

## WN Columns

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*What do you think?*

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*We have been warned. Five vortices. From left, the Biblical Flood (the waves); down to the depths of Dante's Hell; the reversed citadel at Sintra; pattern of flame; Hurricane Katrina over New Orleans*

*Juiz de Fora, Rio de Janeiro.* Humans make patterns. We see what we sense or think is significant. But much of what we look at we don't see, because it is beyond our attention or consciousness. In this period of specialisation from which we need to emerge, most people attend to details. Few people see big pictures. An exception is Mike Davis, my seventh hero. He cannot be categorised. That is part of his point. A professor successively at various Californian universities, and a holder of a MacArthur 'genius' fellowship grant, he has also been a convenor of the New Left in the UK. His writing is consistently apocalyptic. He is constantly vindicated by unfolding events. Here I propose him as one of the guides we need in our times. Yes, he has a lot to say about food systems – as one aspect of life on earth.

Then I return to the theme of the value of life, following my original proposal a few columns ago that human life is not sacred. The prompt now, is events at home. These include the death of Kenai the cat, the arrival of Cristal the kitten, Gabriel my son breeding butterflies, and rituals of grief in societies where death is openly acknowledged and where all family members are likely to see bodies.

'Inequalities in health' strikes me as an odd concept. It is common sense that there always have been, are, and always will be, inequalities in health – and in all other aspects of life also. Surely what is meant is 'inequity', which is an ethical concept – inequalities that are unfair or unjust. By itself 'equality' is sort-of mathematical. So why do most people concerned with public health and public goods persist in using the term 'inequality'? Could 'inequalities in health' be a term originated in bad faith? But my item on Mike Davis takes up these pages, which will appear in the next *WN*.

Box 1

## Who have eyes to see



*We have been warned. Five more vortices. From left, the eye of a hurricane, US East Coast. El Niño, coast of Brazil. Aircraft turbulence. An ocean maelstrom. A tornado storm in the US*

Every period of history is modern for those who are living in it. This may be the first age in which most people foolishly imagine that what is past is inferior. For us now, what is written in the Christian Bible and other texts before the age of science, is ancient history. We are inclined to read of the strange events that were seen as significant then, with a sense of having risen out of an age of superstition. Plagues of locusts! Rivers drying up! Darkness coming upon the earth! Great floods! Animals suddenly terrified! Signs and portents in the heavens! We tend to think of these as chance events, or invented stories, or delusions of hepped-up hermits, and at any rate as not significant.

We need to think again. People up to what is known in Europe as the Middle Ages lived without most of the technology we have now, but they were necessarily more observant than we usually are. They had to be. We need to think again, about what 'natural' phenomena may mean. For example, we all know now that before a tsunami strikes, the ocean recedes, tethered animals scream, and free animals seek high ground. We also know that the eruption of Thira (Santorini) in Biblical times around 1500 BCE, which destroyed the Minoan civilisation, caused great darkness and floods, and because of causing ecosystem mayhem may account for the plagues narrated in the book of Exodus.

As for signs and portents in the heavens, the ancients did not have telescopes, but they had sharp eyes to see clear skies, and they needed to predict what we now know as El Niño events, the meteorological causes of floods and aridity, and thus of all four Horseman of the Apocalypse – famine, war, conquest, death. At least some of the signs they divined did have real meaning. And what we can see if we look – as above – is vortices, which is to say, a spiralling down into the deadly 'eye' of great storms and maelstroms. Compare the tornado (above, right) with Botticelli's picture of Dante's Hell (previous page, second from left). It is the same shape.

We who are trained in 'Western' concepts tend to assume that structures made out of straight lines are rational and real, and that other shapes – as those found in nature – are random or chaotic and have no meaning. But the shapes of the centres of hurricanes, tornadoes and maelstroms are, as you can see, essentially the same. They are vortices, which have destroying force. The ancients may not have been able to see the shape of hurricanes, but tornadoes and maelstroms are visible as terrible phenomena.

So is the increase of hurricanes foretelling a general descent of humanity into disorder, chaos and eventual obliteration? Are they signs and portents of a great curse if not of Jahweh, then of Gaia? Or short of that, a last warning? Is it true to say that the more vortices there are to see, when we choose to look, the greater the trouble we are in as a species? This seems to be a good working hypothesis. In which case, we are back with the ancients, and all the better that we should be. The advice of seafaring folk, to keep a weather eye open, seems wise guidance in these times now.