

The L.A. Earthquake

The Heart of Civilization's Slow Decline

Adam Bregman

1994

At 4:30 am, January 17th, an earthquake...measuring 6.2 on the Richter scale hit Los Angeles. Everyone was suddenly awakened as the earth tossed the city around for thirty seconds or so.

The damage was enormous. Power was temporarily knocked out, an apartment building collapsed killing 16 people, freeways fell to pieces and a motorcycle cop went flying off one of the collapsed ramps to his death. Because it was early morning the day of the Martin Luther King Day holiday, only 61 people were killed instead of the hundreds which could have been if it had struck in the middle of a normal work day.

According to seismologists, it wasn't The Big One Angelenos had been told for years to expect, but it was big enough. It scared the shit out of almost everyone. I freaked out when it hit and dove under a table almost strangling my dog Snorkles in the process. My heart was beating as fast as I can remember since the time I was part of a mob chased by an army of cops on horses.

My neighborhood in West L.A. is pretty friendly, so seconds after the quake, everyone was outside with flashlights, talking and knocking on the doors of a couple of widows on the block to make sure they were o.k. But more often, the earthquake was the first time people got to know their neighbors.

Many expressed shock about how nice and concerned everyone suddenly was. Drivers stopped courteously for others even though traffic signals were out. Almost no one worked for a couple of days and schools were closed for a week or more for many students. The constant aftershocks left everyone rattled with not enough sleep.

The Mayor of Los Angeles imposed a curfew on the city for three nights to deter looting. Most people went along with the lock down with barely a protest and the police arrested anyone for simply being out on the streets. There was little looting perhaps because the quake lacked the circumstances of the riots after the Rodney King verdict in May 1993. On curfew nights, I found relatively unscathed communities like West Hollywood still open, but most city streets were dark and spooky with cops zooming around.

The West Valley around Northridge, Reseda and Granada Hills got nailed. Many ugly, stucco apartment buildings typical of Southern California collapsed. Ventura Blvd. and Sherman Oaks were in shambles. The Northridge College campus was hit especially hard. Santa Clarita, Simi Valley and Santa Monica were all shaken up and many old brick buildings and churches crumbled.

For a few days I felt supremely lucky. Most of my friends and I had survived with only a few cracks here and there, and I didn't care about the wrecked Music Plus or other mall stores with their shattered windows. I only hoped those places wouldn't be rebuilt. But as I got around, things closer to home, places I liked, my favorite few pieces of architecture in the city, were also disaster sites.

The plaster on the walls of my friend's apartment crumbled and exposed a beautiful brick and wood surface that made the place look like an Italian restaurant, but the buildings in Hollywood were lying out on the sidewalk. The earthquake struck rich and poor alike, knocking down brick walls protecting wealthy homes in Chatsworth and dislodging families packed into tiny apartments in Pico-Union.

Not all communities, families and individuals will be able to recover from the disaster. President Clinton and California Governor Pete Wilson flew in immediately to show “concern” and say everyone would be helped, but when officials from the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) arrived to distribute aid it was another disaster. People who had been sleeping in tents for three days without water and heat were forced to wait in huge lines for 8 to 10 hours only to reach the front of the line and get an appointment for possible aid three weeks later.

This victimized earthquake victims further, and angry arguments between them and FEMA officials were captured on live local TV. People who had been paying taxes to the state all their lives found in their time of greatest immediate need, that the government offered them only endless lines, more forms to fill out and the chance of possible housing vouchers and temporary subsidized rent weeks away.

Of course, now much aid is flowing into Los Angeles from federal and private sources, but as I write thousands are still living in tents and shelters or staying with relatives or friends and a whole new group will be added to L.A. county’s already immense homeless population (over 80,000). People just scraping by beforehand—renters who lost their jobs, home owners without quake insurance, that sector of the population which is always a few paychecks away from being out on the street—will find themselves part of L.A.’s most downtrodden victims of the economic collapse: the homeless.

With more food stamps and shelter available, many Angelenos who were homeless before the quake attempted to get a cot to sleep on or some food to eat only to be turned away by the Red Cross because they lacked proof of a permanent residence. “When the homeless are without food, shelter and water—too bad. But the minute San Fernando Valley residents became homeless, we couldn’t imagine them making it through the night without portable toilets,” said Alice Callaghan, director of a skid row based community service agency.

So, what future will befall this megalopolis? This city, having been ravaged by natural disasters and class uprisings, comes closer to resembling a Third World city every day with the homeless camped out on the corner, the rich walled off in high security communities, and the working class trapped in an endless traffic jam on their way to dwindling opportunities.

Rome On Television

Some people will leave L.A.; many already have. They raced out of here days after the ground started shaking, but they are a small minority. Leaving L.A. is generally a luxury. More people will pour into L.A. from Mexico and Central America, leaving their families and homes, braving whatever kind of paramilitary border defense the state and federal governments erect to keep them out, only to be paid less than the minimum wage and then to be derided for the country’s economic problems.

L.A. will continue to grow regardless of what Mother Nature throws at it, but there is no hint it won’t continue to collapse on itself as well. As housing developments move deeper into the surrounding hills and valleys beyond, nature in all its wildness and randomness has found its way back into the human kingdom, tearing away at our fragile sense of order via flood, fire and earthquake.

As L.A. and the First World collapse into decay I have no desire to run off to a rural outpost. I would much rather be at the heart of civilization’s slow decline. I wouldn’t have wanted to watch Rome fall from a distance or on TV. So, I’m sticking it out among the millions of other unfortunates who have little choice in the matter, to see what becomes of L.A., and I’ll be around to rebuild a much more sustainable, living community when this one comes tumbling down.

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