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# INTERVIEW WITH DONALD WORSTER, DISTINGUISHED PROFESSOR OF HISTORY, UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS

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*Shortly after Hurricane Katrina revealed some startling vulnerabilities of U.S. empire and emphasized divisions of race and class in the nation, New Orleans native Brian Azcona sat down with a pioneer of environmental history to discuss what lessons the field might provide in the storm's wake. Donald Worster, who grew up in Kansas and today is the Hall Distinguished Professor of History at the University of Kansas, drew parallels between the Katrina disaster and a disaster closer to his home and personal experience, the Dust Bowl, his treatment of which has become the standard historical work on the 1930s ecological disaster. The strategic position of New Orleans in the U.S. empire demands the city and the levies that hold out the Mississippi River be rebuilt, just as the importance of Great Plains agriculture to the nation warranted that land-use—ill-adapted to the dry plains environment as it was—be sustained by massive federal subsidies. The logic behind that national empire persists, to be questioned further.*

**BA:** Brian Azcona

**DW:** Donald Worster

**BA:** After Hurricane Katrina, references to text in environmental history and interviews with environmental historians, including Ari Kelman and one of your students Ted Steinberg, appeared in major media outlets such as the *Wall Street Journal* and *New York Times*.

**DW:** My phone rang several times, people from *Time* magazine to the *Los Angeles Times*. I think people feel environmental history here has a real relevance.

**BA:** How can environmental history explain the significance of Hurricane Katrina?

**DW:** What's happened with Katrina in New Orleans has been conditioned by what's happened in the past—a project of massive intervention into a natural system, hydrology and ecosystems. This is precisely what environmental historians study. Not enough have studied New Orleans and the Mississippi. We have to know what we did and why we did it there over time; to what extent were economic forces the principal driving factor; to what extent was demography and population growth. That city is the imprint of a lot of people and forces, not just the Army Corps of Engineers or the chamber of commerce, just as there are many levels of responsibility for what happened. But I think one of the questions that environmental historians will ask is a question that, in a sense, John McPhee asks in his book of essays in the *The Control of Nature*. Are you familiar with that book?

**BA:** Yes. But please explain.

**DW:** McPhee wrote on the Achafalaya and how the Mississippi River is trying to change its course. The assumption is that we have nature under control. It is being questioned today, as I think it must be questioned.

What we must ask is where does that assumption come from? How does it manifest itself? To what extent has this control-ideology been expressed at high levels of power and money in society and in the state, but also right down to the local neighborhoods of poor people who may live with a feeling of security since nature is supposedly under control by some big powerful invisible forces out there. But we are all shocked when we lose that control. That, to me, was McPhee's question twenty years ago, and it is a question environmental historians come back to again and again. Is there any way we could ever create a massive city in that situation that is stable; that we could ever control the Mississippi? I'm not talk-

ing about all the ways in which we have augmented the problem, like global warming and erosion, but essentially the question of what, as a culture, we thought we were achieving? The domination of nature is a question environmental historians have looked at for some time, that cultural ideology, where it comes from, and what it has done.

**BA:** The responses to Katrina by those with power go back to the need for more control—”build the levies higher.” They look at the event as a technocratic problem. I have not seen a fundamental rethinking of the relationship between society and nature or the ideology of the domination of nature.

**DW:** Doesn’t everybody want to go back to living there, basically premised on the idea that we can control nature and that we can make life secure, safe and happy and prosperous? There may be levels of skepticism about it. But most cry, “Bring out the Dutch engineers. They can hold off the North Sea so why the hell can’t we hold off the Mississippi?” Or look at all the wonderful gates that Venice built to stop tidal surges or that the British have built to stop tidal surges up the Thames River.”

McPhee’s book suggests that we are up against a power that is going to defy us no matter what. Even if we control the problem of flooding and hurricanes in New Orleans, how do you make the Mississippi stay where it is? The whole state of Louisiana was created by the Mississippi river. Now, it wants to jump as it has done repeatedly over millions of years. We spend billions to make the Mississippi go where it *should go*—which is right where it is now. Behind this effort there is, of course, the huge cultural imperative about the control of water and the building of an American empire. It built the Erie Canal in the 1820s. Before that, it was the dream of Thomas Jefferson and the founding fathers of creating an empire—or, as Jefferson called it, an “Empire of Liberty.” We would be an empire unlike the British Empire, that is, an empire of freedom and liberty, of free people living on the land. This new empire involved expansion to the west coast and controlling the river systems. At the heart of it was the control of the Mississippi; that was the crucial part of the creation of this continental

empire. From the Louisiana Purchase, they began to see what was possible. We have this incredible river system, almost unlike any other on its scale, coming out of some of the richest farmland in the world, the richest extensive body of great soils threaded through with these rivers. There are a few gaps in it. That's what the Erie Canal was designed to fill, so you could go from New York City, the empire state and the empire city, up the Hudson, through the Erie Canal into the Great Lakes, and eventually into the Mississippi down to New Orleans. New Orleans is the pivotal point in this system of rivers and soils and agricultural production. It was one end point in building the colossal American "Empire of Liberty."

**BA:** So, there is this empire to which the control of the Mississippi is essential component. But from my personal experience, speaking as a New Orleanian, that control sustains a unique culture. And, in my own opinion, that culture offers an alternative to the culture of empire. I know I'm romanticizing this to a certain degree, but people live there in a way that they don't live in the rest of the nation. Could these forms of control also give rise to social or cultural contradictions?

**DW:** Well of course it is more complex than the complaint that Americans are all imperialists. Even in Jefferson, in the very phrase I just used, "Empire of Liberty," there is a contradiction. We live with contradictions, as any culture. There are contradictions within individuals. But the creation of New Orleans as the great port at the end of the Mississippi river system is not an accident. It wasn't created by a group of lotus eaters who just went there to have some fun. The city was created as a port for the transportation of economic goods back and forth—e.g., cotton. Surely the people of New Orleans are there because of that. There are many other places they could have lived, and whatever they would have created would not have been the same, but the fundamental reason for all of them being there is, it seems to me, the central place it plays in the national system of rivers and transportation. That's why nobody is questioning it now, because it seems to be the logic of nature, as well as the logic of nations and transportation. People may come there to have a good time, let the good times roll and so

on, but they are not there for reasons that are divorced from their economic function, their ecological function. If you carry out the logic of creating a great economic empire in North America, New Orleans has, in that sense, a predestined place to play in it. And it has to be created there against all forces of nature. You have to create this great control structure, which itself is always going to be problematic and vulnerable to the power of the natural world which can slap it in the face. That is our predicament. We are never going to be secure with empire. It is always going to be vulnerable to enormous surges of power, of rivers, of floods, of hurricanes. It would have been nice to have put New Orleans in a part of the world that is earthquake proof, hurricane proof, and flood proof; instead it ends up in the center of all kinds of natural disaster possibilities. But the cultural imperative means that we will keep it there, and we will spend a lot of money to do it.

**BA:** Then it is inevitable in the empire that we have, this society that we have, that we settle these risky areas?

**DW:** I'm not suggesting that it is inevitable in some kind of divine or cosmic way. It's inevitable given the logic of expanding wealth and power. What country has ever turned down empire when given the chance? The United States is not unique in this sense. We pursued a continental empire, not the whole continent but from coast to coast. Half of that territory is extraordinarily dry. Large parts of it are severely prone to earthquakes. Other parts are severely prone to tornados and hurricanes. There is very little of this country that is not fairly unstable. It has huge continental climate extremes. We are never going to achieve perfect control over it, but most of us, to some degree or another, expect it. Even if you are poor you expect it to work. You expect when you turn on your tap the water should come out reliably. Of course those who have the most at stake expect it most. The green lawn will always be green. The lights will always stay on. The pool will always be full, and the water will always be clean. It seems to me that as you want more power and more wealth from nature you raise the stakes. With agricultural, urban, and suburban development the bed of the Mississippi River keeps rising higher and higher; so, the levies have

got to keep getting bigger and bigger. It seems to be the perfect metaphor for what we call industrial civilization. We just keep raising the stakes. We want more and more wealth and more and more power out of this place. That is what empire is really about! We want a bigger empire than we have got. And, in a way, we are just raising the levies higher and higher. You have to wonder, if you are a gloom-and-doom sort like me, are we not just setting ourselves up for an even bigger catastrophe in the long run?

**BA:** You mention the social contradictions as well as the inevitable power of natural forces that give rise to crisis, such as Katrina. You have studied other crises like the Dust Bowl. Can we learn something from the Dust Bowl to inform our understanding of this crisis?

**DW:** I think the Dust Bowl follows pretty much the pattern I've just described. Up to the 1930s the settling of the Great Plains of course was controlled by the government. They did the land surveys, provided the military, acquired the land, and fought off Indians. But nonetheless the risks were still present at the individual level. Go back to the 1890s drought on the Great Plains and note that most people left. They had to take the risks. They farmed, they lost, and they left. Whole counties were depopulated, with ninety percent of the population leaving. In the 1930s that changed, partly because of the New Deal, but I suspect other governments would do the same. We've certainly done the same since then. Republicans as well as Democrats have accepted responsibility for making the Great Plains as secure as possible, with all kinds of federal aid and disaster relief. Since then, every time there is a drought, even a tiny one, even a miniscule drought, the federal government sends disaster money. So we've basically removed a hell of a lot of the risk from individuals and placed it on the taxpayers.

The pattern here is we have centralized risk with the environment in Washington D.C. and in the state. The state is expected now to bail people out in an environmental crisis. The effect of that is, of course,—and this may sound social Darwinist, I don't think it is—to remove the disciplining force; the adaptive influence that

once existed on this planet. People stay in marginal places, whether it be the droughty plains or flood plains in the Mississippi valley, because the risk is to some extent shared. We continue to push into marginal areas, dangerous areas, and expect government to be there. It's part of the whole FEMA mentality, which some of conservative Republicans were challenging but did not acknowledge that people moved into these areas to serve the needs of the state and to create this great agricultural surplus that we can ship around the world to pay for our Sonys and Toyotas.

That is precisely what happened in the 1930s. Of course the people who made out best then were the people who could afford, for whatever reasons, to hang on. They might have had a job as a teacher or as a banker and could buy out the people who couldn't afford to stay, like my parents who ended up moving to California. The people who stayed made out pretty well. They saw great agricultural abundance return for a while. Generation by generation, after the region depopulates and the land ownership becomes more concentrated, the government continues to underwrite these people, partly through subsidies, partly through drought assistance, partly through giving them secure water rights in the Ogallala. This is the way the modern world deals with environmental vulnerabilities of all sorts, not just with disasters but even on a more mundane level. We keep talking about how everybody is supposed to be self-reliant, but nobody believes it, at least in these times.

**BA:** What seems to be escaping any sort of critique in the aftermath of Katrina is any critical reflection on the market. In fact a lot of there's been a lot of praise celebrating the role of private entities, such as the praise for Wal-Mart who got drinking water into New Orleans when the government couldn't. Big Oil, as well, has claimed deregulation passed the test. Is that what has happened with, let's say, the Dust Bowl. Was there praise of entrepreneurial spirit as something that will get us through?

**DW:** First they pay tribute to the spirit of the people, their pluckiness under any kind of calamity. And they pay tribute to our entrepreneurial culture that encourages people to go out and solve their own problems. Don't stand around waiting for someone to solve

them. Of course this is merely back-patting ideology. It has some truth to it. We have to acknowledge that entrepreneurial energies are necessary and that an entrepreneurial culture has some virtues and that those have a role to play. I don't think Wal-Mart is some great savior of the city, but you don't want a culture that stands by and says, "Uncle, Joe, Come in and solve our problems." The problem is: What are the limits of that solution? How far will it take us? We didn't as self-reliant individuals create the whole system that we have in place up and down the Mississippi river. We didn't create the levies. Those were created by a military bureaucracy. For me the question of capitalism is not whether it is good or bad in some absolute sense. It can be a good servant and a bad master. How can capitalism, or the entrepreneurial spirit, be used effectively?

One fundamental fact that environmental history teaches is that capitalism is not about sustainability. It's about unlimited growth. You are never going to get sustainable cities out of Wal-Mart. There's no profit in sustainability.

**BA:** There's an interesting history of flood control. During the early settlement of New Orleans, it was the legal responsibilities of private landholders to build levees. But that didn't work. It gave rise to conflicts. If your levy breaks, my land is dry. So there was sabotage. Flood protection by private property holders was inherently contradictory. And the federal role was essential.

**DW:** You could do that if you had just a handful of people. You could let this rivalry go on where the stakes were pretty low. When stakes are high, when in fact a whole nation depends on maintaining security and control, depending on private self-interest is not going to work. You may regard the state, either from a left or right point of view, as a demonic force. But you cannot have the control of nature without it. There is no other agency that is even close to being adequate to do the job. It is not going to be done by the chamber of commerce. The biggest corporation in the United States can't do it. To the extent that we want to control nature—and we do want to control the Mississippi river and we do want to put a



city there—it is going to require the biggest state on the face of the earth, the United States government.

**BA:** How can this inform our understanding, or our imagination, of how to move in a direction of a more sustainable culture, economy, and society?

**DW:** Sustainable for how long? We have sustained ourselves for two hundred years, so that's sustainable in some way. You're asking, can we maintain this for a thousand years? Probably not. Do we want to be here a thousand years? If we do, it seems to me, that we need to start putting security ahead of maximizing wealth and power. What places do we avoid? What are the danger spots? How do we try to achieve some sort of balance with the various parts of our environment so that we can minimize the ups and downs of nature? It seems to me that requires a lot of rules and regulation. It involves lots of interference with personal freedoms. The communities that have endured the longest on this planet are usually small agrarian communities, where people have lived in a particular place, in the same families, generations following generations. Historically they have generally been patriarchal societies. They regulate how old you can be before you can get married, who can own land. I don't know any of them that were ideally egalitarian— perfect freedoms and perfect democracies. We should not expect perfection.

**BA:** So what about cities?

**DW:** Is there a model for cities? I doubt it. They are so divided, in the case of New Orleans, by race and class lines, by ethnic origins, by cultural lifestyles. For people to come together to agree on a set of rules that most people feel are enforced fairly is a difficult achievement. It can be done, but we don't have many examples. We have plenty examples of people making decisions for others, deciding who will go where and who cannot, but can we do that democratically? I am saying it will be a lot more difficult in large, complex communities like a city.

For a lot of people the great thing about New Orleans is that anything goes. It is a great city for liberty, having a good time, evading rules and regulations, some yearlong Mardi Gras experi-

ence. I don't think that is a good foundation for building sustainability. It might be a great way to live, in some respects. But sustainable communities are usually those that infringe on such liberty and they are often kind of boring communities. If you want to get a little more sustainability into the future of a place called New Orleans, you've got to have more rules and regulations.

My feeling is that rules and regulations are best made by people at the local level. But if you make rules and regulations at the local level, you've got to assume financial responsibility at the local level. If you pass the buck on, pass the bills to the Army Corps of Engineers and Washington, they are going to make the rules and regulations, holding the power of the purse.

**BA:** But the water, the city, the system is not local, right?

**DW:** Exactly.

**BA:** How do New Orleans and the problem of sustainability connect to the Midwest?

**DW:** What is affecting New Orleans today is soil erosion of the headwaters, the Kansas soils that are building up the delta. Accelerated erosion throughout the prairies is going to have an effect on the city and its vulnerabilities. We've got toxic waste coming down, particularly agricultural chemicals. We've already created "dead zones," massive fish kills resulting from oxygen depletion in the Gulf of Mexico, which results from nitrogen flowing off our fields. So the problem is in Chicago. It is in Kansas. When our practices are that big and have that big of a continent-wide impact you've got to have rules and regulations, eventually, that are on that kind of scale. You've got to have watershed regulations. How you do that democratically and fairly is extremely difficult, but the farmer who is plowing Kansas and putting nitrogen into the soil has got a responsibility for what happens down there. What New Orleans can do locally, we call planning, which is another way to talk about making rules and regulations. But I would not be very hopeful that New Orleans could locally, through planning, come up with a sustainable city for the future.

**BA:** So I guess sustainability is just a different set of values that regulate economic activity. The question becomes who creates those values and when? Is this calamity a good opportunity to re-define values?

**DW:** Disasters like this come along once in a while. They usually don't result in any profound reevaluation. That's what I discovered when studying the Dust Bowl of the 1930s. Some changes were made, but there was no profound reevaluation. There still remained a culture of high risk taking on the Great Plains—risk over security. New Orleans may be a different situation. If evidence begins to accumulate that in some way this is one outcome of what is happening on a more global level, in terms of global change, global warming, which is directly caused by our behavior, that could change things.

We are faced, as a culture, with questions of burning fossil fuels and their impact and depletion. Capitalism grew up with fossil fuels providing unlimited abundance and unlimited possibilities of growth. Nobody knows what effects the end of fossil fuels would bring. It may mean we end up with a new technological panacea or we end up with a global economic collapse. I'm certainly not a prophet.