

Landscape and Eros  
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Abstract

Deliberations concerning societal problems need to complement disciplinary knowledge with cultivation of the erotic element underlying disciplinary perspectives. This is particularly true in the case of New Orleans. The erotic character of the city is tied to the geologic conditions that so markedly define both its past and future.

I.

I pose three questions to frame our thinking about New Orleans<sup>1</sup>:

- How does eros relate to disciplinary knowledge?
- What role has eros played in the history of New Orleans?
- How might eros and landscape interact in a New New Orleans?

II.

Disputes about whether or how to rebuild New Orleans largely turn on different assumptions concerning the management of knowledge. Discussants bring one or more disciplinary frame (economics; ethics; politics; geology) to the table, and then use that disciplinary frame to both express and inform their commitments. Disagreements result more from inter- than from intra-disciplinary discussion: disputes *within* a given disciplinary frame are usually less profound than those *between* disciplinary frames. This is what we would expect, since disciplines are defined largely in terms of a shared set of assumptions about how to best understand a region of being.

Notice that I said ‘commitments.’ One usually hears ‘values.’ Language is diacritical: words are defined in terms of one another. ‘Value’ exists in contrast with ‘fact.’ These two words evoke the entire conceptual architecture of modernity (1650-present), where science provides objective facts that inform our subjective value preferences, which are then adjudicated via democratic debate.

This is an architecture in crisis. Students of science studies have shown that science is neither objective or subjective, but is rather an intricate blend of personal and societal perspectives, robust reflection of the nature of things, interpretive leaps, and an excess of objectivity (Sarewitz, 2000). Humanists on the other hand are still recovering from the potions brewed by Ruth Benedict (e.g., Benedict, 1934), and thus have not gotten nearly as far in expressing the analogous point: ethics and values are *also* neither subjective or objective, but instead occupy an epistemological space broadly equivalent to that of science.

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<sup>1</sup> *Posing* these questions has significance independent of *answering* these questions. I cannot answer them here—or perhaps ever. I pose them by way of making points about the nature of knowledge.

In terms of their epistemological status, the main difference between the sciences and the humanities is this: science circumscribes its reasoning so that it can produce well-founded, reproducible, albeit unreal results. Why unreal? Because the conditions of the laboratory are not the conditions of the world. Lacking the controls of the laboratory, philosophy and the humanities have had a tendency to oscillate between relativism and dogmatic belief. Put differently: we have an agreed upon a method for conducting scientific inquiry (that is, the scientific method); we lack a common sense of a method for conducting humanistic inquiry (e.g., the general acceptance of principles like *phronesis* or *Bildung*).

My own search for an alternative epistemological expression of ‘facts’ and values’ has led to Plato. The analogous terms in Plato—and here I will ignore the differences between Plato’s and Socrates’ philosophy—are *logos* and *eros*. Logos is a richer term than ‘science’ and even ‘logic,’ for it includes all the means by which we total up our experience. Logos, for instance, includes narrative and moral reasoning as well as science.

But it is the paired term ‘eros’ that I want to focus on here. In the first instance it means sexual desire; but it also indicates desire in general. More particularly, for Plato it includes moral and spiritual development. Modernity and Freud in particular obscures our appreciation of this point. For Freud, desire is polymorphously perverse: there is no goal, inherent meaning, or direction to our desires, sexual or otherwise. They just are. In contrast, for Plato our desires could and should be educated; perhaps it is closer to the point to say that for Plato eros itself has an interdisciplinary and transcendent nature. Education, today overwhelmingly technical in nature, for Plato primarily consisted of an education in eros. One learned the proper way to comport oneself in the world through cultivating desire of the right things. Significantly, instruction in music was the single most important part of this self-cultivation. Music tuned and attuned the soul.

Substituting ‘eros’ for ‘value,’ then, involves more than simply poring old wine into older bottles. Value is eros trivialized, subjectified, rendered non-teleological, and stripped of its inherent connections with reason. As a result, disciplinary knowledge today provides order without orientation. Orientation is supposed to come from one’s values; but since values are solipsistic felt preferences, our only options are to aggregate them and take the mean, or allow the majority decide through a vote on discrete choices. The result, often, is intellectual cacophony, whether the question is New Orleans or something else.

For Plato, one can never separate the offering of a rational account of experience from the erotic well-springs that lay at the root of that account. Logos can not be logical unless eros is as well. While Plato believed that eros had a disruptive, even mad element, it also unified the pursuit of knowledge by directing us toward first and last questions, achieving not unity or unanimity but rather a common focus on fundamentals.

The unifying aspect of eros was expressed through music. Whatever disciplinary frame we use, music attunes the soul by making us sensitive to the melodic line as well as to the lyrics or propositional content of our thought. Attending to the melodic line of thinking—

for instance, one that is critical, fair-minded, and generous; improvisational and sympathetic, embodying what jazz musicians call a ‘chase’<sup>2</sup>—is not everything. But combined with a sense that values are more than consumer preferences but rather are subject to cultivation and adjudication, it is a step in the right direction.

It is a faint hope, but perhaps greater attention paid to the erotics underlying of our thinking about New Orleans may help us control the centrifugal pressures presented by disciplinary knowledge.

## II.

Consider New Orleans in terms of the categories of space and time. What is the proper spatial unit for understanding the entity ‘New Orleans?’ Setting aside political boundaries, ‘New Orleans’ can be taken as meaning the French Quarter or the 9<sup>th</sup> Ward, the region between the Mississippi River and Lake Ponchartrain, the entire Mississippi delta south of Memphis, the North American land mass that the river drains, or even the whole socio-economic network through which goods and services come into and out of the American heartland. Temporally, there is the current city, the snapshot that existed on August 27, 2005, the city at its point of highest population in the 1960s, the New Orleans of Storyville and Louis Armstrong, as well as innumerable other possible dates. Similarly, ‘Hurricane Katrina’ can be taken as designating something that lasted 18 hours, a month (i.e., the period of flooding), or the entire period of recovery lasting years into the future.

When we talk about rebuilding New Orleans, what spatial or temporal frame should we have in mind? Most would object to Nietzsche’s suggestion that we build our homes on the side of Vesuvius: an exciting and colorful location, certainly, with splendid views, but also a little dangerous and uncertain. The question is, is New Orleans engaged in a similarly audacious enterprise?

Natural hazards facing New Orleans can be divided into four categories<sup>3</sup>:

- Floods from the river
- Hurricanes
- The river course
- Subsidence

The river will certainly flood again. Moreover, the buttressing of the levees exacerbates the flood danger at the same time that it addresses it. Historical records and geologic research suggests that a major flood occurs every 25-50 years.

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<sup>2</sup> Chases are associated with blues and jazz: during improvisations one player performs a melodic riff and other members in the band take up the theme, often adding additional phrases.

<sup>3</sup> Geologists and hydrologists in attendance can better speak to all of the following points. I welcome their corrections, but do not believe that they will affect my overall argument.

The risks represented by hurricanes are significant. In his paper Gene Turner claims that a category 3 or above can be expected on average every 7 to 8 years. Hurricanes bring wind damage, storm surge, massive amounts of rain, and the destruction of the wetlands that protect New Orleans.

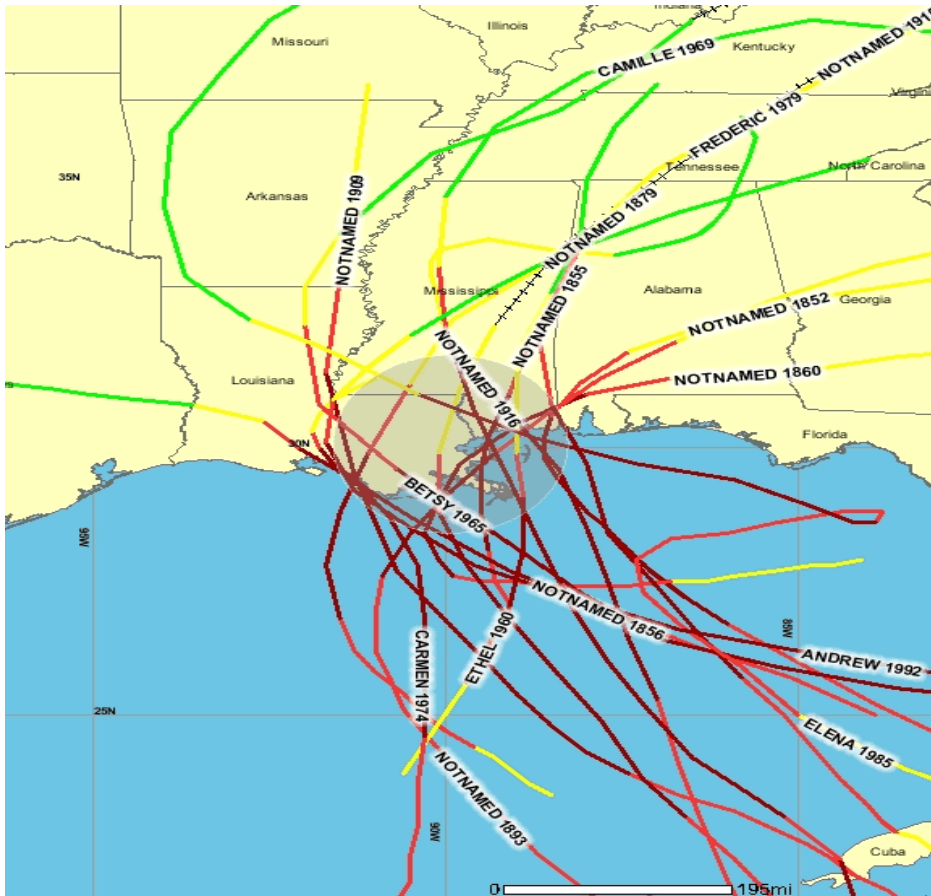


Figure 1: a map produced using the NOAA Historical Hurricane Track Tool, shows the 17 hurricanes Category 3 or higher tracking within 100 nautical miles of New Orleans from 1852 and 2004. Available at <http://geology.com/articles/rebuilding-new-orleans.shtml>.

Concerning the future course of the Mississippi River, most of the sediment that has historically been carried down the Mississippi is now trapped upstream. But this does not change the basic fact that the current river course is overdue for a shift, and would have shifted to the Atchafalaya channel by the 1973 except for the intercession of the Army Corps of Engineers. Gene Turner's figure 4, reproduced here, as well as Sharp, 2006, both show that the oldest lobe (#1) is also the one furthest from the current path of the river.

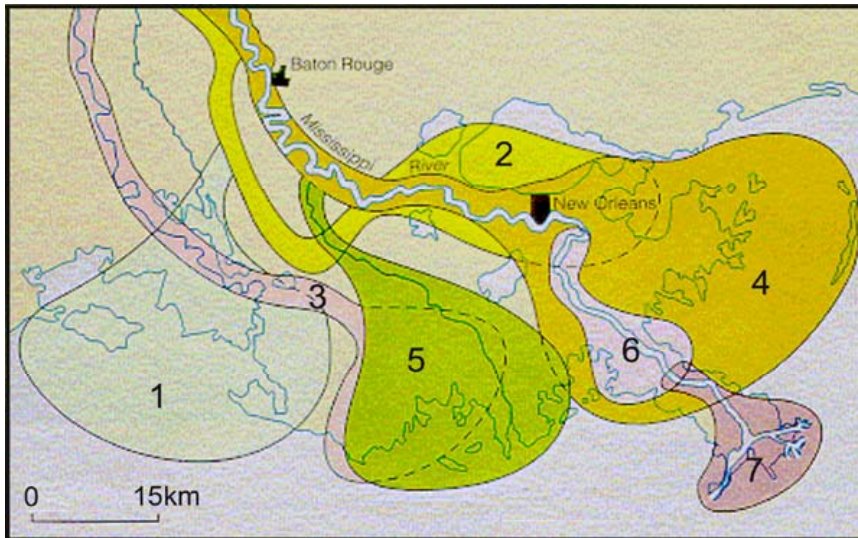


Figure 2: (Gene Turner's figure 4), from Kolb and Van Lopik 1958.

Old River Control structure north of Baton Rouge has so far been successful in keeping the Mississippi River to its current course, but the day will come when (when?) the river will simply abandon New Orleans. The city will then find itself astride a bayou.

As for subsidence: geologists use the term to indicate either sea level rise—a real danger, given the amounts of CO<sup>2</sup> and other greenhouse gases that we are releasing into the atmosphere—or the sinking of the land. New Orleans is likely to be markedly affected by both of these processes. According to the US Geological Survey and the Army Corps of Engineers, the Mississippi River delta has the highest rate of relative sea-level rise (3 feet per century) of any region in the US. Over the next century New Orleans is expected to sink about 3 feet with sea level rising another 3 to 6 feet.

From all of this one might conclude that New Orleans is in the soup. *Sub species aeternitatis*—from the perspective of eternity—it is time to abandon the city. The question, however, is whether eternity is the proper perspective to use, or whether something less infinite might be a more appropriate measure.

If I may be allowed a homely example: a few years ago I was contemplating buying a nice dining room table. Consulting my father, as I often do about economic matters, he suggested that I wait until I had saved the money before spending the \$3000. My response was that, if I waited that long our daughters would be off to college and there would not be any need for the table at all. (As you surmised, I bought the table.)

The point, of course, is that the definition of what's rational varies with one's temporal (and spatial) circumstances. Returning to New Orleans, the point could be phrased in several ways: at what rate do we discount the future? What role should uncertainty play in our in our deliberations? Do Buddhist sand paintings offer a useful analogy for the rebuilding of New Orleans? The question may also be phrased in terms of the pleasure principle. How much should our current plans be affected by our varying calculations of

our immediate or longer term erotic commitments? This is where disciplinary knowledge (for instance, of geology, civil engineering, or environmental justice) can help.

### III.

New Orleans is perhaps America's most erotic city. Already by the time that New Orleans became an American city visitors remarked on its extraordinary sensuality and decadence—the 'Great Southern Babylon,' in the phrase of a visitor in the 1830s—with the nation's largest slave market and most permissive port, the nation's largest concentration of brothels, inter-racial relationships, and tradition of concubinage. New Orleans is the birthplace of jazz, the term itself referencing the sexual act, and home of the nation's largest Mardi Gras. The city has always been out of step with the Puritanism of American culture.

One can only speculate about the sources for this heightened eroticism. Like Amsterdam its situation as a port encouraged a certain laxity of morals. The slave trade, which was also a sexual trade, played a role, as light skinned 'fancy girls' were bought and sold for what was tacitly understood to be sexual purposes (Long, 2004). The city's origins in French and European culture rather than British-puritan traditions sponsored a different attitude toward sex. The languid tropical heat encourages earthiness and sensuousness, and New Orleans' situation in the most conservative part of the United States also creates the conditions for the return of the repressed.

The landscape itself also contributes to the eroticism of the place. To understand how, consider the comments of Thucydides about the affect of uncertainty upon the morals of Athens:

Men now coolly ventured on what they had formerly done in a corner, and not just as they pleased, ... they resolved to spend quickly and enjoy themselves, regarding their lives and riches as alike things of a day.

*The Peloponnesian War, Book 2, Chapter 53*

Thucydides was of course talking about uncertainty resulting from a microbiological rather than geologic event, the effects of the plague upon Athenian civil society. All analogies run on three legs: the geologic uncertainties of life in New Orleans do not constitute a modern plague. In fact, the situation is more nearly the opposite: there is something creative and improvisational in New Orleans that owes its existence to the geologic uncertainties of the place. This uncertainty plays an essential role in the peculiar *joie de vivre* of the city, and must be honored if we are going to avoid killing precisely what we seek to preserve.

How to do so exceeds the boundaries of this brief essay. My point is that an erotics of New Orleans and the Mississippi delta must also be part of the deliberations being conducted on the local, regional, and national levels. The subtle considerations involving principles of hydrology and engineering need also to be directed toward understanding

the relation between landscape and eros in New Orleans—appreciating, for instance, the fact that our feelings for a thing can be made more intense by its fragility. As Heidegger argued, only things that can die need care—things invulnerable to danger by definition can take care of themselves.

2279 words

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