community groups grappling with post-Sandy struggles, the primacy of immediate needs was intense. As a leading organizer with the New York Alliance for a Just Rebuilding explained:

If you don’t have a home you can afford, if you don’t have daycare for your children, or you live somewhere where it’s far away from transportation, then it’s going to be harder for you to get back on your feet . . . But hopefully we learn from . . . Sandy and from some upcoming storms and get to a place where we can really call ourselves resilient and we can really . . . prioritize low-income folks and vulnerable populations and make sure that they’re okay after disaster.

She continued that while the Alliance, a coalition of labor and community groups, was interested in clean energy projects and sustainable urbanism, in the short term it needed to focus on social needs.

The Alliance’s July 2013 report *Turning the Tide* emphasized four priorities: good jobs, affordable housing, sustainable energy and community engagement (Alliance for a Just Rebuilding 2013). The third was the least developed, with only a few paragraphs devoted to carbon emissions (*Ibid.*, p. 10). The more detailed report of the Sandy Regional Assembly (2013a), a second large grouping of social justice-oriented groups, outlined similar priorities, with scant discussion of decarbonization. The adaptation focus prevailed despite years of low-carbon advocacy by some of its most prominent member organizations, like the Harlem-based WE-ACT for Environmental Justice.³ Responding to New York’s SIRR Report, the Sandy Regional Assembly (2013b) issued a response report that re-emphasized their original focus on ensuring a more equitable recovery. The environmental justice groups and their allies mostly preserved continuity with their long-time emphasis on equity, while directing their climate focus to adaptation.⁴

What about volunteer responders and Occupy Sandy activists? The latter composed the best-organized grassroots response to Sandy’s devastation,

mobilizing up to 60,000 volunteers (Ambinder and Jennings 2013). The Superstorm Research Lab spoke to 20 members of this network (and 16 additional volunteer disaster responders).

Mostly, when Occupy Sandy activists addressed climate change in interviews, they spoke in terms of local adaptation and fortification against later storms; they argued that these efforts should be effective, fair and based on community leadership. One Occupy Sandy volunteer said, 'I'm of the belief that I'm not interested in climate change from the perspective of global warming, CO₂ rising, because to me it feels like a red herring. If instead we built up people's sense of injustice around their local environment then, collectively, problems will get solved.'

Other Occupy Sandy activists spoke of circling back to decarbonization eventually, but in vague terms. One respondent said:

I think it makes sense that people are talking about adaptation right now because it's most relevant in terms of how people rebuild and where to rebuild.

Another activist noted that, 'people sort of talk more about bikes than they used to. I mean, there are some small things, you know?' A further respondent referred to recent organizing efforts to block two natural gas pipelines planned for the city.

One of the few respondents to raise clean energy said, 'the best that we can do is start immediately looking into renewable, renewable ways of energizing our planet.' Overall, of 18 Occupy Sandy activists we spoke to, five strongly indicated that some level of government should be acting to reduce emissions or expand clean energy; just two cited specific city-level ways to decarbonize.

For most Occupy Sandy activists, it was easier to react to the storm's exogenous shock by moulding a new focus on climate adaptation to long-standing projects of social and economic justice. These activists' approach exemplified Rebecca Solnit's (2009) thesis that grassroots disaster response can create anti-market, communitarian self-organization that implicitly critiques an unequal economic order (see also Dawson 2017). Nevertheless, with an issue as complex as climate change, a locally utopian response of mutual aid can still reinforce a defensive social logic that forecloses broader political solidarities.

I term New York's broad, post-Sandy focus on adaptation a 'fortress of solitude' logic, a metaphor referring to feudalism, where subalterns are invited to seek protection behind the lord's fortress's walls from threats without. Subalterns benefit from these walls, and may seek to soften the inequalities within. By accepting this arrangement (under duress), local subalterns are walled off from comparable groups in other places, weakening their position. In prosperous, post-industrial cities, elites' power flows not just from local, but also from global arrangements (Brenner 2014, Sassen

2014), just as the emissions caused by local consumption occur physically faraway. The farming and industrial work that undergirds New York's prosperity, and most climate impacts of those emissions, occur beyond city limits. The fortress of solitude metaphor dramatizes the broad acceptance of New York climate politics' newly parochial orientation – especially, the willingness of community groups and activists to accept elites' localist framing to seek improved conditions within. The metaphor spotlights difficult trade-offs: sacrificing broader solidarities across space for the promise of short-term enhancements in economic and physical security, in the solitude of an (ostensibly) delimited city.

Despite the fortress's limitations, efforts within may still prepare more ambitious political struggles. In theory, if emphases on local economic and social security, grassroots democratic agency and contesting elites could be connected to a plausible decarbonization project, it should be possible to contest the confining logic of the fortress of solitude.

Escaping the Fortress

On 18 April 2019, thanks to organizing from progressive groups like the Working Families Party, New York Communities for Change, and the New York City Environmental Justice Alliance, New York City passed the country's most ambitious low-carbon buildings bill. I attended the vote in City Council. Speaker after speaker in the council chambers and press conference linked the bill to Sandy's destruction. In political terms, however, almost two years had passed between Hurricane Sandy and the start of the campaign that would culminate in the 2019 bill, a process I sketch briefly here.

The massive September 21st, 2014 People's Climate March set the developments in motion. On the Friday before the march, the new mayor Bill De Blasio announced that the city would cut its GHG emissions by 80% by 2050, repurposing the plan released on the final day of Bloomberg's administration. De Blasio's subsequent revision of *PlaNYC*, retitled *One New York*, solidified the 80% target, while emphasizing the social and economic justice dimensions of his sustainability policy (City of New York 2015).

One New York's ambitious climate targets did not flow directly from post-Sandy organizing, however, but rather subsequent events. Organizers planned the 2014 march in reaction to the United Nations' (UN) calling a climate summit at the UN as a stepping-stone toward the December 2015 Paris climate negotiations. I have learned through more recent interviews that following the announcement of the New York UN summit, climate activist groups like 350.org decided to organize the march, and contacted environmental justice organizations, Occupy Sandy organizers, unions, and other community groups. The march did not foreground decarbonization. It

was only afterward that organizers forged the ‘Climate Works for All’ coalition (Align n.d.), which campaigned for low-carbon building retrofits to help meet the city’s new climate targets.

The new coalition included groups from the Alliance for a Just Rebuilding and Sandy Regional Assembly, which now linked creating union jobs and preserving affordable housing to decarbonization, forging a novel continuity between social movement demands and a low-carbon agenda – a connection powerful enough to secure the 2019 bill passage.

A deeper analysis of this process is beyond the scope of this study. Still, this timeline demonstrates that low-carbon organizing arose well after Sandy. Sandy’s memory contributed. But weather was not the decisive factor in shaping the *particular substance* of climate policy action, which flowed instead from actors’ responses to the UN summit and other strategic considerations, shifting the political content of the activist groups’ selective continuity.

Conclusion

I have sought to conceptualize and explain a dramatic shift in New York City’s climate politics. I have characterized the city’s post-Sandy policy shift, from a decarbonization-focused tentative cosmopolitanism to an adaptation-focused defensive parochialism, in terms of a ‘fortress of solitude’ social logic. This was not an automatic result of the weather itself. Rather, a variety of political actors’ evolving and intersecting projects, maintaining selective continuities of outlook and practice in response to external shocks, created a new social logic.

Senior disaster officials doubled down on adaptation as their primary climate focus in Sandy’s wake to maintain many of their familiar outlooks and practices. To understand the top levels of the Bloomberg regime’s climate policymakers’ shift in climate policy focus to adaptation and defensive parochialism, and to understand the acceptance of this shift from a range of grassroots groups and activists following the storm, I situated actors’ response in their relationship to power structures, community dynamics and political economy. Elites forged new, adaptation-focused climate policies to take the path of least political resistance, while maintaining their favoured model of economic development; grassroots groups focused on redressing social and economic inequalities.

I have not argued that a prosperous city, damaged by climate-linked extreme weather, will *necessarily* prioritize adaptation over decarbonization. Rather, this is liable to happen when adaptation better aligns with groups’ prior outlooks and practices in a process of selective continuity. An adaptation emphasis can crowd out decarbonization. As extreme weather disasters increase in frequency, and urban climate policies circulate rapidly, we should worry about an urban world that looks like a series of fortresses of solitude.

In affluent cities, so-called ‘urban adaptation justice’ (Shi *et al.* 2015) cannot exist without strong commitments to decarbonization. For a prosperous city like New York, with ample resources and high consumption emissions, focusing only on the city’s grandchildren – however equitably – hardly seems just (Cohen 2020).

I also demonstrate how commitments to decarbonization can survive shifts in policy focus, then regain prominence. Experience of extreme weather could also yield greater policy focus on both decarbonization *and* adaptation, *if* groups align more climate policies with prior outlooks and practices. For instance, in the United States, the idea of a Green New Deal links investment in adaptation, decarbonization and equity (Cohen 2020). Urban actors could work with groups beyond city limits on transforming energy systems, curbing the influence of the fossil fuel sector, and other strategies to decarbonize the global economy.

Admittedly, building theory through case studies limits the immediate generalizability of qualitative, relational sociological approaches. Nonetheless, by elucidating the mechanisms of political change – breaking open the black box of responses to extreme weather – we deepen our understanding of how interactions between multiple political actors forge new policy frameworks (George and Bennett 2005). Research on other cities could further explore the interface between post-disaster climate policy and climate governance networks (Bulkeley and Betsill 2013), domestic climate policymaking, and a growing climate movement. A better understanding of how mobilized political projects – not the weather – do the work of climate politics is no cause for despair.

Notes

1. I borrow the phrase from Jonathan Lethem’s novel about Brooklyn’s gentrification; the book’s plot and title, *Fortress of Solitude*, evoke a mood of eerie, artificial isolation. Lethem was referencing the ‘fortress of solitude’ of Superman mythology.
2. Affluent centers of consumption like New York, and especially their wealthy neighbourhoods, have extremely high carbon footprints when measured with consumption accounting, irrespective of density (Cohen 2016, C40 2018, Rice *et al.* 2020). New York City acknowledged the limits of its territorial accounting method in 2009 (City of New York 2009, p. 6), promising to undertake a consumption count. By 2020, it still had not done so.
3. For examples, see WE-ACT, ‘A Conversation on America’s Climate Choices’, <http://www.weact.org/Projects/CleanAir/AmericasClimateChoices/tabid/622/Default.aspx> <accessed 3 February 2014 >.
4. One exception to the trend of adaptation emphasis was El Puente, a Williamsburg-based environmental justice group that founded the Latino Climate Action Network to coordinate climate activism between New York and Puerto Rico.

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