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Acts of God and Enclosures in New Orleans

By George Caffentzis

The relief effort in New Orleans has had far graver implications for the city's inhabitants than the physical devastation of hurricane Katrina – it represents one of the 'largest and swiftest urban enclosures' in US history. Far from returning things to normal, Bush's neoliberal administration is using the disaster as an opportunity to evict its black working class residents, hand land over to big business and drive down wages – argues George Caffentzis

Dedicated to Megan Perry, who died in New Orleans while in struggle against the New Enclosures[1]

When Hurricane Katrina blew through New Orleans on 28 August 2005, the levees broke and a large part of the city was flooded. Hundreds of New Orleanians drowned and hundreds of thousands fled the city. Katrina was one of the worst *natural* disasters in US history, but what made it so disastrous was the *governmental* response to it. Inevitably, this response became a prism to critically analyse the politics of the Bush Administration. The main motives that have emerged to explain its complicity in the disaster are racism and hostility to ecological considerations. The critics agree that if New Orleans was not a majority black city, then the Bush administration's assistance would have been swifter and more generous and that Bush's pro-corporate agenda impeded efforts to preserve the Mississippi Delta wetlands that could have blunted the impact of the storm.

These analyses of the causes of the New Orleans disaster in the Bush Administration's 'right-wing' ideology are sound, but they do not get at the stark meaning of Katrina on New Orleans in class terms. Below I claim that capital will have to stop or ameliorate natural disasters such as Katrina (whose aggravation by capitalist development makes the distinction between natural and man-made disasters moot) *unless* it can use them to accumulate!

We are at a historical moment similar to the one at the beginning of the nuclear weapons era. In August 1945 the US capitalist class made clear its support for the use of nuclear weapons to destroy any (inter- or intra-class) opponent that seriously threatened its domination, but the question still remained: would the use of nuclear bombs become a *normal* part of warfare in the future? If there had been a consensus that such warfare increases the average rate of profit, I believe that there would already have been many 'nuked' cities. But there was enough fear that the normal use of these weapons might lead to a world-wide revulsion towards and rebellion against capitalism or, at least, a loss of control over workers in the US in the event of a nuclear war that Hiroshima and Nagasaki have remained the only cities to be attacked with nuclear bombs up until now. Similarly, unless capital concludes that the hurricanes, floods, droughts, and mass fires caused or aggravated by global warming, for example, cannot be used to impose greater control over workers and to achieve higher profits, what we have seen in post-Katrina New Orleans will be normalised and applied throughout the world. This is what makes the fate of the city so important both for New Orleanians *and for the rest of us*.

Furthermore, the contemporary model for managing the working class in disasters is increasingly warfare. Workers in a disaster are increasingly being turned first into right-less beings and then, when they resist, they become the 'enemy'. In this logic, the refugee quickly turns into the terrorist.

I argue that the Bush Administration's path to making Katrina a moment of development is through an enclosure, i.e. by uprooting and dispersing a combative, culturally rich and largely black community strategically placed at the geographical centre of the US's oil, natural gas and chemical industries and

replacing it with a 'more profitable' and politically docile population. The US military's intervention during and after Katrina was crucial to stripping black New Orleanians of their rights, even their property rights, in this enclosure.

I will make my case for this analysis by examining the role of the government agencies most involved in the New Orleans disaster: the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the US military. Their behaviour will show that war has become the model for disaster relief and profit the measure of its success.

A Short History of Emergency Management in the US

It is important to have a historical perspective on FEMA's Katrina performance because it was a turning point in the US government's 'emergency management'. Let us review this history in three phases.

In the first phase, lasting from the beginning of the republic to the 1930s, there was no Federal commitment to respond to disasters (natural or man-made). They were legally categorised as *acts of God*, i.e., unforeseen and uncontrollable natural events, in order to indemnify one party in a contract against the occurrence of a disaster that prevents him or her from carrying out the contract's terms. As a private party would not be contractually responsible to act when God acted, the only disaster relief that could be relied upon was from the *ad hoc* resources of communities affected and the 'charity' of the onlookers. In the paleo-liberal logic of that time, any general commitment to subsidise those who lose property due to an 'act of God' is an illegitimate use of public funds.

The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 is a good example of this laissez-faire approach to emergency management. Local capitalists were in charge of dealing with the broken levees and controlling the poor, mostly black refugees. Their main concern was to keep their work force physically tied to the land and not to provide them with funds to escape. But Federal policy towards disasters was changing, for in the following year the Congress passed the Flood Control Act of 1928 that allocated \$325 million for the construction of new levees on the lower Mississippi.

The second, 'Keynesian' phase began in earnest in the 1930s, responding to the working class refusal to take the unemployment and hunger caused by the Great Depression as another 'act of God'. Key to this period was the Federal government's new commitment to the reproduction of the nation's labour power. The working class then had to be recognised as an agent in the social equation and its value preserved or at least negotiated even in disasters.

This transition can be seen by comparing the Flood Control Acts of 1928 and 1936. The first Act was very specific as to the locales of aid, but the 1936 Act recognised that flood control was a 'proper activity of the Federal Government in cooperation with the States, their political subdivisions, and localities thereof'. Subsequently, the US Army Corps of Engineers was budgeted the funds and given the authority to initiate flood control projects throughout the nation. Other agencies were then formed to deal with a wide set of disasters besides floods. By the late 1970s there were more than a hundred Federal agencies committed to responding to major disasters like the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant incident.

FEMA was created in 1979 to centralise these agencies. It often operated as a last remnant of Keynesianism during the neoliberal era of the 1980s and 1990s, since it was in charge of putting a bottom to the value of labour power in extremis and of having a plan to deal with the full spectrum of emergencies. This was a distinctly Keynesian brief in a time when economic planning and welfare programmes designed to overcome 'market failures' were being rejected by both political parties. FEMA remained as a comforting (or troubling) relic of a time when the Federal Government was

committed to preserve (if not increase) the value of the working class. Indeed, with the end of the Cold War, FEMA's direct military role (in civil defence) actually decreased and it focused almost completely on preparing for natural disasters.

The third phase of FEMA begins with the presidential coup that was September 11, 2001, that brought it under the administrative control of the newly formed Department of Homeland Security (DHS). The 'War on Terror' then became its major brief and it also finally fully aligned itself with the neoliberal project whose basic premise is that labour power is to be denied a guaranteed value. The Federal Government's approach to Katrina revealed both a neoliberal *and* militarised approach to emergencies. The government imposed itself through its *selective absence* as well as its *militarised presence* in post-Katrina New Orleans, just as Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) throughout the Third World involved the use of a tremendous state violence to end state 'control'.

FEMA and the New Orleans-Hurricane Katrina Coincidence

Though FEMA's behaviour in New Orleans overtly failed to fulfil any part of its bureaucratic mandate – 'responding to, planning for, recovering from and mitigating against disasters' – it covertly put into place the third phase of emergency management: neoliberal militarisation. Consider first its overt failures.

Planning for: Emergencies are supposed to be surprising, but FEMA predicted in 2004 most of the damage Hurricane Katrina caused. In fact, *National Geographic* in October 2004 published predictions from a FEMA-sponsored simulated response exercise that correctly described the course of damage Katrina inflicted in New Orleans a year later, including the breaching of the levees. Plans were made on the basis of this foreknowledge at least a year before the hurricane. The problem, of course, was with the plans themselves, not the lack thereof. They took as a given that about a hundred thousand New Orleanians would be 'left behind' and be 'on their own' for several days, since they had no private transportation and/or needed extra assistance.

Responding to: Tens of thousands of those who remained in the flooded city went by foot to the Superdome and the Convention Center expecting to be bussed out. The buses did not arrive for days. Louisiana Governor Blanco said that she had 500 school buses that were ready to go into New Orleans immediately after Katrina passed, but FEMA rejected their use as they were not air conditioned and could cause heat stroke! FEMA, according to Blanco, said that it would provide buses, but since they were chartered from Greyhound and other firms (many from out of state), they did not reach New Orleans until 1 and 2 September, more than four days after the storm had passed and the levees had been breached.

Recovering from: FEMA's role in the recovery effort in New Orleans had much to do with alternative housing for what became Katrina's 'refugees', i.e., paying for hotel or motel rooms throughout the region and setting up trailers in the New Orleans area to help the return of the population. As of January 2006, more than four months after the hurricane struck, FEMA was paying for over 25,000 hotel rooms and claimed to have 30,000 trailers available (but not yet set up) to house returnees, once they had been properly sited.

The story of the hotel rooms has been defined by FEMA's efforts to end the subsidies as soon as possible (even though there was no long-term housing available for many of the displaced New Orleanians). FEMA continually changed the termination date for subsidies from the start of the process. Consequently, the scattered refugees did not have a guarantee that they at least would have a roof over their heads until they could return.

FEMA's major 'recovery' strategy seems to have been to spread displaced New Orleanians as far from their homes as possible and to provide as little support for their return as possible. This is where the trailers come in. If they were sited in the neighbourhoods people fled during the floods, there would be a concrete incentive and legal cover for the renters and owners to return 'home'. But the continual shifting of FEMA trailer siting commitments has undermined the will of thousands to return.

Mitigating against: The main 'lesson' in mitigating future disasters that FEMA has apparently learned from its adventure in New Orleans is that it should defer to the military in Katrina-sized disasters.

The Militarisation of New Enclosures

A striking aspect of the post-Katrina New Orleans story was FEMA's public humiliation. Accusations of failure were first aimed at FEMA director Michael Brown, and they continue to be directed at other FEMA-related figures to this day. For example, in its recent study of Federal agencies' Katrina responses, the Government Accounting Office harshly criticised Michael Chertoff, the chief of the DHS, for poor leadership (while lavishing praise for the work of the Coast Guard and the Pentagon).

Indeed, a couple of weeks after Katrina, President Bush himself, who is so averse to admitting error, accepted responsibility for FEMA's 'failures'. This surprising presidential admission, however, was functional to his administration's larger strategy: transferring disaster response to the military. *FEMA had to 'fail', in order for the military to 'succeed' in New Orleans.*

In the past, the military in the form of the state National Guards was often dispatched to scenes of disaster. These Acts of God not only opened up 'a state of nature', but they also posed the possibility that the common bonds of mutual aid developed during the suspension of civil government would open up new modes of social coordination outside the control of the state and capital. The arrival of the National Guard at the disaster site usually marked the end of both the state of nature and the carnival of new possibilities revealed in the complex mixture of terror and hope disasters evoked. But the military's role in New Orleans was not only to set the framework of a return to 'normality', *it was to create a new territorial and demographic reality.*

Within one week the military presence in the area affected by Katrina grew dramatically. On Wednesday, 31 August there were 10,000 National Guard troops on hurricane duty in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida and seven Navy ships staged or on route; by 7 September there were 41,000 National Guard troops and 17,000 Active Duty troops in the area, the Navy had 21 ships south of Mississippi and Louisiana, the Coast Guard had 4,000 sailors on hand while different branches of the military provided 350 helicopters and 75 aircraft.

The military defined the 'rescue' for the public. Within a few days after the hurricane hit, the dramatic pictures of the floating bodies of the dead and the bitter, angry or frightened faces of the thousands of mostly poor and black New Orleanians trapped in the Superdome and Convention Center were replaced by rumours that the city was 'out of control'. Apparently the streets were filled with 'looters and rapists' and the roof-tops were sprinkled with 'snipers' shooting at the rescuers. The story became 'the Army rescues New Orleans from its people', instead of 'the Army rescues the people of New Orleans'.

On Friday, 2 September, Brigadier General Gary Jones, commander of the Louisiana National Guard's Task Force, said to the press:

This place is going to look like Little Somalia. We're going to go out and take this city back. This will be a combat operation to get this city under control.

While the stories of large-scale looting, rapes, and sniping were being debunked as urban legends by mid-September, the true target of the military occupation of New Orleans emerged. It was directed against resistance to one of the largest and swiftest urban enclosures in the country's history. The US soldiers and sailors gave a forceful external face to the Mayor's and Governor's evacuation orders and the prohibitions on return. It was one thing to face down local police officers (who might be your neighbours) when you tried to return to your 'condemned' home, but it is another to refuse an order to leave from a squad of soldiers fresh from battles in Iraq.

The militarisation of New Orleans and the degradation of its black population, therefore, were essential to the mutation of a 19th century 'Act of God' into a 21st century 'Icon of Capital'. Without them the current estimates from a recent National Science Foundation (NSF) study that up to 80 percent of the New Orleans black population will not return would not be credible. Otherwise, by now, instead of much of the city being empty, with almost two-thirds of its pre-Katrina population living outside, the 'natural' drift of the population would have brought many back and transformed places like the 9th Ward into an improvised, informal but lively community similar to those found throughout the Americas struggling with the authorities for resources and autonomy. The US military and not Katrina performed the role required in every enclosure: *the violent force that separated and continues to separate workers from their community of support and subsistence*. True, the soldiers and sailors did save some New Orleanians from the floods at first, but their major long-term role is to be the bailiffs of the enclosures.

For the object of the New Orleans enclosures is the opposite of the local ruling class's goal in the 1927 flood. Instead of fixing black workers to the soil (a plan which ultimately failed, since many of them fled north in the 1930s), the aim now is to remove *en masse* a black working class population that was 'too expensive' and antagonistic to reproduce on site and scatter them throughout the South, further undermining already low wage levels there by intensifying the competition between documented black citizens and undocumented Hispanic immigrants at the bottom of the labour market.

The one thing that has not changed, however, is the old contradictory/ complementary structure of racist stereotypes deployed in justifying the 1927 'concentration camps' and the 2005/2006 'enclosures'. This structure's tried-and-true 'logic' dictates a metamorphosis from the image of the black person as being totally dependent on external assistance to one of the black person as irrationally angry, vengeful and violent. The endless substitution/juxtaposition of these images from 'right wing' talk shows and internet blogs to photos in major media outlets leads in the public imaginary to the denial of any autonomy to black people in the disaster and to the erasure of their rights. That is why it was so easy to switch the New Orleans storyline from one of compassion to fear and hostility almost instantaneously.

The main use of this ancient racist machine now is to justify the replacement of poor and black New Orleanians in the city by another 'more valuable' population that would make the investment in levees and other flood prevention measures worthwhile. Katrina is to be a moment of neoliberal 'punctuated social evolution'. As the NSF-sponsored study mentioned above showed, of the 354,000 people who lived in New Orleans neighbourhoods where flood damage was moderate to severe, 75 percent were black, 29 percent lived under the poverty line, more than 10 percent were unemployed and more than half were renters. It would make no sense from a neoliberal perspective to invest billions of dollars on state-of-the-art levees that can withstand category 4 or 5 hurricanes at the cost of tens of thousands of dollars per resident unless the persons subsidised were 'worth it'. Of course, this does not mean that a new population of well-healed and docile 'urban pioneers' will automatically appear on cue. Indeed, it might be that the flooded areas of New Orleans will not be repopulated for years to come and the wrecked and abandoned hulks of homes in the 9th Ward will become symbols of neoliberalism's disastrous hubris.

But for the moment, the military intervention's success in carrying out and legitimating the expulsion of and banning of much of the black population from New Orleans made it possible for the Bush Administration to unveil the next step in its new conception of emergency management. This transition from the civilian to military was first embodied on 9 September, 2005 when Michael Chertoff replaced FEMA director Brown with Vice Admiral Thad W. Allen, Chief of Staff of the US Coast Guard, as the immediate supervisor of Katrina relief efforts. On 15 September and later on 25 September President Bush suggested that the US military should have responsibility for emergency management in all cases of major natural disasters. He asked:

Clearly, in the case of a terrorist attack, that would be the case, but is there a natural disaster – of a certain size – that would then enable the Defence Department to become the lead agency in coordinating and leading the response effort?

The response he got from some generals was quite positive. Major General John White, for example, said that the response to Katrina was a 'train wreck' and called for 'a national plan' for responses to natural disasters. Soon after this discussion, the Department of Defence began a review of the 1878 *Posse Comitatus* Act that restricts the US military from taking on police functions like arrest, search, and seizure on US territory. The coming debate over the revision of this old law will be the legal face of the effort to go to a new level of militarising emergency management for the purpose of shoring up neoliberal policies. New Orleans is to be the model of the future!

The Right to Return

Can these militarised enclosures be defeated? We have not yet seen in New Orleans the type of massive and decisive resistance to the neoliberal logic of post-disaster relief that occurred after the 1985 Mexico City earthquake when thousands of people in the poorest neighbourhoods refused to accept the government's conditions on reconstruction aid. This is not surprising, because the majority of the *real* potential subjects of resistance were driven far from the city and remain outside until now (compared to the 'multitude' of looters, rapists and snipers inhabiting the media's imaginary). These people are now making a sober assessment of the possibilities of return versus the often positive aspects, at least in the short-term, of their new site of life. For the New Orleans enclosure to be successful, a large percentage of these displaced workers must find the return too risky and repulsive and/or their present situation more guaranteed and attractive.

The forces of enclosure, from the Bush Administration to the real estate developers, are working quietly and effectively to have these displaced ones stay away, while a wide variety of organisations have launched campaigns to call them back. They range from old-line social democratic organisations like The National Urban League and the NAACP, to the community activists of ACORN and the Common Ground Collective, to the various forms of black-identified organisations like the African American Leadership Project and the Nation of Islam. All are, in different ways, demanding that the displaced have decision-making power on the use of Federal funds and on the plans for reconstruction of the flooded parts of the city, including the levees. These 'right of return' declarations also demand that they be given preference in the process of rebuilding the city either in terms of jobs and wages or loans for refounding businesses.

The 'right to return' is a logical demand to make in the face of an enclosure, but for it to be more than rhetorical, *a large number of those demanding the right to return need to have returned. Moreover, the international movement against neoliberalism must put support of this right at the top of its agenda.* Otherwise, the New Orleans enclosure might succeed, encouraging capital to use coming disasters (from the avian flu pandemic to catastrophic species extinctions) for its profit.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Note on Megan Perry: Megan Perry, a member of the People's Free Space in Portland, Maine, organised an effort to bring volunteers and resources to New Orleans in November 2005. The crew left on the Free Space's biodiesel-powered 'Frieda bus' and on arrival in New Orleans they worked with the Common Ground Collective in a wide variety of projects from mould removal to opening a community garden. On 10 December, 2005 the Frieda bus had a road accident on I-10 in New Orleans. Meg was killed and a number of other volunteers were injured. Since then a new organisation was formed in Maine, the Hurricane Autonomous Workers Collective, and the Common Ground Collective dedicated a community garden to Meg. For more information on the project and Meg, write to the Hurricane Autonomous Workers Collective in Portland, Maine <hawc AT riseup.net> and to the Common Ground Collective in New Orleans: <http://www.commongroundrelief.org>

George Caffentzis <gcaffentz AT aol.com> is a member of the Midnight Notes Collective and a coordinator of the committee for Academic Freedom in Africa