

What We Loved Was Not Enough: Sea Level Rise and the Matter of Letting Go

There is a scene in the 2018 documentary *Anthropocene: The Human Epoch* in which Chinese workers attend to the Shengli Seawall and reveal that its purpose is to protect oil production.

While the filmmakers do not comment on the contradiction of building a seawall to protect the industry that is primarily responsible for sea level rise, presumably most observers will note the grim paradox. The implications of this infrastructure reinforce the argument I made in my 2020 book, *Infrastructural Brutalism: Art and the Necropolitics of Infrastructure*: not only is global capitalism protecting the brutal infrastructure that serves as the arteries for an ecocidal economic system that is the primary cause of the sixth mass extinction event, but capitalism is also in some cases accelerating the expansion of fossil fuel extraction and consumption. The Shengli Oil Field Seawall reminds us that some carbon-intensive assemblages should not be protected from sea level rise. In fact, because climate science dictates that most of the remaining fossil fuels must remain in the ground,¹ any fossil fuel production threatened by sea level rise should immediately be decommissioned.





Video stills from the documentary *ANTHROPOCENE: The Human Epoch* © Anthropocene Films Inc. Used with permission.

The 'infrastructural brutalism'² on display in the film *Anthropocene* might be considered progressive by some, since sea walls are often framed as necessary and beneficial forms of adaptation to climate change. But this often presumes the low-lying territory being defended against sea level rise contains life-affirming assemblages or human populations that cannot be moved. When I wrote about 'elevation and cultural theory' in this journal nine years ago, I was contributing to a cultural studies discourse on 'the power differentiations created by elevation'.³ In the case of the Shengli Seawall, the elevation achieved by the wall serves to protect oil production, an industry that must be abolished soon if we are to avoid catastrophic climate change. In the example of Miami Beach, capitalism continues to invite people to reside in a territory that is, in the long term, doomed to erasure by flooding.

So far, what gets abandoned to the onslaught of natural disasters is being determined by colonial and capitalist relations. Capitalism and the state form will protect its material interests, while the poor and their concerns are flooded, buried, paved over. What about mutually beneficial concessions? What about a potential exodus from shoreline urban developments that are doomed by inevitable sea level rise? Instead of protecting property values for the doomed beaches of Miami, Florida, how about mercilessly taxing the rich and using the revenue to pay for low- and middle-income residents to relocate? Instead, Miami Beach bourgeoisie are currently being offered by the city US \$20,000 grants to protect their houses and businesses, 'to help fund flood prevention projects that can include raising homes and lifting sea walls'.⁴ These desperate attempts to protect capital are happening in Miami, one of the most at-risk coastal cities in the world, in a state that already suffers from tropical storms more than any other US state. As Mario Alejandro Ariza writes, 'There is an inescapable truth about life in South Florida: This low-lying region is set to be swallowed by the sea.'⁵ Ariza puts the coming floods into perspective:

Some scientists say that another 6 inches of sea level rise could very well arrive by 2030, and infrastructure planners are bracing for 2 feet by 2060. Five to 6 feet of sea level rise by 2100 is likely, and likely catastrophic: An inundation of this magnitude would physically displace some 800,000 residents of Miami-Dade County—nearly a third of the current population—and render a large portion of the city uninhabitable.

The calculation by capital is clear: protect the investments at all costs, and let the proles fend for

themselves. Worse than allowing existing residents to fight the ocean in a few decades, Miami Beach actually encourages low-income earners to sign up for a First-time Homebuyer Program.⁶

A recent report from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration 'projects ocean levels along the U.S. coast will rise an average of 10 to 12 inches by 2050. Researchers say that amount of sea level rise over the next 30 years is equal to the total increase over the past 100 years.'⁷ Flooding will occur 10 times as often as it does today by the year 2050, and inland flooding will subsume farmland and impact septic and freshwater systems. A 2020 study examining sea level rise on a global scale estimates that as much as 20% of global gross domestic product (GDP) could be negatively affected by flooding by the end of the century.⁸ The authors of this study interpret their results to recommend fortifying coastline barriers and other forms of adaptation.⁹

I am proposing something akin to Mike Davis's article, 'The Case for Letting Malibu Burn', in which he outlines the reasons Malibu is under perennial threat from wildfires and concludes, 'Two kinds of Californians will continue to live with fire: those who can afford (with indirect public subsidies) to rebuild and those who can't afford to live anywhere else.'¹⁰ The case for abandoning coastal cities is obviously more severe: There will be nothing to rebuild. For now, in coastal cities there are those who can afford to finance temporary forms of adaptation to sea level rise, and those who cannot afford to live anywhere else.

Finally, there are applicable lessons for a more equitable and life-affirming response to sea level rise in Rhiannon Firth's recent book, *Disaster Anarchy: Mutual Aid and Radical Action*. While I do not have space here to summarize the book's entire argument, it does include a chapter on the responses to Hurricane Sandy in New York City in 2012, and the overall argument of the volume advocates for an anarchist response to disasters instead of funneling resources and lives into capitalist and state recuperation. Since capitalism and the state form are the principal culprits responsible for the sixth mass extinction event, committing resources to these social forms only enhances a social order that is inherently ecocidal. Firth notes, 'Since [Hurricane] Sandy we have seen a growing trend for the state to rely on spontaneous community responses to compensate for its own incapacity and indifference...'¹¹ Contrary to neoliberal responses to sea level rise and other disasters, 'anarchist relief efforts offer more than simply an effective practical form of relief that can be recuperated back into neoliberal policy. Rather, they operate as an ontological break, prefigurative utopias, autonomous expressions of agency and solidarity, and as mechanisms of consciousness-raising and pedagogy against the inequalities that lie at the heart of the ongoing disaster of capitalism.'

Thus, instead of framing human communities retreating from coastal cities because of anthropogenic sea level rise as some kind of defeat, we should understand such mobilizations as necessary and equitable, and we should respond to current and future disasters using strategies that elevate life over property.

1 Dan Welsby, James Price, Steve Pye, and Paul Ekins, 'Unextractable fossil fuels in a 1.5 C world', *Nature*, 597 (2021), pp. 230-234 <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-021-03821-8>.

2 Michael Truscello, *Infrastructural Brutalism: Art and the Necropolitics of Infrastructure* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020).

3 Michael Truscello, 'Elevation and Cultural Theory', *Stages*, Issue 0 (2013), Liverpool Biennial <https://www.biennial.com/journal/issue-0/elevation...>

4 Martin Vassolo, 'Miami Beach offers \$20,000 grants to protect private homes, businesses from flooding', *Miami Herald*, 12 July 2022 <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/community/miami-dade/miami-beach/article263396718.html>.

5 Mario Alejandro Ariza, 'As Miami keeps building, rising seas deepen its social divide', *Yale Environment 360*, 29 September 2020 <https://e360.yale.edu/features/as-miami-keeps-buil...>

6 <https://www.miamibeachfl.gov/wp-content/uploads/20...>

7 Frank Graff, 'Sea levels are rising fast', *PBS North Carolina*, 27 May 2022 <https://www.pbsnc>.

org/blogs/science/sea-levels-are-rising-fast/.

8 Ebru Kirezci, et al, 'Projections of global-scale extreme sea levels and resulting episodic coastal flooding over the 21st century', Scientific Reports 10, 11629 (2020) <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-020-67736-6>.

9 Yessenia Funes, 'Sea level rise alone threatens to crush the global economy', Gizmodo, 30 July 2020 <https://gizmodo.com/sea-level-rise-alone-threatens...>

10 Mike Davis, 'The Case for Letting Malibu Burn', Longreads, 4 December 2018 <https://longreads.com/2018/12/04/the-case-for-let...>

11 Rhiannon Firth, Disaster Anarchy: Mutual Aid and Radical Action (London, UK: Pluto Press, 2022), p. 6.

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