

The main lesson from Katrina for our petrosociety

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This essay delves into not only our petrosociety's energy vulnerability and outmoded economy, but also examines the government's apparent whitewash of the environmental situation in New Orleans.

Much has been said about the consequences of Katrina, an event for which there was little preparedness or "government compassion." Among the meanings of the whole experience: a wealthy society's betrayal of poor people and minorities, damage to the energy industries' ability to maintain production and distribution, and environmental devastation that will endure because of toxic spills. However, there's little indication that many people have grasped the main lesson of Katrina.

Most of Katrina's lesson is simply this: if the nation could not handle very well a localized disaster, what will the country be like when the entire industrialized world runs permanently short of petroleum in the grip of the coming (final?) energy crisis? This reality is grasped, incidentally, by Congressman Roscoe Bartlett (Republican, Maryland) and his staff.

The biggest step in awareness the public could make is to reject the aspects of our lives and culture that contributed to the Katrina disaster. Because of the almost entire lack of meaningful leadership nationally on down, this will only happen with more disasters as lessons, as people in the short term just want food, shelter and other basics -- understandably so. Even those of us in a comfortable position to make choices can rarely conceive of completely restructuring the way we grow food -- an example of how we must start treating the land, air and water.

Absent is the public awakening, as yet, that petroleum dependence and mega-system distribution of goods and services are a tragic mistake that will soon be visited on the rest of hapless Consumerland (of whatever economic level). The U.S.A. is too weak and unwieldy to do the right thing, dominated as it is by the greedy super rich and the universal worship of technology.

Despite some good reporting, fact finding and deserved blame regarding Katrina's effects, the public is being misled as usual. The best answer to this kind of disaster is not better emergency response or stronger infrastructure through more honest funding, but rather a complete reevaluation of our way of life. Part and parcel to our present way of life as a petrosociety is the extremely unsustainable growth of population, motor vehicles, paving, and reliance on toxic chemicals.

Pollution is constant

When the millions of gallons of gasoline, diesel, pesticides and other chemicals are suddenly and accidentally loosed upon New Orleans and surrounding areas, it is indeed a disaster. However, the result is all the same for the ecosystem and the Earth in the long run if those toxic substances were to be put into the environment gradually as intended.

In other words, the current, much lamented toxic disaster is actually an illusion when it amounted to almost nothing additional in the long run. People forget or are even unaware that land fills and sewage treatment do not really remove anything from the environment; instead, poisons and trash are separated and contained for a time such as by plastic liners.

The problem with this approach is that the Earth is a closed system. When we "throw away" something, there is really no away. There are technological processes to neutralize pollutants, and these are going to be necessary as long as poisons are made. But a century or so of technological amelioration of pollution has brought the Earth to its knees with eco-collapse already begun.

Rather than debate whether Katrina caused a hugely additional environmental disaster in the long run, we must grasp the main reality that the normal operation of the economy is an unmitigated environmental disaster and is a permanent waste of much of the whole planet's resources. An example to help understand this concept is that there cannot be peace with cars. When the materials are mined and manufactured for the cars, and the cars then do their damage before they conk out and pollute still further, these processes of entropy cannot be reversed. Such is the economy today.

The Environmental Protection Agency, which The Onion rightly announced in a recent spoof that the first two words of the EPA's name were to be eliminated, regulates pollution and does not stop it. As long as we pretend society is solving a problem as it gets worse, the day of reckoning will hit harder than imaginable.

Many an old refrigerator and air conditioner in New Orleans this month has spilled CFCs and other ozone-layer destroying pollutants. This is particularly important when we consider the ozone hole over the South Pole is on track to reach a record size. So much for the Montreal Protocol which supposedly solved the problem -- allowing DuPont to keep killing the planet. The ecological disaster is just as strong a reminder as the government's bungling of saving the people

of New Orleans that we must realize that we have no real leadership to protect us. So, we must be our own leaders instead of consuming like sheep on our way to the slaughter.

Despite the graphic descriptions of toxic spills from abandoned consumer items and factories in the Katrina-hit areas, we want to believe that if we are far enough away, and if we can avoid sticking our hand into (or drink) the sludge, we will escape harm. The biological hazard, as deadly as it is, is something that nature can eventually heal and that a person can overcome through health care. Toxic and radioactive poisoning is another story, one that the corporations profiting off these substances do not want brought up. Just as taboo is for the news media and the average compassionate person to blame victims of Katrina for having been polluters of the planet, just for having toxic products and polluting machines on hand.

No responsibility is taken for inviting full disaster owing to the dominant petro-lifestyle: spreading toxic waste and generating global warming that most likely intensified Katrina. To avoid picking up any guilty feelings that could interfere with corporate sales and our precious convenience as consumers, we are led to believe that a plastic widget, for example, is benign and even necessary for modern living. But the thing is made of petroleum and will never biodegrade, as it poisons wildlife and humans for hundreds of years.

Another serious whitewash by government

The U.S. coastguard says that from Katrina more than 6.5 million gallons of crude oil were spilt into local bodies of water in at least seven major incidents. Three-quarters of the oil from the spills has not yet been recovered as of Sept. 15. The figure does not include gasoline and oil spilt from up to 250,000 cars which have been submerged, or that leaked from hundreds of gasoline stations. The coastguard says it has received almost 400 reports of spills, the vast majority of which have not been assessed.

Yet, the latest, inevitable spin from government officials is that the toxic pollution is no big deal and that business-as-usual can get back on track soon in and around New Orleans. This is reminiscent of the New York Twin Towers environmental disaster of 9-11, whereby the U.S. EPA lied to the public that the area around Ground Zero was immediately safe -- despite the extremely toxic effect from smoke, particles and debris containing such material as asbestos, dioxin, PAHs and mercury. The whole idea was, "America, get shopping again now!"

This is what we are seeing in New Orleans when the mayor says commerce can start again imminently. Even more outrageous is that the whole devastated urban area can and should be rebuilt -- Bechtel and Halliburton style, no doubt, instead of ecologically. George W. Bush believes that enough of a public works program, on the order of an Iraq War spending boondoggle, can really help (him), his God willing. As we have seen in Iraq, corporate and political cronyism takes the big bucks and little is done on the ground to reconstruct and heal. It is a kind of cover up to suggest New Orleans -- below sea level, ruined by toxicity for many, many decades -- can be a great city again, to pollute as grandly as it had for about a century.

The Washington Post published an uncritical report of how environmentally okay New Orleans is: "Flood's Pollutants Within the Norm" (Sept. 15, 2005). Pretending that the big problem is temporary bacterial contamination, an official with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's lead environmental boss was quoted as saying "The stuff [toxic sludge] will desiccate and you can clean it up. You fertilize your lawn? It's the same thing." The Post's writer, Dan Brown, quotes government officials saying in essence that the whole toxic effect on the city is temporary. Yet, valuable information toward the end of the article tells the real story, such as five Superfund sites in New Orleans -- one of them still underwater in mid-September.

Petrocollapse foretaste, courtesy Katrina

The whallop of Katrina has taught us nothing, if petroleum refineries are allowed to just start up again and pollute. The halted oil & gas drilling and pumping facilities and the refineries are portrayed as 100% vital and even benign, although global climate change is caused in large part by burning and evaporating petroleum. As we have explored in Culture Change Letter #109, the possibility of global shortfall of crude oil and refined products may usher in petrocollapse and the end of the global corporate economy. In our press release of August 15th, we explored the real cost of subsidized gasoline and energy in general -- so high as to undermine today's economy.

In explaining to audiences and readers what petrocollapse will look like, I have been differentiating between a localized disaster -- one that can be mitigated by the Red Cross et al thanks to petroleum resources -- and an across-the-board breakdown of transportation and other petroleum-dependent systems from which the national and global economy will not recover.

But I hadn't anticipated that the New Orleans post-Katrina situation would be handled so poorly. So we should take as a warning that if we could not handle a localized disaster, what will the country be like when the entire industrialized world runs permanently short of petroleum in the grip of the final energy crisis? We are ignoring a coming tsunami we can see on the horizon.

This column has spawned the term "petrocollapse" and graphic images of "cooking rats over furniture fires." Yet, not to be doom-and-gloomers, we should also anticipate an improved social environment after die-off of most of the petroleum-mainlining population. The transition to sustainability will serve as humanity's path to maturity.

Worldview changing slowly

A growing political sentiment due to Katrina, apart from partisan demands for President Bush's resignation or impeachment, appears to be that the federal government is either useless or even malevolent. To many it is clear the government revealed its racism and allowed massive unnecessary untold death. However, the limitation of that political focus is that we don't deal with the main thrust of even a "compassionate society" which is above all to "share" an ever growing pie. The trouble is that the pie -- the ecosystem pillaged by the economy -- is already maxed out, and making the pie grow is an obsolete approach to living on the finite Earth. And, it seems we are dealing with an arsenic pie, as Richard Register of Ecocity Builders points out.

The already poisoned land and waters known as the U.S. Gulf are expected to give up more blood in the form of petroleum to the consumer economy. Why? So profits can be made on selling motorized toys to thoughtless consumers. So that surplus food can be grown so that people can be kept in their social classes in a division of labor. "Better Living Through Chemistry" is the facade and fallacy for our petroleum lifestyle which did so much to bring on the disaster of Katrina. And when the Amtrak trains were not even used to evacuate people, what is the point of such technology that was foolishly counted on?

A relevant worldview for our times must be more than political and reformist. For example, band-aid environmentalism can be passionate and necessary: Jimmy Carter called for stopping the rape of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge by the oil industry (Washington Post op-ed, September 13). Our best living president is eloquent; however, in his calling for more efficient cars while not mentioning peak oil, he shows that he and the environmentalist establishment are not up to the task of solving the dilemma of technological civilization that is destroying life on a beautiful but beleaguered planet. Cleaner-burning car engines and electric cars are too little and too late pollution-wise and energy-efficiency-wise. And, they still contribute to urban sprawl and the whole petroleum infrastructure that our Arctic wilderness might be sacrificed for.

The September issue of Scientific American's cover story is "Crossroads for Planet Earth." Amidst the many petroleum industry advertisements, there is valuable information and even wisdom thanks to Herman Daly's article "Economics in a Full World." A misleading technofix solution comes from consultant Amory Lovins in the same issue. Perhaps worse is "Myths of the City," an editorial-type article speaking of "more than enough room for expansion: urban areas now cover only 3 percent of the planet's land surface." Figures lie and liars figure. Those ignorant of the role of energy in population growth, urban sprawl and upcoming socioeconomic collapse merely mislead: the U.N. still forecasts continuing urbanization and population growth -- a growing market for Lovins' "hypercars."

Conclusion

Katrina's destructive power was greatly facilitated by widespread vulnerability created by shortsighted petrosociety and its developed landscape. The social system let people down and helped poison and trash everyone's environment. Failure of quick emergency relief and lack of sensitivity by the Bushes were manifested, but these issues wrongly dominate the nation's focus on the meaning of Katrina. The larger lesson is the letdown from our whole petroleum-based structure/system that bit back and punished. Will New Orleans be a national sacrifice zone that we learn from, or will the blockheaded urge to rebuild on the same ground once again characterize the myopic technocracy taking the world down a slippery slope to hell?

Links and further reading:

GLOBAL WARMING 'PAST THE POINT OF NO RETURN'?

http://news.independent.co.uk/world/science_technology/article312997.ece

The Petrocollapse Conference will be held in New York on Oct. 5. See <http://www.petrocollapse.org> to learn more and register now! Full participation cost is \$100, and secure online payment can be made via PayPal on the website.