

NEWS CHRONICLE: AMERICAN TSUNAMI AND FORESIGHT

Franck Biancheri, 13/09/2005

The world was totally shocked and horrified by the disastrous show caused by Hurricane Katrina. A different America was exposed there, that of the poor black population in Louisiana who had no car to flee. Beyond the material damage, the human misery emerged from the TV broadcasted images... and the revelation of the weaknesses of the American governance, which took a long time to figure out the magnitude of the disaster and react effectively. Everything has been said already on this subject, especially within the American media, and mainly by black journalists. There will definitely be some political consequences to all of that.

Nevertheless, before attending any great political debate, one can ask about connections between foresight and political action, since in this case the scenario was known and was announced with remarkable precision.

In 2004, a risk assessment specialist described quite in detail the "almost unimaginable" dangers faced by the people of New Orleans. No one had listened to her¹.

In September 2004, Shirley Laska wrote about Hurricane Ivan as follows:

"New Orleans was spared, this time, but had it not been, Hurricane Ivan would have:

- *Pushed a 17-foot storm surge into Lake Pontchartrain;*
- *Caused the levees between the lake and the city to overtop and fill the city "bowl" with water from lake levee to river levee, in some places as deep as 20 feet;*
- *Flooded the north shore suburbs of Lake Pontchartrain with waters pushing as much as seven miles inland; and*
- *Inundated inhabited areas south of the Mississippi River*

Up to 80 percent of the structures in these flooded areas would have been severely damaged from wind and water. The potential for such extensive flooding and the resulting damage is the result of a levee system that is unable to keep up with the increasing flood threats from a rapidly eroding coastline and thus unable to protect the ever-subsiding landscape."

The warning was clear, black on white:

"For those without means, the medically challenged, residents without personal transportation, and the homeless, evacuation requires significant assistance".

Shirley Laska said further on, about Ivan, in 2004 *"Residents who did not have personal transportation were unable to evacuate even if they wanted to. Approximately 120,000 residents (51,000 housing units × 2.4 persons per unit) do not have cars. A proposal made after the evacuation for Hurricane Georges to use public transit buses to assist in their evacuation out of the city was not implemented for Ivan. If Ivan had struck New Orleans directly, it is estimated that 40–60,000 residents of the area would have perished."*

¹ See Courrier International N°775, Sept. 2005 "The catastrophic scenario", by George Curry in The Black Press of America, Washington.

The article was also speaking of people able to flee, but who refused to. *“Researchers have estimated that prior to a “big one,” approximately 700,000 residents of the greater New Orleans area (out of 1.2 million) would evacuate”, wrote Mrs Laska. “In the case of Hurricane Ivan, officials estimate that up to 600,000 evacuated from metropolitan New Orleans between daybreak on Monday, September 13 and noon on Wednesday, September 15, when the storm turned and major roads finally started to clear. The fact that 600,000 residents evacuated means an equal number did not. Recent evacuation surveys show that two-thirds of nonevacuees with the means to evacuate chose not to leave because they felt safe in their homes. Other nonevacuees with means relied on a cultural tradition of not leaving or were discouraged by negative experiences with past evacuations”.*

This was not about multiple-future foresight, but a single future forward-looking, based on the extrapolation of the recent past. Hence, beyond the classic complaints of the futurists "If we had been listened to", we must go to the sources of this improvidence.

The organised reaction was not prepared because infrastructure protection measures were not part of the political agendas², and the latter were not the translation of a poverty eradication society project. What is at stake is not only the authorities' incompetence, the cumbersome bureaucracy, the lack of coordination of the echelons of the constitutional structure, but the vision of American society on itself. Apparently, this is not rampant racism, or rampant corruption, explaining the lack of political interest for the inhabitants of the damaged areas, nor the stereotypes of New Orleans³ films and jazz in American public opinion. It is the autism of rich people and their political representatives. Where did those black people come from? We did not know them, and they were disturbing the image of the reassuring liberal America, where everyone had a chance to live the American dream. They were not refugees⁴, but Americans in misery.

What to conclude from this major event? In my opinion, the great challenge of foresight and politics is to articulate long-term vision, medium-term programme and short-term action. This implies a new praxeology from both foresight and politics. Reactivity can be thought out in advance, 3-5 year long medium-term programmes must be at the confluence of the problems experienced in the present and the guidance of the general orientation of a self-constructed societal programme with the citizens. The debate on the finalities becomes the essential point⁵. Man and Humanity, and therefore the anthropo, would be the centre and the reason of being; hence the project under development of the "Anthropolitical Prospective".

A leader's vision is more and more needed, but it is not a hundred percent safe. Thus Lenin had the vision that the Bolshevik revolution would burn the global proletariat and that a series of revolutions would occur in Europe. There were many attempts in Germany, Austria and Hungary, but they were just straw fires, which led to the construction of socialism in one country, and to improvising strategic retreats with the New Economic Policy (NEP), in particular ... and to the tragic drift of the USSR.

² We know, moreover, that money amounts had been transferred to military expenditure in Iraq

³ New Orleans is not America, it's even its opposite "slow, lazy, sleepy, sweaty, hot, wet and exotic", but culturally irreplaceable. See Mark Chidress "Why New Orleans will be missed" New York Times- Le Monde September 10, 2005.

⁴ An adjectif outraging Kentucky black columnist Merlene David, Lexington Herald Leader, reproduced in the CI

⁵ I am thinking mainly of the current debates on a programme of the Socialist Party in France and more generally on the French left wing where identity is the real issue.

Today, any vision must be shared and participative at citizen level. This raises the question of the connection between representative and participative democracy, and it allows Hugues de Jouvenel to answer it like this: "... a debate occurred between the foresight proponents serving the prince vs. the foresight proponents of the people... a real debate topic. In fact, we need the three of them: a foresight serving decisions, a foresight as a civic political culture, and a foresight serving parliamentary bodies, where, theoretically, a counter-power is exercised vis-à-vis the executive, which is not that of the street but that of democratically elected representatives of the people." ⁶

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⁶ Hugues de JOUVENEL "Invitation to foresight", *Futuribles*, perspectives July 2004. See also his article "The foresight for new citizens", edited in 1982.