

COMMENT

USA & Sandy: How the 1 Percent conjured a monster storm

Wednesday 31 October 2012, by [WILLIAMS Chris](#) (Date first published: 30 October 2012).

Chris Williams, author of *Ecology and Socialism: Solutions to Capitalist Ecological Crisis*, examines the man-made factors contributing to the disaster of Hurricane Sandy.

“If the study to which you apply yourself has a tendency to weaken your affections, and to destroy your taste for those simple pleasures in which no alloy can possibly mix, then that study is certainly unlawful, that is to say, not befitting the human mind. If this rule were always observed; if no man allowed any pursuit whatsoever to interfere with the tranquility of his domestic affections, Greece had not been enslaved; Caesar would have spared his country; America would have been discovered more gradually; and the empires of Mexico and Peru had not been destroyed.”

— Dr. Victor Frankenstein, in *Frankenstein, or, the Modern Prometheus*, by Mary Shelley

THERE IS little doubt that freakish and unnaturally assembled storms are a taste of what the future holds under an economic system that has “interfered with the tranquility of domestic affections” and galvanized the forces of nature into a fury of clashing dislocations as we pump ever-more heat-trapping gases into our atmosphere and industrial filth into our lungs.

The riptides of climate change are beginning to tear at the fabric of our biosphere as the earth’s climate system lurches, in ungainly and lumbering jerks, from the relatively dormant and benign stability of the last 10,000 years, toward a more volatile, violent and less hospitable new climatic state, previously unknown to human civilization.

It’s therefore quite apt to allude to Mary Shelley’s great work of gothic horror by giving the name “Frankenstorm” to the confluence of Hurricane Sandy and a cold front crossing the Northeastern U.S. Particularly as Shelley herself offered a symbolic criticism of the inner dynamics of capitalism and class society in *Frankenstein*, captured in the quote above, as the conflicted Victor recounts his tale and the uncontrollable forces he has unleashed as a result of his compulsion to continue with his project, despite the warning signs proliferating around him.

The obsession that took over Victor—his growing alienation from the world, which makes him forsake friends, family, even sustenance—is echoed on a global scale by the unquenchable thirst for profits of the global capitalist monster, which eats through our lives and our planet in search of fresh fields for exploitation and growth.

The fact that Victor’s uncontrollable quest consumed him in its flames when his creation turned against him won’t stop similar warning signs from preventing capitalism eating itself—and taking the rest of the planet down with it.

THAT HUMAN-induced climate change is part of the reason for Hurricane Sandy—the “largest hurricane in Atlantic history,” according to the Capital Weather Gang, as measured by the 1,040-

mile diameter of its gale-force winds—is explained by Dr. Kevin E. Trenberth, a distinguished senior scientist in the climate analysis section at the National Center for Atmospheric Research [1]:

"The sea surface temperatures along the Atlantic coast have been running at over 3 degrees Celsius above normal for a region extending 800 kilometers offshore, all the way from Florida to Canada. Global warming contributes 0.6 degrees Celsius to this. With every 1 degree Celsius, the water-holding of the atmosphere goes up 7 percent, and the moisture provides fuel for the tropical storm, increases its intensity and magnifies the rainfall by double that amount compared with normal conditions."

Global climate change has contributed to the higher sea surface and ocean temperatures and a warmer and moister atmosphere, and its effects are in the range of 5 to 10 percent. Natural variability and weather has provided the perhaps optimal conditions of a hurricane running into extra-tropical conditions to make for a huge intense storm, enhanced by global warming influences."

As the climate continues to warm, the effect will only increase, leading to more extreme weather events, flooding and drought, as outlined in two recent *Nature* articles [2].

"And warm it will. Not because we don't have answers to prevent that from happening and derive our energy from sources other than fossil fuels, but because it's simply too profitable to change. There is a compulsion inherent to capitalism; the propellant force of profit that powers further growth in a perpetual feedback loop, whereby the colossal forces of production are testing the limits of the planet to absorb the battering its biosphere is taking."

Never has Karl Marx and Frederick Engels' comment in the *Communist Manifesto* on the nature of capitalism been so apposite:

"Modern bourgeois society, with its relations of production, of exchange and of property, a society that has conjured up such gigantic means of production and of exchange, is like the sorcerer who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells." [3]

At this point, as a thunderous storm barrels up the east coast of the United States—which still suffers from an unprecedented drought in other parts of the country—it seems indisputable that the capitalist system has put the entire web of life on a collision course with a stable biosphere and climate system. One of those systems has to give, and there is no indication that it will be capitalism.

To the extent that anything is being done internationally to address the inextricably intertwined ecological and social crises, the answer seems to be to hack down the last vestiges of humanity's common heritage via the sword of privatization.

THIS IS clear in terms of oil production, which, along with other fossil fuels, needs to peak and start to decline in the next five years if we are to avoid irreversible climate change, according to the International Energy Agency [4]. Instead, oil production is projected to rise from its current 80 million barrels per day to 110 million barrels by 2020 [5], as oil companies seek to exploit their reserves and drill for more.

Along with higher profits for oil companies due to the price of oil, the Age of Obama has helped to usher in a gusher of new exploration and increases in output that, according to an Associated Press report quoting research by Citibank [6], means the U.S. could soon rival Saudi Arabia as the largest producer of oil on the planet and make the U.S. "the new Middle East":

"The Energy Department forecasts that U.S. production of crude and other liquid hydrocarbons, which includes biofuels, will average 11.4 million barrels per day next year. That would be a 40-year

high for the U.S. and just below Saudi Arabia's output of 11.6 million barrels. Citibank forecasts U.S. production could reach 13 million to 15 million barrels per day by 2020, helping to make North America "the new Middle East."

While Obama repeatedly boasts of his administration's commitment to lay enough pipeline to encircle the earth—and has taken Romney to task with ads accusing the Republican of being "anti-coal," [7] U.S. coal exports are at record highs due to the expansion of another fossil fuel: fracked natural gas [8].

So even as U.S. carbon emissions have decreased due to coal plants shutting down and being replaced by natural gas, there has been a bonanza for U.S. coal companies exporting their product abroad—leading to no net reduction in carbon emissions for the world as a whole [see below]. In fact, quite the opposite is the case, making a mockery of the argument that natural gas is somehow a "transition" or "bridge" fuel to a cleaner energy future—leaving aside the intensely polluting effects of the fracking process itself.

Perhaps this is why the Obama administration recently abandoned its commitment to keeping global temperature increases below the absolutely critical threshold of 2 degrees Celsius [9], which it had formally adopted just two years ago.

That's no wonder as the number of drilling permits granted in the Gulf of Mexico is set to exceed the number issued in 2007 [10], and production will be higher still, a mere two years after the worst environmental disaster in U.S. history. According to the *Times-Picayune*:

"Two years after the White House lifted a moratorium on deepwater drilling in the wake of the BP oil spill, federal regulators have issued the most permits for new wells since 2007, and many in the industry expect oil production in the Gulf of Mexico to soon exceed pre-spill levels."

No doubt all this extra domestic production is helping ConocoPhillips, the world's ninth largest corporation, rake in cash from planetary ecocide. On October 25, ConocoPhillips announced its third quarter profits had come in at \$1.8 billion [11]. Meanwhile, the company receives \$600 million in tax breaks annually while sitting on \$1.3 billion in cash reserves and the former CEO, James Mulva, "earned" \$18.92 million in total compensation in 2011.

IN LIGHT of Frankenstorm Sandy, I bet Obama is now wishing he'd had some small reserve of political principle left to at least mention climate change in one of the stultifying presidential debates. Instead, the two candidates, whenever talking about energy, sparred over who would burn greater amounts of fossil fuels and more swiftly transform the earth into a burnt cinder.

As the *New York Times* reported, "Even after a year of record-smashing temperatures, drought and Arctic ice melt, none of the moderators of the four general-election debates asked about climate change, nor did either of the candidates broach the topic." [12]

As the *Times* wrote:

"For all their disputes, President Obama and Mitt Romney agree that the world is warming and that humans are at least partly to blame. It remains wholly unclear what either of them plans to do about it..."

"Throughout the campaign, Mr. Obama and Mr. Romney have seemed most intent on trying to outdo each other as lovers of coal, oil and natural gas—the very fuels most responsible for rising levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere."

In fact, even as the science of climate change has vastly improved and the pronouncements of climate scientists become ever more definitive—not to mention desperate—this was the first set of debates not to mention climate change in a generation! Not since before 1988—when even Republican vice presidential candidate Dan Quayle thought it was a problem that should be tackled—has climate change not been addressed by candidates during these national debates.

Not only did the candidates clearly have no interest in addressing the issue, neither did the moderator of the second debate, CNN's Candy Crowley—despite a petition signed by no less than 160,000 people demanding that debate moderators at least include a question on climate change.

Crowley excused her omission on this basis: "Climate change, I had that question...All you climate change people. We just, you know, again, we knew that the economy was still the main thing." [13] Only the candidates did manage to find time to debate the issue of gun control, despite its less-than-direct connection to the economy.

In point of fact, the whole reason why the candidates don't want to discuss climate change is precisely because of the economy—specifically, the U.S. economy—which depends, as no other in the world, on fossil fuel energy.

Speaking later in an interview for MTV about the complete lack of discussion of climate change in the debates, President Obama expressed his "surprise" that it hadn't come up—as if the president of the United States has no ability to raise issues in a presidential debate!

This effectively puts Obama to the right of the group Young Evangelicals for Climate Action. Members of the group car-pooled their way to the second debate on Long Island in order to pray in the parking lot for a mention of climate change and the adoption of government policies such as taxing carbon emissions and helping the poor deal with the effects of climate change [14].

While I have a tactical disagreement with regard to the effectiveness of their chosen method, I couldn't agree more with the group's spokesperson Ben Lowe: "This is a long fight that we are committed to fighting."

SO THE critical question becomes: Is voting for Obama as the lesser of two climate evils part of that long fight? My answer is the same as Chris Hedges' in his excellent article on *Truthdig*, and consists of a definitive no [15]:

"The November election is not a battle between Republicans and Democrats. It is not a battle between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney. It is a battle between the corporate state and us. And if we do not immediately engage in this battle, we are finished, as climate scientists have made clear..."

The corporate state has successfully waged a campaign of fear to disempower voters and citizens. By intimidating voters through a barrage of propaganda with the message that Americans have to vote for the lesser evil and that making a defiant stand for justice and democracy is counterproductive, it cements into place the agenda of corporate domination we seek to thwart.

This fear campaign, skillfully disseminated by the \$2.5 billion spent on political propaganda, has silenced real political opposition. It has turned those few politicians and leaders who have the courage to resist, such as [Green Party candidate Jill] Stein and Ralph Nader, into pariahs, denied a voice in the debates and the national discourse. Capitulation, silence and fear, however, are not a strategy. They will guarantee everything we seek to avoid."

As Hedges points out, throughout history, our side has only won anything when we have independently organized—and built movements and political parties outside of, and in opposition to,

mainstream parties and politics.

Such movements have the power to affect the mainstream dialogue in the U.S. One of the best illustrations of this is Richard Nixon's 1970 State of the Union Address [16], which includes a lengthy discussion on the need to address the "great question of the '70s" and whether we:

"shall...surrender to our surroundings, or shall we make our peace with nature and begin to make reparations for the damage we have done to our air, to our land, and to our water?"

Restoring nature to its natural state is a cause beyond party and beyond factions. It has become a common cause of all the people of this country. It is a cause of particular concern to young Americans, because they more than we will reap the grim consequences of our failure to act on programs which are needed now if we are to prevent disaster later.

Clean air, clean water, open spaces—these should once again be the birthright of every American. If we act now, they can be."

Though Nixon was an unquestionably right-wing megalomaniac who caused untold suffering, mass murder and environmental devastation in Southeast Asia, he felt compelled, by a growing mass movement on the ground independent of the Democrats, to reign in corporate power with the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency, and to sign legislation that established many of the most effective environmental regulations we still have on the books.

WHILE I think that Nicholas Carne's argument in a recent op-ed article in the *New York Times* contradicts his claim about living in a "great democracy," the article nevertheless illustrates what's really going on with U.S. elections [17]:

"Elections are supposed to give us choices. We can reward incumbents or we can throw the bums out. We can choose Republicans or Democrats. We can choose conservative policies or progressive ones.

In most elections, however, we don't get a say in something important: whether we're governed by the rich. By Election Day, that choice has usually been made for us. Would you like to be represented by a millionaire lawyer or a millionaire businessman? Even in our great democracy, we rarely have the option to put someone in office who isn't part of the elite."

Precisely. And those representatives of the elite will sponsor and push policies which favor their class, not ours. And if those policies contradict a broader reality, such as calling in to question the stability of the entire planetary climate system, so be it.

Which means that I'm far more interested in working with people, forging alliances and building a climate justice movement with anyone who wants to fight against the ruling elite in the intervening 1,460 days before the next competition between two representatives of the corporate 1 Percent than I am in whether someone is voting for the lesser of two evils on November 6.

And in those struggles, I'm far more likely to be doing that by linking arms with the Young Evangelicals for Climate Action than I am with Obama and his coterie of Democratic Party operatives.

For many environmentalists, it seems easier to imagine the end of the world than it does the end of the economic and social system known as capitalism. I disagree with that as a premise, if we don't get rid of capitalism, there won't be much of a world left to imagine.

Therefore, even as we build a broad-based movement to fight for real reforms within the system—to slow down the monster of runaway, fossil-fueled capitalism that is creating Frankenstorms and much else in the way of ecological and social devastation—we need a vision for a completely different social system.

This means locating the practical and ideological operation of capitalism and environmental degradation within a unified framework that requires its replacement with a system based on cooperation, real democracy, sustainable production for need and the earth held in common trust by all the people in the interests of future generations. Only then, by that revolutionary social change, can we hope to avoid cataclysmic dismemberment of global ecosystems via anthropogenic climate change.

The agent of that change is not on the ballot. For there is another way to read Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*—the monster that the reader sympathizes with, manufactured and brought to life by the bourgeois Dr. Frankenstein, is so enraged by his oppression and exploitation that he is the representative for the revolutionary overthrow of his creator and antagonist.

In other words, Dr. Frankenstein, much like capitalism, has created his own gravedigger, in the shape of the organized workers, peasants and communities who must fight in the streets, fields and forests of the world for the emancipation of ourselves and our planet.

Chris Williams

P.S.

* Socialist Worker, October 30, 2012:

<http://socialistworker.org/2012/10/30/1-percent-conjure-a-monster-storm>

Footnotes

[1] <http://theconversation.edu.au/hurricane-sandy-mixes-super-storm-conditions-with-climate-change-10388>

[2] <http://thinkprogress.org/climate/2011/02/16/207545/two-nature-paper-join-growing-body-of-evidence-that-human-emissions-fuel-extreme-weather-flooding-that-harm-humans-and-the-environment/?mobile=nc>

[3] <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch01.htm>

[4] See on ESSF (article 26780), [World headed for irreversible climate change in five years, IEA warns](#).

[5] <http://priceofoil.org/2012/10/25/oils-new-supply-boom-is-a-bust-for-the-climate/>

[6] <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/us-may-soon-become-worlds-top-oil-producer>

[7] <http://thinkprogress.org/climate/2012/08/07/651191/its-a-mad-mad-world-obama-ad-touts-coal->

[record-slams-romney-for-having-admitted-coal-plants-kill-people/](#)

[8] See on ESSF (article26781), [Coal resurgence threatens climate change targets](#).

[9] <http://thinkprogress.org/climate/2012/08/06/642141/obama-administration-abandons-two-degree-commitment-made-in-2010/>

[10] http://www.nola.com/business/index.ssf/2012/10/many_expect_gulf_oil_production.html

[11] <http://thinkprogress.org/climate/2012/10/25/1086991/conocophillips-third-profit-2012/>

[12] http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/26/us/politics/climate-change-nearly-absent-in-the-campaign.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

[13] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2012/oct/23/us-president-debates-climate-change>

[14] <http://www.eenews.net/login>

[15] http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/why_im_voting_green_20121029/

[16] <http://www.infoplease.com/t/hist/state-of-the-union/183.html>

[17] <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/14/opinion/sunday/which-millionaire-are-you-voting-for.html?pagewanted=all>