Book Reviews

Rebecca Solnit. ***A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disasters*****.** New York: Viking, 2010. 353 Pages;

Richard Misrach. ***Destroy This Memory*****.** New York: Aperture, 2010. 140 Pages.

In an obscure academic essay originally written in the late 1960's, philosopher Donald Davidson observes "it is easy to appreciate why we so often identify or describe events in terms of their causes and effects. Not only are these the features that often interest us about events, but they are features guaranteed to individuate them in the sense not only of telling them apart but also of telling them together."[1] We invoke causal relations, and the place of events in some scheme of such relations, in this view, in order to give them meaning, to differentiate them, and to group them under common descriptions. In *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disasters,* Rebecca Solnit addresses the causes and consequences of a category of events—earthquakes, hurricanes, tsunamis, and so forth—"telling them together" in Davidson's sense as a political happenings, namely "disasters."

Solnit is perhaps our most acute and creative public intellectual, a prolific and seemingly effortless writer whose beat is culture and politics and who regularly collaborates with visual artists of various sorts. Being Californian, she begins the book at home with the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and the fires that raged in its wake. Her concerns are not local, however. She takes us on a tour across continents and centuries, visiting and learning from the sites of many disasters, especially earthquakes—Lisbon (1755), San Juan, Argentina (1944), Managua (1972), Mexico City (1985), Loma Prieta, California (1989) and Tang Shan, China (2008)—but also heat waves

[1] Donald Davidson. *Actions on Essays and Events* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 179.

(Chicago, 1995 and Europe, 2003), explosions (Halifax, 1917), hurricanes (New Orleans and environs, 2005), and terror attacks (New York, 2001). In each instance Solnit focuses on causes and consequences. In so doing, she is able to establish two important things. First, she shows that what turns a disaster into a catastrophe typically is politics in the form, beforehand, of mal-distributed resources and concern and inadequate preparedness and, subsequently, of misguided elite reactions. Second, she shows that, repeatedly, popular response to disaster, while hardly flawless, is never as brutal and depraved as political and media elites suggest. The solidarities and mutual aid that common people display in the face of disasters afford, on Solnit's account, a glimpse at utopian possibilities.

In one sense there is no news in Solnit's claim that disasters are political events. It is now a commonplace, for instance, that famines result not from an absolute lack of food but of mal-distributed entitlement and access to such food as exists. Thus famine is best conceptualized as a political-economic rather than "natural" phenomenon. This insight has been extended lately by analyses of other sorts of putatively "natural" disasters.[2] Likewise, there is little news in the case she makes regarding the views of media and political elites. She herself draws freely on a significant body of sociological research in "disaster studies" that establishes how, repeatedly, in the wake of disaster, violence and mayhem are more likely to result from "elite panic" than from the sort of aggressive popular criminality that the elites fear. "Beliefs matter" as Solnit likes to say. And the unfounded beliefs of elites, often amplified by complicit media outlets, time and again have provided grounds for what turn out to be needlessly repressive official responses to disaster.

What is new in *A Paradise Built in Hell* is Solnit's expansive vision of political possibilities. In her account, the range of possibilities available to us becomes visible in light of the way most people act in the face of disaster. We do not need to create the individuals who might populate utopia. They are here now. This is quite an inference. But Solnit insists that:

> "… accounts of disaster … demonstrate that the citizens

[2] See, for instance, Amartya Sen. *Poverty and Famines* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981) and Matthew Kahn, "The Death Toll From Natural Disasters: The Role of Income, Geography, and Institutions," *Review of Economics and Statistics* 87 (2005), 271-84.

> any paradise would need—people who are brave enough, resourceful enough, and generous enough—already exist. The possibility of paradise hovers on the cusp of coming into being, so much so that it takes powerful forces to keep such a paradise at bay. If paradise now arises in hell, it's because in the suspension of the usual order and the failure of most systems, we are free to live and act another way."

It is not that we should hope for disasters and the suffering and hardship they create. But we should not neglect the by-products of disaster: "it is the disruptive power of disaster that matters here, the ability of disasters to topple old orders and open new possibilities." This power manifests itself directly in politics—for example, in the rise of Juan Peron in the wake of the 1944 Argentine earthquake, in the pressures earthquakes placed on the ruling Somoza regime in Managua and the entrenched Partido Revolucionario Institucional in Mexico City, in the way Hurricane Katrina precipitated George W. Bush's descent to the bumper-sticker status of "worst president ever." But it also holds out constructive possibilities by creating spaces for popular solidarity and improvisation.

Solnit is not naïve. She understands that, in normal times, there exist "powerful forces that keep … paradise at bay." Hence, for her, "disasters are ultimately enigmas: it is not the disaster but the struggle to give it meaning and to take the opportunity to redirect society that matters, and these are always struggles with competing interests." The lethal potential of such struggle is especially clear in Solnit's discussion of post-Katrina New Orleans. There we witness the intentionally sclerotic response of the federal government; we find the Mayor of the City and the Governor Kathleen Blanco ordering troops and police to use deadly force to prevent "looting" rather than concentrate their energies on aiding stranded citizens; we find major media outlets reporting as fact unfounded rumors of marauding gangs engaged in wanton robbery, murder, and rape; we find white vigilantes—both private citizens and police officers—shooting and killing unarmed black men. All these factors, and others, aimed to preserve what had gone before. They contributed to transforming Katrina from disaster into catastrophe. Yet we also find an outpouring of unofficial aid from across the city, the region, and beyond. We find local, activist responses such as Common Ground whose motto "Solidarity not charity" captures the spirit animating their efforts to provide food, shelter, legal advice, and medical aid to

those displaced by the storm and flooding. The aim of such groups has not been to simply rebuild—that is, to replace—what Katrina destroyed but to reform and remedy the political-economic conditions that placed so many at risk in the first place.

Among the first things Solnit discusses is the way humorous, ironic signs and graffiti emerged at sites of mutual aid following the San Francisco earthquake. She comments as well on how similar sorts of spontaneous expressions emerged following Katrina. In *Destroy this Memory* photographer Richard Misrach offers without comment a tour of post-Katrina New Orleans. As his vehicle he takes the ample supply of graffiti residents put on offer.[3] In the images of destroyed cars and homes and storefronts Misrach captures, among other things, the faith ("Isaiah 26:3"), the humor ("T + E – We love what you've done with the place!"), the hope ("Keep the Faith!"), the bravado and defiance ("Hey Katrina!! That's all you got? You big sissy!!!! We will be back!!! Norman, Keena, Sean, Lil Norman."), the grief ("R.I.P Zack"), and the need to re-establish contact ("547-1347 JANE") among people who've survived the storm. He also depicts scrawled indictments of insurance companies and government officials, attempts to locate friends and family who have gone missing, and anguished concern for pets, dead, lost, found, on the loose. There is plenty of profanity and some misogyny ("Katrina is a Bitch!"). And there is bluster leavened by humor, exemplified in the warning sprayed across one boarded up storefront—"Don't try. I am sleeping inside with a big dog, an ugly woman, two shotguns and a claw hammer!" Arguably, though, one image is central to Misrach's enterprise. It shows a wood frame house, ripped by the storm from its foundations and deposited obliquely in the middle of an unnamed residential street. In the background a red sedan, trunk popped open, is perched precariously astride a link fence between two less mobile houses. The displaced house, clapboards yellowed and roofing partially stripped, has come to rest atop of a clutch of dark fabric. Someone has spray painted a large black arrow pointing downward to the fabric, inscribing in block letters over the whole "Wicked

[3] Solnit herself greatly admires Misrach and his work, which, she elsewhere suggests, encourages us "to feel the conflicts of being fully present in a complicated world." Rebecca Solnit. *Storming the Gates of Paradise: Landscapes for Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 3.

Here it is appropriate to note that Misrach has donated all his author royalties to the Make It Right Foundation which is working to re-build sustainable, middle income housing in the Lower 9th Ward. He also has donated prints of the images in *Destroy this Memory* to a handful of museums in New York, New Orleans, Washington D.C., and Houston.

Witch." In this scene, as in the land of Oz, we see the demise, however inadvertent, of evil. Only here it takes on a humorous twist. It likewise leaves the future unresolved—bleak perhaps, but less ominous than it might be. Misrach depicts an opening. The question is what can be made of it. The back cover of *Destroy this Memory* depicts a boarded window posing that question acutely—"WHAT NOW?"

So here we come around to a quintessentially political question: What is to be done? Solnit astutely insists that "what happens in disasters matters for political philosophy." And, indeed, she weaves themes, observations, and objections from a host of political theorists and activists, canonical and not, throughout her reflections. She takes as interlocutors Peter Kropotkin, Thomas Hobbes, George Orwell, William Wordsworth, Dorothy Day, Thomas Paine, William James, Gustav LeBon, Winstanley the Digger, Martin Luther King, Jr., among others, arguing and agreeing with them by turns. She admits that the improvised communities that disasters call into existence are typically fleeting, "ephemeral moments." But she wonders throughout the book whether it is possible to extend them or, better yet, to sustain a civil society consisting of robust forms of creativity, mutual aid and solidarity that does not require that disaster serve as a midwife.[4] Solnit, in other words, invites us not just to think utopian thoughts but to take the utopian steps of recognizing the resources that already are at hand and asking how we might transform them to our own purposes.

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[4] Here Solnit makes common cause with others who seek to disconnect political transformation from precipitating crisis. See Roberto Mangabeira Unger. *The Left Alternative* (Verso, 2009).