

Anarchy in New Orleans?

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“Anarchy Disrupts US Storm Relief” claims the BBC. “Scenes of Anarchy in Super dome” declares CNN. “Anarchy in the streets”. But what's really going on in New Orleans? Whether or not the hurricane itself is the result of human actions is questionable, but what is clear is that the chaos and death in the Big Easy are anything but the result of anarchy.

by Shevek

Despite the cowboy rhetoric, from the day we are born we are conditioned through schooling, through the family, and through observations of existing social structures to be dependent on hierarchical relations. We quickly excel at taking orders and then either processing them or relaying them to others without question or thought. Even when we do 'learn', we mainly act as a receptacle for information, focusing on absorbing facts and formulas, rather than learning through practice, free to trial and error, how to make decisions and how to think for ourselves. Our free thought processes and creativity (with the exceptions of specific kinds that serve limited roles) become highly underdeveloped, even further trapping us in the master/slave character. This social conditioning is by no means an accident, but rather a necessary component of our smooth functioning later in life when we begin to sell our labor.

Due to the highly bureaucratic and centralized nature of our existing economic and political systems, and the extreme specialization of knowledge, we quickly become alienated from our surroundings, institutions that exist on an abstract, rather than human-social level. Like radio or television dramas, politics and current events are absorbed packaged as a commodity requiring little to no thought. Most of us lack even a basic working knowledge of the means through which we live, through which our society is organized. Not allowed to ask why, we no longer care how.

“Whoever is winning at the moment will always seem invincible” - George Orwell

The nature of government forms a praxis, both creating and playing off of our subordination and alienation. The existing abstract social relations are presented as invincible and eternal. The power of the policeman is benevolent, but complete. Existing legal mores and economic relations become internalized and spit back up as 'human nature' or 'higher morality'. The sharp authoritarian and anti-social nature is so omnipresent that it becomes invisible, beyond comment or question.

Katrina brought that all crashing down.

In times of crisis the seemingly peaceful social relations are violently exposed in their true light. While the rich quickly leave to their second homes, the poor were are left behind. Some reluctantly accepted help from the state and where ushered into the Superdome, not knowing what else to do. Others, unable to go, or unwilling to leave behind their only possessions remained, choosing to brave out the storm.

The role of government is clear. News reports the evening of the storm were filled with stories of police chiefs lamenting that they 'had' to focus their attention on battling looters rather than saving those in need. While thousands sat starving, stranded on their roofs, armed patrols marched and floated down the streets engaging in battles with people appropriating goods that could no longer be sold. Soon the media began reported that the National Guard was too thinly stretched fighting imperial wars overseas to provide relief here at home.

As help poured in from around the world - donations of medical aid and boats to rescue survivors, offers of housing around the country, technical help so survivors could contact their loved ones - motivated by nothing other than a common humanity, those who had put their faith in the state and had gone to its shelters quickly learned that not only where they not supplied food, water, or dry clothes, but they were not even free to leave. All relationships with the state, even those seemingly based on support, quickly become dependent.

Inside the Superdome, dead bodies began to pile up as the National Guard stood by helpless. Quickly the conditions inside became intolerable. A people, conditioned not to think for themselves and not to act for themselves, began realizing that the social abstraction they put their faith didn't care about them, and was unable to assist them. The gun battles that began to erupt around the stadium, however irrational, show the frustration and fear of a caged animal forced to walk, after being

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released for the first time.

Likely, New Orleans will be closed off, and all traffic to it blockaded while specialists begin to rebuild the city. Because of their faith in bureaucratic abstractions, rather than in themselves and their community, thousands have likely lost their lives to a devastating storm. Unable and unwilling to act for themselves, left to die while offers of support from ordinary people are turned down by a government focused on “maintaining order”, the harsh outcome of our hierarchical relations is only too clear.

Rather than 'anarchic' chaos or disorder, the violence and ruin on the streets of the Big Easy are the only possible endgame of the debilitating and alienating social conditioning and economic relations of a bureaucratic capitalist state. Disasters like this can only be met when ordinary people begin to work together on a human level, to the best of their abilities helping each help each other get through, instead of relying on highly bureaucratic and irrational social abstractions to save them. Then there will actually be anarchy in New Orleans.

<http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/2005/09/322379.shtml>