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## Hurricane Harvey and the Dialectics of Nature

By Louis Proyect  
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Between 1872 and 1882, Frederick Engels worked on a book titled “The Dialectics of Nature” that sought to apply Marxist dialectics to the natural world. Although it was never completed and is filled with dated ideas about science, it is a work that has earned the respect of some of the most important scientists on the left such as Stephen Jay Gould who praised its best known chapter that was issued separately as a pamphlet—*The Part played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man*. Long before people such as Barry Commoner and Rachel Carson were laying the groundwork for the eco-socialism of today, Engels anticipated the kind of contradictions that have led to three disastrous hurricanes: Katrina, Sandy and now Harvey. Engels wrote:

Let us not, however, flatter ourselves overmuch on account of our human victories over nature. For each such victory nature takes its revenge on us. Each victory, it is true, in the first place brings about the results we expected, but in the second and third places it has quite different, unforeseen effects which only too often cancel the first. The people who, in Mesopotamia, Greece, Asia Minor and elsewhere, destroyed the forests to obtain cultivable land, never dreamed that by removing along with the forests the collecting centres and reservoirs of moisture they were laying the basis for the present forlorn state of those countries.

If you understand that the prairies surrounding Houston, the wetlands to the south of New Orleans and the brush that grew across the coastline around greater New York were closely related to the forests of the earliest class societies that Engels refers to, you will realize that “each

victory” will bring us closer to the ultimate defeat of civilization itself. Just consider the words that follow those above:

When the Italians of the Alps used up the pine forests on the southern slopes, so carefully cherished on the northern slopes, they had no inkling that by doing so they were cutting at the roots of the dairy industry in their region; they had still less inkling that they were thereby depriving their mountain springs of water for the greater part of the year, and making it possible for them to pour still more furious torrents on the plains during the rainy seasons.

*Furious torrents.* Are there any words better matched to the pictures of Houston seen on television every night?

Now poised to get the second battering since Katrina as Harvey plows ahead, New Orleans was a victim of its own success—at least measured in capitalist terms. The city was founded in 1718 on a natural ridge of high land as recounted in an article titled “Louisiana’s Wetlands: a Lesson in Nature Appreciation” on the Environmental Health Perspectives (EHP) website. Even before capitalist development began the inexorable process of what Engels referred to as “victories over nature”, flooding was a problem. Settlers built levees along the Mississippi River up to 165 miles north of the city just to keep the river tamed.

To stave off yellow fever epidemics, the city government drained the swamps whose mosquitos had killed 40,000 residents between 1817 and 1905. This was in effect robbing Peter to pay Paul since it was such “wilderness” that protected the city from flooding as well. This was long before environmental science had begun to warn about the consequences of removing natural barriers. The city’s elite only saw the upside of allowing suburbs to be built all around the city rather than “wasteful” swampland.

As more and more levees were built along the Mississippi, the same unforeseen consequences took their toll as the blockage of water accelerated the demise of the wetlands to the city’s south. Additionally, the nutria took their toll. These large rodents that were originally imported into Louisiana for their use in fur coats were able to escape from their pens and began to eat away the wetland’s vegetation in the same way that the nonnative lamprey eels devastated the Great Lakes.

The job that was begun by killing mosquitos and by marauding nutrias was completed by the oil companies that dredged canals throughout the wetlands for drilling opportunities. The saltwater they allowed to seep in helped to kill vegetation. A shipping channel used by the oil companies that connected the Gulf of Mexico to the Mississippi River served as funnel for Katrina’s storm surge, according to the EHP website. But why should that bother the captains of industry who saw New Orleans mainly as a port from which oil and soybeans could be exported? The poor African-Americans who were displaced from New Orleans could always go somewhere else. Indeed, many went to Houston where a double whammy now forces them to migrate once again.

Like New Orleans, New York City was a major seaport. And also like New Orleans, it was subject to natural disasters for the same reason it was so successful commercially. It is what geographers call a “bight”, a curve in the coastline that provides a natural inlet for ships. When

Hurricane Sandy slammed into the bight, the water had no place else to go except into the streets closest to the river. This included the financial district that constitutes the nerve center of American capitalism. That Goldman-Sachs has supplied so many of Donald Trump's cadre as he plunges recklessly into fostering the exact conditions that created Hurricane Sandy is just another example of Engels's "victory over nature".

Many of the people who worked on Wall Street commuted from Staten Island and the Rockaways. Like the poor and working class in New Orleans, they also took a hit but probably not as severe.

Developers built over 2,700 homes on Staten Island between 1980 and 2008, much of it on marshland along the island's Atlantic-facing south shore. 21 people living in these houses were drowned by Sandy's flood. Like the yahoo city officials in Houston, the "enlightened" liberal leadership of New York City permitted such houses to be built even though climate scientists warned about the risks.

The Rockaways was another victim of capitalist development. In a video I made a few weeks after Sandy struck the Queens peninsula, I explained how its saturation by middle and upper class housing destroyed natural barriers to flooding. Like the Jersey Shore, it had become a warren of amusement parks, boardwalks and other lures for inner-city residents in the 1930s who could not yet afford Miami Beach. To make this all possible, the marshlands had to disappear. While the middle-class suffered from the flooding, including some people I filmed right next to the Atlantic Ocean, it was mostly the Rockaway poor that suffered most. The housing projects that Robert Moses built there became a Siberia where Blacks and Latinos could be quarantined as part of his overall "urban removal" strategy. When the electricity went out in these high rises, the old and the frail lacked water, food and other necessities.

But it is in Houston where the victory over nature is most complete and also where nature takes its ultimate revenge.

As was the case in New Orleans, there were warnings about the potential catastrophe that awaited Houston. On March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2016, Pro Publica published an article titled "Hell and High Water" whose first sentence read "It is not if, but when Houston's perfect storm will hit."

Although not nearly as well-known as Katrina or Sandy, Houston had been clobbered by Hurricane Ike on Sept. 11, 2008. It resulted in \$30 billion in damages and cost the lives of 74 people. But the city had not borne the full brunt of Ike that had veered away at the last minute. However, if it had hit the bulls eye of the city, it would "kill America's economy", according to Pete Olson, a Republican congressman from Sugar Land, a Houston suburb.

The article predicted how such a devastating economic hit could take place. It would first of all deal a major blow to the oil and chemical industries that would affect supply chains across the USA and the world. As it turns out, that is happening right now as 1/5<sup>th</sup> of America's oil output has been shut down. At the risk of sounding morbid, maybe this will have the beneficial and certainly unintended effect of helping the Venezuelan economy to recover.

While the article is useful as background in pinpointing the shortsightedness of the city's elite, its answer to the problem lies much more in building super-dikes rather than in analyzing how the city became so vulnerable to flooding. For that you need to look at the same issues that condemned New Orleans, Staten Island and the Rockaways to ruin.

Houston, like the other regions, had "developed" real estate on top of what was viewed as empty and useless prairies ringing the city in order to build the sterile tract housing that I used to see from my car when I traveled around the city in the 1970s when I was in the Socialist Workers Party. The prairies, like the marshes in New Orleans and New Yorker, absorbed the rainwater that has now turned Harris County into something approximating Lake Michigan. The Katy Prairie is only one-fourth of what it was before the real estate developers cashed in. Like Robert Moses, the state's planners built expressways that made it easy for suburban Houstonites to commute to downtown jobs. In the eyes of capitalist politicians, this what progress amounts to.

There is a nonprofit called the Katy Conservancy but its website gives hints about its ineffectiveness. When you click a link for the history of Katy Prairie, you get a message that the page cannot be found. Maybe the fact that Hardy Murchison serves on the advisory board is a signal that it pulls its punches. Murchison is the CEO of Encino Energy, a corporation focused on shale oil extraction—just the sort of man you need to help lead a conservation crusade.

Another advisory board member is Roger A. Soape, whose company describes itself as involved with various projects including Bridgeland. What is Bridgeland, you ask? It is a proposed 11,400 acre gated community development in Northwest Houston just like the kind that is gobbling up the prairieland surrounding the city. It has the temerity to name one of its faux "villages" Prairieland Village. You can't make this shit up.

To conclude, let me return to Frederick Engels's uncompleted "Dialectics of Nature", which except for the chapter I cited above is largely neglected. I would argue that this was not an effort made in vain. Socialist scholars of the 21<sup>st</sup> century might consider writing an updated version that provides a unified field theory for society and nature that are so often compartmentalized as separate topics of investigation.

Isn't there an artificial distinction between society and nature? Since scholars and philosophers of the left tend to be anthropocentric, they see Marxism as a tool to understand society but isn't society merely a component of the natural world?

When you were a kid, you might have had one of those ant colonies where you could watch the tiny creatures interacting with the sand and the food you give them. What is the difference between a worker ant and a factory worker? They are both subsumed within their natural world and all are subsumed within the universe itself that is made up of colliding atoms.

In his introduction, Engels writes:

Thus we have once again returned to the point of view of the great founders of Greek philosophy, the view that the whole of nature, from the smallest element to the greatest, Member of Protista (Vorticella) from grains of sand to suns, from protista to men, has its existence in

eternal coming into being and passing away, in ceaseless flux, in un-resting motion and change, only with the essential difference that what for the Greeks was a brilliant intuition, is in our case the result of strictly scientific research in accordance with experience, and hence also it emerges in a much more definite and clear form.

Wouldn't a unified field theory of eco-socialism place the whole of nature—including homo sapiens—into a framework in which the consequences of capitalist development can be seen with the greatest clarity? In some ways, climate change has made this inevitable since it has created the floods that have devastated New Orleans, New York and Houston while at the same time creating the drought in Syria that helped to trigger a catastrophic civil war that may be coming to a sad and pointless conclusion.

Ironically, one of the few Marxists who came closest to unifying society and nature conceptually was in prison at the time and subsequently executed after a show trial found him guilty of “anti-Soviet” behavior.

In “Philosophical Arabesques”, Nikolai Bukharin anticipated Stephen Jay Gould's notion of ‘punctuated equilibrium’, long before the Marxist paleontologist considered it:

The dialectical interpretation of development thus includes both gradualness and leaps, in their transition from one into another and in their unity. The real historical process, whether in nature or in society, presupposes both gradualness and leaps, and Saint-Simon already divided epochs into ‘organic’ and ‘critical’. Is it really the case that the history of the earth, its geological history, has been without catastrophes, ice ages, earthquakes, ‘inundations’, the disappearance of dry land beneath the sea, the vanishing of water, and so forth? Is it true that the universe does not know the collision of planets and stars with one another? Has human society not witnessed the downfall of whole civilisations? Has it not known wars and revolutions? Of course, we look closely at Darwin's theory of natural selection. Does it, despite the gradualness of evolution, really exclude leaps? Let us take the appearance of the adaptive feature, the concrete peculiarity, which selection ‘seizes upon’. This peculiarity appears ‘by chance’; Darwin's law is a law of selection, necessity that includes fortuity. But how does it occur, the appearance of such a feature? As a mutation, that is, a leap. Furthermore, the process of selection includes struggle. When, for example, a war between ants takes place, and one ant colony destroys another, is this not a leap? And so on to infinity.

Let's hope that we are not facing a war between nations today that will have the same disastrous result as it would with ant colonies. Unlike ants, we have the gift of reason that ants lack. Our future is not dictated by nature's iron laws but by our ability to understand and change nature on the path to preserving it and ourselves. But unless we begin to forge an effective political instrument, all hope is lost.