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Disastrous Accumulation

In the United States during the spring and summer of 2005, long-simmering debates over “intelligent design” came to a boiling point. Long a favorite of the Christian Right, which had never reconciled itself to some of the causal and temporal implications of modern biology and geology, intelligent design represents a revamped creationism, the antievolution belief that the world is too complicated to have been created in any way other than by the actions of a divine intelligent being. With court challenges looming, which if successful would potentially mandate that Kansas and Pennsylvania school districts teach supernatural doctrine in science classes; with President George W. Bush declaring in August 2005 that intelligent design ought to be taught; and with scientists mobilizing against such unwarranted political and religious intrusion into the science curriculum, this and the so-called avian flu looked like the hot-button issues of the fall political season. But a funny thing happened on the way to the legal showdown over intelligent design. By the time the court cases were duly convened in December 2005 and Christian fundamentalist challenges scathingly rebuffed, the issue had faded considerably from

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public view. The opposition had successfully highlighted the insanity of teaching god on a par with natural process, but it received unanticipated, overwhelming, and crucial support from a wholly unscripted and unwanted source: Hurricane Katrina. If the intelligent design doctrine had any merit at all, it was difficult to escape the conclusion that Katrina, which struck on August 29, and the consequent devastation of New Orleans and the north Gulf Coast at the cost of an estimated 1,570 lives must represent some kind of “intelligent meteorology.” The Indian Ocean tsunami of eight months earlier, with an estimated death toll of about 226,000, was still raw in the public imagination, and five weeks after Katrina the Pakistan and Kashmir earthquake killed 74,000. In the meantime, Hurricane Stan, though now largely blanked from memory in the United States, killed more people in Guatemala than Katrina did across the Gulf Coast. Intelligent design began to look less than intelligent and any design manifestly cruel. Cagier Christians backed away from embracing such a patent absurdity.

The appeal to divine intervention was not entirely abandoned, however. A story circulated in the wake of Katrina concerning the Christian fundamentalist, global capitalist, and televangelist Pat Robertson, who was a 1988 Republican presidential candidate and who more recently called for the assassination of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez—a recommendation that qualifies him as a potential terrorist under Britain’s new antiterrorist laws. Whether this multimillionaire and White House habitué really does believe that Hurricane Katrina expressed “God’s wrath” on the hometown of lesbian television celebrity Ellen DeGeneres is unclear, although such invocations of intelligent meteorology are a signature of Robertson’s *modus operandi*. About the comments of U.S. Representative Richard Baker of Baton Rouge there is no doubt, however. Stunning as it seems, this elected Louisiana official actually rejoiced at the death of working-class, usually aged African Americans in the floodwaters of Katrina: “We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans,” Baker commented as bloated bodies floated through New Orleans streets. “We couldn’t do it, but God did.”¹

The appeal of the supernatural as a way of understanding catastrophic events spans the social spectrum from the powerful to the powerless. For both it can provide some kind of connection with events beyond our immediate control, but in the case of the powerful it provides the further benefit of disguising to others the very real social power they do possess over the translation from catastrophic event to social disaster. Strange

as it might sound, the appeal to *natural* causation, insofar as it posits an autonomous, wholly external nature, defined in opposition to that which is human and social, performs much the same work as invocations of the supernatural. Both displace responsibility for “natural” disasters beyond social prerogative.

However untenable such a strict conceptual separation of nature and society may be upon cold philosophical examination, it nonetheless still underlies in significant part the deepest ideological prejudices of Western societies concerning nature. Whether god is retained as exclusive author of nature or whether nature is celebrated as its own monadic author, the radical externality of nature, whatever else it allows, too easily provides an alibi for social exploitation and oppression. Indictments of the “unnaturalness” of homosexuality, for example—or of any social conduct that defies social norms—appeal (with great ignorance of the astonishing array of nature’s sexual practices, it should be noted) to the rigid authority of such an unchangeable external nature. Herbert Marcuse once put the point more broadly: with an eye less on religion than technology, he observed that modern science “came to provide the pure concepts as well as the instrumentalities for the ever-more-effective domination of man by man through the domination of nature.”² A belief in the objective externality of nature was one such conception and a vital catalyst for modern forms of domination to take shape.

Whether the machinations of nature be god-given or self-given (as with science), the extraordinary social power accorded such a rigidly external nature provides a fertile refuge for rascals of many stripes. George W. Bush sought to hide behind the displaced mendacity of such an autonomous nature as he desperately attempted to deflect responsibility for the global spectacle of the race-cum-class cataclysm that was Katrina. “The storm didn’t discriminate,” Bush pleaded defiantly, “and neither will the recovery effort.”³

What gets to count as natural is one of the most deeply political questions in any society, precisely because nature is not a wholly external presence in the cosmos but the world itself—a world that includes different societies and the people in them as powerful elements. Nature in fact is universally if selectively held up as a mirror for recognizing and designing specific models of social order. The ideology of external nature is real enough and carries extraordinary social power, but it is demonstrably ineffective, even absurd on its own. If nature is external, how are we to under-

stand the ways in which different societies organize and rationalize their involvements in the natural world? Just as powerful ideologically, therefore, are opposing claims to the universality of nature, the all-inclusiveness of nature, and in particular the inclusion of human beings and their societal organizations within a nature whose elements and products they require for survival and whose laws and processes they cannot escape. Ecological visions of the world, Gaian and otherwise, are often rooted in this view of a universal nature, as are many poetic and religious visions. But the crucial point here is that the external and universal conceptions of nature are far from mutually exclusive; in contemporary ideologies of nature in fact these contradictory notions not only intermingle but are mutually dependent. They feed on each other. Thus the claim that some aspect of social behavior is unnatural (for example, homosexuality) not only appeals to the "rules" of an external nature "out there" for guidance, but it does so in order to impose the universal order apparently dictated by this same nature. It is this intense, never resolved dialectical shuttle between externality and universality that provides the hallmark of bourgeois ideologies of nature, opens up the intellectual space in which that ideology can work, and at the same time disguises its own political power.⁴

The idea of a natural disaster, therefore, is anything but innocent. Insofar as a disaster is rendered natural, with the implication that social agency is absolved of any responsibility for its causes and effects, there is no such thing today as a natural disaster.⁵ Viewing Katrina-ravaged New Orleans with horror, global television audiences hardly needed the theory to arrive at the same conclusion.

Nature as Accumulation Strategy

Surprisingly, perhaps, many in the more dispassionate U.S. insurance industry arrived at a very similar conclusion. In the year following the hurricane and its aftermath, insurance corporations paid an estimated \$41 billion in Katrina-related claims. While compensating for wind and rain damage, these corporations refused to pay for most of the flood damage, which affected as many as 200,000 homes in New Orleans alone and accounted for most of the loss of life and property damage. Flood damage was not covered by regular home insurance policies, the insurers claimed in an argument concerning what counted as natural. When sued, the insurers argued that their policies' exclusion of flood damage recognized no distinc-

tion between naturally inspired and “man-made” flooding. This was crucial as regards Katrina insofar as the failure of the levees, built by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, was the immediate cause of the flooding. But a federal judge, finding in favor of the homeowners, ruled that since the flooding resulted from “man-made” causes, namely, the failure of the levees, and since the policies did not specifically exclude such “man-made” disasters, the insurers were indeed liable.⁶

In fact, the insurance companies and their parent corporations have emerged as major beneficiaries of the hurricane: for them Katrina was no disaster but a bonanza of highly profitable underwriting. Despite proliferating lawsuits and the overall price tag for Katrina, the insurance industry made a total profit of \$43 billion in 2005 and anticipated a record industry profit of \$60 billion in 2006. Such “obscene” profits, as one former Texas insurance commissioner labeled them, are fueled primarily by increased premiums following Katrina, especially along the Gulf and Atlantic Coasts, where premiums have risen “by as much as 10 times over last year’s rates.”⁷ Insurance corporation stocks consequently jumped in value by 12 percent in the final three months of a quiet 2006 Atlantic hurricane season (which saw no compensatory downward movement on premiums, exposing perhaps the endemic asymmetry of power in the free market) as the industry attracted not just stockbrokers but investment bankers and hedge fund managers.⁸ The latter financial capitalists have been especially aggressive investors in reinsurance, the part of the industry that insures the insurance companies themselves. “Inspired by the weird profit opportunities that natural disasters create,” reports the *New York Times*, “hedge funds have been piling into reinsurance.”⁹

But where did this capital come from in the first place, and in what way does the financialization of disaster render nature an accumulation strategy? In the labor process, the externality and universality of nature are actualized in social production. Divorced through the wage labor relation from any social relationship with his or her materials, the laborer externalizes nature as an object of labor, yet at the same time, by transforming the nature of the raw material, he or she effectively universalizes it as an amalgam of social and nonsocial natures. What applies at the individual scale applies equally at the scale of society, and nature therefore circulates alongside value in the ventricles of global capital. Ever since there were markets, nature has always been commodifiable, but under the social conditions enabling capitalist production, this cycle of commodification is completed

with the buying and selling of human nature—embodied in labor power—for a wage. In that sense, nature has always been an indispensable element of capital accumulation, and it is the particular mission of the mainstream environmental movement to try to render this necessary engagement less harmful.

Over the last few decades, however, nature has become an accumulation strategy in a much more intense way.¹⁰ The extensive scouring of the planet for raw materials proceeds apace, up to and including the search for water off Earth, but the frontier of nature exploitation is increasingly etched by an intensive production of nature via biotechnology, medical research, information technology, nature patenting, biopiracy, and so forth. Nature continues to be absorbed into capital and to circulate through its economic circuits, whether as water or oil, labor power or ingenuity, but the converse is now increasingly important: capital circulates through the veins of nature—quite literally.¹¹

If technology companies have led this unveiling of nature as accumulation strategy, no sector of capital wants to remain on the sidelines. For the insurance industry, disaster profits are not “weird” but the very genius of capitalism itself, making a profit on social destruction. Geographer Gilbert White, an early, trenchant, and persistent advocate as well as critic of flood management policy (or lack thereof), which as often as not tended to exacerbate rather than solve the problem, both lobbied for flood insurance in the United States and pointed explicitly to the role of insurance corporations in magnifying the scale and danger of disasters.¹² Two syndromes are at work here. On the one hand, there is the so-called levee effect whereby the state (national or local), under pressure from homeowners and insurers to provide flood protection, tries to solve the risk of flooding by building and rebuilding levees higher and better. This has the effect of containing more and more small and medium-size floods while ensuring that any deluge which breaches the levees will be massive. As this contradiction came to be understood in the 1960s, not least through White’s work, engineering solutions were matched by financial ones via a national flood insurance system. But the proviso that insurance would be available only in areas where local flood prevention and abatement plans operated was weak and easily skirted, and as higher levees seemed to provide greater security, more intense development followed in many cases, ensuring that when a disaster eventually occurs again, the losses of life and property will be even more staggering.

In New Orleans, this developmental logic of accumulation was exacerbated by two other integral processes. Not only was there a long history of reconstructing and heightening levees up to “last storm plus one foot” levels (in this case, a category 4 storm) and a long-term urban expansion fueled by lax or nonexistent flood insurance policies. The development of “unimproved” land also radically diminished the extent of wetlands protecting the city from storm surges, and the drainage of this land resulted in its subsidence, much as a desiccated sponge collapses, by as much as two to three meters, thus making it even more vulnerable to flooding.¹³

On the other hand, insurance companies profit from risky investments insofar as they can charge high premiums, and so it is actually in their best interests to encourage, within certain statistical risk limits, the redevelopment of coastal land, floodplains, and other flood-prone lands. Disasters are good for the insurance business. They may buffet a few smaller, more marginal companies and depress profits periodically, but they recharge homeowner fear and insecurity concerning financial loss and trigger a surge of policies at inflated premiums. Sadly, White’s pioneering research was largely canalized into bureaucratic policy prescriptions that nibbled at the edge of the fundamental social causes of disaster while the conditions for such disasters were constantly made and remade at higher scales.

Intent on further penetrating the disaster “market” in search of windfall profits—literally—several insurance companies, not content with record earnings, have sought to blur and reassert simultaneously the distinction between the “natural” and “terrorist” provenance of disasters. Allstate and State Farm insurance companies, which together insure more than a third of U.S. homes, have teamed up with several Florida lawmakers to propose legislation limiting companies’ insurance liability in the event of future “natural” disasters. They appeal to the program of terrorist insurance already passed by Congress whereby, in the event of a declared terrorist attack, federal subsidy of the insurance industry kicks in once the industry has paid out a certain sum. In the case of terrorist-provoked disaster, the threshold is \$25 billion; the insurance corporations are pressing to set that threshold at \$4.5 billion for “natural” disasters.¹⁴

Disaster spells opportunity for other sectors of capital too. Echoing the sentiments without repeating the words of Louisiana’s Representative Baker, New York Times columnist David Brooks, also writing while the visible bodies of victims gave graphic evidence of the macabre underside of capitalist wealth, cheered the fact that Katrina had created “a blank slate”

(albeit still underwater) and that out of “tragedy comes the opportunity.” “If we just put up new buildings and allow the same people to move back into their old neighborhoods,” he judged, “then urban New Orleans will become just as rundown and dysfunctional as before.” What the supernatural did not achieve, it seems, Brooks was ready to mandate by social means.¹⁵

For some, the half-life of grieving in New Orleans, even as TV newscasters worked wholly without a script reporting the most gruesome scenes, was determined more by the temporality of capital movement than the cycle of lives horribly lost. Only hours after the levees broke, investors swarmed to the city or sent their money in search of discounted property—Craigslist.org actually posted one ad for property “in any condition or location” on the same day the storm hit. A local developer, who owned fifteen hotels in and around the French Quarter, New Orleans’s tourist central, had bid on twenty further hotels in the region within three weeks of the storm; a Miami businessman wired a New Orleans real estate agent \$10 million with instructions to buy fast and to advertise “Flooding no Problem.” Florida developers who have specialized in postdisaster bargain-basement property purchases were especially virulent, but developers all across the United States got in on the act. While news commentaries still bemoaned the possible end of the city’s life, interested property buyers outnumbered sellers twenty to one. “It raises the question,” suggested a Los Angeles Times reporter, “of what sort of housing—if any—will be available without a six-figure salary.”¹⁶

It is an axiom among disaster researchers that postdisaster recovery and reconstruction follow and even exacerbate predisaster trends and trajectories.¹⁷ This rush to rebuild the familiar is very much in evidence in New Orleans. The depth of the tragedy resulted, in the first place, from the systematic dismantling of state support for erstwhile working-class populations rendered surplus in the restructuring “new” economy, and that trend continues with a vengeance. While the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), now an arm of the Department of Homeland Security, has systematically discouraged displaced and dispersed residents from returning, jobs in the city’s reconstruction are being channeled to Mexican and Central American workers to whom employers can pay (with federal government collusion) derisory subminimum wages for dangerous work conditions, bad housing, and few services, all without benefits, a union, or even minimal job security. Business owners (whether residents or not) were given preferential treatment over mere residents, being allowed to

return to the militarized city before the rest of the population. The inequity of an already scandalously unequal city is intensifying. The gentrification that city elites pursued prior to Katrina, in consort with the tourist industry, is now the template for tomorrow: the much vaunted Urban Land Institute plan insists that the reconstruction “must ignore socioeconomic lines and practices—real or perceived—of the past.” Meanwhile, the new urbanist architects, while giving lip service to low-income housing in response to stinging criticism, have their eyes on the prize of picking up where god left off and redesigning much of the Gulf Coast with just enough low-income housing to attract people to run the casinos and restaurants and nanny the children of the rich. “Welcome,” laments one architect, to “Bush’s neo-urbanism.”¹⁸

The financialization of disaster is relatively recent. In most parts of the world there is no such thing as flood insurance, or any other form of disaster insurance, and in the United States the first national flood insurance program was not created until 1968 and was not well advertised. Private flood insurance has become more available recently, with government subsidies, but its premiums are prohibitive for most people. The financialization of nature and of disaster in particular has also developed along an alternative track. Since the 1990s the Chicago Mercantile Exchange (CME) and various European financial markets have traded environmental futures devoted to environmental hazards and pollutants. Among the most common are carbon sequestration credits, wetland mitigation credits, species credits for specific birds (International Paper trades in red-cockaded woodpecker credits¹⁹), and other environmental credits and derivatives, and since 1999 the CME has traded in “weather futures.” Weather futures operate just like commodity futures, except that instead of being based on the production of oranges or hog bellies, the indexes compiled for weather futures are based on quantitative measures of the weather such as temperatures. The index measures the number of “degree days” by which a month’s temperatures are above or below normal levels, allowing investors to bet on future weather conditions. The major inspiration behind this market is energy companies that want to hedge their bets against extreme patterns of energy use related to weather. Other kinds of weather indexes are possible, and a prototype “hurricanes future” market is currently being mooted. By some estimates, weather futures, which experienced a million trades in 2005, now represent an \$8 billion industry.²⁰

Insofar as they provide financial insurance against extreme events,

energy and other companies—if they bet correctly—get from weather and other climatic futures markets what god regrettably cannot provide: intelligent meteorology. The weather market provides an alternative means of handling disaster. But as it has established itself, the market's major players increasingly are speculators whose only interest in the weather is their ability to profit from its financialization. Nature is refurbished as the newest casino. Weather futures marketeers have even proposed that since the markets represent an extraordinary concentration of "information," the way people bet can actually be used to predict the weather. (Lest this sounds outlandishly backward, we need remember only that ex-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld briefly initiated a similar program in 2004 whereby bets by the public on where terrorists would hit next would be used to predict where and when terrorists would strike.)

This weather futures market has its dark side. As with any casino, winners win only to the extent that losers lose, and the expansion of the futures market to natural events expands the opportunity for a financial crash as much as for a financial bonanza. To the extent that such content-free forecasts pass into real currency and contribute to misguided disaster abatement efforts, the social making of disasters penetrates even more deeply into the political economic integument of capitalist society. The weather futures market today covers eighteen U.S. cities, nine in Europe, six in Canada, and two in Japan. It therefore intensifies the invisibility of African, Latin American, and many Asian cities, contributing to a deepening geographical disparity of response to disasters. In these parts of the world, we might surmise that in addition to the overall poverty of people, their heightened vulnerability, and the resilient effects of global racism, the comparative lack of financial reparation for disasters also results from a certain undercapitalization of nature. Not only is there no effective insurance against such disasters in such places, but the amount of economic value that capital can scavenge from postdisaster reconstruction is minimal.

There *Is* an Alternative: Cuba

On September 5, 2004, Tropical Storm Ivan reached hurricane strength in the Atlantic Ocean. Continuing west toward the Caribbean, it battered a string of islands as it gathered strength into a massive category 5 storm, 500 kilometers in diameter and with sustained winds recorded as high as 170 mph. It turned abruptly north in the waters off the Yucatán, crossed

western Cuba, and weakened into a category 3 storm before making landfall in Alabama on September 16. Quickly losing power over land, it crossed northeast into the Atlantic off Virginia before circling back over Florida as a strong tropical storm. Ivan killed an estimated 52 people in the United States and another 70 in the Caribbean, mainly in Grenada and Jamaica, which took direct hits. Yet in Cuba, where it crossed as a category 4 hurricane on September 14 and was the most powerful such storm to affect the island in fifty years, it caused \$1 billion of damage to buildings, roads, and crops, but no deaths.

That such a geographical discrepancy existed in the number of deaths caused by “Ivan el Terrible,” as it was dubbed by Cuban disaster relief workers even before it hit, is not an accident. The month before, the eye of Hurricane Charley, also a category 4 storm, passed just west of Havana, killing four people in Cuba, while it went on to kill thirty in Florida.²¹ Hurricane Katrina, the eye of which did not make landfall on Cuba but which battered the island with hurricane-force winds and caused massive precautionary evacuation, killed no one although it destroyed 20,000 homes. There are a number of specific reasons for the consistent success of Cubans in avoiding hurricane-induced casualties. First is education. Disaster prevention is a way of life in Cuba, beginning with the school curriculum but continuing through higher levels of education and the workplace. Annual two-day training sessions stress risk reduction and new techniques as well as rehearsing established practices. Second, hurricane preparedness is routinized: forty-eight hours before expected landfall, all of the island’s institutions—community, work, government—are mobilized, and the written and electronic media galvanize the broadcast of information about the storm and necessary preparations. Third, their efforts are guided by a pre-existing emergency plan, overseen by an island-wide Civil Defense network that operates at all scales, from the national to the provincial, municipal to community. Everyone plays a role in this preparation, and local authorities take special care to deal with invalids and the aged who require special help.

Fourth, and perhaps most crucial, is the massive evacuation plan. For Hurricane Ivan, 1.9 million people—17 percent of the country’s population—were evacuated. For Katrina, the figure was 1.5 million. The evacuation mobilizes all of the island’s sources of transportation from cars and buses to trains; evacuation centers on higher land are already set up and provisioned with food, water, and medical care; families and households in safer areas take in evacuees; and everyone knows where they should

be. Livestock and animals are also evacuated to higher ground. Fifth, the widespread state provision of Cuba's high-quality health care ensures quick access for the injured and longer-term recovery care, including psychological support. Finally, the state underwrites some of the reconstruction of homes and other buildings and the restoration of ravaged land. Summarizing Cuba's experience with five hurricanes prior to Ivan, the International Red Cross concluded that "the implementation of a set of well-organized emergency procedures ensured rapid and orderly evacuations from high-risk areas, reducing the deadly impact." The United Nations has repeatedly proposed Cuba as a model of hurricane damage mitigation, a conclusion ratified in the light of Ivan by the Atlanta-based NGO Medical Education Cooperation with Cuba: the island's "monumental preparation program . . . could serve as a global model."²²

Cuba defies expectation in one other respect. Hazard and disaster researchers take as axiomatic that, generally, the poorer a country or community, the more vulnerable it is to the loss of life associated with disaster. To the extent that "natural" disasters strike wealthy countries, these populations are better able to absorb the consequent hardship, have superior medical facilities and knowledge, and have quick access to the technology that facilitates reconstruction. But this nostrum of disaster researchers is turned on its head by Cuba. The widely recognized success of the Cuban model of hurricane preparedness comes despite the very modest income levels throughout Cuba. Political will and a mass mobilization that integrates everyone into a practical social response before a hurricane strikes are central to its success. According to academic evaluations of the program, everyone joins the effort, compliance is impressive, and the central priority is indisputably on saving lives.²³

The contrast with the individualized chaos that marks most U.S. responses to an imminent hurricane could hardly be more stark. Scenes of rapid yet orderly preparation in Cuba are quaint alongside the now routine CNN images of the obligatory last-minute supermarket panic for water, food, flashlights, batteries, candles, and plywood boards followed by the equally predictable scenes of empty shelves and long snaking queues at gas pumps. It's every consumer for him- or herself. Evacuation is a personal responsibility, first and foremost dependent on private cars, leading to massive highway traffic jams that induce new kinds of danger. Hurricane Rita, following quickly on the heels of Katrina, was probably the most egregious

such case. Offers by Amtrak to evacuate New Orleans residents by rail were refused by FEMA; victims of Katrina, wading out through the fetid water, were in some cases turned back by armed sheriffs, militias, and the military guarding the white suburbs on higher land from desperate hurricane refugees.²⁴ Such scenes would be unthinkable in Cuba.

No coherent or effective plan guides the response to disaster in the United States, and no organized provision is made for dealing with those who succeed in escaping. The destination of evacuees is their own responsibility, making the decision to leave even harder, and insofar as people are forced to evacuate, many lose their access to established medical attention in the balkanized and bureaucratized private provision system. Standing plans for emergency housing are virtually nonexistent, which is why FEMA following Katrina sent in a panicked order for 130,000 mobile homes, much to the delight of the manufacturers but to the horror of many evacuees who refused to live in the new trailer camps hidden in the woods and swamps on the outskirts of Gulf towns. Little wonder that with Katrina, as with other hurricanes affecting the United States, many people choose to “stick it out,” refusing to evacuate due to fear for the private property they would leave behind. Apprehension over looting, however real or illusionary, takes hold as decisions are made between risking death or abandoning property.²⁵ Many individual acts of great kindness certainly took place in the aftermath of Katrina, but the official response in lieu of any real plan, which was to herd those left behind into a football stadium—or, more accurately, to tell them to wade there on their own through the water, waste, and corpses—stretched the stunned credulity of television audiences around the world. In Cuba, by contrast, the meticulous plan for collective evacuation even includes pets and animals, further loosening people’s propensity to sit out a storm in dangerous low-lying land.

The refusal to evacuate is widely understood to be the major killer in the case of hurricanes, and this is the focus of Cuban hurricane preparedness. By contrast, U.S. preparedness emphasizes huge engineering and capital investment programs, from river canalization and levee construction to sea walls and building infrastructure. However much these measures enhance the profit rate for a swath of construction and development interests, they are demonstrably ineffective when the storm is large enough, lead to a false sense of physical security, and actually cost lives. The entire social system, in fact—built on a foundation of private property and wealth accumula-

tion through housing investment, dedicated to the defense of individual assets, and lubricated by the ideologies of individualism that accompany these social choices—conspires to force myriad individual calculations that weigh security of property versus security of life. There is nothing natural in this perverse choice; rather, as the Cuba case suggests, it is the direct expression of social choices about the kind of society one chooses to make. The obscenity of Katrina is not simply that an astonishingly unaware president continued to vacation while hundreds of working-class and African American citizens died unnecessarily. As the evidence from Cuba confirms, there is no such thing as a natural disaster. It is not the physical event itself that is so destructive of human life but the logic of free market capitalism, unfettered by more than cursory ameliorative action by the state, that is the true obscenity.

Creative Destruction

In 1976 a devastating earthquake and its aftermath eventually killed 23,000 people in Guatemala and made 1.5 million people homeless. The “eventually” is important; the vast majority of deaths were not the direct result of the physical event itself but played out in the days and weeks of flooding, disease, and starvation that followed. Considerable international relief flowed into Guatemala as did hazards researchers, but it was not funneled to the most affected and neediest people and places. The country’s totalitarian military regime put the army in charge of aid distribution with the result that some of it was siphoned off to Guatemalan elites, while food and blankets were sold by the army to those with cash rather than distributed to those most in need. As the misery continued, the peasants eventually came to refer to the disaster as a “classquake.”²⁶

In communities surrounding the Indian Ocean, ravaged by the tsunami of December 2004, the extent of the damage was greatly magnified by two decades of mangrove clearance, especially in Thailand, where vast areas of coastal swamp and estuary land have been cleared for the seafood industry devoted to shrimp export to the dinner plates of Europe and North America. Throughout the region, the class, caste, and ethnic fissures of the old societies were re-etched deeper and wider by the patterns of response and reconstruction following the tsunami. In Sri Lanka especially, but in other coastal regions too, “reconstruction” forcibly prevents local fishermen from re-establishing their livelihoods at the edge of the sea. Instead,

extant plans privilege large-scale national and international developers planning oceanfront hotels, resorts, shopping, and restaurants in hopes of attracting wealthy tourists. The path is paved for far greater destruction in a future disaster. Displaced local fishers and peasants have increasingly come to call the reconstruction effort the “second tsunami.” As the destruction wrought by “Hurricane Bush” on the U.S. Gulf Coast attests, it is not just in the poorer parts of the world that one’s chances of surviving a disaster are more than anything dependent on one’s race, ethnicity, and social class, and, in a different way, gender.

In every phase and aspect of a disaster—causes, vulnerability, preparedness, results, response, and reconstruction—the contours of disaster and the difference between who lives and who dies are to a greater or lesser extent a social calculus. With the intensification of global warming, the very causes of disaster become more deeply social. Disasters do not simply flatten landscapes, washing them smooth. Rather, they deepen and erode the ruts of social difference they encounter. A day or a year after Katrina, and despite all the good words of the Bush administration to the effect that New Orleans will “come back bigger and better,” one would have to invest a lot of faith to imagine that the first item of federal business in New Orleans, from the staunchly pro-market Bush administration, will be to reconstruct public housing so that the mass of ordinary people can return to their city. In fact, when Katrina hit in 2005, thousands of evacuees from hurricanes Charley and Ivan a year earlier remained in “temporary” trailer parks in Florida.

“Capitalism is being killed by its achievement,” the Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter once observed.²⁷ Since Schumpeter and before him Marx, we have come to understand that capitalist societies survive and indeed thrive through the process of creative destruction. Financial capital, whether in the form of futures or insurance, enlists nature to the cause. Disasters provide extraordinary opportunities for highly profitable reconstruction. The financialization of disaster absorbs the politics of who lives, who dies, and whose life is utterly destroyed, displacing such raw power into the polite, privatized, anodyne multibillion-dollar calculations of boardroom denizens. There, Hannah Arendt’s “banality of evil” is alive and well.²⁸ There is no better exemplar than “natural” disaster of the will to class power over (human) nature. The financialization of disaster is premised on the expectation of lucrative and productive investment in the exploited labor of reconstruction as well as on the exploitation of fear left

by the hollowing out of state-underwritten social security. The linkage of insurance and reconstruction resulting from disaster is about regulating and controlling the profitability of nature rather than prevention or amelioration. But the well-being of information on which futures forecasting is based is not at all the same as the social well-being of people.

The Nation summarized the origin and meaning of Katrina's devastation: "Many of the social protections gradually assembled during the twentieth century have been systematically dismantled, defunded and discredited, with results every bit as predictable, and every bit as tragic, as the collapse of the levees."²⁹ As this conclusion and the comparison with Cuba highlight, the rhetorical point that capitalism more than Katrina is the true disaster seems less of a polemic and more of a reality. This conclusion was glimpsed in the outrage following Katrina, but within a year it had come to little. Bush's Republican administration was handed a resounding defeat in the 2006 elections but more because of the failure of the Iraq war than because of continued domestic outrage. The political "rabbit holes" of race and class, suddenly in the spotlight after Katrina, "proved too deep and too ugly," according to Gary Younge, "and in the end it was a journey the country had neither the will, curiosity nor leadership to make. . . . The anger was there, but with no movement to harness it or ideology to advance it, the fury burned bright but fizzled quickly."³⁰

As the frenzied discovery of global warming builds to a crescendo, disasters may or may not become more frequent as socially inflected climatic processes slam into the habits of social economy. They will certainly be more widely reported and their instance more prominent in the political sphere. We can be sure that this new recognition of disasters will include a periodic eruption of godly apocalypticism aimed at this or that group of social sinners who are spoiling God's patrimony for the rest of us. Yet this apocalypticism is not the sole preserve of the religious Right. Many of the global Left who until recently have had very little connection with environmental politics have seized on global warming and the disasters it promises as a new lever for inspiring social mobilization. The appeal of apocalypticism finds fertile ground here too, the very real environmental threats notwithstanding. In this respect, Nobel physicist Stephen Hawking's widely publicized admonition that the human race will need to colonize space to survive should be taken less as a viable strategy—a strategy for transplanetary

capital accumulation, in fact—but as a suggestion concerning the gravity of the stakes.

Disastrous accumulation has its origins not in a sullied environmental realm beyond the responsibility of capital but in the disastrous social relations that intrude capital accumulation between the natural world and people's need to live within that world. Marketizing environmental issues—for example, through environmental insurance or environmental derivatives—strengthens rather than dismantles disastrous accumulation. Carbon futures markets do not necessarily diminish the amount of carbon emitted by the global economy but actually create an incentive for pollution in some places insofar as a profit can be made. Marketized recycling may do less to reduce the volume of pollution than to provide the original producers with discounted raw materials for the ever-expanding production of garbage. Any apocalypse of rising water and falling skies will not be put off by a political desperation that confuses capitalist technological and economic action with actually confronting the problem. By contrast, social and political organizing, aimed at creating the power to alter the technological and economic rules, holds the potential for history-altering change.

Notes

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- 4 Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital and the Production of Space* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991).
- 5 Phil O'Keefe, Ken Westgate, and Ben Wisner, "Taking the Naturalness out of Natural Disasters," *Nature* 260 (April 15, 1976): 566–67; and Neil Smith, "There Is No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster," Social Science Research Council, <http://understandingkatrina.ssrc.org/Smith/> (accessed XXX).
- 6 Joseph B. Treaster, "Judge Upholds Policyholders' Katrina Flood Claims," *New York Times*, November 29, 2006. As of this writing, the case is under appeal.
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- 10 Cindi Katz, "Whose Nature, Whose Culture? Private Productions of Space and the Preservation of Nature," in Bruce Braun and Noel Castree, eds., *Remaking Reality: Nature at the*

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- 11 Donna J. Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium.FemaleMan©_Meets_Onco_Mouse™: Feminism and Technoscience* (New York: Routledge, 1997).
 - 12 Gilbert White, *Human Adjustment to Floods: Problems of the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1945).
 - 13 Craig Colten, *An Unnatural Metropolis: Wrestling New Orleans from Nature* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2005); and R. W. Kates et al., “Reconstruction of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina: A Research Perspective,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 103 (2006): 14653–660. In the record monsoon rainfall (93 centimeters in one day) and deadly flooding that hit Mumbai on July 20, 2006, geographers and others cited the same combination of increased surface paving and the loss of wetlands for exacerbating the flooding.
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 - 15 David Brooks, “Katrina’s Silver Lining,” *New York Times*, September 8, 2005.
 - 16 For the reference to Craigslist.org and the report on Florida investors, see David Streitfeld, “Speculators Rushing in as the Water Recedes,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 15, 2005, <http://news.yahoo.com/s/latimests/speculatorsrushinginasthewaterrecedes>. For information about the hotel owner in New Orleans, see Gary Rivlin, “For Hotelier, Crisis Is Another Word for Opportunity,” *New York Times*, September 22, 2006.
 - 17 Kates et al., “Reconstruction of New Orleans,” 14653.
 - 18 Quotes are from Matthew Smith, “The Katrina Legacy,” *Designer/Builder* 13.1 (May/June 2006): 29. See also Mike Davis, “Gentrifying Disaster: Ethnic Cleansing, GOP-Style,” www.motherjones.com/commentary/columns/2005/10/gentrifying_disaster.html (accessed November 14, 2005); “Katrina One Year After,” *Nation* 283.8 (September 18, 2006): 3–4; Adolph Reed, ed., *Unnatural Disaster* (New York: Nation Books, 2006); and Gary Younge, “New Orleans Forsaken,” *Nation* 283.8 (September 18, 2006): 17–20.
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 - 20 See www.investopedia.com/terms/w/weatherfuture.asp and <http://hurricane-futures.miami.edu/> (accessed November 16, 2006).
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 - 22 Manuel Rodriguez and Cristina Estrada, “Cuba Prepares Itself for the Worst,” www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900SID/JMAN-64SCVC?OpenDocument&rc=2& (accessed XXX).
 - 23 Holly Sims and Kevin Vogelmann, “Popular Mobilization and Disaster Management in Cuba,” *Public Administration and Development* 22 (2002): 389–400; and Pedro Mas Bermejo, “Preparation and Response in Case of Natural Disasters: Cuban Programs and Experience,” *Journal of Public Health Policy* 26 (2006): 13–21.
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2005. The private mercenary corporation Blackwater, which enjoyed large contracts for its “private contractors” in Iraq and is owned and run by fundamentalist Christians, took it upon itself to police New Orleans. Blackwater’s “forces beat most federal agencies to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005,” reports Jeremy Scahill, “as hundreds of heavily armed Blackwater mercenaries—some fresh from deployment in Iraq—fanned out into the disaster zone. Within a week they were officially hired by the Department of Homeland Security” and within a year the company would have “raked in more than \$70 million in federal hurricane-related contracts.” Scahill, *Blackwater: The Rise of the World’s Most Powerful Mercenary Army* (New York: Nation Books, 2007), xxiv–xxv.

- 25 “In the days after Hurricane Katrina, terror from crimes . . . gripped new Orleans. The fears changed troop deployments, delayed medical evacuations, drove police officers to quit, grounded helicopters. Edward P. Compass III, the police superintendent, said that tourists—the core of the city’s economy—were being robbed and raped on streets that had slid into anarchy.” A subsequent review of crime suggested that many of the “most alarming stories” were “figments of frightened imaginations, the product of chaotic circumstances.” Crime may have been lower than normal, and no rapes were ever reported or documented. The police superintendent soon resigned. Jim Dwyer and Christopher Drew, “Fear Exceeded Crime’s Reality in New Orleans,” *New York Times*, September 29, 2005.
- 26 O’Keefe, Westgate, and Wisner, “Taking the Naturalness out of Natural Disasters,” 566.
- 27 Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (London: George, Allen and Unwin, 1952), xviii.
- 28 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963).
- 29 “Katrina One Year After,” 3.
- 30 Younge, “New Orleans Forsaken,” 18.

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