



## From New Orleans to Dublin Neo-liberal chickens come home to roost

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The road to the brutal hell of post-hurricane New Orleans 2005 was paved a long time ago with bad intentions. Let us see how!

Our search for the roots of the disaster brings us back to the Dark Ages of 1975. In that year, a report concerning the “governability of democracy” was commissioned by a highly influential US establishment ‘think tank’, the Trilateral Commission. It concluded that democracy was bad for capitalism. Among the draftees of this report was the Samuel P Huntingdon – he of *The Shock of Civilizations* notoriety – whose thinking continues to justify aggressive US foreign policy, particularly in the Islamic world. This Trilateral Commission was formed on the initiative of David Rockefeller, then director of the Chase Manhattan Bank; Zbigniew Brzezinski, national security adviser to Jimmy Carter when the latter was elected US president in 1976; ex-Secretary of State Cyrus Vance; Paul Volcker, then president of the US Federal Reserve, together with key personnel from more than forty US-based multinational companies.

The report warned that the quest for the democratic ideals of quality and individual rights was leading to a “delegitimation of authority”. And that, in order to counteract such a “crisis”, governments were forced to “dangerously expand” re-distributive policies. “Democratic expansion of political participation has generated an unbalanced expansion of government activities which have exacerbated inflationary tendencies in the economy”, it warned ominously. Huntingdon and his colleagues counterposed the respect for ruling hierarchies, seen as being essential for the preservation of the existing social order, to the “egalitarian, individualist, populist and impatient” demands of those infected by the radical democratic bug. “Any social organization requires... inequalities in regard to authority and distinctions according to function...” this influential report trumpeted.

The democratic notion that government is somehow responsible to the people it, allegedly, represents generates the expectation that it can and must meet the needs of all social groups. Faced with the demands of business, trade unions and the beneficiaries of governmental prodigality [social welfare recipients, I suppose], it becomes difficult, if not impossible, for democratic governments to cut costs...

In other words, the root cause of all our socio-economic ills was nothing other than too much democracy. What the social body needed was a strong purgative. And luckily, bright new economic, geopolitical and military doctrines were available to administer it. And those with a little help, in some refractory parts of the planet, from reigns of terror instituted by military/paramilitary forces trained directly by US advisers, and often in the military installations of the US itself.

And so, away back in 1975, was forged the ideological basis for the neo-liberal onslaught which, within a short space of time, dislodged and buried the moderate Keynesian policies which had more or less hegemonized the industrialized world since the second world war. The stagflation of the 1970s seemed to vindicate the central contentions of the Trilateral Commission report, so paving the way for implementation of ‘realistic’ neo-liberal economic recipes. Recession at the beginning of the 1980s provided the occasion for a generalized swing towards now-familiar monetarist policies which set socio-economic priorities that had been in force since the nineteenth century on their heads: reduction of inflation by

generating unemployment and low-paid labor (the capitalist need for a permanently marginalized underclass, as noted by Marx), market deregulation, balanced budgets, redistribution in favor of the rich, withdrawal of the state from provision of essential services, outward expansion of the economy through globalization ('imperialism' in Lenin's terminology; 'global extension of democracy' in Bush-speak)...

But what has all of this got to do with New Orleans, García? Hold on! We are getting there!

In short, what we have here is the genesis of the 'good government is less government' philosophy that continues to this very day to inform the thinking of business and administrative elites. Both in the US itself and in areas of the globe—such as Ireland, the Asia-Pacific region, Italy, and Britain—that are solidly locked into the US sphere of influence. It is a philosophy continuously hammered home by the capitalist-owned or dominated mass media of all of these regions. Apart from debasing and dumbing down the masses with a non-stop diet of distracting trivial entertainment, these media actively promote, liminally and subliminally, the core values of neo-liberalism—self-interest, selfishness, acquisitive greed—that erode social solidarity, and hence interest in democratic participation. Values that serve solely to sustain and reproduce the current consumerist order.

(Galloping social disintegration in the US has been minutely documented by Robert D Putnam, Harvard sociologist and guru, it seems, of Irish Taoiseach Bertie Ahern. As a denizen of foreign parts, I am loath, of course, to comment on your prime minister's bizarre choice of intellectual stimulation. Suffice it for me to say that, with stereotypical neo-liberal reluctance to explain social decay in terms of the glaringly obvious—the socially disruptive effects of the economic policies of recent US administrations—Putnam blows from his magic pipe conceptual bubbles, such as "social capital", which, being totally empty, don't even offer the ghost of a solution to the social degeneration he describes.)

This alienation of the broad masses from any form of political involvement plays, of course, right into the hands of the corporate and political elites who were warned initially against the 'dangers' of too much democracy by the Trilateral gentry. In this way, the economic and associated political machinations of neo-liberalism remain hidden from the public at large. For what most favors the interests of the US economically super-privileged is a massive concentration of power in Washington in the hands of an administration whose policies are framed by, and in the interests of, major US multinational corporations. To put the matter bluntly, the neo-liberal slogan 'Good government is less government' effectively hides the real one-liner: 'More government—as long as it is our government'.

So what has all this got to do with the New Orleans tragedy?

Everything! The disaster cannot be understood outside the broad political context in which it is located. Let us be clear about this! The egregious failure of the Bush administration to act responsibly, and in time, to protect the lives, homes and services of thousands of US citizens is firmly rooted in the neo-liberal ideology of the said administration and the type of society such an ideology cultivates. An ideology whose basic tenets were first enunciated in that 1975 Trilateral Commission report I referred to earlier.

First of all, it must be understood that the New Orleans disaster was perfectly avoidable. By contrast, when neighboring Cuba was hit last year by a comparably powerful hurricane, the Cuban government—aided by citizen committees and local Communist Party activists—evacuated 1.3 million people (more than 10 per cent of the island's population) without a single loss of life, in spite of heavy material damage. Needless to say, this achievement went almost unmentioned in the US media.

So why that deadly hesitancy that stayed the hand of the administration in those critical few days before and after the arrival of Hurricane Katrina? Racism? As New Orleans is (or was) 67 per cent black, angry voices in the black community have not been slow to see in this stasis clear expression of a covert white supremacist position. Maybe there is a grain of

truth in this! However, although Bush himself belongs to that tight core of exclusively white ultraconservative decision-makers that rules America, he himself does not appear to be a visceral racist. He seems to be, above all, a pragmatist in these matters. It was he who made Condoleezza Rice Secretary of State, for example. And Colin Powell before her. 'Figureheads', it can be alleged, but still he did it. The sin of the New Orleans victims seems to be less that they were black than that they were poor and, thence, second-class citizens. And since those of them who bother to vote at all vote overwhelmingly Democrat, probably even third-class citizens. Ultraconservatives don't normally rush to help poor black Democrats in their hours of need.

Doubting Thomases who may find it difficult to accept a possible class basis for the delayed relief effort might ponder the fact that the police order of September 10 that bars New Orleans homeowners from owning guns does not, according to my local radio station, apply to the—quote—"M16-toting private security guards hired to protect businesses and wealthy property owners"—unquote. Crucial time wasted in discussions between Ray Nagin, mayor of New Orleans, the governor of Louisiana Kathleen Blanco and the federal administration is probably more to the point. This undoubtedly contributed significantly to the extent of the tragedy. As pointed out above, part and parcel of Bush's neo-liberal show is that excessive decision-making power is concentrated in Washington. The initial unwillingness of his administration to cede responsibility and power to local authorities on the ground clearly reflected the limpet-like determination of the former to hold onto every iota of that power.

However, the main factor behind the devastation of New Orleans appears to have been a mixture of dogmatic adherence to the neo-liberal social and economic model currently being imposed by the Bush administration on US citizens together with a type of naked and cynical cronyism that can only flourish in a largely de-politicized society. An obvious fall-out effect of this state of affairs is the corrosive cynicism and extraordinary lack of solidarity that has gripped the country, a state of affairs completely at odds with the traditional American 'give me your huddled masses' ethos.

This disaster gives two instances of such a seismic value shift. One: that the order to evacuate New Orleans issued from the office of the governor was given without taking into account those underprivileged citizens—amounting to no less than 30 per cent of the total population—who had neither the means nor the money to flee the city. And the other was the general lack of motivation—almost indifference—of the rest of US society. Up to now, the general population here has always been more or less unsparing in its solidarity with residents of zones hit by natural disasters. That the times they are a-changin', as Bob Dylan put it in the much more optimistic context of the Vietnam war protests, is evidenced by the time it took for the civil sector to get up off its butt and mobilize to put together a support network for the New Orleans victims.

But it is in the economic sector that the criminal (the word is not excessive, as we shall see) depredations caused by administration neo-liberal policies have caused maximum damage. The financial drain caused by the Iraq war and the supposed 'war against terrorism' (with consequent enrichment of arms industry moguls), deep tax cuts and the seemingly limitless promotion of the construction sector are three initiatives designed to enrich the friends, collaborators and hangers-on of the president. Let us have a brief look at some aspects of this story which have a direct bearing on the New Orleans tragedy!

In 1979, president Jimmy Carter created the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), an entity possessing ministerial rank and dedicated to coordinating federal, state and municipal efforts in the event of natural/human disasters. After 9-11, bowing before an avalanche of criticism regarding the chaotic response of the US to the attack, Bush created the Department of Homeland Security, which incorporated 22 pre-existing agencies and has the role of protecting the country against terrorist attacks. Since then, the role of FEMA has

been a steadily diminishing priority. Why? Because the efforts and resources of the federal government are almost single-mindedly focused on the 'war against terrorism', leaving scarcely any provision for natural disasters!

The criminal aspect of this is that Bush received in 2001 a firm clear warning that one of the three most serious disasters that could occur to the US was the flooding of New Orleans. Officials of FEMA knew that hurricanes in the Gulf of Mexico have been growing in frequency and violence in recent years. The Bush administration refusal to abide by the terms of the Kyoto convention on carbon dioxide emissions—and consequent climate change in the region—has probably, according to reputable scientific opinion, a lot to do with this unsought and undesirable phenomenon. The flooding of New Orleans was inevitable given the ramshackle defenses of that city against storms of the magnitude of Hurricane Katrina.

So, with all of this information, what did our President do? Why, he incorporated FEMA into his new security structure, thus neutralizing it! And, following a tax cut to benefit his cronies, he effectively paralyzed the only remaining entity that could take steps to prevent such a natural disaster, i.e. the publicly accountable SELA (Southeast Louisiana Urban Flood Control Project), founded in 1995 by president Bill Clinton. SELA had a ten year project underway, carrying a \$430 million price tag, to protect the city from the sea by a system of dykes and sluice gates involving low-lying swamplands on the seaward side of the city. The project was stymied when federal support was cut back to €250 million. And in 2003 the Bush administration, in keeping with its pristine neo-liberal principles, privatized these swamplands—the only natural barrier against the flooding of the city—selling them to speculators, who proceeded—would you ever believe it?—to build houses (now under water) on them...

So the inevitable happened: the worst—and perfectly avoidable—natural disaster in US history. And the current major world power—and self-proclaimed global policeman—is so deteriorated socially, economically and politically that it is reduced to asking for foreign help (unlike Cuba) to help confront a disaster in its own backyard. Another black chapter in this blackest of stories is that neighboring Cuba offered to send 1,100 trained and equipped medical personnel—without conditions—to New Orleans during the immediate aftermath of the disaster, when such help was sorely needed in the stricken city. This generous offer fell on ears stuffed with neo-liberal earplugs. Which is logical when you consider that Bush and his cronies operate a form of politics where opportunism and right-wing ideology is everything, and the safety and well-being of ordinary citizens their least and last consideration!

The lesson of the New Orleans disaster should not be lost on socialists everywhere. Its case history demonstrates, in a clear, graphic and spectacular way, a direct cause-effect relationship between the implementation of socially irresponsible neo-liberal economic policies and their devastating effects on human populations. Unfortunately—and heart-rending though it be—this tragedy merely represents the tip of a vast iceberg of human suffering, caused by the imposition globally by international US-dominated financial agencies of brutal restrictive economic regimes that impoverish and kill. New Orleans happens quietly every day, with much less media exposure, right across our globe. Socialists need to be aware of this, and to publicize the mechanisms whereby the rich make themselves richer, and the poor become poorer and poorer and die. And not only in the third world!

But this could not happen in Ireland!

Could it not? Not on the same spectacular scale as New Orleans or Rwanda, maybe! But note that Ireland—which has taken the neo-liberal bait hook, line and sinker, and has become, after Norway, the wealthiest country on the globe—now boasts (if that is the word) the third highest poverty rate (15.2 per cent) among the eighteen most industrialized

countries of the world. And in terms of lack of social solidarity and unequal wealth distribution, among the thirty most industrialized countries it rows in fifth behind the US, Hong Kong, New Zealand and Portugal. Any wonder that, cheek by jowl with the Celtic Tiger bonanza, Ireland—conforming to its chosen US model—is paying the social cost inherent to the said bonanza? Irish media report that the country is experiencing latterly an unprecedented surge in social problems, violent crime, suicide rates among the young, psychiatric disorders, etc.

As I write this article, for example, I note on my online *Irish Times* (September 10) that one quarter of patients in the Irish Republic waiting for surgery have to wait for more than one year for their operations. And that two homeless people—one a young woman sleeping rough—were found dead close to Dublin city center. Prompting Alice Leahy, director of the Homeless Charity Trust of that city, to comment that such deaths happen “almost weekly”. “We are not hearing about these deaths”, she said. “It is a very serious issue and we cannot deny it.” Such deaths, we would add, whether in New Orleans or Dublin, should wake society up to the fact that they occur to victims of the same social marginalization intrinsic to all neo-liberal programs.

The New Orleans disaster should wake us all up with its starkest of warnings that neo-liberalism is toxic—is people poison! And kills wherever it finds a foothold—whether in the first or third worlds. Socialists know this. Socialists know there is another way. Most others don’t know. It is up to us to spread the news: no-one else will!

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