

# **Letter from New Orleans**

## **Reclusian Reflections on an Unnatural Disaster**

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The following letter was sent to an International Conference on Elisee Reclus, the 19<sup>th</sup> century anarchist geographer and political theorist. The conference, which was held in Milan on October 12–13, was one of several planned for 2005 to celebrate the 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Reclus' birth and the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death. I was invited to do a presentation but couldn't leave New Orleans to attend. Fortunately, our electricity, which had been out for almost six weeks, resumed shortly before the conference, and I was able to write the letter hastily and find a place to email it. It arrived in Milan the day before the conference and was read during the proceedings, and it will be translated and published in the Italian anarchist magazine *Libertaria*.



Élisée Reclus (1830–1905)

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October 11, 2005

Dear Friends,

I regret that I can't be with you for the international Reclus conference in Milan this week. I was looking forward very much to seeing all of my good friends there and participating in the extraordinary event that you've organized. I decided that to help make up for my absence from my session tomorrow that I'd send you some reflections on what I've been doing recently and what has been occurring here in New Orleans.

I was in Dharamsala, India in late August when I heard that a major hurricane was approaching New Orleans. I was there with the Louisiana Himalayan Association (a group I belong to that works with Tibetan refugees), teaching English and making plans for future programs there for my students in New Orleans. Ironically, I soon found out that I was to leave the Tibetan refugee community to return to what had itself become a city of refugees. When I arrived home, I found a city of empty streets, fallen trees, debris scattered everywhere, abandoned cars, flood-ravaged houses, and eerie silence. Since then, I've been working with the cleanup effort in my neighborhood and with several grassroots organizations around the city. Over the past month, the city has slowly begun to come back, as symbolized by the "second line" jazz funeral parade that marched through the city Sunday—the first time this has happened since the hurricane.

The following reflections area bit in the spirit of a jazz funeral—they mourn our collective tragedy but speak out also for our collective hope. They are also very much in the spirit of Reclus, who will frequently be quoted in what follows. If Reclus, despite all his social and ecological prescience, didn't actually predict the Hurricane Katrina disaster a century in advance, we'll see that much of what he said is rather prophetic in relation both to this particular event and to the state of the world in which we live today.

Writing in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century during his two-year stay in Louisiana, Reclus commented on the ecologically precarious condition of the city of New Orleans. In *A Voyage to New Orleans: Anarchist Impressions of the Old South*, Reclus writes, "One has only to dig a few centimeters, or during dry spells, one or two meters, to reach muddy water. Also, the slightest rain is enough to flood the streets, and when a heavy rain beats down over the city, all of the avenues and plazas become rivers and lagoons. The steam engines work almost constantly to rid New Orleans of its stagnant waters and to discharge them through a canal into Lake Pontchartrain, four miles north of the river." He further notes that "the districts far from the Mississippi are only a few centimeters above sea level, and people's homes are separated from the alligator nests only by drainage pools of stagnant and always iridescent water..."

Since the time of Reclus, the city has spread far beyond the natural levees of the Mississippi and the few so-called "ridges" or higher ground on which it was first constructed. Much of it now lies well below sea level—at times as much as three meters or more. As the city has grown, it has expanded to areas more and more susceptible to flooding, and the job of pumping water out has become increasingly more difficult—and as we now know, sometimes impossible! Furthermore, the destruction of Louisiana's coastal cypress forests and the massive erosion of coastline (ultimately reaching the level of forty to fifty square miles per year) have resulted not only in the loss of great natural beauty but also in the elimination of the city's natural protective barrier against the destructive force of hurricanes. According to an often-cited statistic, the loss of 2.7 miles of coastal wetlands results in about a one-foot increase in storm surge.

Reclus notes that throughout history despots have "placed cities in areas in which they would never have grown up spontaneously," so that "once established in such unnatural environments, they have only been able to develop at the cost of an enormous loss of vital energy." Today, he says, such "unnatural" urbanization is caused not by mad tyrants but rather by the despotism of the market: by "powerful capitalists, speculators, and presidents of financial syndicates." Our "unnatural metropolis" (as it has been aptly labeled in one geographical work) has grown irrationally and anti-ecologically as a result of the

tyranny of capital, with its imperious dictates of profit, growth, development, and blind, opportunistic exploitation.

The local media repeated the refrain that the true destructive potential of a major hurricane was ignored not only by the politicians and other major decision-makers—but by the population at large. In short, nobody really caught on, and nobody really warned us. Nobody is really guilty because everybody is equally guilty. This is, however, far from the truth. Environmental writers such as John McPhee and Christopher Hallowell have written eloquently of the coming disaster; official hearings have been held in which its details have been discussed; and eventually and occasionally, even the popular media chimed in. Moreover, ecological activists—certainly the most radical ones, often contemptuously dismissed by the complacent mainstream—have continually stressed the dangers of ecologically irrational urban sprawl, deforestation, and coastal erosion. They have pointed out the aggravating effects of global climate change, with the consequent likelihood of increased storm activity and intensity and rising sea levels, and have called for an immediate change of direction. These supposed prophets of doom have now been proven to be the true realists, for this year has already seen the second-highest number of tropical storms in history, and the season is not yet over. (Since this was written several more tropical storms and one major hurricane have occurred. The year has seen the most storm activity in the past 150 years.)

A century and a half ago, Reclus saw these destructive social forces at work and suggested what their consequences might be. He observes that “foremost among the causes that have vanquished so many successive civilizations” has been “the brutal violence with which most nations have treated the nourishing earth.” In “The Feeling for Nature in Modern Society,” he specifies among the evils that have led to this result that they have “cut down forests” and “caused rivers to overflow.” In another telling passage from the same early work (1866), he writes of a “secret harmony” that exists between humanity and the natural world and warns that “when reckless societies allow themselves to meddle with that which creates the beauty of their domain, they always end up regretting it.”

What they come to regret is called disaster. As in the case of Thanatos in general, disaster is the Thing that haunts everyone: the Thing that we spend our lives thinking about by not thinking about it. Reclus was struck by the fact that New Orleans was a city plagued by disaster. And he was perplexed by the seeming complacency of its inhabitants in the face of its ongoing disasters and occasional catastrophes. Soon after his arrival, he was to be stricken in one of the epidemics of yellow fever that periodically killed a large percentage of the city’s population. But what made a greater impression on him at the time of his arrival were the spectacular fires that constantly plagued the city and ultimately destroyed almost all the architecture dating back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In *Voyage*, he writes, “In New Orleans...the total destruction caused by fires is equivalent to half of the loss due to similar catastrophes throughout France.” He was understandably astounded that New Orleans, a city of 200,000 at that time, could have half as much destruction by fire as his own country, with its tens of millions of inhabitants.

Reclus was also shocked by the terrible ongoing loss of life that took place on the river. He observes that “from the construction of the first steamboat up to the present time, more than 40,000 persons have been burned or drowned in the Mississippi because of accidents of all sorts, including explosions, collisions, or fires—an average of 1,000 victims per year.” One of the most striking passages in *Voyage to New Orleans* is his description of a fire on the river in which seven large steamships in a row were consumed in flames and destroyed. New Orleans has continued to live with disaster and the threat of catastrophe, along with its continued propensity to think about the unthinkable by resolutely refusing to think about it. As mentioned, it has long been known on some level that a powerful hurricane directly hitting the city or coming close to it would produce a major disaster and possibly even destroy the city. In 1965, the relatively large Hurricane Betsy caused massive destruction and flooding and a number of deaths in and around the city and became part of local legend. Over the next forty years, the conditions for catastrophe have only been aggravated. All along, there were those few voices crying out in—and sometimes on behalf of—the wilderness, but their sound was so faint that few noticed their existence.

Requests for increased funding for hurricane protection were made, but both Congress and a “fiscally conservative” administration could safely ignore the problem and fund imperialist adventures instead, given the lack of outcry for a solution on the part of such seemingly willing victims of the imminent catastrophe. Another phenomenon that astounded Reclus was the level of crime and violence in antebellum New Orleans. He said that one town in the Wild West was apparently more violent, but apart from that one case, New Orleans was unsurpassed. He explains, “The night watchmen are far too few in numbers to be very effective in preventing disasters...The most notorious criminals are hardly ever arrested, except when, emboldened by long success, they have the audacity to kill in broad daylight. Each year several hundred murders are committed and duly reported by the press, but they are rarely pursued by the judges. However, criminal activity is so excessive that, in spite of the casual nature of justice, 25,000 to 30,000 arrests are made each year.” Nostalgic southerners, as they wave their little confederate flags, still fantasize about an Old South that was all magnolias and mint juleps, rather than murder and mayhem. Fortunately, we have Reclus to remind us of the deep roots of our heritage of violence, which was itself rooted in long traditions of racism, complacent conservatism, and social injustice.

Our traditions continue. Today, there are still several hundred murders per year in New Orleans—in the worst year there were four hundred—in addition to similarly astronomical rates for many other crimes. So, it was not entirely surprising that in the chaos of the aftermath of Katrina there should be an outbreak of crime and violence. Many around the world were shocked by the media’s depictions of widespread looting in the city after the storm and by later stories of mass desertions by the police and police participation in looting and theft.

Some New Orleanians were perhaps appalled—but also rather amused—by scenes of crowds carting off entire shelves of merchandise from stores as the police looked on, by reports that a military helicopter had been fired on, and by rumors that one of the major shopping malls had been emptied and then burned to the ground. Many New Orleanians have a sort of perverse pride at the idea that “almost anything can happen here,” and disaster stories of the extreme and the bizarre fed this feeling.

Others seemed to be caught in paranoid delusions, as in the case of wild stories of hundreds of bodies of shooting victims piled up in the Superdome. The coroner’s office reported that in reality no one was shot there. A friend who lives in an elite section of the city passed on a rumor (no doubt the product of wishful fantasies of some in the neighborhood) that 600 looters had been shot dead by the police.

Other stories could produce only unmitigated horror in anyone, as in the case of elderly people who were abandoned to drown helplessly. It has been reported that the majority of the over one-thousand local storm victims were in their 60’s or older. A friend circulated a harrowing story of wading through chest-high rising water looking for high ground, of seeing bodies floating in the water, and of observing addicts pushing a child’s swimming pool through the floodwaters—they took turns getting into the pool to shoot up while the others pushed.

The great majority of the public accepted the fact that necessities should be taken from stores and used—but the ugly side of the free enterprise system was seen in frantic plunder of consumer goods for later resale. This was followed by legalized plunder as price-gouging took effect for essentials such as emergency repairs on roofs, and large corporations raked in windfall (sic) profits from juicy contracts as they subcontracted the actual work to hard-working but underpaid small businesses.

Among the nicknames for New Orleans are “the Big Easy” and “the City that Care Forgot.” Both reflect the fun-loving, carefree, hedonistic character of the city. While other cities adopt slogans such as “Proud to call it home,” bumperstickers in New Orleans proclaim, “New Orleans—Proud to Crawl Home.” This is, of course, a reference to the city’s cult of alcoholic excesses, something Reclus observed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He said that he had never been anywhere with so many bars per inhabitant. He noted that “the city’s more than twenty-five hundred taverns are always filled with drinkers, and fuel the most violent passions with brandy and rum.” In this area, New Orleans has changed markedly. The passions of the patrons of bars and nightclubs are now fueled not with brandy and rum, but rather with beer and whiskey, along with the vast array of drugs that they will obligingly be offered. Needless to say,

among the few businesses to reopen in the weeks after the hurricane were a number of bars—and apart from hurricane cleanup, this still seems to be the major form of commerce in the city six weeks after the disaster.

The mayor of New Orleans stated several days ago that it will be necessary for decision-makers to “think outside the box” if the city is to recover successfully. He then proposed that the key to recovery would be reliance on tourism and shipping—the precise industries that the city has depended on almost exclusively for most of the past century. His one slightly innovative idea was to build more gambling casinos for the tourists, since they have hitherto had only two within the city plus a few more in the suburbs. So much for the boxed-in mind of his honor the mayor.

The mayor’s desperate hope that the city’s fortunes can be improved by betting on games of chance recalls Reclus’ comment on a certain economic delusion that he saw spreading in mid-nineteenth century America. “The American,” he notes, “is constantly on the lookout for opportunities, waiting for fortune to pass by so he can hop on and be carried away toward the land of Eldorado.” There is a sort of perverse or pathological logic to the mayor’s gamble. Year after year, we bet against the inevitable disaster—and finally lost. Maybe if we keep betting on and in the casinos, we’ll finally win.

To many people, indeed to the masses of people, the world usually seems like a game of chance. Accordingly, catastrophe always appears like something out of the blue. It seems like something rather-catastrophic! The reason for this is that the rules of the game remain carefully hidden. They are hidden by design, a design we call social ideology, and by a deeper design we call the social imaginary. However, if we make the effort we can gain insight into the nature of these designs, and into the character of the rules of the game. Catastrophe will then appear a bit less catastrophic in one sense—that of overwhelming disaster that seemingly comes from nowhere. But it will appear more catastrophic in the root sense of the term. “Catastrophe” comes from the Greek for “overturning.” A catastrophe thus overturns what has been built up, and it is more or less “catastrophic” according to the nature of the structures that have been built up. So, in order to understand the context of catastrophe, we need to understand the structures of domination that have created the conditions of catastrophe.

Reclus made an important contribution to just this kind of understanding. In reflecting on the problems of the city, he concluded that what he called the “urban question” is inseparable from the more fundamental “social question.” This question, as posed by classical anarchist theory, concerns the nature of the existing system of social domination and the possibilities for the creation of a free, just, ecological society to replace it. If we apply such an analysis to the present question, we will see that the true nature of the Hurricane Katrina disaster in New Orleans can only be understood in relation to the development of underlying, long-term social conditions. We will find that the disaster reflects in very specific ways the interaction of major forms of domination that were analyzed in great detail by Reclus, especially in his magnum opus of social geography, *L’Homme et la Terre*, but also throughout his works.

It relates especially to three of these forms of domination. The first of these forms is the state. Reclus attacked the state apparatus and its bureaucracy for being hopelessly inefficient, for aggravating the problems it claimed to solve, for oppressing people through arbitrary and abusive actions, and for concentrating power in the hands of irresponsible and often arrogant officials. The second relevant form is racism. Reclus was unusual among classical radical theorists in grasping racism as a major form of domination—an understanding that resulted in large part from his experiences in Louisiana. And the third form is capitalism. Though Reclus was scathing in his critique of the state, racism, patriarchy and other forms of domination, he was careful to identify capital as the overriding form in the modern period.

Though I can only sketch the outlines of an analysis in this brief communication, the Hurricane Katrina disaster reflects very clearly the dialectic between these forms of domination. The most obvious aspect has been the most blatant bureaucratic inefficiency of the various levels of government and of traditional aid agencies such as the Red Cross, in addition to the oppressiveness of the police. Only slightly less obvious has been the systemic racism that is reflected in the greater impact of the disaster on

the black community: the scandalously slow rate at which essential aid reached it; the comparatively low level of aid that was given; the long delay in restoring basic services; and the prevention of community members from returning to their neighborhoods.

Further below the surface, but even more deeply determining, are the priorities of capital and their effects. In New Orleans, we see a failure to invest in the social (and social ecological) infrastructure as quite appropriate from a capitalist standpoint for a community that works primarily in unskilled, labor-intensive, “service” industries such as tourism food and beverage, entertainment, and gambling. The larger southeast Louisiana region, with its reliance not only on tourism, but on highly-polluting, socially undesirable petrochemical and extractive industry, must be seen as a semi-peripheral sector, a sphere of greater exploitation relative to investment, within a core economy. Furthermore, racist patterns of urban development have resulted in an extreme concentration of personal wealth outside the city limits, and reinforced segregation within it, so that the core city and the poorer areas within it become increasingly less significant from the standpoint of economic and political power—and thus more dispensable socially. At least, this is how things must necessarily appear from the systematically distorted perspective of the dominant system. Of course, that system doesn’t grasp the organic connection between social and ecological phenomena. Occasionally, however, an event such as a major disaster offers some renewed hints that things are indeed connected.

I would like to elaborate a bit on one area of this analysis, not because it is more important than the other dimensions, but because it has been so obviously and scandalously on the surface. The Katrina disaster is a case study in the applicability of Reclus’s observation in “The Modern State” that bureaucracy “impedes individual initiative in every way, and even prevents its emergence” and “delays, halts, and immobilizes the works that are entrusted to it.”

Media around the world commented on the shocking ineptitude of the US government in helping victims of the disaster (I first read about it in a scathing editorial in the Times of India). The huge gap between the imperial state’s ability to destroy life and its ability to save it became painfully evident. In Iraq, it can in a matter of minutes call in precision bombers to destroy a house suspected of harboring enemy combatants (often destroying much of the surrounding neighborhood and many of the neighbors in the process). But back in New Orleans, it was for days on end incapable of rescuing storm survivors begging for help—as shown repeatedly on international television reports. Around the world, viewers saw images of people stranded on rooftops for days with signs bearing heart-rending captions such as “Please Help Us,” “No Food or Water for Three Days,” and “Diabetic—Need Medicine.”

Large private bureaucracies—the Charity Establishment—seemed no more competent than the public ones. The Red Cross, which had raised almost a billion dollars in the early weeks after the disaster, was conspicuous by its absence in the areas of greatest need, including the city of New Orleans. I saw large numbers of Red Cross volunteers in airports on my way to the city, but few, if any, after I got back. Residents of the badly devastated Mississippi Gulf Coast reported a similar experience. Presumably, many Red Cross volunteers ended up in suburbia or in cities where evacuees were located, but in New Orleans, they were not to be seen.

For a long time, there was very little aid of any kind to some of the most devastated areas, which were most often those of poor and black communities. The city administration not only gave no official recognition or assistance to citizens’ efforts at mutual aid and grassroots cooperation, but instead engaged in active opposition to it. Citizens attempting to enter the city or to return after leaving were turned away at the city limits. At one point, I was taking an injured volunteer to a hospital outside the city limits (none were open inside the city) and was told that if I left I couldn’t return.

The same problem arose when leaving the city to seek supplies. For weeks on end, it was often necessary to try several routes back into the city before finding police or National Guard members who were flexible enough to allow volunteers through roadblocks.

Barring citizens from their houses and neighborhoods for over a month added to the initial devastation of the hurricane. Further needless destruction of homes and possessions took place during Hurricane Rita, the second hurricane to hit the city, as rainwater poured through damaged roofs, wind

caused additional damage, mold continued to grow in water-damaged houses, and further looting took place in some areas. If there had not been a drought for the six weeks after Hurricane Katrina (with the exception of one day of heavy rain from Rita), destruction would certainly have been enormously greater.

During the crisis the state wreaked havoc not only by its exclusion of citizens from the city and its failure to deliver aid to storm victims, but also through its active persecution of those citizens who sought to save and rebuild their communities. Reclus in his important chapter of *L'Homme et la Terre* on "The Modern State" notes that "minor officials exercise their power more absolutely than persons of high rank, who are by their very importance constrained by a certain propriety." Consequently, he says, "the uncouth can give free rein to crass behavior, the violent can lash out as they please, and the cruel can enjoy torturing at their leisure." Such characteristics, so typical of those who govern us, have been abundantly exhibited during the hurricane disaster.

For example, both local and out-of-state police harassed 7<sup>th</sup> ward community leader Mama D for remaining in her neighborhood, which was under an evacuation order, and operating an autonomous community self-help project. She was cursed at, accused of being a prostitute, and threatened with arrest. Jeffrey Holmes and Andrea Garland have a building on the main street running through the Bywater neighborhood. The first floor, which was flooded in the hurricane, was an art gallery and a center for community-based activities. Jeffrey and Andrea took the artworks from the gallery and created a "Toxic Art Exhibit," consisting of damaged art works and political slogans, on the neutral ground (the New Orleans expression for "median") in front of their house. The exhibit was vandalized by the military that was patrolling the area and later removed by the authorities. The police later raided the house and arrested Jeffrey for "disturbing the peace"—a rather ironic, indeed ludicrous, charge considering he was arrested in his own home during the night and none of his immediate neighbors had yet returned after the storm.

Also ironic was the fact that an interview with Jeffrey appeared on National Public Radio at 9 a.m. the next morning, with no mention of the fact that he had been arrested during the early hours of that same day.

A few days ago, three young people working at Mama D's Wahid, Sandy, and Mama D's own son Ortegas—went to look at a parking lot where Ortegas had parked his car on high ground before the hurricane to avoid flooding. He said that when he had returned earlier he had found that the cars that had been parked there had been looted by vandals. Wahid, who came with the Family Farm Defenders group from Wisconsin, decided to take photos at the site to include in an article he was writing. On arriving, the three were confronted by police who forced them down to the ground, accused Ortegas of being a looter who was returning to loot again, kicked him in the side, held guns to the heads of all three, subjected them to verbal abuse, and then arrested them all for trespassing. The three had to spend the rest of the day and all night in an outdoor makeshift jail set up at the bus station and sleep—or attempt to sleep—on the pavement. The next day, they were told they had to plead guilty or be taken immediately to a state prison a hundred miles away. Similar stories of abusive behavior by police and arrests without cause are common.

So far, I have dwelled primarily on the negative—what we might call the disastrous side of the disaster. However, I would like to conclude with a few words on the positive side of this experience: the extraordinary and inspiring efforts of local and outside volunteers; the reemergence and flourishing of grassroots community; and the creation of hope for a better and qualitatively different future. The weeks I've spent in New Orleans since the hurricane have undoubtedly provided some of the most gratifying periods in my life. Seldom have I felt so much gratitude for the goodness of people, for their ability to show love and compassion for others, and for their capacity to create spontaneous community.

Out of this disaster has come abundant evidence of the power of voluntary cooperation and mutual aid based on love and solidarity that Reclus described so eloquently. Mutual aid, he writes in *L'Homme et la Terre*, is "the principle agent of human progress." In his view, the practice of mutual aid would begin with small groups of friends—affinity groups, in effect—and extend out to larger and larger communities,

ultimately transforming society as a whole. He expresses this perspective in a letter in which he appeals: "Let us found little republics within ourselves and around ourselves. Gradually these isolated groups will come together like scattered crystals and form the great Republic."

Elsewhere, he says that the anarchist must "work to free himself personally from all preconceived or imposed ideas, and gradually gather around himself friends who live and act in the same way. It is step by step, through small, loving, and intelligent associations, that the great fraternal society will be formed."

For Reclus, "Anarchy" means much more than its negative dimension of anti-statism, opposition to coercion, and rebellion against arbitrary authority. It is above all a positive practice of social transformation and social regeneration based on non-dominating mutual aid and cooperation. Furthermore, it refers not only to the free, cooperative society of the future, but also to every aspect of that society that can be realized in the present, "here and now." Reclus explains that "anarchistic society has long been in a process of rapid development," and can be found "wherever free thought breaks loose from the chains of dogma; wherever the spirit of inquiry rejects the old formulas; wherever the human will asserts itself through independent actions; wherever honest people, rebelling against all enforced discipline, join freely together in order to educate themselves, and to reclaim, without any master, their share of life, and the complete satisfaction of their needs."

I have found a great deal of this spirit of voluntary cooperation and concern for people's real needs—in short, the spirit of the gift—in New Orleans over the past month. The most inspiring aspect of the recovery from the disaster has been this grassroots, cooperative effort to practice mutual aid and community self-help. A vast spectrum of local and outside grassroots organizations have been at work in the recovery effort. These include the Rainbow Family, Food Not Bombs volunteers from several states, the Common Ground Collective in Algiers, the Bywater neighborhood collective, the Soul Patrol in the 7<sup>th</sup> Ward neighborhood, the Family Farm Defenders from Wisconsin, the Pagan Cluster, and groups of students from Prescott College in Arizona, Appalachian State in North Carolina, and other colleges and universities. Individual volunteers have come from throughout the US, from Canada, and from other countries, often linking up with local community groups or groups of volunteers from outside the state who are working with local groups. I felt great satisfaction when one young volunteer from a distant state said to me explicitly, "We came here to practice mutual aid." The Idea is still very much alive!

For the first week after my return, I worked primarily with the collective in the Bywater neighborhood of the city, which was inspired by the Common Ground project across the river in the Algiers neighborhood. My friend Leenie Halbert volunteered her house as the center for the group, which focused on preparing and distributing food to residents who remained in the city. A dozen or so volunteers stayed there or camped nearby and many more came by to help. The Food Not Bombs group from New England joined the project, along with many other local and outside volunteers, including many anarchists. A reporter from the New York daily newspaper Newsday did an article on the group, describing his first encounter with "communitarian anarchists." Leenie's house became a focus of social activity and hope in a largely deserted neighborhood and city. The food deliveries lifted the spirits of many and were essential to others who were isolated, such as the elderly man who had not heard about the hurricane and flood several weeks after the events.

After a break of several days to wait out the second hurricane and protect my house against water pouring through a seriously damaged roof, I joined community leader Mama D and the Soul Patrol in the city's 7<sup>th</sup> Ward neighborhood. Mama D has led a crusade to get citizens back into their neighborhoods—both to save their houses from further damage and to save their neighborhoods from planners and developers who would like to transform the racial, economic, and cultural character of the city by excluding many of the citizens. Some of the anarchists left Mama D's because of her allegedly hierarchical outlook. (Anyone who wastes time or who violates Mama D's high standards of culinary cleanliness gets "time out" the first time and banishment from the neighborhood along with a highly vocal cursing-out the second time.)

But most stayed and toed the line, along with an ever-growing group of additional volunteers. These included the busload of very hard-working young people from the “Family Farm Defenders” group in rural Wisconsin. After about a week of strenuous effort, the immediate neighborhood had been cleared of rubble. “Welcome Home” signs were placed on houses, and volunteers had begun to help returning residents to clean the insides of their houses. There was also continuing food distribution and mobile crews with tasks such as putting tarps on roofs, cutting and removing fallen trees and tree limbs, and clearing rubble. Mama D’s had also become a center of social activity, with a constant flow of neighborhood people stopping by for food and other supplies, visitors from other neighborhoods, newsmen from various states and countries and documentary filmmakers, among many others.

One day, I had the privilege of driving Mama D to a City Council meeting that was held at Louis Armstrong International Airport, which is located very tellingly far out in suburbia, about fifteen miles from the city. She delivered a rousing fifteen-minute speech to the Council about the disastrous policies of excluding the citizens from their neighborhoods and the assault on poor and black citizens that was implicit in these policies. It’s questionable what effect her eloquent words will have on the officials, but they will certainly continue to echo through the neighborhoods.

Perhaps predictably, the local monopolistic newspaper distorted everything she said in a report on the meeting. As I wrote in a (so far unpublished) letter to the editor “It is true that Mama D deplored the fact that ‘able-bodied black men’ were not being allowed to return to their communities in a time of need. However, it is absolutely false that she was ‘aghast’ that immigrant workers were brought in to work in the cleanup. In fact [she] expressed moral indignation over the fact that many of these workers were underpaid and were given no food, water or inoculations while on the job.”

The battle between truth and distortion goes on, as does the struggle between freedom and oppression. Volunteers have set up two small community radio stations to shift the balance a little. Perhaps the time will come when we will finally create means of communication that our communities deserve—in this case as always, it’s very good to see a beginning. What might we conclude from these reflections? Reclus’ philosophy of life was based on a deep love of humanity and nature and on a profound faith that the community of humanity and nature can be regenerated and liberated through personal and small-group transformation based on the practice of mutual aid and social cooperation. Though the Hurricane Katrina disaster has demonstrated the irrationality of the system of domination that Reclus analyzed so perceptively, it has also, in the forms of mutual aid and grassroots community that have emerged “in the midst of crisis,” offered powerful evidence of the viability of his vision of a future society based on love, justice, and freedom. If we are to carry on the spirit of Reclus, our conclusions will be exhibited not only in the ideas we hold, but in the feelings we experience and the lives we live.

Best wishes for an excellent conference!

Love and anarchy,  
John

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The motto of the grassroots mutual aid effort in New Orleans is “Solidarity Not Charity.” If you’re inspired by what’s being achieved through radical compassion and cooperation, please express your solidarity by participating in this work. There are many ways to help. For example, if you’re looking for a worthy vocation in life, please consider moving to New Orleans and making a long-term commitment to the work of restoring and regenerating our community and culture and fighting against ethnic cleansing, cultural destruction, and ecocide. Or if you have a few months, weeks, or even days to offer, please consider coming to work with one of the grassroots groups. Finally, if you can’t come, please consider sending much-needed money or supplies. Here’s information on two groups that need your support:

Mama D  
Soul Patrol Neighborhood Relief  
1733 Dorgenois St.  
New Orleans, LA 70119  
504-723-7738

Common Ground Collective  
331 Atlantic Ave.  
New Orleans, LA. 70114  
Phone: (504) 368-6897  
<http://commongroundrelief.org/>

The Library of Unconventional Lives

John Clark  
Letter from New Orleans  
Reclusian Reflections on an Unnatural Disaster  
2006

<[www.fifthestate.org/archive/371-winter-2006/letter-from-new-orleans](http://www.fifthestate.org/archive/371-winter-2006/letter-from-new-orleans)>  
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