

HOUSE ORGAN

In terms of sheer destruction, Hurricane Katrina was not the worst disaster to have ever happened to Planet Earth. Indeed, it was not even the worst within the surrounding year, being surpassed by the tsunami that struck the Indian Ocean eight months before and the earthquake that hit Pakistan less than two months later. Nonetheless, Katrina will stand forth as the first indisputable instance in which global warming erupted within the confines of the metropolis, shattering, for a moment at least, its veil of illusion and denial. The callous incompetence of George W. Bush and associated hoodlums caught most eyes; but the far larger part of the story lay in the way it epitomized the impact of the ecological crisis as a whole in a spectacular and existentially vivid way.

Our business at *CNS* is to contend with the ecological crisis as a manifestation of the crisis of capitalist society. And so, insofar as the notion can apply to a quarterly journal of reflective scholarship, the complex of disasters that befell New Orleans has added an urgent focus to our inquiry. In this respect, Katrina's impact upon our regular contributor, life-long New Orleanian, John Clark, provides us with a correspondent who is at once an eyewitness to recent events, an activist who contends with them, and a radical ecologist and philosopher capable of grasping their scale and meaning (Clark told me a decade ago that the city stood to be inundated and destroyed by a massive hurricane). We are happy to be able to print immediately following this House Organ Clark's reflections upon Katrina in the form of an impromptu letter expressing regrets for not being able to attend a conference in Milan on account of the compelling happenings in his home city.

The Milan conference was devoted to the life and work of Elisée Reclus, radical geographer, naturalist, and a particular interest of Clark's. We were able to make use of John's translation (with Camille Martin) of Reclus' travels in New Orleans in the mid-19th century to provide a series of epigraphs placed at the end of articles in our December 2005, issue. In the present communication, alongside and intertwined with his observations on Katrina and its aftermath, Clark expands considerably on Reclus. His letter stands as a vital eyewitness account, enriched by a praxis which, as in the best Marxist tradition, sees theory and practice as mutually generative.

Except that Clark's account is not within the Marxist tradition but that of anarchism—which also sees theory and practice as mutually generative. Like Reclus, John Clark has been an important contributor to anarchist theory and practice, from the late 1970s through the present communication, which he ends by the traditional salutation, “Love and anarchy.”

More power to this, I would say, power to realize the forces of love—the nature-given capacity of freely reaching out to others—and anarchy, which I take to mean the autonomous, self-determined collective making of the human world, free from hierarchical intrusion. Does that mean more power to anarchism? Well, yes, but it also means more power to anarchism's traditional antagonist, socialism, so long as socialism authentically aspires towards these goals, which happen to have been built into its foundation. Did not Marx write in the *Manifesto* “We shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all”? Did he not, in the *Manuscripts*, call

communism the “negation of the negation,” that is, the overcoming of possessiveness and the isolation of the alienated individual? And should not the building of freely associated community include the community of radicals?

The gathering ecological crisis also gathers these old antagonists, who can begin by building on the ample common ground they already inhabit. Both anarchism and socialism embraced an ethos of emancipation from below, both paid great attention to the new working classes as bearers of this process, both valorized the Paris Commune of 1871 as the epitome of the kind of struggle they sought to advance, and some of their prominent figures, for example, William Morris and Peter Kropotkin, or Rosa Luxemburg and Gustave Landauer, would be hard to tell apart were it not for the labels. Moreover, the divisions within each doctrine could be greater than those between them. One wonders how figures so disparate as Mikhail Bakunin and Kropotkin, the one espousing a nihilistic politics of the deed, the other embracing mutual aid and collectivity, could both be luminaries of anarchism. Chasms of comparable scale separate Stalin and Luxemburg, however, and can be endlessly found throughout the history of socialist movements.

The critical antagonism between socialism and anarchism was defined by competing claims to organize the forces of radical revolt. This has traditionally been framed in terms of a debate about the role of the state; but it took actual shape when Marx vied with Bakunin over control of the First International. So bitter did the conflict become that Marx and Engels destroyed the organization by moving its offices to New York in 1875 to keep it out of the Russian’s unscrupulous grip. The greatest chasm between the two doctrines opened up, however, in the early Soviet period; and the onus for this must be assigned, not to Stalin, but to Lenin and Trotsky. The treatment of Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman when they arrived in Bolshevik Russia upon being expelled from the United States, the nightmare of Kronstadt, and much else besides, conditioned a bitterness that cannot be conjured away and should not be forgotten. But Marx himself, indeed, anybody who espoused a philosophy of freedom, would also have been swept away in the maelstrom of War Communism. And it is these conditions, rather than any underlying essence of a repressive State, that need to be understood and overcome. An honest radicalism needs to incorporate the recognition that no revolutionary movement has solved the question of state power, nor can there be any perfect resolution to this problem, which rests on the ontological tension between the individual and the collective, and is grounded in the problematics of human existence itself.

In any event, the ecological crisis has restructured our reality. Today, there is no power left for the left to fight over, only the obligation to protect the earth from what would destroy life. The generalized penetration of ecosystems by capital now sets the conditions of struggle and re-positions each doctrine. We need a deeper, more radical conception of capital and its class relations for the period in which we now find ourselves, and for this only Marx can prepare us. But we also need to be more attuned to the workings out of ecosystems in the human world—and for this, anarchism, with its traditional emphasis on community and autonomous development, has made the greater strides.

Only mental inertia and lack of imagination stand in the way of building common ground. *Ecosocialism* is a word that indicates the direction of struggle within socialism and the Marxist tradition as it contends with ecological crisis. *Social Ecology* has been a term denoting

the efforts of anarchism to wrestle with the same. Is it too much to ask of us to find an emergent unity here?

—Joel Kovel