

## The Stark Inequality of Climate Change

By [Rachel Riederer](#) 9:00 A.M.



*Two new books argue from different angles that natural disasters—like flooding in North Carolina caused by Hurricane Florence—make inequality worse. Photograph by Joe Raedle / Getty*

As Hurricane Florence moved across the Atlantic in early September of 2018, state officials issued evacuation orders for communities along the Virginia and Carolina coasts. The writer and law professor Jedediah Purdy, who was teaching at Duke at the time, was situated well inland, where the Atlantic coastal plain meets the Piedmont, and in his new book, “[This Land Is Our Land](#),” he writes about his own surge of disaster preparation. Stocking up on canned goods and candles, he was also cataloguing his dependencies, contemplating how his household might get along without stocked shops and available gasoline. Could he make a cup of coffee if the electricity went out or remember loved ones’ phone numbers without the use of a smartphone? Human beings, at least we modern ones, are “an infrastructure species,” he writes, dependent on elaborate systems for shelter, electricity, and water. Purdy contemplates

the potential devastation—the friendliest, nearest-term end of the the disaster-scenario spectrum [laid out by David Wallace-Wells](#) in “[The Uninhabitable Earth](#),” but still no picnic—and thinks of the fate of what King Lear calls “unaccommodated man,” defenseless and soggy, “like an oyster ripped from its shell.”

The accelerating climate crisis is a Rorschach test, with everyone responding differently to the inkblot of planetary trauma. Hard deniers (a shrinking group) believe, or convince themselves, that established science is not real; softer deniers may understand the problem on some osmotic level but choose not to engage. Others react with outrage, terror, or gallows humor, or settle in somewhere on the spectrum between anxious resignation and outright nihilism. Some get to work securing a bunker and a disaster-preparedness plan, wishing to insulate at least their

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own homes and families from the wider risk. Others metabolize their anxiety into demonstrations, like the marchers who filled streets around the world in September's global [climate strike](#), or into direct-action protest, like the [two women, indicted last month](#), who are now facing decades in prison for sabotaging the Dakota Access Pipeline's progress in Iowa. (They are awaiting trial.) Purdy's response, a scholarly kind of action, is to break down the politics that created the climate crisis, identifying the extractive practices and competitive ways of thinking that brought on the Anthropocene and imagining a system that could help us get out of it.

To survive the climate crisis, he argues, we will need to establish what he calls "commonwealth" values, which will animate a way of living and relating to one another that's not zero-sum, but where "my flourishing is the condition of your flourishing, and yours is reciprocally of mine." Key to that transformation is changing the way that we treat, value, and think about land. Purdy, a child of back-to-the-landers who was raised in West Virginia, where the landscape is being literally flattened by the especially aggressive coal-mining technique of mountain-top removal, chronicles the exploitative political history of American land: how it was seized from native people and then transformed by the labor of enslaved people. He offers counterexamples, too—surprising moments of solidarity when land brought people together. The radical labor organization Miners for Democracy, based in West Virginia and Pennsylvania, took control of the United Mine Workers of America in the early nineteen-seventies, pressing for workplace safety regulations and linking their own health to their local environment; their platform declared that if coal extraction was going to kill their mountains and streams, miners should refuse to do it. The city planner and forester Benton MacKaye proposed the idea for the Appalachian Trail in 1921, as part of his social goal to, as Purdy puts it, "make the human environment, from the workplace to the untouched woods, welcoming and stimulating." This is part of what he calls "the long environmental justice movement," as distinguished from the mainstream environmental movement, which Purdy contends has always been "susceptible to identity crisis." (Purdy stresses that conservation luminaries like John Muir and Theodore Roosevelt were interested in protecting nature that would be available only for certain types of people—mostly white, male,

and upper-class.) The cornerstone of commonwealth values, he writes, will be to bridge this old, well-established gap between social and environmental concerns, and "to combine human and ecological caretaking."

When Florence made landfall, it didn't rage, as predicted, at the coast—instead it moved inland and stalled, dumping what the journalist Gilbert Gaul calls a "rain bomb" over the state. It killed more than fifty people, drowned thousands of hogs and millions of chickens, and left whole communities swamped in agricultural contaminants. Purdy writes that the damage "fell unequally on North Carolinians. It always does." The contamination disproportionately affected rural, poor people of color, showing the unnaturalness of "natural disasters." Similar contamination followed Hurricane Floyd, in 1999, Purdy points out. And despite these damages, and the increasing power of hurricanes as the sea warms and rises, the state legislature passed a statute in 2012 prohibiting planners in North Carolina from taking rising sea levels into account until the law expired in 2016, not wanting to burden developers along the coast. Nature makes the storm, but people make the infrastructure, and people decide—wittingly or not—who will be vulnerable when the storm comes.

In "[The Geography of Risk](#)," the journalist Gaul writes about the same situation from an inverse angle: he focusses on coastal communities from Texas to New Jersey, where post-hurricane recovery efforts have brought floods of federal disaster funding and insurance money. This "seemingly endless loop of government payouts," he writes, keep developers and homeowners building, rebuilding, and expanding, in "one of the most ecologically fragile and dangerous places on earth." Gaul argues that the current illogical pattern of coastal building is not just "a peculiarly American expression of optimism, commerce, and defiance" but also one of the greatest and most expensive planning failures in the nation's history.

It wasn't always this way. Gaul traces the development of this situation—one that is replicated up and down the eastern seaboard—through the example of Long Beach Island, a barrier island north of Atlantic City. When the shoe-store owner Morris Shapiro first saw the section of the island that he later purchased and developed, it was empty of houses and overgrown with blackberry bushes; there were some fishermen's shacks and simple bungalows elsewhere

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on the island. He started building simple houses, aimed at blue-collar families. Other developers were doing the same, advertising seashore lots for forty dollars apiece with ads in the Camden and Philadelphia papers, reading, “They say money won’t buy happiness. Well, they’d better guess again.” As American purchasing power skyrocketed after the Second World War, sales of second homes did, too, and, by the end of the nineteen-fifties, Shapiro’s section of the barrier island was blanketed with bungalows from ocean to bay. Over time, the houses got grander and more lavish. (Locals have long observed that Long Beach Island is divided between “the Haves” and “the Have Mores.”) Today, Gaul notes, the tract of land that Shapiro bought for fifty-three thousand dollars is worth four hundred million dollars.

The accumulation of lavish property in vulnerable coastal areas, then, “amplifies the opportunities for damage and the likelihood that federal taxpayers will spend ever-larger sums to help coastal towns rebuild.” Highly subsidized flood insurance from the federal government, as well as federal disaster-recovery packages, mean that while the million-dollar views belong to the owners of the homes perched on the beaches, much of the risk of building there is carried by others. The cycles of destruction and rebuilding also have a psychological effect, Gaul writes. Each one “normalizes” the choice to build in such risky places, with the assumption that help will come. Coastal-development and federal-disaster funding have grown up together: in the nineteen-fifties, federal funds covered about five per cent of disaster-relief payouts; by 2012, it was over seventy per cent. The right to the beach house became so entrenched that when the governor of New Jersey proposed, in 1979, a bill to forbid the construction of new homes between the shore and the nearest paved road or the rebuilding of heavily storm-damaged ones, in order to preserve dunes, he was met with a campaign of remarkable vitriol.

Craig Fugate, the head of *FEMA* during the Obama Administration, told Gaul that he had proposed adding a deductible to disaster-aid packages, so that coastal communities would “have some skin in the game.” No such policy has been adopted, and there is

now at least three trillion dollars’ worth of property at risk from catastrophic storms. As Gaul writes, “the U.S. Department of the Treasury is serving as the insurer of last resort.” There is no current version of coastal disaster relief that apportions risk fairly, to say nothing of one that embodies Purdy’s commonwealth values, which recognize that “remaking the economy and remaking our relation to ecology are two sides of the same change.”

What’s galling isn’t just the stubborn rebuilding-in-place; it’s that support gets funnelled along the same meridians as other kinds of privilege. Those with means get even more, while those who need the help most go without, so that natural disasters [make inequality worse](#). In the age of climate change, “natural” disasters are especially stark illustrations of these patterns: they are exacerbated by atmospheric changes resulting, largely, from making the lives of the comfortable even more comfortable; and the burdens fall on people who are made more vulnerable by visible political choices, not just because of the accident of geography. A refrain of both Purdy and Gaul’s books, in fact, is that geography is never an accident.

For decades, Orrin Pilkey, a coastal geologist in North Carolina, has been advocating for slow, planned retreat from the coasts. “Barrier islands are always moving. Beaches are always eroding. It’s only a problem when you put a house there,” he tells Gaul. Pilkey’s message has made him a controversial figure—he has the clarity of purpose of a true evangelist, and his vision of coastal retreat seems almost mystical in its divergence from the status quo. Then again, coastal retreat [is already happening](#). Earlier this year, Pilkey published an [op-ed](#) pointing to a beach community in France that, after sustaining major damage in a storm, was moved back from the shoreline. The lesson of both Purdy’s and Gaul’s books is processes of great change: in mind-sets, policies, landscapes. “The great power of a political species,” Purdy writes, “is to change the architecture of its common world.” Neither book has a checklist of policy recommendations, but both serve as reminders of just how capable human beings are of remaking the world, when it suits them.

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