

Capitalism and Climate Change: When a Natural Disaster Becomes a Social Disaster

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Hurricane Sandy has left parts of the eastern seaboard devastated. More than 100 people have died in the U.S. Two million people in the New York-New Jersey metropolitan area are, at this writing, without electricity. Parts of lower Manhattan remain flooded.

From public housing projects, the reports mount of older residents and the very poor going without food, needed medications, and means of travel. In suburbs, where the violent rampages of wind and rain literally hollowed out neighborhoods, people have been left to fend for themselves.

It is a time of immense suffering and need. But for the ruling authorities what was the litmus test for getting the city back on its feet? That Wall Street reopen, that the wheels of finance keep turning for the endless accumulation of capital. Meanwhile, and just several city blocks away, emergency deliveries of water and food to those in need were stalled for days. In New Jersey, the authorities moved with the same kind of Wall Street zeal to reopen the gambling casinos.

Under dire circumstances, people try to cope and solve problems together. But there are no institutional mechanisms to foster that cooperation. The overarching concern of ruling authority is to keep people passive, to keep people in place, and to keep people under control. People have been thrust into the darkness of power outages, but they are kept in the dark about what is actually happening. In places like Coney Island, people have gone without heat and lighting, while facing curfews and threats from the police.

This is a system in which a small owning-class controls the economic lifelines and resources of society. It is a system where profit rules. It is a system where state power is used to preserve and extend global exploitation and misery, and to suppress resistance.

But things do not have to be this way.

Let's first step back and examine three key dynamics of this natural and social disaster.

1) Capitalism and Climate Change

As the article "[Superstorm Sandy and Climate Change](#)" explains, the ferocity of Hurricane Sandy has everything to do with climate change. Massive emissions of carbon are leading to Arctic ice-melts and collapses, warmer oceans, and more moisture in the air. And this is causing more frequent and more severe hurricanes. Global climate change is also responsible for rising sea levels that put coastal cities worldwide, with their densely packed populations, at greater risk for flooding.

Capitalism-imperialism has everything to do with climate change. You see, oil, natural gas, and coal—the fuels most responsible for rising carbon dioxide levels that are contributing to global climate change—are essential and foundational to the profitable functioning of this system. Consider the fact that in recent years 7 of the 10 largest corporations in the world were oil and auto companies. Or that the U.S. military is the single largest consumer of oil in the world.

And consider the trends. In 1997 the U.S. pledged to reduce greenhouse emissions by 7 percent below 1990 levels. But by 2009, U.S. carbon emissions had *risen* by almost 7 percent! This is the logic of profit and big power jockeying. There is intense competition for market share and strategic advantage in the world economy. There is no “incentive” to radically transform energy production and energy consumption. It’s expand-or-die. Drill in the Arctic...drill in West Africa—or some rival corporations and rival powers will beat you.

And so the planet heats up.

2) The Nature of the Capitalist Metropolis

A city like New York plays a certain role in the workings and management of the American empire. It is a kind of financial-administrative command-and-control and communications center for globalized imperialist capital. It is profoundly parasitic. Finance is the engine of economic growth. Resources are siphoned towards real estate, speculative construction, and development.

It is a city of extremes: high-paying jobs and the concentration of wealth, on the one side, and, on the other, vast swaths of poverty, low-wage labor, chronically high rates of unemployment, unequal schooling and stop-and-frisk in the oppressed neighborhoods. It depends on vast pools of super-exploitable immigrant labor.

The city depends on carbon-intensive transport for food supplies. Its buildings are major sources of greenhouse gas emissions. And it has become more vulnerable to extreme weather.

The New York Times ran an article recently about how, for over a decade, scientists warned of the dangers of rising sea levels to the city, and how the city could be flooded. They called for storm and surge barriers to restrain floodwaters. Other task forces took a broader view, calling for measures to protect fragile shorelines and to rethink the density and patterns of urban development.

But these warnings and proposals were ignored. These kinds of long-term and protective measures run straight up against the short-term horizons of capitalism. It was more urgent, more of a priority, to expand lucrative property development than to invest in storm barriers, and protect and expand wetlands that soak up floodwaters. It made more “business sense” for the utility companies to keep investments on the maintenance and upgrading of transmission lines and other infrastructure to a minimum.

And the warnings from the scientists about the city’s susceptibility to storm surges were borne out with Hurricane Sandy.

3) How the System Atomizes People

It is very stark. The disruptions in transport and power generation, the dislocation of basic services, and the fact that the city stopped working when people could no longer work—all this revealed how densely interconnected are the activities of social and economic life in a large city like New York. But the city and the larger society are not organized in a way that corresponds to that interconnectedness. There is no conscious social planning to meet human need, to mobilize for emergencies, to protect vital ecosystems.

People are atomized by the very workings of the system. They are forced to compete with each other for jobs, for housing, for higher education. Why? Because of private ownership and control over the means of producing wealth and over the resources of society. It is a system where people are compelled to sell their labor power to survive. At the same time, the system promotes its ethos of each for him or herself, and sets people against each other.

People have a great desire to join together to act in a crisis like Sandy. But that potential is held in check and quashed by this system.

A Radically Different Society: A Viable and Liberatory Socialism

[*The Constitution for the New Socialist Republic in North America \(Draft Proposal\)*](#) from the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA sets forth a vision and a plan for building a very different social, political, and economic system. This Constitution is a blueprint for a new state power that protects the rights of the people, that enables people to participate in the running and all-round transformation of society, and to carry the revolution forward to a world without classes.

This Constitution sets forth the principles and mechanisms for a liberating economy that meets the basic needs of people, including overcoming the inequalities between nationalities, between men and women, between those who work mainly with their hands and those who work mainly in the realm of ideas. This is a society and economy that will promote the world revolution to emancipate all of humanity from exploitation and oppression. This is a society and economy that will be working to repair, to protect, and to enhance the ecosystems of the planet.

In short, this society is the opposite of what we live under.

In socialist society, the means of production—the factories, transport, telecommunications, land, raw materials, and so forth—will no longer be the property of a small handful of exploiters but will be under a system of public-state ownership. This will enable society to utilize these resources for what is useful and important to the betterment of humanity. People will be guaranteed work; and instead of being drudgery, work will be contributing to the development of society and people's all-around capabilities.

The new socialist society will develop an economy that is no longer based on oil and other fossil fuels and long-distance supply systems. This will require extraordinary innovation and effort, but it will be a priority. The new society will aim to create sustainable cities—more capable of producing to meet basic needs, including food.

These will be cities where the formerly oppressed, rather than being isolated and penned up, will be able to interact with each other in meaningful ways, to organize politically, to create and enjoy culture, and to forge vibrant community. These will be cities in which

barriers are being broken down between basic masses and artists and intellectuals, in which people with different backgrounds, training, and talents would be dynamically interacting with and learning from each other as part of the long process of creating the social and material conditions in which everyone will be able to work productively and in the realm of ideas.

The army and police will no longer enforce global empire and the occupation of the inner cities. New security forces will serve the people, protect their rights, and help the people to sort out and work through their differences.

Socialist Society Facing A Crisis Like Hurricane Sandy

The *Constitution for the New Socialist Republic in North America* emphasizes that the conscious activism of the masses of people is what must be relied upon to solve problems and to carry the revolution forward. The Constitution also emphasizes that society will combine centralized planning and allocation of resources with decentralized initiative and creativity.

In a crisis like Hurricane Sandy, the socialist state would allocate needed resources, like food, temporary shelter, building materials, equipment, to where they would be needed most. This will not have to go through the patchwork and competing channels of private ownership and control that exist in capitalist society. The allocation of resources would not be contingent on the preservation of private property and the profit system.

The revolutionary state would be doing all it could to tap and unleash the desire of people to step forward and to help on all kinds of fronts. Relying on the masses would be at the heart of everything that would be done in the wake of such a disaster.

In a socialist society facing a natural disaster of the magnitude of Sandy, emergency priorities would be established—for instance in identifying the most vulnerable sectors of the population, helping the most devastated communities or areas of historic oppression and environmental degradation, and restoring critical links of the economy. Calls for volunteers would be issued and the means provided for them to become involved in relief efforts. Medical personnel, teachers, engineers, youth, and so forth would be dispatched to where they were needed.

Centralization means overall leadership and coordination. It also means paying attention to key social priorities, like uprooting the legacy of racism and the subordination of women.

In a situation like Sandy, efforts would be made to educate people about the scale and challenges of the situation. Specialized knowledge of experts would be popularized—for instance, environmental science, civil engineering—among broad sections of the people. But these experts would also be learning from the knowledge and direct experience and aspirations of basic people and of the youth. Architects and planners would be conducting investigations among the people. Medical personnel would be gaining a deeper sense of local conditions and needs—and training paraprofessionals.

Incredible local initiative and experimentation would be unleashed. Conditions are not the same everywhere. How to make the most of older equipment? How to conserve limited resources? What are the local priorities in rebuilding? Fact-finding missions. Group discussions and debates in neighborhoods. Streamlining administration. Transmitting ideas

and criticisms to higher levels of leadership.

The government media and other institutions of state would be spreading advanced experience of dealing with the crisis and the new understanding gained, spreading lessons about how barriers between people and contradictions among the people are being overcome.

In such an emergency, big questions and controversies will pose themselves. Yes, there is acute short-term necessity to provide shelter, food, and health care, and to rebuild. But these needs cannot be met by disregarding longer-term effects on ecosystems. There will be disagreements over specific policies. And in times of disaster, some will be intensely agonizing over the overall direction of society.

It will be necessary to mobilize the activism and understanding of people to confront extraordinary circumstances such as a Hurricane Sandy, and to pull together. But differences will emerge, debates will break out. This is a good thing. The Constitution recognizes the importance of dissent and protest under socialism. In a crisis like this there will be contention and struggle. This process, if handled correctly by the leadership of the new society, will actually enhance both the knowledge and understanding of reality of society as a whole, and serve to forge unity on a new and stronger basis.

Bob Avakian teaches that dissent should not only be allowed but actively encouraged and valued. This is part of the process of getting at the truth of society and the world, of promoting critical thinking, and of enabling those who had formerly been on the bottom of society to more deeply understand and more profoundly transform the world.

Conclusion

This kind of socialist society, for which this Constitution is the framework, makes it possible for human beings to cope with a crisis like Sandy. It makes it possible for people to fit themselves to become caretakers of the planet. It makes it possible to bring a new world into being.

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