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Disaster, Crisis, Revolution

Disaster is everywhere and touches everything. Currencies plummet, greenhouse gases rise, cells overproduce, levees break, individuals spiral, nation-states collapse, populations explode, art distracts, thought seizes up—all causing and all causes of disaster. But if the category of disaster can spread so easily from financial markets to individual psyches, from aesthetics to biology, from politics and ecology to philosophy, then it might be worthwhile to seek out a possible underlying logic of disaster—a historical logic that reveals a shared form, a shared function linking these various levels. Or then again, is disaster itself in disaster—a category so ubiquitously and glibly invoked that it has been cut off from any meaning beyond its own instrumentality?

Disaster is that moment when the sustainable configuration of relations fails, when the relation between one thing and another breaks down. In finance (for a capitalist economy), disaster hits when goods cannot be related to markets, when idle capital and idle labor cannot be related, or when currency bubbles burst, replacing so much cold cash with so much hot air. In ecology, the disaster of global warming hits when the emission of carbon dioxide no longer relates to the

planet's natural capacity to absorb it. For those with HIV or cancer, disaster comes when the logic of cells overproduces so that they no longer relate to the logic of the living body, and disaster hits when one is denied antiretroviral or chemotherapeutic drugs due to the inability to pay for them. In philosophy, disaster is that moment when thinking is cut off from history, while individuals are in psychological disaster when they are no longer able to relate to the world. As for political disaster, it comes with the severed relation between those desiring representation and those authorized to grant it.

But such a laundry list itself betrays a certain similarity to that other ubiquitous category capable of slipping easily from one discourse to another, namely, crisis. Like disaster, crisis' stock is sky-high however much its analytical force has bottomed out. To understand the significance of disaster today, therefore, requires a certain delineation of how disaster is similar to and different from crisis, not to mention the need to reconfigure both categories and salvage them from so much reactionary deployment. And then there is a third term that triangulates *disaster* and *crisis*, namely, *revolution*, which, unlike the other two, is out of vogue today no matter how indispensable it is to the overall equation. "Disaster" is what we usually say when we mean "crisis," and "crisis" is what we usually say when we really want—or do not want—to say "revolution," or, at the least, "radical change." All three terms are what we confuse when we forget that at different historical moments the function and effects of these three categories shift, thus emptying disaster, crisis, and revolution of the transcendental force we usually invest in them.

One thing we invariably learn when natural disasters strike (such as the tsunami in Southeast Asia or Hurricane Katrina) is that such events are not natural, or at least the effects of such events are not natural. Their fallout, quite obviously, is social—products of human choices, political systems, even cultural assumptions. Extending this understanding to the limit, however, effectively evacuates the category of disaster itself. This is because although disaster is contingent (coming from the stars, as its etymology suggests), its effects are almost always predictable and quite logical. Most people in power knew exactly what would happen if the New Orleans levees broke, just as any epidemiologist can predict how many will die of AIDS if left untreated. Those in power simply cross their fingers and hope that such events will not occur. When they do occur and their tragic consequences ensue, calling them disasters is like calling a dying man a hypochondriac.

Although its effects may be completely predictable, the contingency of disaster is what sets it apart from crisis. Unlike a disaster, there is something necessary about a crisis, something true to the larger systemic form. Crises occur when things go right, not when they go wrong. In other words, crises are built right into many systems themselves; systems are structured so that crises will occur, strengthening and reproducing the systems themselves. The boom-bust cycle of capitalism is only one of the more obvious examples of this logical necessity. Both contingent disasters and necessary crises, therefore, are linked in the way that their breakdown in relations is built back up again by a different set of relations within the same system.

Revolution, in contrast, is that moment when a new set of relations takes hold within a different system. This crude distinction better explicates the new ubiquity with which *disaster* and *crisis* have been invoked over the past twenty years, while *revolution* has been driven underground, not only rendered unspeakable but, more important as I will argue, unthinkable.¹ This trend has everything to do with the political-economic situation of the post-cold war era, a symptom of our own historical formation, which currently, for good or ill, goes by the name of *globalization*.

Disaster and *crisis* have always been quick off the lips of those wishing to justify mishap and misfortune. If it were not for that earthquake, the town would not be in such disrepair; if it were not for the crooked officials or crony capitalists, then there would be better public transportation, better health care, and more wealth to go around; if it were not for the new terrorists, then we would be free from anxiety, sleeping comfortably on cushions bought by the peace dividend. Crisis and disaster are those props pulled out of the bottom of the bag when all other explanations lose operational force or cannot be spoken.

With the end of the cold war, anomalous and nonsystemic disaster and crisis (that is, events from the outside—like a meteor or a madman) have been even more likely to be employed to explain inequality and injustice. During the cold war, for example, to speak the language of disaster and crisis was at once to speak the language of revolution: the discourse could easily slip into revolution. Disaster and crisis were truly dangerous. With *mutually assured destruction* the watchwords of the day, one crisis could accumulate into so many crises until the quantitative curved into the qualitative and the whole system was in tatters. We need only to think about the Cuban missile crisis or the oil crises of the 1970s to remember what a cat's step away crisis and disaster were to revolution. But with the transformed

geopolitical situation following the cold war in which the United States was the sole superpower and the "end of ideology" the ruling ideology, it *seemed* riskless (not to mention utterly gratuitous) to call upon crisis and disaster. At that moment, crisis and disaster were as far apart from revolution as heaven from earth. What needs to be considered at the current post-post-cold war moment is whether this is still the case. Is something changing so that crisis and disaster are becoming dangerous again, no longer the trump cards of those in power? Is something changing so that revolutionary discourse is creeping back into everyday consciousness, in the way we understand radical social change, but also in the more banal ways we understand ourselves and think about the future?

I will leave these last questions about revolution to the conclusion. For now the task is to consider how along with this new abandon with which we invoke disaster and crisis comes the conspicuous desire to overcome them, to preempt them. From first-strike military strategies to psychotropic medications, from "structural adjustment policies" led by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to computerized shutdowns of the stock market, from ecotechnologies to stem cells and genetic engineering to the cultural production and commodification of crisis in the name of reality TV—the drive to outsmart or short-circuit crisis and disaster is the order of the day. But the logics of crisis and disaster preclude their management—to remove their danger is to straighten their circles in such a way that betrays their logics and turns them into something else. Whether it is possible to reappropriate the discourses of disaster and crisis today, therefore, and stem their disastrous consequences is a question that requires close attention to the shifting role of revolution. Without incorporating this third term of *revolution* into the equation, we will be destined to react incredulously and as passive witnesses to the growing heap of disasters and crises—events that are, more than anything else, products of our own hand.



Unlike the 1991 Gulf War, the present war in Iraq was not provoked, not by an Iraqi invasion of another country or by the late Saddam Hussein's possession of weapons of mass destruction. Notwithstanding the faulty intelligence, even if Iraq did possess nuclear weapons following September 11, 2001, it had no more provoked others with these weapons than India, Britain, Israel, Iran, France, Pakistan, Russia, China, or the United States itself. But the logic of George W. Bush was clear: Saddam Hussein

was a time bomb—a "not if, but when" threat that had to be snuffed out sooner rather than later. The United States' argument came down to one of self-defense under article 51 of the United Nations Charter, a condition in which, according to the Bush administration, the traditional strategies of deterrence and containment are no longer sufficient. As Bush himself argued in June 2002, "Deterrence means nothing against shadowy terrorist networks with no nation or citizens to defend, and containment can't work when unbalanced dictators with weapons of mass destruction can deliver those weapons on missiles or secretly provide them to terrorist allies."² For Bush, the world had changed so that "if we wait for threats to fully materialize, we will have waited too long."³

In March 2006, Bush reaffirmed his commitment to preemptive war: "When the consequences of an attack with weapons of mass destruction are potentially so devastating, we cannot afford to stand idly by as grave dangers materialize."⁴ Bush went on to emphasize in the National Security Strategy document, "The place of pre-emption in our national security strategy remains the same."⁵ With Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad continuing uranium enrichment, many now fear the likelihood of a preemptive attack on Iran before the November 2008 U.S. presidential election. Moreover, when Kim Jong Il tested an atomic bomb in October 2006, questions of a U.S. attack on North Korea have been put back on the table. More disturbing is the response by Japan's prime minister, Abe Shinzo, who is seriously considering revising the Japanese pacifist constitution and developing nuclear weapons in order to protect the Japanese islands. Under the Bush doctrine of preemptive war (or more precisely "anticipatory self-defense"), what would stop Japan from launching missiles on Pyongyang?

This gets to one of the obvious stumbling blocks of the Bush doctrine: that it can be applied by any nation, even against the United States itself. In an attempt to sidestep this problem, the Bush doctrine was conceived as a uniquely American right "to attack a country that it thinks could attack it first."⁶ But as Noam Chomsky wonders:

If the United States has the right of "anticipatory self-defense" against terror, or those it thinks might attack it first, then, a fortiori, Cuba, Nicaragua, and a host of others have long been entitled to carry out terrorist acts within the United States because of its involvement in very serious terrorist attacks against them, often uncontroversial. Surely

Iran would also be entitled to do so in the face of serious threats that are openly advertised. Such conclusions are, of course, utterly outrageous, and advocated by no one.⁷

This raises questions not only about the universality of the Bush doctrine but also about how various nations might be driven to respond in equally catastrophic ways.

For example, Kim Jong Il is understood to be a rogue leader, fanatical and irrational. However much this may be true, it is clear that he understands how the world works under the Bush doctrine. In other words, recent history has shown that if Kim possesses nuclear weapons, there is much less chance that North Korea will be on the receiving end of Bush's military, not to mention all the new bargaining power (and, ironically enough, international respect) he will garner.⁸ Moreover, Mohamed ElBaradei, head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, recently warned that thirty more nations could soon develop nuclear weapons.⁹ The unilateral, preemptive strike on Iraq, therefore, has ushered in a new arms race without the bipolar logic of the cold war to keep it in check. In fact, Bush invoked these very changes in the world system to legitimate his new preemptive military campaign when he invoked a breakdown in the nation-state-based world system as well as the UN itself. It is one thing for national leaders like Kim and Ahmadinejad to possess nuclear weapons, but it is another when nonstate actors possess these weapons, since total war against a geographically stable, national population will not be possible as the ultimate threat. "Mutually assured destruction" is much more unstable, if not inoperative, in such a reconfigured geopolitical world.

This is what is different about preemptivity today compared to its use as a military strategy in the past. Of course, history is full of examples of preemptive strikes in which imminent threat is used to justify unilateral action. Many critics like to retrospectively tick off examples in which preemptive military attacks might have reversed a tragic event in history, such as if France and Great Britain had preemptively attacked Germany following the Nazi reoccupation of the Rhineland in 1936 in order to overthrow Hitler and avert World War II. Be this as it may, we must not let the similar historical appearances of preemptivity, or the retrospective fantasy of preemptivity, obscure the fact that this category works differently today from how it did in the past. But it also needs to be emphasized that preemptivity is not only about geopolitics and the military; it is as much about an overarch-

ing ideology of how things are and can be, and about how we understand ourselves as we live through the terror and hope of the current moment. Instead of moving back through history to show how preemptivity is different or similar today compared to the past, it may be more useful to move laterally away from the past into various contemporary realms in which a similar preemptive desire operates in order to analyze what becomes of its promise to solve disaster and crisis in advance.

Recent shifts in the discourse of the IMF betray a similar desire to that of the Bush doctrine. Rather than simply coming to the aid of crisis-ridden countries, the IMF now desires to preempt financial crisis by prescribing the liberalization of capital markets and austere monetary and fiscal policies. Bail-ins instead of bailouts, purgatives instead of palliatives, early lending instead of lending too late, this is the new mantra of the IMF—one that has effectively served the interests of the financial markets and transnational corporations more than global economic stability or the very countries in crisis themselves. In fact, it was precisely these policies (followed by a deadly prescription of sharply increased interest rates) that produced rather than preempted the East Asian financial crisis, not to mention the crises in Brazil, Argentina, and various other countries in the past decade.

The shift in discourse is interesting to track. An older, more Keynesian conception of the IMF emphasized the health of the global economic system by putting pressure on individual countries to maintain their economy at full employment and to provide liquidity for those countries that could not afford the appropriate amount of government expenditures and expansionary policy.¹⁰ Following the establishment of the IMF at Bretton Woods in 1944, the leaders of the IMF understood their role as managing crises in individual nations so that the larger economic system would not be jeopardized. This was a role not well suited to individual nation-states since what appeared rational for their own country in the short term could turn out to be disastrous for the global economy.

It was not until after the oil crises of the 1970s that the IMF's mandate began to shift and a new emphasis on preemption emerged. IMF discourse now took a more active, interventionist tone, one stressing development issues and, especially after the end of the cold war, control over the eastern bloc transitional economies for which the IMF stressed contractionary

monetary policies and comprehensive privatization. No longer as interested in managing the crises of various economies but in remaking these economies in advance, the IMF's mandate changed: it now serves the interests of global financiers, speculators, Wall Street investors, and global bankers rather than the larger health of the global economic system, let alone the workers and underprivileged who make up the world's majority. At stake is not only an approach toward crisis and disaster but an ideological understanding of these categories.

It is not that the leaders of the IMF or proponents of neoliberal economic discourse in general believe they can escape the crises and disasters of the capitalist system; rather, they believe that preemptive action can direct the consequences of economic crisis and disaster away from those whose interests they serve, namely, the transnational capitalist class. Of course, all of this is understood in terms of a persistent and tightfisted cold war ideology that views free markets and free societies as one and the same, regardless of what existing circumstances reveal. Only after an economic crisis strikes do the whistles blow and self-righteous judgments flow toward so many bad apples, be they crony capitalists of South Korean banks or cunning, amoral chief executives of Enron. But it is precisely here where things go awry, for the problems emerge not only when things go wrong (when corrupt individuals break the rules) but when things go right, when individuals respect the law, uphold the contract, and crises and disasters still occur.

Indeed, this is one of the central tasks for the current configuration of what was once called the antiglobalization movement. In the late 1990s, the movement emerged and was organized around a concerted search for and exposure of the transgression: "Where is the immediate exploitation of labor?" "Where is the contract being broken?" "Where is the corrupt official?" Of course these questions must be asked because there is too much injustice that goes on as a result of corruption. But the more difficult struggle that the movement faces now is how to analyze what goes wrong when things go right. When Nike cleans up and everything is supposed to be all right, there will still be systemic inequality and environmental degradation due to the larger commodity system—but how is the movement going to articulate what is wrong with it then? This requires a way of understanding formal and structural problems that is less concerned with whistle-blowing than with how crises and disasters are built right into the capitalist system itself—not only in terms of economics. Instead of reacting incredulously to the latest disaster or to the latest disaster induced by the

very desire to preempt disaster, a new candor is required about how the system works, about what we should expect and what needs to shift before the logic of disaster itself can shift.

The recent ascendancy of preemptive medicine is another interesting example. Today in the culture of cancer, very few doctors speak of cure, and even the category of remission is starting to lose its value. Rather, the watchwords are now *management* and *preemption*. Instead of depending on the total removal of cancer by cutting, burning, or chemically killing it (procedures that always leave the possibility of relapse), drugs are produced to manage cell growth, and other procedures (such as stem cell therapy) are designed to preempt the very manifestation of cancer itself. The mainstream media and numerous support groups might still characterize cancer as the big C, a cartoonish enemy to be conquered, beaten, fought with high hopes and an unwavering spirit, but in the trenches where medical researchers and clinicians—together with pharmaceutical executives—work, cancer is quickly transforming from something to be cured to something to get along with, to manage with so many technologically advanced drugs that keep things in check like insulin to the diabetic. The war metaphors still exist, but now instead of carpet bombs and nuclear blasts, we have smart bombs and reconnaissance drones. The profits, as usual, end up in the same pockets.

At the heart of such transformations is the radical expansion of detection and imaging technologies. For example, recent experiments with highly sensitive detection technologies revealed that a preposterously high number of people in the general population are walking around with certain forms of cancer.¹¹ Whether the disease will accelerate before they die of something else is difficult to determine. The crisis here is between what the new data are telling the image scientists and the inability of so many radiologists to process and interpret such data. When cancer might be in all of us with only some of us unlucky enough to have it let loose, then the very categories of health and illness, benign and malignant, living and dying become permanently confused.

The consequences of such confusion are especially acute if you are an insurance actuary or health care bureaucrat. Without a clear-cut category of preexisting illness or of illness itself, how do you determine risk? In addition to this, the usual ways of determining the durability of a therapy

through long-term results are radically changed when management (with its rapid modifications and unique-to-patient configurations) is emphasized over cure. As usual, there is also a certain economics at work in which an emphasis on management serves certain financial interests while an emphasis on prior notions of cure serves others (the stakes and money are too high to think otherwise). And patients often get caught in the middle. In Canada, a bone marrow transplant is paid for by the provincial health care plans, while successful targeted therapies that treat the same disease are not. These deadly serious differences could certainly influence a decision about which medical course of action to take.

Things will really get messy when medical preemption becomes more common. With detection technologies revealing latent illnesses, it is no surprise that so much financial and emotional investment is placed in stem cell research, especially procedures in which a patient's own stem cells (themselves not terminally differentiated) are extracted and then inserted into ailing organs in order to regenerate deteriorating cells. Trying to fix the crisis of cancer or any other serious illness before it hits with so many advancements in medical research, without simultaneously engaging the social structures in which such advancements exist, will only produce a crisis of another kind—one that is sure to spread not only greater injustices and violence but (and here is where the circle closes) greater threats to human health itself, especially in the form of mental illness and the biological maladies caused by environmental damage. For instance, there is no way under the present system that the medical technologies will ever be properly democratized; in fact it is precisely around the inequality of cutting-edge health care where we will see the impossibility of democracy under the current system of global capitalism.

What marks our current moment is an apology for inequality based on the unapologetic logic of the capitalist market—one that is not at liberty to suspend the rule of profit and expansion under any circumstance. With the emergence of biotechnology and the dominance of the global pharmaceutical industry, for example, who lives and who dies comes down to simple affordability and access that cuts across national borders. "Sorry, we simply can't afford to save your life" is said to the dying. The really sad part is that this excuse is not a lie, but the truth—so many are dying not because capitalism is failing but because it is succeeding, because it is fulfilling its logic—a fact that seems more and more visible today than at any other time in recent history.

It is not as if the pharmaceutical corporations could solve the problem simply by acting more generously, by acting less out of a desire for profit growth and more out of the desire to save lives. If they did substantially change their ways, then we would quite simply be in a different economic system. And it is for this reason that criticism of the pharmaceutical corporations can go only so far. Rather, it is a systemic problem in which the production of drugs within a globalized commodity system necessarily generates such access problems and other undemocratic outcomes. The key is not to focus on cases such as Vioxx (a me-too drug) and the bad faith enacted by Merck in concealing potentially damaging medical results (a focus on individual cases that go bad); rather, the focus should shift to a case in which the drug is unimpeachable and big pharma has been acting relatively aboveboard—this is the only way to understand the crucial sociological point that things are structured in dominance especially when they go right and are not simply corrupt when they go wrong.¹²

It is indeed a difficult if not unanswerable question whether an alternative system can be established in which such goods and convergences would not necessarily lead to such inequities, but to exercise our minds to open up to such alternatives, to such different assumptions and possibilities, not only will make for a more candid debate but can change the shape of the debate itself. Most likely, however, the present debate will shift all by itself, especially with the emerging prevalence of preemptive medicine. As defective hearts are repaired with stem cell procedures and future cancers prevented by genetic engineering, the unequal realities of everyday life will simply become impossible to conceal. The harsh realities will become more transparent as the ideologies of democracy and equality weaken and become harder to sell. To justify such a system, there will be the employment of a permanent state of crisis and disaster. Those in power will doubtless shift rhetoric from one that apologizes for democracy's slipups to another that justifies democracy's suspension. The problem is that of the extension of the *meantime*, in which the meantime becomes the permanent destination rather than a temporary moment of development.

There is also an emotional and psychological level to this shift in the meantime of crisis and disaster. As with so many who were diagnosed HIV positive before the successes of antiretrovirals or with many who were diagnosed with certain cancers before the success of targeted therapies, they were told that death was not far off. But today the crisis is deferred for those fortunate enough to receive successful treatments. Crisis used to be

defined by a turning (the Greek *krisis*), a decision that had to be made in the present, an immediate need to act. Crisis was always a condition of the short term. But now there seems to be the crisis of the long term—a crisis that has hit but that is being managed in such a way that the meantime has been extended, sometimes indefinitely. Such a crisis will require all new emotional and psychological ways of management, of answering the question, how does one exist as the living dead?

But this is not limited to those who are fortunate enough to have such good (lifesaving medications) and bad (life-threatening illnesses) luck at once—it could include everyone. Think about some of the ecological forecasts that predict an already-too-late scenario of our environmental future. Or any other it-is-only-a-matter-of-time situation in which the end is foretold, however long it might take to reach. Perhaps it is death itself that has always represented such a limit, a challenge that inspires us to learn how to live and love and work in the meantime before the safe inevitably falls. Indeed, a fresh engagement with our individual deaths, instead of the usual avoidance through technological desire, might open up all new ways of engaging our collective fate and all new ways of changing it.

What we have seen in the Bush doctrine, the new IMF mandate, and the emergence of preemptive medicine is that this preemptive desire functions to produce disaster and crisis, but disaster and crisis on their own terms. But if we know anything about the process of desire, it is that we often desire precisely that thing we ostensibly abhor. And since we refuse to own this abhorrent desire, we are shocked when faced with the reality that we had anything to do (however inadvertently and however accidentally) with its very production—even though this was our aim all along.

This brief psychoanalytical point brings us to reality culture, a form in which a disaster or a crisis is being not just recorded but simultaneously produced in order to service a growing market of viewers who desire to experience these so-called real events. At the heart of reality culture is the possibility that the unexpected can occur and hijack the show from its usual course. The allure of reality culture is that events occur unpredictably, however much reality culture attempts to commodify and reproduce these seemingly irreproducible events. By manufacturing disasters and crises, reality culture programs effectively attempt to preempt them—for disasters and crises are precisely those events that cannot be contained, reproduced, or

commodified. We can prepare for crisis, we can stage it, reenact it, even practice it, but when the airplane is going down we can never be sure if we will be helping others out the door or curled up in the fetal position shaking uncontrollably. Of course, the danger here is that once a proven market for such crisis events emerges, the events must then be produced at all cost. It is not too difficult to imagine the dystopian dimension to all of this, such as the production of crime and murder (such as in arson or snuff films).

At the same time, reality culture offers a utopian dimension; it marks a collective desire for openness, for a spontaneous eruption of the unexpected, the accident, the unpredictable, the messianic, the apocalyptic, the revolutionary, and the Houdini act that performs the impossible escape from our intolerable lives. I view the current boom in reality culture (in both production and consumption) as expressing not only the nightmares but also the social dreams of the current historical moment. Instead of criticizing the underlying logic of reality culture (or the Bush doctrine and IMF policy), perhaps there is something in their logics that can be appropriated for more progressive ends.

A reconsideration of revolution today is crucial, not necessarily in the battered terms of revolution versus reform, or a Leninist “seizure of power” versus a Gramscian “war of position.” What these indispensable debates sometimes foreclose is the more general ideological function of revolutionary discourse on consciousness itself. One’s ideas about revolution significantly inform ways of thinking about nonrevolutionary life, no matter how hackneyed and everyday. Georg Lukács made this point when arguing that the point of view of totality (“the all-pervasive supremacy of the whole over the parts”¹³) is the bearer of the principle of revolution. Marx made little analytical advance over the classical political economists, at least in terms of the discrete categories of the discipline. Rather, it was the way Marx put the categories in relation to each other and in relation to history itself that made his work revolutionary. Similarly, it was the “classes,” for Lukács, who could posit the world as a totality and inhabit such a revolutionary consciousness, unlike the bourgeoisie who were epistemologically shut out from this recognition.

Today, however, it seems that people the world over are forming a similar understanding of global capitalism—one in which all ideals are at the mercy of the larger economic logic. Of course, such a totalizing recognition

has existed since capitalism's inception, but it is only after the cold war and after the well-nigh total dominance of neoliberal economics that such a global understanding can flourish. An example of this can be seen in the different responses to the ideological justifications employed during the first Iraq war and the second. Back in 1991, the oppositional slogan "No blood for oil" was viewed as a bit too conspiratorial by many; by 2003, however, even those directing the war admitted that the economic imperatives were crucial as they were inextricably linked to "our democratic way of life." Explaining the difference in the U.S. treatment of nuclear North Korea and WMD-less Iraq, then deputy defense secretary Paul Wolfowitz said: "Let's look at it simply. The most important difference between North Korea and Iraq is that, economically, we just had no choice in Iraq. The country swims on a sea of oil."¹⁴

My temptation is to understand this more candid assessment of how things work—this *real economic*—in relation to ideological shifts that themselves are more "candid." And this new candor opens up new possibilities and limitations for both cultural production and political action, even though they will necessarily express themselves differently in different locations. Most notably, it is revolutionary discourse itself that is mutating, from the revolutionary discourses associated with the cold war (primarily based on political ideologies of democracy and freedom, of either the capitalist or the socialist kind) to the antirevolutionary discourses associated with the post-cold war moment (based on political ideologies trumpeting the final victory of the global market). A transformation is under way today in which a new anticapitalism is emerging, but it must be distinguished from the cold war one mentioned above. In the most basic way, what makes contemporary anticapitalism distinct is how it is more geared toward the economic than the political; economic ideologies of the global system are prioritized over political ones, so that the economic logic of scarcity, sustainability, and profit has much more traction than political slogans such as democracy, freedom, and rights. From the Left to the Right, economic questions now seem to dominate the debate. Indeed, the sacrifices of those who are most vulnerable today are justified by this impersonal logic of the market rather than by more grandiose political visions. Together with this transformation comes a transformation in resistance sensibilities; thus, moralizing arguments (which tend to be political in nature) lose their force, while a more objective, economic appreciation of the world system grows.

What is uncertain is how this anticapitalist consciousness (however dis-

persed and uneven around the world) will articulate a political project. It is true that today this anticapitalism expresses itself in the form of an overarching anti-Americanism. But in the most generalized and symptomatic way, anti-Americanism is simply a placeholder for a political solution whose emergence is presently impossible. In the meantime, it is the economic lessons of the current anticapitalisms that are most pedagogically productive. This is because they articulate the global system in stark and structural terms without resorting to so much political rhetoric that usually conceals the larger systemic logic. For instance, when asked about his Sandinista past, Daniel Ortega (who was reelected as Nicaragua's new president in 2006) explained that he is less interested in criticizing U.S. imperialism and preaching socialism and more interested in struggling against "savage capitalism."¹⁵ However much Ortega is a "tiger who has not changed his stripes"¹⁶ (as his opponents describe him) and however much Hugo Chavez hates George Bush more than Bill Clinton (let alone Donald Trump), these tigers growl in a different jungle.

Whatever form this new revolutionary discourse takes, a rearticulation of disaster and crisis must accompany it. A struggle is required over how disaster and crisis are understood and how they are inextricably linked to revolution. Indeed, by deemphasizing individual crises and disasters and by stressing their more general logic as imminent to capitalism itself, a more objective understanding of how things work today will doubtless emerge (however bleak and despairing). But compared to so much wishful thinking, bleakness and despair are always a more productive starting point from which to forge new political and intellectual projects.

Notes

- 1 Of course, this has nothing to do with the use of revolution as an advertising slogan, as in so many new revolutionary products.
- 2 George W. Bush, commencement address, United States Military Academy at West Point, Virginia, June 1, 2002, www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/06/20020601-3.html.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 George W. Bush, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2006), www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss/2006/nss2006.pdf.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Noam Chomsky, *Failed States: The Abuse of Power and the Assault on Democracy* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006), 82.
- 7 Ibid., 84.

- 8 The North Korean official news agency said, "The D.P.R.K. had remained unfazed in any storm and stress in the past when it had no nuclear weapons. It is quite nonsensical to expect the D.P.R.K. to yield to the pressure and threat of someone at this time when it has become a nuclear weapons state." Quoted in Thom Shanker, "Rice to Urge Radiation Inspections to Thwart North Korea," *New York Times*, October 17, 2006.
- 9 Amy Goodman, "ElBaradei: 30 More Nations Could Develop Nukes," *Democracy Now*, October 17, 2006, <http://www.democracynow.org/article.pl?sid=06/10/17/1439224>.
- 10 Joseph Stiglitz, *Globalization and Its Discontents* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002), 195-97.
- 11 Dr. Jeffrey Lipton, personal conversation with author, Princess Margaret Hospital, Toronto, Ontario, March 2004.
- 12 One of the great success stories for big pharma is Novartis's targeted oral therapy for chronic myeloid leukemia called Gleevec. See Daniel Vassela, *Magic Cancer Bullet: How a Tiny Orange Pill May Rewrite Medical History* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003).
- 13 Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), 27.
- 14 These comments were made by Wolfowitz in an address to delegates at an Asian security summit in Singapore in June 2003 and reported in George Wright, "Wolfowitz: Iraq War Was about Oil," *Guardian*, June 4, 2003. See also the correction to the article, www.guardian.co.uk/corrections/story/0,3604,971436,00.html.
- 15 Jeremy Schwartz, "'El Comandante' Poised to Lead Nicaraguans Once Again," *Globe and Mail*, October 20, 2006.
- 16 Ibid.

Jerry Herron

Detroit: Disaster Deferred, Disaster in Progress

Just Like Home

We love a parade—Americans do—and anniversaries and special days and “festival” occasions and sites. Politicians issue commemorative proclamations, the calendar fills up with memorializations, so many in fact that they become impossible to keep track of: General Pulaski Day, Panama Canal Day, Trivia Day, National Hugging Day, National Pencil Week, National Snack Food Month, et cetera. We invented the greeting card after all, and we can't seem to get enough when it comes to reasons for sending one. And it's not just happy times that people want remembered. We love a good disaster too: perfect storms and earthquakes, plane crashes and catastrophes (both monster induced and otherwise). Even 9/11 has now made its way to the big screen—first with *United 93* (dir. Paul Greengrass, 2006), and more recently with *World Trade Center* (dir. Oliver Stone, 2006). Or more to the point, when it comes to our national obsession with popularized catastrophe, consider James Cameron's *Titanic* (1997), which set records for production cost and subsequently box office take, and then went on to win a record eleven Academy Awards.