

A Hurricane Harvey diary

Part one

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2 September 2017

I began these notes in the evening of Tuesday, August 29, 2017, after the hurricane moved off to the east and Houston skies began to clear. The observations here are personal in nature, and reflect my own thoughts as the events unfolded, and as earlier parts of the story were better filled in with new information.

The date and approximate time I took down the notes is included. All times are in the Central Standard Time zone, with the summer "Daylight Time" in effect.

Tuesday, August 29, 2017, 8:49 p.m.

** Law enforcement begins to assert itself*

There was apparently an armed robbery this morning in the midst of all the flooding. I missed the details, but it prompted a press conference by the Houston Police. They stated their determination to maintain law and order, and enumerated the police "assets" at their disposal.

For the most part, given the stressful circumstances, there has been a lot of the spirit of mutual assistance, helpfulness, and friendliness among the people who are affected by the hurricane. This has extended to the local news media and government officials. The story has been that "we are all in this together." But I have been waiting for the other shoe to drop.

As the Texas National Guard, National Guard units from other states, the US Coast Guard, the US Navy, Army, and other military forces have come into the city on their humanitarian mission, it has been an opportunity to (a) display their fearsome-looking (although nonlethal) hardware, (b) show the flag, so to speak, building street credibility and good will among the people they help, (c) provide an authoritarian backdrop for local law enforcement's press conferences, and (d) underscore that their purpose, not only in Houston but throughout the world, is to be a "force for good" as they carry out their imperialist atrocities elsewhere while saving voters' lives here.

Sinister hints of "looting" and "disorder" have been dropped by the local police without much, if any, supporting evidence being given.

Tuesday, August 29, 2017, 10:30 p.m.

** Curfews now in force*

For most of Houston and Bellaire, a curfew has been set up from midnight to 5 a.m. According to the mayor of Houston, this is because of certain "trouble spots" remaining after the rain stopped and the water began to recede. He cited as trouble spots underwater obstacles such as cars, fences, gates, and curbs that are entirely underwater and hard, or impossible, to see at night. (Many of the rescue crews commented on the problem of these underwater hazards.)

Originally, the curfew started at 10 p.m., but the Mayor noticed that many water rescue operations were still in progress after that, in spite of the difficulties, so two extra hours were allowed before the curfew begins each night.

For most other nearby communities, curfews are also in effect, most of them from 10 p.m. until 5 a.m.

** Allegations of criminality made by police*

At a press conference, the Chief of Police described an armed robbery. I missed the details and the outcome, but this was a perfect opportunity for the police to remind us of the terrifying specter of mob rule and anarchistic disorder. (I like the British spelling: spectre. It seems more, um, threatening.) He alluded to "lowlives" up to no good out there, especially at night, and this was a further reason to enforce a curfew.

According to the Chief, some people have been masquerading as Homeland Security agents, knocking on doors and announcing that the residents were being evacuated and had to leave immediately, so they could then loot the victim's home. Sounds plausible, but the Chief's press conference is the only place I have heard about such incidents.

** The flooding affects the police, too*

According to Chief Acevedo, some 200 Houston-area police officers have lost their own homes to flooding. This prompts a few contradictory thoughts.

In all probability this report is true (at least approximately). Police have to live somewhere, and in such a huge city as Houston it would make no sense for a policeman to commute in to work from far away, although a 30- to 40-mile commute is no big deal for many workers in Houston. It's a sprawling megalopolis of some six million people, after all. So the police are victims of the flooding, just like the working class. And I suspect this was the point: to remind us that "our peace officers" are just like us—only they are "heroes" and we aren't.

Only they aren't just like us. The Marxist theory of the state is that it is an instrument of class rule, it stands above society (not as a part of it), and it includes the notion of a "special body of armed men" whose job it is to protect the bourgeois class from the proletariat.

These armed men are not workers. They are not the proletariat! Yes, they may be on salary, and they may report to work every day, but they do not produce anything. They are not connected organically to the means of production, as workers are, but to the state, serving as its professional agents. Therefore, the police are different from you and me. And we have been seeing more and more instances of police shooting dead those workers who have the "gall" (for such it is seen) to question their conditions of life and work.

But. In this centennial year of the Russian Revolution, one is reminded that Tsar Nicolas II's soldiers, who were paid agents of that state, but who mostly were peasants whose home life and little bits of land were being wrecked by the ongoing war, joined the Bolsheviks in huge numbers, bringing behind them the wider peasantry, to stop the war, to demand bread, peace, and land. And to land the Bolsheviks in power.

The police and military forces of the US today are not in the same condition as the Tsar's soldiers were a hundred years ago. But to the extent that individuals within the US police and military forces are also suffering from the effects of war and natural disasters, perhaps to that extent we may yet find some of them thinking along socialist lines.

But it would be foolhardy for the working class to assume the police are anything but the police.

** Shelters opening*

Lakewood Church, NRG Center (formerly known as Reliant Stadium, next door to the Astrodome), and the George R. Brown Convention Center, among others, are now sheltering flood victims. NRG and GRB each can support ten thousand people, offering dry clothes, kitchen services, bathrooms, and daily necessities like toothpaste and shampoo. A lot of this is supplied by the Red Cross. Many area churches are now opening up shelters.

** Reunited families*

Social media is full of stories of families being reunited after being separated during the flooding and the rescue efforts. I was talking with my brother and sister-in-law last night—they live in the Kansas City area—and they were most impressed by the role of the social media in helping people to advertise their circumstances, post messages and photos of missing family members, and organize volunteer rescue operations. I note that not one government agency has set any of this up—it is entirely self-directed by the people themselves.

So another thought intrudes. Social media, layered atop the Internet, originally funded as a military research project, which exploded into a mass reality for the working class, I would say, in the 1990s, now has become another class battlefield. The ruling class, having (as usual) ignored it until it was an un-ignorable threat, now, I suspect, regrets ever letting the Internet into the wild, where its abundant growth threatens to choke off the privilege the ruling class used to enjoy of monopolizing the “means of intellectual production,” as Marx put it.

So now there are insistent claims that the Internet itself is a “terrorist threat,” and access to it should be a ruling class privilege. And people who expose the criminal misuse of the Internet by the national security threat are themselves tarred as criminals and terrorists.

I understand there was a recent, similar attempt to label US Interstate Highway I-10, which runs from Atlanta, Georgia to Los Angeles, California (by way of Houston, Texas, by the way) as a “terrorist highway” because it has been used by shady characters!

And yet, to yank away access to Internet and social media it supports would itself likely provoke a revolution, so I see the bourgeoisie walking on eggs on this one.

** Danger! Ammonia plant! Or something!*

In Crosby, Texas, to the north-northeast of Houston, residents were rudely awakened by local authorities early this morning and told they must leave their homes at once.

Apparently, due to the storm or the flooding, or both, an “ammonia plant” (as it seems to be known to the local population), located in Crosby, lost electricity during the storm, and this shut down some critical temperature-control system or other. The “chemicals” [not specified at my writing this but later identified as “organic peroxides”] are unstable if not rigorously temperature-controlled and this could, they say, lead to an explosion.

Remember the West, Texas anhydrous ammonia plant explosion not too long ago? Could the same thing happen in Crosby? Nobody seemed to know for a time, and nobody wanted to take chances with it.

The existence of this Crosby plant seemed to be known, but something mysterious, to many of the local population. I heard the name of the company spoken by a local news reporter, but as it was not spelled out on the screen I was watching, I couldn’t quite catch it. It later emerged that the company is a French one called Arkema. I’d never heard of it before, and now ... it’s famous. Dare one say, “Public Relations”?

Tuesday, August 29, 2017, 10:52 p.m.

A FEMA official, whose name I missed, implored people to sign up, preferably online or by calling 1-800-621-3662, for FEMA assistance. Those who have flood insurance should file a claim ASAP. Those who don’t are eligible to apply for a grant, which I understand can be something up to the neighborhood of \$30,000. Not much to replace a lost

home, but in some cases it might replace damaged gypsum board and paint, and treat some mold infestations.

** Relief telethons and other fundraising*

With great fanfare, various celebrity sports and entertainment figures announced fund-raising projects for the relief of Harvey’s victims. Houston Texans football star JJ Watt announced that he opened a YouCaring account and himself pledged \$100,000 to kick it off. By noon the same day, this account had raised nearly \$5 million, and shortly thereafter Watt set a fundraising goal of \$10 million.

Various other sports stars joined in with this and other funds; not to recite too precisely, baseball figures pledged certain fabulous amounts for every home run they hit, and so on. Support immediately came from across the National Football League.

Of course, it’s nice for rich and famous people to raise funds to help the poor and all, but one has to ask: why the need for all this charity nonsense? Why doesn’t the state just be a sort of big, nonprofit insurance company, where ***everyone*** who’s working pays in a little every day, parasites do not abscond with the money, and it’s there to be used to take care of ***everybody*** in times of need? Oh, well, that way, you see, the rich and famous could no longer build false resumes as friends of the poor. But I reply that there may be famous people (I hope there are), but there will no longer be rich people using disaster philanthropy as a way to further their careers.

** Rainfall record*

As the heavy rains began to fade out of the picture, the official rainfall total was announced: 51.88 inches (1.318 meters). This was the official number, and it came in second only to a record of 52 inches that once fell in Hawaii. For the lower 48 states, Harvey was an absolute record for rainfall. Again, this was the official record. Rain gauges in various parts of Harris County gave readings of as much as 55 inches.

** River reports*

As the rains diminished, attention turned to the swollen rivers. Only a part of western Texas is dry and dusty (and this will play a role which we shall soon see). But Southeast Texas is crisscrossed by dozens of rivers, creeks, and streams.

The lay of the land is down from the High Plains, the famous Staked Plains of Coronado’s travels, to sea level, and the contours are more or less parallel to the Gulf Coast. Hence, the rivers run roughly perpendicular to the coastline, and there are many of them.

A quick look at the county boundaries on a map of Texas confirms this. In West Texas, the plains were divided into counties by neat, rectilinear surveys; the counties in the Texas Panhandle look like a stack of children’s wooden blocks.

But not so in southeast Texas: The predominance of rivers makes natural—irregular and meandering—boundaries for the county lines. And Harvey filled them all up to an unprecedented degree.

So river flooding becomes the next part of the disaster to unfold. Flash flood warnings came like machine gun bullets. Cars, houses, people and animals swept away. The water levels got high and stayed there for days. And where the flood levels dropped, a dismal accounting begins as bodies are uncovered.

To be continued



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