The Drowned World

J. G. Ballard and the Politics of Catastrophe

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J. G. Ballard's fictional depiction of a future London under water bears a striking similarity with the actual experience of New Orleans. In reality, however, the impact of racism and "disaster capitalism" on both relief efforts and urban reconstruction have added a disturbing new dimension to Ballard's neo-Hobbesian evocation of the collapse of the late modern public realm.

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> As the sun rose over the lagoon, driving clouds of steam into the great golden pall, Kerans felt the terrible stench of the water-line, the sweet compacted smells of dead vegetation and rotting animal carcases.
>
> —J. G. Ballard

This is J.G. Ballard's depiction of a future London submerged under water in his prescient novel *The drowned world*, in which survivors must contend with searing heat, giant mosquitoes, and the constant threat of attack by rival gangs scattered across the flooded city. First published at the height of the cold war in 1962, the novel explores what happens to modern urban societies in a postcatastrophe scenario. The destruction of Ballard's London is attributed to a dramatic change in climate so that the city is thrown into a reprise of the Paleozoic era, complete with giant gymnosperms, iguanas, and screeching bats swooping out of the sky. For Ballard, environmental catastrophe affords an opportunity to explore the fragility of modernity: he presents a bleakly neo-Hobbesian vision based on the pretext that anarchy lurks beneath the surface of ostensibly civilized urban societies. The apparent order of modernity is sustained by accepted codes of behavior in combination with vast technological networks: without these complex structures of organization and control, there is a return to small-scale

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human societies dominated by fear, violence, and the brutal reassertion of male authority. At one level, Ballard's gloomy synopsis can be read as an indicator of the exhaustion of utopian politics, but like the best science fiction writers, he uses a hypothetical scenario with which to explore tensions within contemporary society. Yet for Ballard, the relationship between complex technologies and modern societies remains obscure: the technological debris of an abandoned modernity acquires a mysterious significance, as if the crumbling streets and buildings were the ruins of an ancient civilization whose belief systems have long since been forgotten.

The paradox for the contemporary city is that only incessant inputs of energy, materials, and human labor can sustain complex technological networks, yet these maintenance activities require far-reaching governmental interventions that conflict with the neoliberal impetus toward the corporate disavowal of the public realm. Under a postsecular urbanism, the public realm persists as a fragile anachronism and potential threat to the hubris of transcendental capitalism. Where no collective imaginary exists, the arguments for any kind of coordinating role for the state lose their political legitimacy, so that society is little more than an amalgam of individuals linked by fear and self-interest. In 21st-century America, we encounter a postrational political discourse that rejects evidence or reason: the Bush administration had forced deep cuts in the budget appropriation for the maintenance of the New Orleans flood defenses—in part to fund the war in Iraq—and had disregarded expert advice on the scale of the risk even to the extent of claiming that the event could not have been foreseen. More bizarre still, the now discredited director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, Michael Brown, had claimed 4 days after the flood that he was unaware that thousands of people were trapped in the city's convention center (despite images being broadcast throughout the world).

The case of New Orleans reveals the fragility of the postindustrial public realm: the city presents a starker illustration of this than many other U.S. cities because of its pervasive poverty, social segregation, and moribund municipal government. In the wake of the city's inundation, New Orleans was effectively abandoned and then transformed into a militarized zone through the colonization of inner urban areas once inhabited by the poor, while wealthy suburbs were quickly cordoned off by a plethora of private security firms to produce social exclusion zones. These security firms present the first wave of a "disaster capitalism" to be followed by companies such as Kellogg Brown & Root (a subsidiary of Halliburton) and other specialists in posttrauma reconstruction who began winning "no bid" contracts within days of the flooding. Like a militarized gentrification process, the real estate developers have followed the civil engineering companies, so that "trauma capitalism" has become a tool of urban redevelopment not unlike the role of riots in Indian cities: what fire achieved in Ahmadabad, water performed in New Orleans.

We should not, however, romanticize the city's ailing flood protection infrastructure as a political foil against the advance of the neoliberal behemoth. Although there are parallels with the devastating floods of the pre–New Deal era that played a decisive role in transforming the scope of federal government, the outcome was a largely technocratic response to rebuilding the American public realm. The race riots of the 1960s exposed the degree to which this earlier incarnation of the public realm was largely chimerical for the non-White working classes, immigrants, and others excluded from trade union representation, trapped in dilapidated slum housing and condemned to menial poorly paid work. The remnants of a technocratic modernity in the 21st century are no match for a capitalist risk society divided between the insured and the

uninsured, where to live outside the market is to become invisible: mere flesh and blood of no economic consequence.

All modern cities face an invisible threat of system failure. Although cities are dependent on elaborate technological networks, the politicization of urban infrastructure has tended to be associated with failure rather than success, whether it be the disease outbreaks of the 19th century or the climate-change-induced flooding of the 21st century. The political history of urban infrastructure has been one of crisis, reconstruction, and neglect, a cycle that becomes ever more worrying in relation to the twin threats of climate change and the denigration of the public realm. Interviewed in the German broadsheet *Die Zeit*, Ballard concedes that the flooding of New Orleans appears to mirror many aspects of his vision of social breakdown in advanced industrial societies. What Ballard finds most disturbing, however, is not the city's technological failure—which had in any case been widely predicted—but the virulent racism that posed an even greater threat to the survivors. If London really were to be flooded as Ballard describes, it would be the poor and ethnic minority communities in the east of the city that would first be inundated by rising water levels rather than middle-class neighborhoods historically constructed on higher ground to escape the pollution of the 19th-century city.

Reference

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