



The radical politics of shade

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The Radical Politics of Shade

The beginning of autumn is a good time to reflect on the class politics of urban summer heat in an epoch of global warming.

Pathbreaking research in wake of Chicago's infamous heat disaster of July 1995, which killed 550 inner-city residents (mainly Black, elderly and poor), confirms that excessive summer temperature, artificially aggravated in urban heat islands, is [the nation's major climate hazard.] It is seldom appreciated, moreover, that the concentration of summer heat in the unshaded asphalt jungles of our inner cities is also a classic example of racially biased environmental dumping.

These elementary findings come late in the day considering the surprisingly long history of urban climatology. The "urban heat island" phenomena, for example, was discovered shortly after Waterloo by Luke Howard, whose temperature studies comprise a major segment of *The Climate of London* (1818). Similar quantitative studies of the impact of the coal-burning Victorian city upon its own thermal climate were widely undertaken in Europe before 1890: Paris (1855), Munich (1860), Berlin (1886), etc.¹

Comparable research in the United States, however, lagged a full generation behind pioneering European studies, and failed to keep pace with 20th century British, German, Scandinavian and Japanese monographs until the 1960s. In terms of the crucial public-health dimension, little was known about heat-death incidences until the early 1970s. The turning point was Ellis's (1972) careful examination of hospital and coroners' records from the 1950s and 1960s. He

¹Timoth Oke, "Climate of Cities," in F. Baer, et al., eds., *Climate in Human Perspective: A Tribute of Helmut E. Landsberg* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1991), pp. 61-63.

demonstrated that the actual death toll from summer heat waves was typically ten-times higher than the numbers officially recorded.²

Eleven years later, an investigation by the Senate's Special Committee on Aging (1983) concluded that the 1980 heat wave had been responsible for more than 10,000 excess deaths. Follow-up research on historic heat waves identified 9,500 deaths in 1901, 3,900 in 1936 (in a single eight-day period), 6,700 in 1967, and 10,000 in 1988.³

Writing in a special issue (1996) of the *Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society*, a team of experts from the Midwestern Climate Center estimated that an annual average of 1000 Americans are directly killed by heat, contrasted to 500 by winter cold, 160 by floods and 82 by tornadoes. "The loss of human life by hot spells," the authors write, "exceeds that caused by all other weather events in the United States combined, including lightning, rainstorms-floods, hurricanes, and tornadoes. Thus, the short-term extremes of summer weather conditions are the most severe weather events affecting human life in the United States" (their emphasis).⁴

Heat waves, on the other hand, do not produce mega-billion-dollar property damage and economic disruption like hurricanes, floods and great winter storms. They are thus of minimal concern to the insurance industry, the decisive shaper of federal and state natural disaster policy. Nor, before the Chicago holocaust, was there any serious debate about a basic social entitlement to protection from lethal heat, in the same sense that federal subsidies have long supported the winter energy needs of the aged and poor.

The recent research, incidentally, has categorically refuted the widely publicized claims by Chicago officials, as well as their medical sycophant, Dr. Ross Zumwalt (vice-president of the National Association of Medical Examiners), that overzealous health examiners inflated the body count by including many elderly patients who were already dying. Health officials, on the contrary, have radically undercounted genuine heat victims.⁵

²F. Ellis, "Morality from heat illness and heat aggravated illness in the United States," *Environmental Research*, 5, 1972.

³Cited in S. Chagon, K. Kunkel and B. Reinke, "Impacts and Responses to the 1995 Heat Wave: A Call to Action," *Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society*, 77, 7, July, 1996, p. 1499.

⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 1499 and 1504.

⁵*Ibid.*; for Zumwalt, see *Chicago Tribune*, July 19, 1995.

The midwestern Climate Center researchers also provide new insights into the social and environmental factors that led to the 1995 Chicago tragedy. They were particularly concerned to understand why even more extreme heat waves in 1931 and 1936 produced far fewer fatalities than 1995. Population growth since the 1930s in core areas has been too small (less than 20 percent) to explain the difference, while the subsequent "air-conditioning revolution" should have reduced heat mortality.⁶

In fact, few of Chicago's Black and Latino inner-city residents have residential access to air-conditioning, and must depend instead on fans, which as a recent study by the Center for Disease Control found, have little effect when temperatures exceed 100 degrees. (Air-conditioning, on the other hand, improves survival by more than 50 percent.)⁷

Back in the 1930s, on the other hand, poor Chicagoans, like slum dwellers elsewhere, camped out in city parks or slept with open doors and windows during hot spells. The first option, of course, is no longer even legal in many cities, while the second is considered too dangerous.

[Universal climate control in middle-class offices and homes, moreover, has rebounded against the poor. In the first place, the waste heat emitted by downtown air-conditioning, factory exhausts, and commuters' car engines accumulates as a deadly pollutant in adjacent poor neighborhoods. Chicago's poorest neighborhoods are the center of a heat island whose (outdoor) daytime temperatures are 5 degrees (F) hotter than lakefront neighborhoods and, at night, nearly 10 degrees hotter than most suburbs.⁸]

Secondly, because air conditioning mitigates summer discomfort for office-workers and suburbanites, it minimizes pressure on local government to respond to killer heat waves. "We all have our little problems," Mayor Daley, Jr. scolded residents of the boiling west and south sides of Chicago in July, 1995, "but let's not blow it out of proportion." He waited four days into the heat wave, until bodies were

⁶*Ibid*, pp. 1500-01.

⁷CDC research cited in *Tribune*, *ibid*.

⁸Cf., K. Kunkel, et al., "The July 1995 Heat Wave in the Midwest: A Climatic Perspective and Critical Weather Factors," *Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society*, 77, 7, July, 1996, pp. 1516-17; and Robert Livesay and Richard Tinker, "Some Meteorological, Climatological, and Microclimatological Considerations of the Severe U.S. Heat Wave of Mid-July 1995," in *ibid*, p. 2053.

stacked like cordwood outside of overcrowded morgues, before declaring a public-health emergency.⁹

Precisely because of the law of the conservation of energy (which mandates that the energy utilized to produce one person's cooling becomes someone else's thermal garbage), air-conditioning is only a partial solution to the problem of sweltering heat-island neighborhoods. The real issue is shade and that points to other facets of urban environmental inequality.

To switch location to my own hometown, a short hike in the Hollywood Hills or San Gabriel Mountains reveals an astonishing fact about metropolitan Los Angeles: whole neighborhoods and cities disappear from view. Or, rather, the density of landscaping is so great in affluent Westside districts, as well as in wealthy cities like Pasadena, that housing is no longer visible through the urban forest. Although luxury home-builders pay little attention to elementary standards of site orientation or insulation, outdoor summer temperatures are dramatically reduced by the abundance of shade trees.

Inverse conditions, of course, dominate in the poor immigrant district west of downtown where even solitary weeds are hard to find in the concrete and asphalt desert. All this "hardscape" acts as a giant solar mirror to reflect August and September heat (as high as 108-110 degrees) into the suffocating tenements full of mothers, babies and small children. The hottest days, moreover, also tend to be the maxima of ozone and micro-particulate pollution, and the malign health impact of synergistically combined heat and toxicity is only poorly understood.

Los Angeles, of course, may be unique in the extraordinary range of its microclimates: simultaneous temperature differences of nearly 40 degrees have been recorded in different sections of the city. Yet this extreme differentiation of local temperature and air-quality conditions only reinforces the equation of class position and environmental comfort.

Any green agenda for Los Angeles, perforce, must include a "politics of shade;" i.e., demands for massive inner-city landscaping and tree-planting, immediate air-conditioning of schools, daycare centers and workplaces, the recycling of vacant lots into "tot parks" and community gardens, the shading of bus-stops, public drinking fountains, and so on.

The inevitability of global warming makes this mitigation of summer heat even more urgent. The Center for Climatic Research at the

⁹Changon, Kunkel and Reinke, *op. cit.*, p. 1503.

University of Delaware has been studying the likely impact of a small increase in average summer temperature upon public health in major world cities. Turning up the thermostat by two to four degrees, they argue, will double the annual number of extremely hot days. In the United States this will make 10,000-fatality heatwaves, which have already happened episodically in the 20th century, an annual occurrence.¹⁰

Shade, in other words, has become an inalienable human right.

¹⁰See Richard Stone, "Cities Could Face Killer Heat Waves," *Science*, February 17, 1995, p. 958.