

Disaster Anarchism: Hurricane Katrina and the Shock of Recognition

[This is a final draft of the text that later appeared as Chapter 7 of the book *The Impossible Community: Realizing Communitarian Anarchism*]

The following reflections on the Hurricane Katrina disaster and its aftermath consider the contradictory, radically divergent dimensions of crisis and traumatic experience. The first part is an abridged version of a text written for an international conference in Milan on Elisée Reclus, the foremost geographer of his time and a major communitarian anarchist political theorist. I was scheduled to do a presentation at the conference. Six weeks before it took place, the Hurricane Katrina disaster hit. At the time of the conference, I was still heavily involved in the recovery, so I quickly composed this text and sent it as my contribution. It was written very much in the midst of crisis, as was the second part, a postscript written nine months later, on the first day of the next hurricane season. The central theme of these reflections is that although the Katrina disaster offers abundant evidence of how crisis creates ideal opportunities for intensified economic exploitation, what has since then come to be called “disaster capitalism,”¹ and also for increased repression, brutality and ethnic cleansing, which might be called “disaster fascism,” it also creates the conditions for an extraordinary flourishing of mutual aid, solidarity and communal cooperation, something we might call “disaster anarchism.”

1.

Reclusian Reflections on an Unnatural Disaster

I was in Dharamsala, India in late August when I heard that a major hurricane was approaching New Orleans. I was there with the Louisiana Himalaya Association, a local group that works with Tibetan refugees. I soon discovered that I was to leave the Tibetan refugee community to return to what had itself become a city of refugees. When I arrived home, I found a city of empty streets, fallen trees, debris scattered everywhere, abandoned cars, flood-ravaged houses, and eerie silence. Since then I’ve been working with the recovery effort in my neighborhood and with several grassroots organizations around the city. Over the past month the city has slowly begun to come back, as symbolized by the “second line” jazz funeral parade that marched through the city Sunday—the first time this has happened since the hurricane.

These reflections are a bit in the spirit of a jazz funeral. They mourn our collective tragedy but speak out also for our collective hope. I believe that they are also very much in the spirit of Reclus, who will frequently be quoted in what follows. If Reclus, despite all his social and ecological prescience, didn’t actually predict the Hurricane Katrina disaster a century in advance, I think that you’ll agree that much of what he said is rather prophetic in relation both to this particular event and to the state of the world in which we live today.

¹ Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Picador Press, 2008).

Writing in the mid-nineteenth century, during his two-year stay in Louisiana, Reclus commented on the ecologically precarious condition of the city of New Orleans. “One has only to dig a few centimeters, or during dry spells, one or two meters, to reach muddy water. Also, the slightest rain is enough to flood the streets, and when a heavy rain beats down over the city, all of the avenues and plazas become rivers and lagoons. The steam engines work almost constantly to rid New Orleans of its stagnant waters and to discharge them through a canal into Lake Pontchartrain, four miles north of the river.”² He noted further that “the districts far from the Mississippi are only a few centimeters above sea level, and people’s homes are separated from the alligator nests only by drainage pools of stagnant and always iridescent water.”³

Since the time of Reclus, the city has spread far beyond the natural levees of the Mississippi and the few so-called “ridges” or higher ground on which it was first constructed. Much of it now lies well below sea level, at times as much as three meters or more. As the city has grown, it has expanded to areas more and more susceptible to flooding, and the job of pumping water out has become increasingly more difficult, and, as we now know, sometimes impossible. Furthermore, the destruction of Louisiana’s coastal cypress forests and the massive erosion of coastline (ultimately reaching the level of forty to fifty square miles, or about one-hundred to one-hundred thirty square kilometers, per year) have resulted not only in the loss of great natural beauty, but also in the elimination of the city’s natural protective barrier against the destructive force of hurricanes.⁴

The Social Ecology of Disaster

Reclus notes that throughout history despots have “placed cities in areas in which they would never have grown up spontaneously,” so that “once established in such unnatural environments, they have only been able to develop at the cost of an enormous loss of vital energy.” Today, he says, such “unnatural” urbanization is caused not by mad tyrants but rather by the despotism of the market: by “powerful capitalists, speculators, and presidents of financial syndicates.”⁵ Our “unnatural metropolis” (as it has been aptly labeled in one geographical work⁶) has grown irrationally and anti-ecologically as a result of the tyranny of capital, with its imperious dictates of profit, growth, development, and blind, opportunistic exploitation.

The local media have repeated the refrain that the true destructive potential of a major hurricane was ignored not only by the politicians and other major decisions-makers but by the population at large. In short, nobody really caught on and nobody really warned us. Nobody is really guilty

² Eliséé Reclus, *A Voyage to New Orleans: Anarchist Impressions of the Old South*, Translated and edited by John Clark and Camille Martin (Thetford, VT: Glad Day Books, 2004), pp. 49-50

³ Ibid, p. 50

⁴ According to an often-cited statistic, the loss of 2.7 miles of coastal wetlands results in about a one-foot (30.5 cm.) increase in storm surge.

⁵ Eliséé Reclus, “The History of Cities” in John Clark and Camille Martin, *Anarchy, Geography, Modernity: The Radical Social Thought of Eliséé Reclus* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004), pp. 190-191

⁶ Craig Colten, *An Unnatural Metropolis: Wrestling New Orleans From Nature* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2005).

because everybody is equally guilty. This is, however, far from the truth, and implicitly a recognition of the depth of fetishistic disavowal. Environmental writers such as John McPhee and Christopher Hallowell⁷ have written eloquently of the coming disaster, official hearings have been held in which its details have been discussed, and even the popular media have eventually occasionally chimed in. Moreover, ecological activists (and certainly the most radical and political ones, who have often been dismissed contemptuously by the complacent mainstream) have continually stressed the dangers of ecologically irrational urban sprawl, deforestation, and coastal erosion, pointed out the aggravating effects of global climate change, with the consequent likelihood of increased storm activity and intensity and rising sea levels, and called for an immediate change of direction. These supposed prophets of doom have now been proven to be the true realists, for this year has already seen the second-highest number of tropical storms in history, and the season is not yet over.⁸

A century and a half ago Reclus saw these destructive social forces at work and suggested what their consequences might be. He observed that “foremost among the causes that have vanquished so many successive civilizations” has been “the brutal violence with which most nations have treated the nourishing earth.” He specifies among the evils that have led to this result that they have “cut down forests” and “caused rivers to overflow.”⁹ In another telling passage from the same early work (1866) he writes of a “secret harmony” that exists between humanity and the natural world and warns that “when reckless societies allow themselves to meddle with that which creates the beauty of their domain, they always end up regretting it.”¹⁰

What they come to regret is called disaster. As in the case of Thanatos in general, disaster is the Thing that *haunts* everyone: the Thing that they spend their lives thinking about by not thinking about it. Reclus was struck by the fact that New Orleans was a city plagued by disaster. And he was perplexed by the seeming complacency of its inhabitants in the face of its ongoing disasters and occasional catastrophes. Soon after his arrival, he was to be stricken in one of the epidemics of yellow fever that periodically killed a large percentage of the city’s population. But what made a greater impression on him at the time of his arrival were the spectacular fires that constantly plagued the city and ultimately destroyed almost all the architecture dating back to the 18th century. “In New Orleans . . . the total destruction caused by fires is equivalent to half of the loss due to similar catastrophes throughout France.”¹¹ He was understandably astounded that New Orleans, a city of 200,000 at that time, could have half as much destruction by fire as his own country, with its many millions of inhabitants.

⁷ John McPhee, *The Control of Nature* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1989), pp. 58-64; Christopher Hallowell, *Holding Back the Sea: The Struggle for America’s Natural Legacy on the Gulf Coast* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), pp. 163-179. See also Richard Campanella’s indispensable work, *Time and Place in New Orleans: Past Geographies in the Present Day* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Co., 2002), especially pp. 38-61 and 78-80.

⁸ Since this was written several more tropical storms and one major hurricane have occurred. The year has seen the most storm activity in the past 150 years.

⁹ “The Feeling for Nature in Modern Society,” in *Anarchy, Geography, Modernity*, p. 127

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 125-126.

¹¹ *Voyage to New Orleans*, p. 53.

Reclus was also shocked by the terrible ongoing loss of life that took place on the river. He observes that “from the construction of the first steamboat up to the present time, more than 40,000 persons have been burned or drowned in the Mississippi because of accidents of all sorts, including explosions, collisions, or fires—an average of 1,000 victims per year.”¹² One of the most striking passages in his “Voyage to New Orleans” is his description of a fire on the river in which seven large steamships in a row were consumed in flames and destroyed.

New Orleans has continued to live with disaster and the threat of catastrophe, along with its continued propensity to think about the unthinkable by resolutely refusing to think about it. As mentioned, it has long been known on some level that a powerful hurricane directly hitting the city or coming close to it would produce a major disaster and possibly even destroy the city. In 1965, the relatively large Hurricane Betsy caused massive destruction and flooding and a number of deaths in and around the city and became part of local legend. Over the next forty years the conditions for catastrophe have only been aggravated. All along there were those few voices crying out in the wilderness (and sometimes on behalf of the wilderness), but their sound was so faint that few noticed their existence. Local officials and media discussed the coming cataclysm only occasionally and exerted little pressure on behalf of adequate preventive measures. Requests for increased funding for hurricane protection were made, but both Congress and a “fiscally conservative” administration could safely ignore the problem and fund imperialist adventures instead, given the lack of outcry for a solution on the part of such seemingly willing victims of the imminent catastrophe.

A Heritage of Violence

Another phenomenon that astounded Reclus was the level of crime and violence in antebellum New Orleans. He said that one town in the Wild West was apparently more violent, but apart from that single case, New Orleans was unsurpassed globally. “The night watchmen are far too few in numbers to be very effective in preventing disasters. . . . The most notorious criminals are hardly ever arrested, except when, emboldened by long success, they have the audacity to kill in broad daylight. Each year, several hundred murders are committed and duly reported by the press, but they are rarely pursued by the judges. However, criminal activity is so excessive that, in spite of the casual nature of justice, 25,000 to 30,000 arrests are made each year.”¹³ Nostalgic southerners, as they wave their little confederate flags, still fantasize about an Old South that was all magnolias and mint juleps, rather than murder and mayhem. Fortunately, we have Reclus to remind us of the deep roots of our heritage of violence, which was itself rooted in long traditions of racism, complacent conservatism and social injustice.

The local traditions that shocked Reclus a century and a half ago continue today. There are still several hundred murders per year in New Orleans (in the worst year there were four hundred), in addition to similarly astronomical rates for many other crimes. So it was not entirely surprising that in the chaos of the aftermath of Katrina there should be an outbreak of crime and violence. Many around the world were shocked by scenes of widespread violence and looting in the city

¹² Ibid., p. 55.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 55-56.

after the storm and by later stories of massive police desertions by the police and police participation in looting and theft.

New Orleanians were appalled to see scenes of crowds carting off entire shelves of merchandise from stores as the police looked on (or joined in), and to hear reports that a military helicopter had been fired on, and that one of the major shopping malls been emptied and then set on fire. Some stories were the result of paranoid delusions, as the claim that hundreds of bodies of shooting victims piled up in the Superdome, though the coroner's office later reported that not a single body was actually found there. Yet, all the horror was not the product of fantasy. Reports of the rape of women trapped in the city by the storm, and of large numbers of elderly people being abandoned to drown helplessly or die in attics of heat exhaustion proved accurate.

The issue of looting ultimately proved to be more complex than the media images implies. The great majority of the public accepted the fact that necessities should be taken from stores and used, but the ugly side of the free enterprise system was seen in frantic plunder of consumer goods for later resale. This was followed by legalized plunder as price-gouging took effect for essentials such as emergency repairs on roofs, and large corporations raked in windfall profits from juicy contracts as they subcontracted the actual work to hard-working but underpaid laborers. As always, the most insidious violence is the systemic violence. The worst looting is the looting that is quite legal.

Games of Chance

The mayor of New Orleans stated several days ago that it will be necessary for decision-makers to "think outside the box" if the city is to recovery successfully. He then proposed that the key to recovery would be reliance on tourism and shipping, the precise industries that the city has depended upon almost exclusively for most of the past century. His one slightly innovative idea was to build more gambling casinos for the tourists, since they have hitherto had only two within the city limits, plus a few more in the suburbs. So much for the boxed-in mind of his honor the mayor.

The mayor's desperate hope that the city's fortunes can be improved by betting on games of chance recalls Reclus' comment on a certain economic delusion that he saw spreading in mid-nineteenth century America. "The American," he noted "is constantly on the lookout for opportunities, waiting for fortune to pass by so he can hop on and be carried away toward the land of Eldorado."¹⁴ There is a sort of pathologically perverse logic to the mayor's gamble. Year after year we bet against the inevitable disaster—and lost. Maybe if we keep betting on (and in) the casinos, we'll finally win.

To many people, indeed to the masses of the populace, the world usually seems like a game of chance. Accordingly, catastrophe always appears like something out of the blue. It seems like something rather—catastrophic! The reason for this is that the rules of the game remain carefully hidden. They are hidden by design, a design we call social ideology, and by a deeper design we call the social imaginary. However, if we make the effort we can gain insight into the nature of

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 59.

these designs, and into the character of the rules of the game. Catastrophe will then appear a bit less catastrophic in one sense, that of overwhelming disaster that seemingly comes from nowhere. But it will appear more catastrophic in the root sense of the term. “Catastrophe” comes from the Greek for “overturning.” A catastrophe thus overturns what has been built up, and it is more or less “catastrophic” according to the nature of the structures that have been built up. So in order to understand the context of catastrophe we need to understand the structures of domination that have created the conditions of catastrophe.

Reclus made an important contribution to just this kind of understanding. In reflecting on the problems of the city he concluded that what he called the “urban question” is inseparable from the more fundamental “social question.” This question, as posed by classical anarchist theory, concerns the nature of the existing system of social domination and the possibilities for the creation of a free, just, ecological society to replace it. If we apply such an analysis to the present question, we will see that the true nature of the Hurricane Katrina disaster in New Orleans can only be understood in relation to the development of underlying, long-term social conditions. We will find that the disaster reflects in very specific ways the interaction of major forms of domination that were analyzed in great detail by Reclus, especially in his magnum opus of social geography, *L’Homme et la Terre*,¹⁵ but also throughout his works.¹⁶

It relates especially to three of these forms of domination. The first of these forms is the state. Reclus attacked the state apparatus and its bureaucracy for being hopelessly inefficient, for aggravating the problems it claimed to solve, for oppressing people through arbitrary and abusive actions, and for concentrating power in the hands of irresponsible and often arrogant officials. The second relevant form is racism. Reclus was unusual among classical radical theorists in grasping racism as a major form of domination, an understanding that resulted in large part from his experiences in Louisiana. And the third form is capitalism. Though Reclus was scathing in his critique of the state, racism, patriarchy and other forms of domination, he was careful to identify capital as the overriding form in the modern period.

The Hurricane Katrina disaster reflects very clearly the dialectic between these forms of domination. The most obvious aspect has been the most blatant bureaucratic inefficiency of the various levels of government and of traditional aid agencies such as the Red Cross, in addition to the oppressiveness of the police. Only slightly less obvious has been the systemic racism that is reflected in the greater impact of the disaster on the black community: the scandalously slow rate at which essential aid reached it; the comparatively low level of aid that was given; the long delays in restoring basic services; and the prevention of community members from returning to their neighborhoods.

Further below the surface, but even more deeply determining are the effects of the priorities of capital. In New Orleans we see a failure to invest in the social (and social ecological) infrastructure (the social ecological base) as quite appropriate from a capitalist standpoint for a community that works primarily in unskilled, labor-intensive, “service” industries such as tourism, food and beverage, entertainment, and gambling. The larger southeast Louisiana region,

¹⁵ Elisée Reclus, *L’Homme et la Terre*, 6 vols. (Paris: Librairie Universelle, 1905-08).

¹⁶ See *Anarchy, Geography, Modernity*, ch. 6, “The Critique of Domination,” pp. 87-112.

with its reliance not only on tourism, but on highly-polluting, socially undesirable petrochemical and extractive industry, must be seen as a semi-peripheral sector, a sphere of greater exploitation relative to investment, within a core economy. Furthermore, racist patterns of urban development have resulted in an extreme concentration of personal wealth outside the city limits, and reinforced segregation within it, so that the city and the poorer areas within it become increasingly less significant from the standpoint of economic and political power—and thus more dispensable socially. At least this is how things must necessarily appear from the systematically distorted perspective of the dominant system of power. Of course, that system does not grasp the organic connection between social and ecological phenomena. Occasionally, however, an event such as a major disaster offers some renewed hints that things are indeed interconnected.

A State of Disaster

Thus, the Katrina disaster revealed strikingly the connection between social and ecological crisis and the disastrous mode of functioning of the modern nation-state. It offered abundant evidence on behalf of Reclus' contention that bureaucracy "impedes individual initiative in every way, and even prevents its emergence" and "delays, halts, and immobilizes the works that are entrusted to it."¹⁷ Media around the world commented with amazement on the shocking ineptitude of the U.S. government in helping victims of the disaster. The huge gap between the imperial state's ability to destroy life and its ability to save it became painfully evident. For those caught in the midst of the disaster, it was galling to realize that the state can in a matter of minutes call in precision (or, tragically, not so precision) bombers to destroy a building on the other side of the planet suspected of containing enemy combatants, while for days on end it proved unable or unwilling to rescue storm survivors seen everywhere on global news media begging for help.¹⁸

For a long time, there was very little aid of any kind to some of the most devastated areas, which were most often in poor and black communities. The city administration not only gave no official recognition or assistance to citizens' efforts at mutual aid and grassroots cooperation but instead engaged in active opposition to it. Citizens attempting to enter the city or to return after leaving were turned away at the city limits. At one point I was taking an injured volunteer to a hospital outside the city limits (since none were open inside the city) and was told that if we left we couldn't return. The same problem arose when leaving the city to seek supplies. For weeks on end it was often necessary to try several routes back into the city before finding police or National Guard members who were flexible enough to allow volunteers through roadblocks.

Barring citizens from their houses and neighborhoods for over a month added to the initial devastation of the hurricane. Further needless destruction of homes and possessions took place during Hurricane Rita, which hit the city only a month after Katrina, as rainwater poured through damaged roofs, wind caused additional damage, mold continued to grow in water-damaged

¹⁷ "The Modern State" in *Anarchy, Geography, Modernity*, p. 210.

¹⁸ Large private bureaucracies—the Charity Establishment—seemed no more competent than those of the state. The Red Cross, which had raised almost a billion dollars in the early weeks after the disaster, was conspicuous by its absence in the areas of greatest need, including the city of New Orleans.

houses, and further looting took place in some areas. If there had not been a drought for the six weeks after Hurricane Katrina (with the exception of one day of heavy rain from Rita) destruction would certainly have been enormously greater.

During the crisis, the state wreaked havoc not only by its exclusion of citizens from the city and its failure to deliver aid to storm victims, but also through its active persecution of those citizens who sought to save and rebuild their communities. Reclus in his important chapter of *L'Homme et la Terre* on "The Modern State," notes that "minor officials exercise their power more absolutely than persons of high rank, who are by their very importance constrained by a certain propriety." Consequently, he says, "the uncouth can give free rein to crass behavior, the violent can lash out as they please, and the cruel can enjoy torturing at their leisure."¹⁹ Such behavior, which is so common on the part of those who govern us, was given free rein during the Katrina disaster.

For example, both local and out-of-state police harassed Seventh Ward community leader Mama D. for remaining in her neighborhood, which was under an evacuation order, and operating an autonomous community self-help project. She was cursed at, called a prostitute, and threatened with arrest. Community activists Jeffrey Holmes and Andrea Garland created in their Upper Ninth Ward neighborhood a "Toxic Art Exhibit," consisting of damaged art works and political slogans, on the neutral ground (the New Orleans expression for "median") in front of their home and art gallery. The exhibit was vandalized by the military that was patrolling the area, and later removed by the authorities. The police later raided the house and arrested Jeffrey on the ludicrous charge of "disturbing the peace. Three young volunteers in the Seventh Ward, who were taking photos of the effects of looting and vandalism, were confronted by police. The police forced them to the ground, kicked one of them (the only African-American in the group) and accused him of looting, held guns to their heads, subjected them to verbal abuse, and then unjustly arrested them all for trespassing. They spent the rest of the day and night on the concrete floor of the makeshift Greyhound station prison and were told they had to plead guilty and do forced labor or be taken immediately to a state prison a hundred miles away. Similar stories of abusive behavior by police and arrests without cause are common in Post-Katrina New Orleans.

On a Street Named Desire

So far I have dwelled primarily on the negative—what we might call the disastrous side of the disaster. However, I would like to turn to the positive and hopeful side of this experience: the extraordinary and inspiring efforts of local and outside volunteers; the reemergence and flourishing of grassroots community; and the creation of hope for a better and qualitatively better future. Despite the suffering and tragedy around us, the weeks I've spent in New Orleans since the hurricane have undoubtedly been one of the most gratifying periods in my life. Seldom have I felt such a sense of the goodness of people, of their ability to show love and compassion for one another, and of their capacity to create spontaneous community.

Out of this disaster has come extensive evidence of the power of voluntary cooperation and mutual aid based on love and solidarity that Reclus described so eloquently. Mutual aid, he said,

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 212.

is “the principle agent of human progress.”²⁰ In his view, the practice of mutual aid would begin with small groups of friends (affinity groups, in effect), and extend out to larger and larger communities, ultimately transforming society as a whole. “Let us found little republics within ourselves and around ourselves. Gradually these isolated groups will come together like scattered crystals and form the great Republic.”²¹ Elsewhere, he says that the anarchist must “work to free himself personally from all preconceived or imposed ideas, and gradually gather around himself friends who live and act in the same way. It is step by step, through small, loving, and intelligent associations, that the great fraternal society will be formed.”²² Reclus believes, based on his study of the vast sweep of the human story since its beginning, that such free association fulfills a deep longing that is deeply rooted in our nature and history.

“Anarchy,” for Reclus means much more than its negative dimension of anti-statism, opposition to coercion, and rebellion against arbitrary authority. It is, above all, a positive practice of social transformation and social regeneration based on non-dominating mutual aid and cooperation. Furthermore, it refers not only to the free, cooperative society of the future, but to every aspect of that society that can be realized in the present, “here and now.” Reclus explains that “anarchistic society has long been in a process of rapid development,” and can be found “wherever free thought breaks loose from the chains of dogma; wherever the spirit of inquiry rejects the old formulas; wherever the human will asserts itself through independent actions; wherever honest people, rebelling against all enforced discipline, join freely together in order to educate themselves, and to reclaim, without any master, their share of life, and the complete satisfaction of their needs.”²³ The free community has enormous potential for “rapid development” precisely because it satisfies fundamental human needs—and above the long-suppressed need for that community itself.

I have found a great deal of this spirit of voluntary cooperation and concern for people’s real needs (in short, the spirit of the gift) in New Orleans over the past month. The most inspiring aspect of the recovery from the disaster has been this grassroots, cooperative effort to practice mutual aid and community self-help. A vast spectrum of local and outside grassroots organizations have been at work in the recovery effort. These include the Rainbow Family, Food Not Bombs volunteers from several states, the Common Ground Collective in Algiers, the Bywater neighborhood collective, the Soul Patrol in the Seventh Ward neighborhood, the Family Farm Defenders from Wisconsin, the Pagan Cluster, and groups from Prescott College in Arizona, Appalachian State in North Carolina and other colleges and universities. Individual volunteers have come from throughout the US, from Canada, and from other countries, often linking up with local community groups or groups of volunteers from outside the state who are working with local groups. I felt great satisfaction when one young volunteer from a distant state said to me explicitly, “We came here to practice mutual aid.” The Idea is still very much alive!

²⁰ *L’Homme et la Terre*, vol. 1, p. 145.

²¹ Letter to Reclus’ sister Louise (no date, 1859), in *Correspondance*, vol. 1 (Paris: Librairie Schleicher Frères, 1911), p. 206.

²² Letter to Clara Koettlitz (April 12, 1895) in *Correspondance*, vol. 3 (Paris: Alfred Costes, 1925), p. 182.

²³ “Quelques mots d’histoire, Suivi de Préface à la Conquête du pain de Pierre Kropotkine” [cited May 31, 2003] at http://fraternitelibertaire.free.fr/reserve/quelques_mots_dhistoire.doc.

For the first week after my return I worked primarily with the collective in the Bywater neighborhood of the city, which was inspired by the Common Ground project across the river in the Algiers neighborhood. My friend Leenie Halbert volunteered her house on Desire Street as the center for the group, which focused on preparing and distributing food to residents who remained in the city. A dozen or so volunteers stayed there or camped nearby and many more came by to help. A Food Not Bombs group from New Haven joined the project, along with many other local and outside volunteers, including many anarchists. Leenie's house became a focus of social activity and hope in a largely deserted neighborhood and city. The food deliveries lifted the spirits of many and were essential to others who were isolated, such as the elderly man who had not heard about the hurricane and flood several weeks after the events.

A reporter from the New York daily newspaper *Newsday* did an article on the group, describing his first encounter with "communitarian anarchists." The reporter explained that Leenie "had come back into town with some of the aforementioned communitarian anarchists—people who believe in do-it-yourself action within small groups. . . . Her aim was to feed the hungry and bring water to the thirsty, to fix the broken homes of her neighbors and to offer a sense of community in their deserted streets."²⁴ He conceded that "whatever Leenie and her friends called themselves and whatever they believed, though, they were doing a good thing," and quoted Leenie's own explanation of what our group was doing: "I just wanted to bring love back to my neighborhood."²⁵ This may be an offense to the militants and foolishness to the post-modernists, but it's as good a description of communitarian anarchism as I have heard.

What might we conclude from these reflections? Reclus' philosophy of life was based on a deep love of humanity and nature, and on a profound faith that the community of humanity and nature can be regenerated and liberated through personal and small-group transformation based on the practice of mutual aid and social cooperation. Though the Hurricane Katrina disaster has demonstrated the irrationality of the system of domination that Reclus analyzed so perceptively, it has also, in the forms of mutual aid and grassroots community that have emerged in the midst of crisis, offered powerful evidence of the viability of his vision of a future society based on love, justice and freedom.

2.

Facing the Future

It is now exactly nine months since Hurricane Katrina. The past months have only reinforced the lessons that were learned in the first weeks after the storm. The abject failure and utter irrationality of the dominant system of state and corporate power have only become more obvious with the passage of time. On the other hand, we have seen growing evidence of the extraordinary and inspiring achievements possible through mutual aid and solidarity.

As we enter the new hurricane season, the situation in New Orleans remains very dismal. The social crisis continues. Most of the members of our community remain scattered around the

²⁴ Alex Martin, "On a Street Named Desire" in *Newsday* (September 26, 2005).

²⁵ *Ibid*,

country in exile, dreaming of return while their homes and neighborhoods lie abandoned and rotting. As we watch the spectacle of hundreds of billions of dollars being squandered on wars of aggression, it is quite clear that the means to assure our exiled citizens the ability to return are abundantly available. Yet, there has been no large-scale, official effort to enable them to come home. Instead, we find a policy of de facto ethnic cleansing in which the generally poor and black majority of New Orleanians remain stranded in distant cities with few resources at their disposal. At the same time, vast areas of our city remain ruined, depopulated, and deteriorating. The means have also been available for a major rebuilding program to save these neighborhoods, but no such program has been undertaken. Even the piecemeal approach that would help a certain segment of needy homeowners has been plagued by delay and under-funding.

What is even more troubling from a long-term perspective is that the city remains vulnerable to further massive devastation by the hurricanes and tropical storms that are expected to increase in frequency and intensity because of global climate change. Even if the repairs and reinforcement of the levees that are underway are completed, they are unlikely to prevent flooding, should another storm at the level of Katrina hit us in the coming months. Most disquieting of all (to those few who are capable of thinking about it) is the real possibility that the long-predicted “Big One” might finally hit the city before a comprehensive protection plan is completed. In the worst case scenario, twenty feet of water might cover even the higher ground and the city could remain underwater for months. No effective plan to protect us from such a killer storm has been adopted, much less put into effect. Neither has any plan been undertaken for comprehensive restoration of wetlands, which are our first line of defense against the kind of storm surge that was so devastating during Katrina. The games of chance continue.

We have just seen a farcical political campaign for mayor and city council in which the enormity of the tragedy and the dangers of imminent catastrophe were not faced. The major candidates were all representatives of business interests and had no intention of raising any difficult questions about social injustice, racism, exclusion of the citizens from decision-making concerning their own communities, and, needless to say, the bankruptcy of the political and economic systems that caused the Katrina disaster. None really confronted the issue of the criminal negligence of the Corps of Engineers, the criminal eco-vandalism of coastal wetlands by the oil industry, or the disgrace of condemning a large segment of our citizenry to indefinite exile. Instead, they engaged in mindless and trivial quibbling over which of them has superior “leadership ability.” Each covets the distinction of leading this great and historic city, though the direction in which they plan to lead us only takes us further into the abyss of social and ecological disaster.

The Social Crisis in New Orleans

It is difficult even to begin to summarize the diverse forms of injustice that we have seen over the months since Katrina. They have included de facto ethnic cleansing, mistreatment and exploitation of migrant workers, widespread police brutality, denial of prisoners’ rights, collapse of the courts and legal system, unfair evictions, price gouging on rent, discriminatory housing policies, discriminatory reorganization of the school system, and gutting of the health care system, to mention some of the more important problems.

Perhaps none of these problem illustrates the depth of the crisis more than does the issue of housing. Lack of available and affordable housing has been one of the major obstacles to the return of evacuees. While thousands of units of public housing suffered little damage, officials exaggerated that damage and have kept the vast majority of public housing residents (who have no other immediate options) from returning. In addition, landlords have often forced residents out of scarce rental units, at times through fraud and subterfuge, to enable them to raise rents drastically. This has effectively driven some residents out of their neighborhoods and prevented others from returning to the community.

Some neighborhoods have even been threatened with complete destruction. HUD secretary Alphonse Jackson notoriously questioned whether the entire Lower Ninth Ward neighborhood should even be rebuilt, though he later backtracked on this position. For the time being, residents who are home-owners are free to begin repair and rebuilding with the hope that sufficient density will be achieved to make their immediate neighborhoods viable. However, the difficulties that residents have experienced in moving back into many areas (lack of jobs, schools, and health care; inadequate funds for rebuilding, repairs or rent; etc.) makes the future of these neighborhoods questionable.

In addition, we have seen the promotion of a “New Urbanist” agenda for rebuilding that puts priority on creating “diverse,” mixed-income neighborhoods in place of predominantly poor, African-American ones. The New Urbanism was already applied before Katrina in the demolition of the St. Thomas Housing Project, which was replaced by an ersatz “urban village” development called “River Garden.” While St. Thomas residents were promised a large share of the new housing, in the end they received only twenty percent or less of the new units and the vast majority of the community was displaced.

In a city with a seventy percent African-American, and heavily poor, population, the redevelopment of neighborhoods into overwhelmingly affluent white enclaves has obvious implications. It is a strategy for re-appropriating desirable real estate that the white elite foolishly abandoned during the white flight hysteria, by displacing a large segment of the poor African-American population that now occupies much of these areas. As whites began to move out of deteriorated, obsolete older suburbs, room was created for a certain segment of the displaced black population to be relocated from historic and architecturally-valuable areas ripe for redevelopment. However, the convenient post-Katrina exile of most of the black population to distant cities has been an even more effective solution to any displacement problem that might stand in the way of the New Urbanist ethnically cleansed utopia.

Post-Katrina housing problems have offered vast opportunities for profiteering. One of the most pressing needs in the effort to preserve our housing stock after Katrina was adequate tarping of roofs to prevent further water damage. Official policy has consistently subordinated community needs to exploitative programs that favor large corporations. In this particular case, large companies were paid \$150 to \$175 per hundred-foot square to install temporary tarps for roofs. After several layers of subcontracting and skimming off of profits, the small companies and crews that finally installed the tarps were sometimes paid as little as \$10 per square for doing the actual physical work. Thus, there has been up to a 1750 percent markup on actual productive labor, an absurd increase that even defies credibility. The companies at the top of the pyramid

justified their plunder in the name of overhead, but it is in fact a clear case of opportunistic exploitation of disaster. Furthermore, considerable funding that could have subsidized permanent roofing for residents who are in need, and who deserve restorative justice, was squandered on what is essentially corporate welfare.

It is tragic that an image that sticks in the minds of many TV viewers is the “looter” walking out of a store with a case of beer or a boom-box in the few days after the Katrina. These viewers miss the more complex that is invisible in the mainstream media. This is the tragic story of the ongoing plunder of billions of dollars by rapacious capitalists, while real grassroots recovery receives sadly inadequate funding.

The Environmental Crisis in New Orleans

The criminal negligence of the Federal government in its levee design policies has become blatantly evident, as careful analysis of the disaster has progressed over the past months. Corps of Engineers commander Lt. General Strock stated before Congress that "levees were never intended to protect against a category four hurricane such as Katrina." This statement is in itself damning, since the charge of the Corps has been to protect the city from catastrophic flooding, yet it indicates that the Corps had no plans to protect the city from inevitable category four or five hurricanes which are becoming increasingly more likely in view of global warming and generally increased storm activity. In fact, the Corps' "Standard Project Hurricane," which is defined as "the most severe storm that is considered reasonably characteristic of a region" was based on ridiculously obsolete data and assumed a level of storm activity that had already been exceeded several times in very recent Gulf Coast climatic history. However, the effects of Hurricane Katrina itself we now know were only those of a low category three hurricane. So the Corps not only failed to prepare for the climatic realities of the region, but also failed to achieve even the inadequate protection that it claimed to have as its goal.

On April 5, Gen. Strock told the United States Senate Subcommittee on Energy and Water that: "We have now concluded we had problems with the design of the structure." This ludicrously ironic understatement is not much a concession, given the level of negligence and malfeasance by the Corps and the enormity of the resulting disaster. Studies based on information that has long been available now show numerous design flaws in many levees. To mention only the most outrageous one, the Corps designed levees in which sheet metal extended only a short distance down into layers of sand that were susceptible to seepage and undermining by canal water, rather than using longer sheets that would have reached a layer of impervious clay.

While Strock and the Corps continue to claim that such problems didn't come to light prior to Katrina, in reality, studies by the Corps as early as 1986 suggested the possibility of failure based on inadequate wall design. Anyone interested in the details of the greatest engineering disaster in U.S. history should read Ivor van Heerden's excellent analysis *The Storm*,²⁶ which presents all the shocking details. It is clear that the Corp of Engineers caused the Katrina disaster through its

²⁶ Ivor van Heerden and Mike Bryan, *The Storm: What Went Wrong and Why During Hurricane Katrina—the Inside Story from One Louisiana Scientist* (New York: Viking, 2006).

malfeasance and the federal government should be fully liable for damages to the lives and property of the victims.

Evidence of the role of wetland loss in the disaster is also now quite clear. If we still had the wetlands that existed fifty years ago and that have been destroyed in the pursuit of maximizing economic exploitation, flooding from Hurricane Katrina resulting from storm surge from the south and east would have been, at worst, moderate rather than catastrophic. It is now known that the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet (MRGO), which was constructed at a huge cost to benefit a few corporations, has eaten up an enormous expanse of wetlands and during Katrina acted as a funnel for storm surge, and vastly increased devastation and deaths. However, the overwhelmingly greatest single factor in overall wetlands loss has been the canalization of coastal areas by the oil industry to support drilling and movement of equipment.

Over two thousand square miles of wetlands, an area almost the size of the state of Delaware, have been lost in the last half-century as the result of this activity. On the other hand, in the same period the oil industry has produced nearly twenty billion barrels of oil in Louisiana's offshore waters, and at peak production the state was producing over three hundred million barrels per year. Enormous wealth has been generated for the national and global economies; however, Louisiana has reaped few economic benefits, while suffering the consequences of massive pollution, destruction of the natural beauty of coastal areas, and the loss of its natural protection from hurricane disasters. There is an enormous issue of restorative justice here. Justice requires minimally that the oil industry be required to undo the enormous harm that it has inflicted on Louisiana in the course of its reckless pursuit of profit by underwriting a significant portion of the cost of restoration programs.

A viable plan to restore Louisiana's coastline has long existed, and its price-tag has been estimated at \$14 billion, a small fraction of the \$200 to \$300 billion estimated cost of Hurricane Katrina's damage. Van Heerden estimates that a comprehensive program to build effective levees and flood gates and also to restore wetlands would cost a total of \$30 billion. In September 2005, newspapers featured a headline announcing the Bush administration's proposal for \$250 million for wetlands restoration. Perhaps many readers thought that this was a generous step in the right direction, but what most of them did not probably grasp was that this allocation (even if it were carried out, which it has not been yet) was less than 1% of the total funds needed to restore our wetlands and complete the public works projects necessary to protect the region. In view of the responsibility of the federal government for creating the disaster, such a level of response is grotesque.

Mike Tidwell, author of *Bayou Farewell*,²⁷ has been one of the few commentators to describe our current dilemma with stark clarity: "To encourage people to return to New Orleans, as Bush is doing, without funding the only plan that can save the city from the next Big One is to commit an act of mass homicide."²⁸

²⁷ Mike Tidwell, *Bayou Farewell: The Rich Life and Tragic Death of Louisiana's Cajun Coast* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003).

²⁸ Mike Tidwell, "Goodbye New Orleans," *AlterNet* (Dec. 9, 2005) at <http://www.alternet.org/katrina/29274/comments/?page=1>.

Mutual Aid and Solidarity in New Orleans

At the same time that the state and corporate capitalism have shown their ineptitude in confronting our fundamental social and ecological problems, the grassroots recovery movement has continued to show its strength, its effectiveness, and its positive vision for the future. Most importantly, within this large and diverse movement, some have begun to lay the foundation for a participatory, democratically self-managed community based on mutual aid and solidarity.

The Common Ground Collective has been at the heart of this recovery movement from the beginning, and has been the major force within it that has focused on putting a transformative vision into practice. Common Ground was founded in the Algiers neighborhood of New Orleans only one week after Hurricane Katrina, when, according to a now legendary account, three friends sitting around a kitchen table, with only a cell phone, \$50, and their own energy, imagination and compassion to work with, decided to take direct action to save the community.²⁹ The former Black Panther leader and longtime Green activist Malik Rahim is one of Common Ground's strongest guiding spirits and its main visionary. Malik's vision includes not only the immediate disaster relief and first response for which Common Ground initially became well-known, but also more far-reaching programs such as sustainable and environmentally sound rebuilding and a solidarity economy based on workers' cooperatives and other forms of mutual aid.

Over eight thousand volunteers have participated in Common Ground's projects over the nine months since Katrina and its aid programs have helped 80,000 people.³⁰ Common Ground volunteers range from students who have come for a week at Thanksgiving or spring break to long-term relief workers who have stayed for months or even moved to New Orleans for long periods to work as permanent staff members. In March alone, 2600 volunteers from 220 colleges, fifty states, and at least eight countries, came to work with Common Ground. During that single month volunteers gutted 232 houses, four schools and one church. The work of the volunteers saved the community and residents the equivalent of \$1.5 million in paid labor.

Common Ground is now an important presence in a number of neighborhoods and has instituted a wide spectrum of programs to serve diverse needs of the community. Its main center has moved three times to accommodate its rapidly expanding activities and is now located at St. Mary of the Angels School in the city's ravaged Ninth Ward. Every classroom in the school building is filled with cots and the center can now house up to five-hundred volunteers at one time. Common Ground operates several distribution centers, two media centers, a women's center, a community kitchen, several clinics, and various sites for housing volunteers. Its current

²⁹ The essential work on the story of the Common Ground Collective is co-founder Scott Crow's *Black Flags and Windmills: Hope, Anarchy, and the Common Ground Collective* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2011). Few works express so eloquently the spirit of communitarian anarchism that is defended here.

³⁰ Since this was written, the total number of Common Ground volunteers has reached 35,000 and its work on many projects continues. For an update, see the Common Ground website at <http://www.commongroundrelief.org>.

projects include house gutting, mold abatement, roof tarping, tree removal, temporary housing, safety and health training, a community newspaper, community radio, bioremediation, a biodiesel program, computer classes, childcare co-ops, worker co-ops, legal assistance, eviction defense, prisoner support, after-school and summer programs, anti-racism training, and wetlands restoration work.

Portraits of Tragedy and Hope

Francesco di Santis is an "embedded artist," "visual folklorist" and long-time Common Ground volunteer. He arrived in New Orleans on September 11, 2005, less than two weeks after Hurricane Katrina, and I met him a week later on Desire Street. He had already begun talking to survivors, evacuees and volunteers and sketching their portraits. He went on to create the "Post-Katrina Portrait Story Project," a collection of over a thousand powerful and expressive portraits, on each of which the survivor or volunteer has written his or her story. The project became one of the official projects of the Common Ground Collective, and collections of portraits could be found on the walls of various Common Ground sites. Francesco also put hundreds of pages of these images and texts online.³¹

Francesco's work is a beautiful and eloquent expression of communitarian anarchist values of communal solidarity and voluntary cooperation based on mutual aid. In the "Foreword" to the collection, he describes the outlook that guided his project:

respecting the heritage of those displaced or dispossessed by disaster is mandatory for disaster relief work. Awareness of regionality is a crucial dimension of politics. . . . New Orleanians in particular tend to have a very strong sense of neighborhood and local culture sadly lacking in lands overtaken by suburban and ex-urban sprawl, car culture, corporate monoculture and mass media consolidation. And recognizing this upon arrival won my heart over.³²

Even a few brief excerpts from the Portrait Story Project say more than many pages of analysis possibly could about tragedy and hope, trauma and transcendence, and the practical meaning of "disaster anarchism."

Many passages in the Portraits evoke the experience called "the Dark Night of the Soul," the descent into the depths of ones being that for ages has been seen as the harbinger of spiritual

³¹ Online at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/postkatrinaportraits/show/>. A collection was also published as a large format art book, *The Post-Katrina Portraits, Written and Narrated by Hundreds, drawn by Francesco di Santis* (New Orleans: Francesco di Santis and Loulou Latta, 2007). The work of post-Katrina volunteers, including many anarchists, is also documented extensively in many recent films, including Danish director Rasmus Holm's *Welcome to New Orleans*, which can be found at <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=829424674434594989> and Farrah Hoffmire's *Falling Together in New Orleans: A Series of Vignettes* (www.organicprocess.com).

³²<http://postkatrinaportraits.org/>

rebirth and awakening. A volunteer relates such an experience powerfully, strikingly juxtaposing images of darkness and light, waking and reawakening. “At night, it gets dark. Darker than I ever knew a city could become. Now the stars can finally be seen. Last night, I woke to the shaking of my room. The walls were rattling and the whole house moved. I clung to my bed. The earth was quaking and I thought, ‘this is it.’ Pieces of the world were coming apart and I tried to grasp onto the remaining fragments of reality—before it was all gone. I woke again.” It is an experience of the world coming apart.

A survivor tells of the trauma of her waking nightmare. “You are looking at the face of a traumatized Katrina survivor! Katrina came and uprooted my family and community like a thief in the night. Been to so many places. You can never know what it was like for me and my child to see everything disappear right in front of our faces. The media lies! So did the people that told me they were taking me somewhere safe, but instead tossed us under a bridge, held at gunpoint without food or water for days on end. I WAS LIED TO when they told me my child and I would be transported to the same place—they lied and separated us.” It is an experience of the seeming disappearance of everything.

Other passages recount the traumatic confrontation with death or the threat of death, along with the disintegration of everyday normality. A volunteer at Charity Hospital describes his horror at finding a Katrina diary written on a marker board in the flooded hospital during the first days after the flood. The tone of the entries by the trapped survivors changes from hopeful expectation the first day to panic and despair by the sixth. “Day 1: We are all ok. . . . Day 2: We are all ok. . . . Day 3: Help is on the way. . . . Day 4: Where is the help? . . . Day 5: Bodies floating in the water! WHERE IS THE HELP? . . . Day 6: WE ARE ALL GOING TO DIE!!” It is the experience of the reality of mortality.

The Portraits are the story of this trauma. But their deepest and most pervasive message concerns what emerged from this devastating, disorientating experience. As Hegel teaches, the confrontation with contingency and death can free one from the empire of the everyday, It can allow a distracted and superficial everyday self to recognize, to respond to, and to give way to a larger reality.

The woman who was mistreated and separated from her child moved beyond the trauma to activism. She says in the end that “this is my home. I want to return to and give back to and help rebuild my community. My name is Miss Donna and I am a survivor of Katrina, the US gov’t, FEMA & media.” Miss Donna went on to become a key figure in Common Ground and to coordinate its Women’s Center. Similarly, the Charity Hospital volunteer responded to his encounter with human tragedy with resolution to help. He says that the thought of the desperation experienced by the flood victims still moves him to tears, but “This is why I’m still here!”

Repeatedly, one finds images of awakening, and references to a new awareness. A survivor says, “My eyes have been opened wide to those of you who have come from afar to help us. I see your eyes open to us and our lives. I see your eyes open to us and our lives.” A volunteer says that “there is something special about living in a disaster zone. I would explain it as a change in

the perception of reality. Mundane events become far more meaningful.” The extraordinary, the marvelous, and even the miraculous are found at the heart of the ordinary.

A photographer from the mainstream media writes of “working in a devastated area in the Ninth Ward,” and of finding realities beyond the reach of that mainstream. “I realized that I was in a place that had been invisible to me, the rest of white America, and to the world before Katrina tore the lid off it.” He was one of many volunteers who was haunted by his experience, and irresistibly drawn back to New Orleans. “I came back in December because I did not want the darkness and neglect, my own and everyone else’s, to descend on this place again.”

A volunteer who had previously worked with the Red Cross writes of her experience of personal and political change. She says that in working with Common Ground she found “authenticity” and “a model of people being the power instead of the bureaucracy.” She says that “this one week experience struck me so much that for three months at home I just wanted to come back.” She returned, and is moved by “seeing flowers and birds coming back literally and figuratively.” She concludes that “out of deep hurt can come beautiful transformation personally and collectively.” Many volunteers expressed such a feeling of engagement with people and communities, and with their needs, their problems and their possibilities. They began to realize that such active involvement was something that they had consciously or unconsciously longed for. I spoke to a nurse with Common Ground Health Clinic who said that she had been waiting all of her professional life for this experience.

Volunteers and survivors often described the experience of a break with conventional reality, and the emergence of a new time and space of possibility. A volunteer who rushed from the Aegean coast immediately after Katrina, says that he learned that “what matters most” in the wake of Katrina there was a “system crack” in which new realities had become possible. As a result of this “crack” or break, “we now have the chance to help enact a transformation.” He, like many, found that in the midst of disaster there is a reappearance of the outside, that powerful otherness that challenges the official reality and creates previously unimaginable possibilities. He found renewed faith in the possibility of widespread social change, as he imagined the effects of “all points radiating out from this our swampy heaven.”

One survivor, in the midst of suffering and disaster, was able to say “I have had and am having one of the greatest experiences ever,” and, of her still largely destroyed city, “I love this place!” Similar sentiments were expressed by many. What such often-expressed sentiments signify is, in part, that out of disaster has come an ability to experience the beauty, the wonder, and the sacredness of the place, and of the people of the place. Once again, perhaps for the first time since the enchanted world of childhood, one achieves the capacity to perceive the extraordinary within the ordinary. The trivial aspects of life are pushed to the side and one appreciates the intrinsic value of persons and things. Such sentiments are also a response to qualitatively different forms of activity that had begun to take place in that place. One could become deeply immersed in action that expresses values such as mutual aid, solidarity, love of the community, compassion, sharing, the spirit of the gift, equality, anti-hierarchy, the quest for justice, and outrage against the manifold abuses of racism, capitalism, sexism, authoritarianism, bureaucratism, and all forms of oppression, exploitation, and domination. One could experience one’s own activity as intrinsically valuable.

After an account of desperate and often frustrating struggles against overwhelming challenges, one volunteer concluded that “a revolution is being born.” This is easy to dismiss as hyperbole, the naïve enthusiasm of someone caught up in the moment. But that’s precisely the point. There is a transformative moment that can become a powerful reality, if one has the negative capability to be caught up in it. It becomes the decisive moment, the moment of insight. It becomes the revolutionary moment, the moment in which things begin to turn around. The crucial question is whether this moment will lead to many other such moments. The answer is in the lives of the thousands who were caught up in those moments. Who knows where they will lead? How caught up are they?

There are hints about the extent of such possibilities. Sometime after Katrina, a young woman from Rumania contacted me, saying mysteriously that she was on her way to New Orleans from England, that she needed to talk to me, and that she would tell me why when she got here. When we met, she told me that she had been a student in Oxford, and her roommate there had been a volunteer in New Orleans after Katrina, and had spoken very movingly to her of that experience. She said that she did not want to return to Rumania, and that she felt that England was spiritually dead. She had crossed the ocean looking for spiritual life, for meaningful engagement in the world. What she had heard about post-Katrina New Orleans had inspired her. She decided that she had a vocation here, perhaps to study philosophy, but above all to become immersed in the life of the community and to serve it.

I don’t know what she is doing now, but her story only is one of many like it. The best are full of passionate intensity! There is a convergence of such stories, in which a personal quest becomes more and more a collective reality. There develops (in Proudhon’s words) a *force collective*, which is also a *force imaginaire*. It draws together many in whom dwells (to use Landauer’s words) the same spirit. It makes possible the impossible community

The few excerpts from the Portraits quoted here only begin to convey the depth, the beauty, the humanity, and the spirit of hope expressed in these works. What they and many similar experiences show is that the trauma of disaster can lead in very divergent directions. One direction is the “disaster capitalism” that is exhibited in rampant profiteering, exploitation of migrants and other workers, and predatory development projects. Another is the “disaster fascism” that is manifested in police brutality, racist stereotyping of survivors, and ethnic cleansing of neighborhoods and communities. In a certain sense, both of these developments are merely an extrapolation and intensification of business as usual.

But finally, there is a “disaster anarchism” that breaks radically with this ordinary course of things. It consists of an extraordinary flourishing of love, compassion, solidarity, mutual aid, and voluntary cooperation. Within it there emerges a strong sense of the possibility of a qualitatively different way of life, through the actual experience of that other way of living. Through crisis, people are shocked into a renewed awareness of their shared humanity, of what is, on the deepest existential level, of most value to them as human beings. They grasp the simple truth that the young Marx expressed so well when he said that the “greatest wealth” for the human being is “the other human being.”

As a well-worn cliché tells us, crisis is a time of both danger and opportunity. The danger lies in the familiar depredations of disaster capitalism and disaster fascism. The opportunity lies in the often neglected possibilities of transformative disaster anarchism.