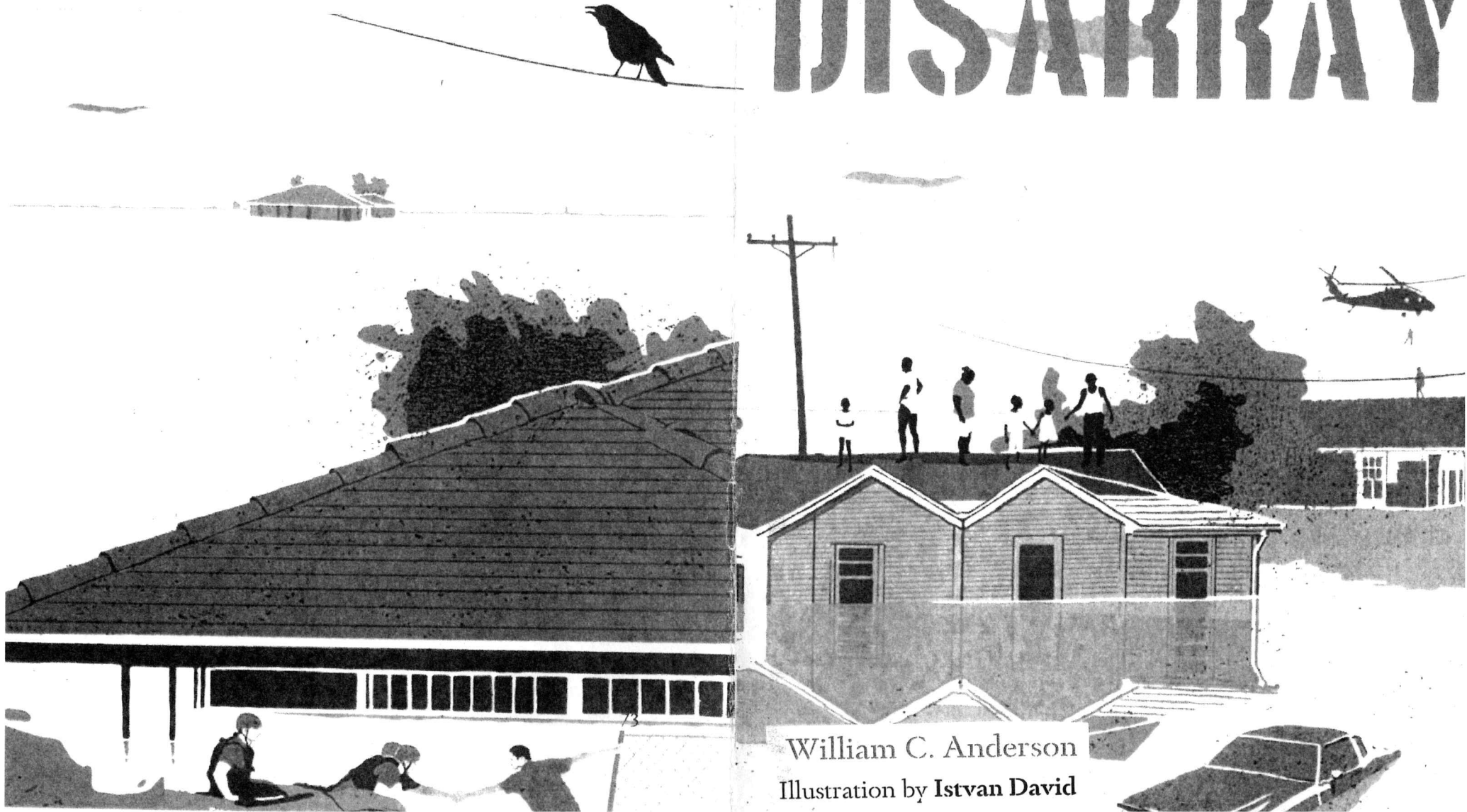


**COULD THE REVOLUTIONARY
INTERCOMMUNALISM OF THE
BLACK PANTHERS PROVIDE AN
ANSWER TO THE STATE'S
PURPOSEFUL NEGLECT OF
VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES
DURING NATURAL DISASTERS?**

CLIMATE CRISIS AND THE STATE DISARRAY



William C. Anderson

Illustration by Istvan David

We are indebted to the Earth. Our gracious host has provided us with more than enough resources to live, grow and prosper over time. But throughout history, and especially in the modern capitalist era, some have let their desire for more become a perilous dedication to conquest. The urge to make other humans, wildlife and all parts of nature submit to the will of markets, nations and empires is the rule of the day. Today, anything associated with nature or a true respect for it is regarded as "soft." That which is not vulturous like the destructive economics of the reigning system is steamrolled to pave the road to unhinged expansion.

This logic of expansion and conquest undoubtedly changes the relationship between humans and their environment. In this context, the "debate" over climate change actually becomes a matter of human survival. Those who entertain climate change as a question at all have already, maybe unknowingly, chosen a side. The fact is that climate change will create more refugees and forced human migrations; it will lead to the murder of environmental activists around the world and start new resources wars; it will spread disease and destabilize everything in its path — and more. Unless capitalism's unquenchable thirst for natural resources and the fossil fuel combustion that powers it is abandoned, the Earth will be forced to do away with humans cancerously plundering the carbon energy it has stored over millions of years of natural history.

Over 150 people worldwide have been murdered this year while defending the environment. This piece is in loving memory of those who have died and will die doing so. Thank you for all that you did for us.



WILLIAM C. ANDERSON

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A proactive pre-revolutionary situation will raise the consciousness of people to realize that they are already carrying out the radical politics they are often told to despise. Ahistorical liberal reimaginings of the past make tragedy into a necessary stepping stone for an empire that is learning at the expense of the oppressed. Real resistance positions people to build movements that undo the violence that oppression inflicts. We are not in need of excuses; we are in need of a better world. If we want that better world, we have to align our politics with a radical imagination, with sustainable everyday resistance and innovative strategy.

It is not new for communities in the US dealing with white supremacy to support each other and build resistance from within. Starting our own services and building up each other is an everyday revolutionary politics of survival.

The task of making the planet a better place is a great task, but it is the only choice we have — lest we allow capitalism to destroy the carrying capacity of the one we currently inhabit. We can no longer afford to let crisis keep us entangled in this current state of disarray. Instead, we should charge our suffering to a system that must pay with its unacceptable existence. ★

What is most unfortunate is that capitalism, which has multi-layered discriminations encoded within it — racism, sexism, classism, and so on — affects how thoroughly people are capable of bracing for the damages wrought by climate change. Though nature is indiscriminate in its wrath, the sustained ability to protect oneself from rising temperatures and natural disasters is a privilege not all can afford. Those who are already harmed under the pitiless whims of capital are doubly hurt by the lack of protection afforded to them for life in an increasingly turbulent environment. The Global South is much more likely to feel the brunt of climate change, despite contributing much less to causing it. But even in the world's wealthiest nations, the poor and working classes are much more vulnerable to ecological devastation.

If the people who understand the gravity of the situation want this state of affairs to cease, then the system of capitalism and the egregious consumption of the so-called First World itself must cease. That which puts all of us at risk cannot be tolerated. The vast satisfactions in wealth hoarded by a few does not outweigh the needs of the many suffering the consequences every day, as the Earth deals with malignant human behavior. The systemic drive towards excess that is pushing the planet's carrying capacity to the brink must be brought to a halt throughout the world, but especially in the empire that exemplifies excess best: the United States of America.

THE MYTH OF “THE NANNY STATE”

Ever since Donald Trump became president, crisis and disarray have been regular in an extraordinary sense. Not that the United States hasn't always been this way; it has been for many of those oppressed within this society. But the dramatic events unfolding today have been very confronting for those who are only now realizing that progress — or the things that represent it symbolically — can be done away with overnight.

In the midst of an onslaught of draconian far-right legislation, the liberal establishment has failed to muster a convincing rebuff. This is due in part to complicity in the shift towards the right, and in part due to a more general crisis of confidence within liberalism. But what is also failing today is the state itself. At a time when environmental, social and economic crises are running out of control amid authoritarian overreach, the state seems to be in a moment of purposeful neglect and disarray. This is leading people to take the response to the confluence of crises into their own hands, raising the question of the state's *raison d'être* to begin with.

When former White House chief strategist Steve Bannon spoke at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), he said that President Trump's choices for his cabinet would be aimed at “deconstruction of the administrative state.”

The current situation demands proper respect given to its purpose. Intercommunalism focuses on and prioritizes Black self-determination outside of the state's failures to adequately look after the needs of the Black community. The survival of underserved people is understood to be a part of the necessary politics of transformative change. Aside from the glitz of revolution that fuels popular depiction in the media, politics and culture, our current pre-revolutionary situation requires the everyday survival of those of us who would do the revolting in the first place. Intercommunalism pays respects to revolution as a process, and not merely an overnight reaction.

Across communities Black and all colors, we see a persistent need to address whatever shortcomings white supremacy delves out to us. It is not necessarily new for communities in the US dealing with white supremacy to support each other and build resistance from within. Starting our own services and building up each other is an everyday revolutionary politics of survival. However, what can and often does happen is that maintaining our own institutions within the bounds of capitalism becomes the objective when ending capitalism should be a necessary outcome. More than simply reacting to capitalism in anarchistic ways, we should be proactively working to overcome it by making our very models of resistance anti-capitalist. Depending on the likes of sympathetic capitalists and liberal elites is counter-productive in this respect. Instead of building ways to consistently respond to disaster, we must be proactive in ending the crisis of capitalism rather than solely attempting to counter it one day at a time.

Their confinement makes their labor hyper-exploitable and again flattens the burden of problems linked to natural disasters, while the elite who caused the problems remain unfazed in their chase to destroy the planet for profit. In Texas, inmates raised about \$44,000 to aid those affected by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. After Hurricane Harvey, inmates remembered previous fundraising efforts and requested officials to restart a program that allows them to donate their commissary for relief purposes. After just one month, 6,663 inmates had donated \$53,863 for Hurricane Harvey relief from the usually very *small* commissary accounts that they maintain (often \$5.00 or less depending on the person).

PICKING UP WHERE THE STATE FALLS THROUGH

None of this is new. The Black Panthers focused much of their work around meeting the needs of the Black community that the capitalist state and market had failed to fulfill. Projects like the Free Breakfast Program and ambulance services give credence to the extensive history of this type of mutual aid. It was the Panthers who exposed the extensive sickle cell anemia epidemic in the Black community by carrying out the work that the state should have done. The concept of “revolutionary intercommunalism,” theorized by Black Panther leader Huey P. Newton, helped develop a strategy for structured community service programs also known as “survival programs.” These programs were meant to address the lack of helpful institutions and services in Black communities serving the needs of the people.

Bannon suggested that the primary goal should be to limit the regulatory agencies and bureaucratic entities getting in the way of the administration’s self-styled economic nationalism. “The way the progressive left runs,” Bannon went on to say, “is if they can’t get it passed, they’re just going to put in some sort of regulation in an agency. That’s all going to be deconstructed and I think that’s why this regulatory thing is so important.” Years before this, in 2013, he had already told a writer for the *Daily Beast* that “I’m a Leninist ... Lenin wanted to destroy the state, and that’s my goal, too. I want to bring everything crashing down, and destroy all of today’s establishment.

Without overemphasizing the irony and risible misleadingness of the latter self-comparison, Bannon does raise a key question for the far right: what’s the use in a state? While such a question could potentially be put to progressive use in some hands, it is definitely dangerous in these. For the right, the question of the state’s usefulness is answered by the assertion of dominance and the infliction of violence — something that is clearly distressing for those of us resisting oppression. But at the same time, right-wing propaganda and talking points also depict the state as a “nanny state,” or an overprotective manifestation of liberal charity. Clearly, this characterization is as stale as it is untrue. The very idea that liberalism itself is charitable is a blatant falsification, yet the far right continues to disseminate this myth in its unending desire to maximize the state’s fascistic potential while depriving it of its limited welfare functions.

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Austerity measures — something the world has become all too familiar with in recent years — provide us with the brutal confirmation that we never actually needed to dispel the far right's propagandistic falsehoods. As governments around the world cut back on services, regulations and agencies that are meant to benefit social welfare and the public good, the trope of overzealous liberal government is shown to be untrue. Austerity threatens to undermine the very things that are supposed to make societies peaceable. But as consistently seems to happen in a world dominated by capitalism, those who are most vulnerable bear the brunt.

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The expectation that lower- and middle-income people will provide aid during crises with greater passion than the super-rich and state agencies, when we do not have nearly as much money as either of them, is absolutely and utterly ridiculous. But it is this utter ridiculousness that is the quintessence of contemporary capitalism. Though capital is unequally distributed, the burden of fixing whatever the problems of the day may be is all ours, while the elite shy away from ever having to pay as large a price as the cost of being poor in a capitalist society.

One of the most despicable examples of these injustices played out in California, where raging wildfires killed dozens of people in 2017, while inmates were being paid \$2.00 per hour to risk their lives fighting the fires.

Though not all Puerto Ricans are Black, from Flint to San Juan we have seen that when certain geographies are associated with Blackness or the non-white Other, their citizenship can always be called into question. As Zoé and I wrote:

Due to this extra-state location, Blackness is, in so many ways, anarchistic. African-Americans, as an ethno-social identity comprised of descendants from enslaved Africans, have innovated new cultures and social organizations much like anarchism would require us to do outside of state structures.

Now, as Puerto Ricans have worked excruciatingly hard with the assistance of other people throughout the US to pick up the slack of the Trump administration, we can see the emerging contours of an anarchistic response brought about by the climate crisis. In the shadow of Hurricane Katrina and Flint, we have had it proven to us one too many times that the white supremacist state does not care about us. The

consistent need to crowdfund and organize to fill in the gaps of the lackluster response of federal agencies for the richest nation in the world must call into question the very purposes of the state itself.

Trump's proposed military budget of \$700 billion is more than enough to end poverty in the US, make college free, or provide everyone with universal health care — let alone quickly fix the problems in places like Flint, Puerto Rico, and so on. Instead, people are left to fend for themselves, begging the state to carry out the functions it is supposedly obliged to carry out while depending on celebrities and liberal oligarchs to give like the rest of us. This is clearly absurd, given the endless wealth of the state and the gap between the rich and the poor.

DISMANTLING PROGRESS AND PROTECTION

In 2016, Oxfam announced that world's 62 richest billionaires held as much wealth as the poorest half of the world's population. In 2017, this number decreased significantly to just eight people because new information came to light showing that poverty in China and India are much worse than previously thought, widening the gap between the ultra-wealthy elite and the bottom 50 percent. While this information is certainly beyond troubling, capitalism largely continues its path of destruction without being disturbed itself.

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A slew of hurricanes hitting the Caribbean in 2017 made the world pause to consider the dangers of climate chaos. Many of the conversations that took place as a result of the back-to-back destruction wrought by hurricanes Irma, Jose and Maria focused on the threat of a disturbed environment. Under President Trump, these threats are only further exacerbated. As someone who campaigned on rejuvenating the coal industry and who has actively worked to transform climate denialist sentiments into government policy, Trump is one of the worst presidents anyone could hope for at a time of pressing climate disaster. With regard to the aforementioned “deconstruction” of the regulatory state that Banon spoke of, Trump accomplished major strides at the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Under the regressive guidance of Scott Pruitt, a long-time fossil fuel defender, the EPA has seen absurd government moves to destabilize the very purposes of the agency itself in favor of corporate interests.

Pruitt built his career off of suing the EPA as attorney general for the state of Oklahoma. Under Trump, he can now secure his ultimate favor to corporate interests by dismantling the state agency altogether. Everything is up for grabs and the agency has become increasingly secretive about its agenda. The New York Times reported complaints of career EPA employees working under Pruitt, explaining that “they no longer can count on easy access to the floor where his office is,” as well as doors being “frequently locked.”

It has even been said that “employees have to have an escort to gain entrance” to Mr. Pruitt’s quarters, as well as some being told not bring cell phones or take notes in meetings. The *Washington Post* recently reported that the EPA spent almost \$25,000 to soundproof his work area. For a state agency tasked with protecting the environment, the actions being carried out sound more in line with that of federal law enforcement or intelligence at the FBI or CIA.

The example of Pruitt is one of many hinting at an increasingly restructured state, in which right-wing corporate forces that once fought regulation now become the regulator themselves, showing how the will of capital will always fulfill itself in this system. At the same time, as the trifecta of terrible storms hit the Caribbean and the Southern US coastline, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) displayed a similar lack of social concern. In response to the lackluster response of the authorities, local communities were left to fend for themselves, with only a few celebrity figures tasking themselves with taking action. At a very emotional press conference, Mayor Carmen Cruz of San Juan compared the neglect taking place to genocide and shed tears demanding more help for US citizens in Puerto Rico: “we are dying here. And I cannot fathom the thought that the greatest nation in the world cannot figure out logistics for a small island of 100 miles by 35 miles long.”

CITIZENSHIP, EXPECTATION AND FAILURE

The emphasis on Puerto Ricans during the aftermath of Hurricane Maria and the other storms often gives special attention to their American-ness. Despite the fact that the entire Caribbean was hit, the question is why US citizens would be neglected in this way. The logic of American exceptionalism should render everyone within the nation’s borders and territories — or colonies — special due to their citizenship within the bounds of empire. But as Zoé Samudzi and I argued in our essay for *ROAR Magazine*, “The Anarchism Of Blackness,” some US citizens, particularly those of us who are Black, are actually considered extra-state entities.