

EDITORIAL

LESSONS OF THE STORMS

The monster hurricanes of this grim season have taught us a number of things: the radical incapacity of the United States government to cope with disaster; the abyss of poverty and racism that afflicts the richest society on earth; and, most unsettling and difficult to absorb, the practical certainty that these disasters can only be a prelude to worse. Why *practical* certainty? Because although no one can predict with perfect confidence that global warming lies behind the special ferocity of the latest wave of storms, what is known tells a rational person to act, and act now.

The model we have for global warming is statistical, yet inexorable; it quite rigorously accounts for the pattern of recent events, though not for any individual event, and just as rigorously insists that things will get worse. If it is the case that the intensity of storms has increased some 85 percent over the past 30 years, then there is no reason not to believe that this intensity will continue to increase so long as growing concentrations of greenhouse gases trap increasing amounts of solar energy. This conclusion is reinforced by the realization that other concomitants of global warming, like the rising of the seas or the redirection of currents like the Gulf Stream, have barely begun.

Global warming is thermodynamic: it is not the overall amount of energy, but the fact that energy is entropically degraded, which sounds the alarm. The entropy of the ecosphere as a whole is rising, becoming chaotic and slipping out of our paltry control. It is hard to come to grips with such a turn of events, yet fatal not to. Practical decisions require weighing statistical probabilities; and if survival is at stake, then reactions like denial, rationalization, and passive acceptance of authority can be deadly. Unfortunately, all the mechanisms of capitalist society work in this direction. The ecological crisis, after all, is part of the system.

We have argued that the dynamic of capital accumulation is at the center of the crisis, and most definitely, of global warming. Rising concentration of greenhouse gases are relentlessly dragged into the ecosphere by capital's industrial apparatus; they heat the oceans, from which heat is transferred to atmospheric disturbances. But the relentless drive plays itself out in the other features of the situation as well. The callousness, cronyism, and sheer incompetence of the Bush administration were glaringly exposed by the response to Hurricane Katrina. This in turn is linked to an ideologically elaborated contempt for any governmental function that does not contribute to accumulation. It is manifest in the tax cuts that beggar agencies, which merely serve popular welfare, and in the wars that divert resources away from human needs. Iraq, after all, was invaded by men who cannot abide the prospect of flattening energy supplies in the face of capital's ever-growing demand for energy. And, finally, capital accumulation is the nemesis of the integrity of civil society. Capital did not create racism and poverty, but it has chained them to its demands, and continually reproduces them on a widening scale as the money nexus dissolves human bonds and leaves great swathes of paupers both useless to accumulation and helpless before its ravages.

The horrors of this hurricane season are, taken all in all, one of those “non-linear” changes in which relatively independently moving lines of destabilization interact and cause the ecological crisis to lurch onward. They reveal strikingly that just as capital disintegrates communities, so does its unchecked development break down basic functions of the state as well, including most pointedly, the protection of citizens. Even the established military becomes inadequate. Today in New Orleans, just as in Baghdad and Port au Prince, private armies patrol the streets and protect the propertied classes against threats from below. It is not simply the victimized societies, then, that manifest a “failed state”: the United States has also become a failed state as it breaks down in the face of growing threats of ecocatastrophe.

There are larger practical lessons to be learned, the chief of which is to radically distrust any official authority where the ecological crisis is concerned. It would be a huge mistake to sentimentalize about the technically better management of disasters under Democratic administrations. To simply be better than the lethal Bush is not nearly good enough, given the central role played by capital and the growing threat of ecocatastrophe. To throw out of office the gangsters who run the United States government is therefore only a small part of our task. We also need to keep before us a vision of what it will take to survive these times—and since survival is only the minimum condition of life, of what it will take to live in the future laid out before us. The glimpses provided by the great storms disclose what needs to be done, as well as what needs to be avoided:

- The spectacle of 2.5 million people fleeing Houston, overwhelmingly in private cars, evokes an image of dinosaurs trying to escape the dust clouds that brought the Jurassic era to a close. We have a very imperfect idea of how to get out of harm’s way. But at least we know that privatized, energy-intensive and individualized ways of living and getting around are catastrophic.
- We should live so long as to be able to govern ourselves as well as has Cuba in the face of great storms (see the following note by Richard Levins, which supplements his article on Cuban science in the September *CNS*). Call it by its right name: we need to strive for a socialist mode of organizing society, and not just for the reasons of justice and economic democracy. We need socialism to endure a hyper-entropic ecosphere and to reverse its direction of flow.
- There is no direct path to what Cuba has achieved. The presently urgent need, therefore, is to find ways of building viable autonomous zones at points where ecological breakdown is coupled with state failure. Here the model is that of the ill-fated Paris Commune of 1871. Created in the vacuum left by retreating armies of the Franco-Prussian War only to be crushed four months later by a reconstituted bourgeois state, the Commune became the Ur-event of both socialist and anarchist legend. The conditions for new versions spontaneously germinate in the scenarios now unfolding. Many have embarked on the creation of new quasi-autonomous zones thanks to the cruel hand dealt by history, some inside the range of overt catastrophe, others under circumstances of more normal breakdown, all with the potential of reconstituting society in the very pores of capitalism.

This is what needs to be studied. Let a thousand Communes bloom!—but let us see to it that they work this time.