

Disaster communism & anarchy in the streets



Queensland 2011

In January I sat in front of my TV spellbound by the floods that swept through Queensland. For those of us who have been campaigning for years around environmental issues and climate change the floods weren't a huge shock. However the feelings of helplessness in the face of such astounding power can rapidly flow into the sort of defeatism experienced by those who believe that it's too late to make a difference in the face of widespread environmental destruction. My initial reaction to the flooding was to contact family and friends, isolated in rural Queensland and evacuated in the face of the rising waters in Brisbane, offering what support I could. The floods starkly posed the questions – What should we, or could we, do in the face of such power? Yet no sooner had these questions been posed than a multitude of answers were immediately provided by those who individually and collectively confronted the disaster, working alone and together to protect homes, salvage communities, minimise injury and save lives.

During the days that followed I was reminded of Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine*. Klein's book details how neo-liberalism takes advantage of people's disorientation following massive collective shocks – wars, terrorist attacks and natural disasters – to push through unpopular economic measures often called 'shock therapy'. In *The Shock Doctrine* Klein does a good job of exposing what she calls 'disaster capitalism'. Most of the book is an unremitting horror story, a powerful and grim exposition of the viciousness of contemporary capitalism. There is little else in the book apart from violence, torture, terror, surrender and defeat. The problem with this concentration on, and emphasis of, the power of capital and capitalist state forms, is that it ends up reinforcing the shocks of disaster capitalism. What would have made this book more useful to those struggling for a better world was greater attention to the growing alternatives to the 'shock doctrine'. It is not until the very end of the book that Klein acknowledges those who "are learning how to build shock absorbers into their organising models" through the development of "democracy in daily life". Here she explains that the experience of living through a disaster "is the feeling of being completely powerless: in the face of awesome forces, parents lose the ability to save their children, spouses are separated, homes, places of protection, become death traps". However what she and many others dealing with disasters have learned is that the best way to recover from helplessness is helping, being part of a communal recovery.

Even before the Queensland floods arrived in many areas people had already formed human chains, organised defence groups to protect homes from the rising water, turned neighbourhood centres into bases for local organising and set up resident action groups to address the needs of those affected. Then there were those who risked and lost their lives. Most of the daring rescues were carried out by ordinary people. And no formal duty made emergency service workers throw themselves into harm's way. All of these heroes risked their lives and gave of themselves, not for glory, a pay packet or a promotion, but because of their humanity. And nothing requires that people help out afterwards. Those, like me, watching on TV, went from being shocked by the floods devastation to being awestruck by people's response. In the water's wake came a great surge of common feeling and collective action from tens of thousands of eager volunteers. Prime Minister Julia Gillard exclaimed that "The scale of the volunteering is taking people's breath away . . . literally everyone is trying to find someone to help, selflessly going and helping a neighbour". Flood survivor Christina Avolio told the media there was "so much kindness it makes you want to cry".

Queensland Premier Anna Bligh quickly attempted to have the government organise, and claim as 'Operation Compassion', those who turned up to clean out inundated homes and streets. However the Brisbane City Council, which organised the cities 'official' volunteer force, had to turn away thousands of people every day for whom it simply didn't have any transport. Most of them, took it upon themselves to get to wherever they could be most useful. In fact, they had a better chance of getting more done this way. The government's attempts to coordinate the stream of volunteers was severely hampered by the time and energy wasted on red tape and bureaucratic stupidity. Although there were hundreds of 'official' volunteers in many areas scraping and digging away at the toxic sludge that blanketed the area, there were thousands more who arrived of their own volition carrying flat headed shovels, rakes, brooms, cartons of drinking water, disinfectant, food supplies, whatever they thought might be needed. Amongst them were people from all walks of life, young and old, multicultural and from many parts of the world. As hundreds more poured in from interstate, it was fascinating to see how such a multitude cooperated. As one observer noted; "All up and down the long road broom pushers realised they could sweep a small tide of mud away from the houses and back towards the river if they locked their broom heads together and pushed all at once. Somebody had come up with the idea of fashioning a giant squeegee from the doors of ruined cupboards sitting in the trash piles by the side of the road. There were no foreman or gang bosses to coordinate the efforts of this volunteer force, and yet it organised itself".

Soon those who couldn't get to Queensland, or to the affected areas, were making donations of money, food, clothing, toys, furniture and transport, collecting goods and fundraising. Hundreds of millions in cash, supplies and equipment was quickly donated by people from around the globe. Evacuation centres across Queensland were overwhelmed with offers of help. A group of people who had lost their homes in Kinglake Victoria, during the 'Black Saturday' bushfires drove up with supplies and joined the recovery effort. Refugees in detention centres donated money. Individuals and groups, from local cricket clubs to rock bands, organised sausage sizzles, concerts and cake stalls, taking it upon themselves to redistribute wealth to those in need.

The flood crisis unleashed on a massive scale something that occurs every day, yet is often neglected, ignored or denied; people offering others a helping hand. These actions make a lie out of the idea that people are selfish, self-absorbed and apathetic, that there is no alternative to individualistic cravings for commodities or a brutal 'dog eat dog' world. Tens of thousands of

people showed that we don't need capital or governments to get things done. They demonstrated the will of people to take part in comforting each other, re-building, creating and moulding their own futures. In *The Shock Doctrine* Klein uses the term "direct action reconstruction" to describe the efforts of communities hit by disaster that do not wait for the state, or allow capital to take the initiative, but instead 'negotiate with their hands', rebuilding their own communities and 'healing themselves', resulting in communities that are stronger. I call these efforts disaster communism, others call it anarchy.

In her recent book, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster*, Rebecca Solnit explains what people tend to do for themselves in disasters. Her book is an investigation of the moments of altruism, resourcefulness, and generosity that arise amid disaster's grief and disruption and considers their implications for everyday life. What Solnit highlights is not merely that so many people rise to the occasion, but that they do so with joy and love, revealing a widespread yearning for community, purposefulness, and meaningful work. As well, she details how the negative impacts of disasters are often deepened by those in power, through fear or panic, and how often and quickly the authorities resort to extreme and violent measures. The heroism of ordinary people is part of Solnit's study. But she also questions the widespread tendency to assume that people will not act in heroic and altruistic ways and how 'official' responses come out of this belief. Solnit examines the dominant narrative governing business and state reactions to specific case studies including the London blitz, the Mexico City earthquake of 1985 and Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath in New Orleans. In these cities wracked by disaster much of the response by authorities was based on beliefs that their primary job was to protect private property from rampaging mobs and suppress the panicked populace. As Solnit uncovers, these visions of post-disaster policing are at best a misinterpretation of the reality on the ground. "The standard assumption among government planners, Hollywood filmmakers and wealthy people is that disasters result in anarchy, crime and panic in the streets". We are all familiar with the dominant themes of apocalyptic scenarios; terrified crowds trampling each other to escape, the rapid breakdown of social order, people looting, hoarding and defending their turf as they viciously fight each other for limited resources. These scenarios are based on depressing, demoralising and fear inducing views of 'human nature' promoted by the mainstream media, governments and law enforcement agencies, which are often used to justify authoritarian and violent repression. Solnit argues that pessimistic views of how people respond to disasters are fundamentally wrong. Instead, she examines how disasters are far more likely to bring out the best in people. "Disasters are extraordinarily generative," she writes, as capitalism collapses: "In its place appears a reversion to improvised, collaborative, cooperative and local society".

When creeks and rivers burst their banks they powerfully defy the borders of an unnatural order. The structures of 'normal' life are ruptured; many facades of capitalist society topple and are swept away, exposing both hidden vulnerabilities and potentials, transforming people, their relationships and communities. It is often during such events that we feel most alive, most human, the most connected to our family, neighbours, friends and community, the rest of humanity and the planet. Anything could happen. Things that seemed impossible a day or two before suddenly seem irresistible and we discover new ways of doing things. Of course certain things are no longer possible, the power maybe out, the roads closed; we aren't able to do what we usually do. But other things seem, and are, more possible. For many there is no need to go to work, school or university. In some respects there is more freedom for people to act as they wish – freedom to connect, to engage in communal activity, to use their imagination, to make things different or differently, to figure out for themselves what to do,

how to do it and then organise to get it done. And what did most people do with this liberty during the flood crisis? They reached out to each other, took direct action, re-configured spaces and relationships, got to know each other and developed more democratic, caring and egalitarian social processes. These alternative communities arise at times of turmoil. They demonstrate the capacity of people to stop doing what they usually do, to transform private space, private time and private property into community space, community time and community property, to self-organise production, distribution and exchange.

Disasters prise open the apparent limits of the possible into which can rush potentials for progressive new developments and anti-capitalist experiments. Although people continue to use old methods and mechanisms, they also create new, more valuable and useful ways of getting things done. The horizontal network forms of organising that replace the usual state forms are shown not just to be more inclusive and democratic, but more efficient and more productive. The lived experience of alternative society transforms norms, values and beliefs, from those of self-interest into those of human interest. Skills or attributes that are often under-valued; healing, caring, flexibility, self-sufficiency, counselling, local knowledge and community connections are suddenly understood as crucial. As people come closer to each other they are better able to share resources, knowledges, ways of doing and experiences, enriching lives and communities, opening up new horizons for creativity, and further deepening interactions.

In *A Paradise Built in Hell* Solnit details how people who went through the San Francisco earthquake or the immediate aftermath of 9/11 in Manhattan report that it was a “peak experience” of human connection and shared purpose. She uses the work of sociologist and disaster expert Charles Fritz who wrote: “Disasters provide a temporary liberation from the worries, inhibitions and anxieties associated with the past and future because they force people to concentrate their full attention on immediate moment-to-moment, day-to-day needs within the context of present realities. Disaster provides a form of societal shock which disrupts habitual, institutionalised patterns of behaviour and renders people amenable to social and personal change”. In disasters, writes Solnit, “the hierarchies, administrations and institutions, the social structures, tend to fall apart, but what result tends to be anarchy in [the] sense of people coming together in freely chosen cooperation rather than the media’s sense of disorderly savagery”. The experience of “freely chosen cooperation” in disasters allows people to see the rigid, inept, self-serving, authoritarian nature of ‘rulers’, and encourages them to entertain the communal as an appealing alternative. The rise of communism is precisely what is so threatening to elites, which is why they often react to disasters with military/police power. Solnit calls it “elite panic”, the deep fears among elites that the commoners will go wild and destroy private property, challenge the government and the status quo. As Solnit explains, this fear is not unfounded as people “themselves in these moments constitute the government, the acting decision-making body, as democracy has always promised and rarely delivered. Thus disasters often unfold as though a revolution has already taken place”.

The reason that this type of government, this democracy, can occur during these critical times is because revolution has already taken place, and is already taking place. The new forms of government, ‘spontaneous communities’ and ‘commons’ that arise in disasters are in fact constructed from pre-existing support networks, organisational forms and alternative economies. As one reviewer of Solnit’s book explains; “The power of disasters . . . may be in their power to give us a real-life glimpse of the “utopias” that exist within us and our communities every day, but which are papered-over by the accumulated patterns of culture

and politics. Disasters disclose another reality. We can actually matter. We can actually work together with strangers of different backgrounds. We can actually play heroic roles and improvise effective solutions. We can actually experience membership in a beloved community . . . people can begin to experience their own personal agency and collective power”.

Disasters like those in Queensland, Christchurch and Japan pose questions about what has personal value and social worth? What is really precious? While accountants, bankers and technocrats try to calculate the cost of disasters in money terms, the impact on the economy or GDP, many people cease to care about their possessions and open their wallets, their homes and their hearts. Over and over you hear survivors and rescuers exclaiming that possessions are not important; life is important, we are important, our relationships and communities are important. This understanding challenges the capitalist concentration on consumption, commodification and exchange value as common social realities. People in crisis don't just conceive of doing things without money, they do things without money. And they are much more likely to recognise that family, friendship and community networks are incredibly valuable. The Queensland floods, exposed the existing social solidarities, the 'moral' and 'gift' economies of community service, fellowship, self-help and improvement, the sharing of work, money, goods, emotional and psychological support provided by the on-going organisation of non-capitalist exchanges. Today these social relations of production are widespread, ranging from 'gift economies' such as the open source movement, peer-to-peer networks and 'grass roots' activism, to 'moral economies' that include recovered enterprises, cooperatives and fair trade networks. The spread of sharing and barter economies that organise production, distribution and exchange through collaborative labour is today weaving 'networks of economic solidarity' involving millions of people working for common benefit, rather than for profit. Communities and social movements have always relied on such sharing, cooperative and caring relationships and the more visible these practical alternatives become the more people become aware of the actual existence of liberatory communism.

Disasters are horrific. People die; many more are injured, lose their loved ones and their homes. Washing over the devastated areas of Queensland, along with the toxins and shit, were a layer of people acting like human scum, taking advantage of the disaster in order to rise to the top. There are those who profited from the floods; scam artists, much of the media, some politicians, businesses and developers. And if you want more details on how horrific this 'disaster capitalism' can be then I definitely recommend *The Shock Doctrine*. However as the Queensland government rushed to restore coal exports ASAP, and the diggers and the skips removed the flotsam of the past and the muck of the present, we were not only presented with a new capitalist year zero. Instead this 'biblical flood' reminds us of our continuing attempts at exodus, our flight from the toxins and shit, from the chrome and plastic crap, from alienation, bad jobs and shallow relationships. Looking upon the remnants of their lives the first things that most people choose to save from their past are pets, photos, sentimental items and most importantly, of course, they rescue each other. While some quickly return to 'business as usual', countless others continue to rely on their social networks, the support, generosity and love of others. As the most vulnerable face the devastating impacts of extreme weather, environmental, economic, military and social crisis, we all face the question of how we should confront these frightening challenges. During and after disasters some government intervention is helpful and useful. There are a variety of capitalist state forms, some of which are worse than others. For example, the reaction of the Queensland and Federal Governments to the floods was dramatically different to the Bush administrations reaction to hurricane Katrina. The ability of people to powerfully self-organise themselves helps to shape, transform

and limit the impact of state power. The extension of existing communism, democratic, peaceful and loving self-government, is a movement of autonomy, both against and outside capital.

In the wake of disasters things do not just return to 'normal' and we do not just start anew. Instead we rebuild on foundations that have weathered the storm; foundations of solidarity, of friendship, of love, strengthening our relationships and communities, re-imagining work, not for pay or profit, but for each other. Counter-disaster activities produce new relationships, networks, shared experiences, understandings and goals, and these are not just left to float away or simply discarded like rotting debris. The sharing of money, goods, labour, skills, experiences, knowledge and resources, can construct communal relations, where the reliance on others is capable of sustaining alternative cooperative society. When capitalism and its state forms are weakened, forms of mutual aid, affinity and social collaboration can flourish. In the face of disaster we see more clearly that we cannot rely on capital, governments and bureaucrats, and in response many of us turn to each other for support, building camaraderie and trust. These are the social relations we can rely on when faced with future crises. Although there are dark clouds on the horizon and our lives often seem to hover on the edge of an abyss, environmental and other disasters are not the only rising tides. There are also surging global waves of struggle, rebellion and revolt. As we have recently seen, in places like Tunisia and Egypt, when people take part in revolutionary uprisings they behave in different or unexpected ways. Many people do the same when faced with disasters like those in Queensland, New Zealand and Japan. It is easy to forget that this also happens in a multitude of ways every day. In response to the daily individual and collective disasters of capitalist society, the desire to help others, to make a difference, to aid recovery and healing, to share and care, to make life more wonderful, and to construct a better world together, inspires a vast amount of powerful affective social action. Disaster communism is everyday communism writ large.

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