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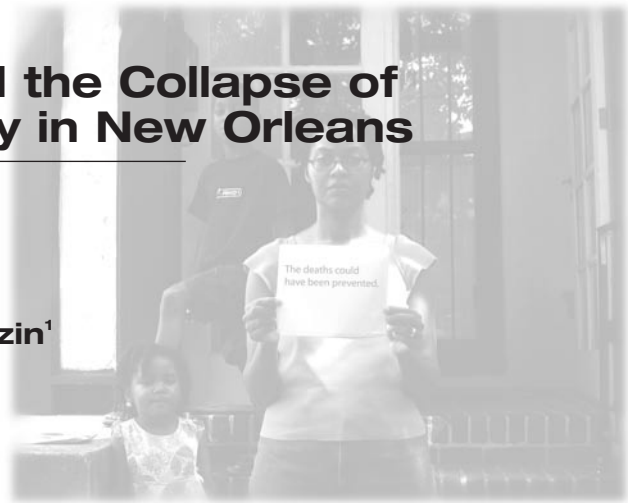
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Katrina and the Collapse of Civil Society in New Orleans

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The author offers a critical reading of the federal government's responses to Hurricane Katrina and the hurricane's effects on the city of New Orleans. A collapse of civil society was observed in the immediate aftermath of the hurricane. A plan for the democratic reconstruction of the city is outlined.

Keywords: *New Orleans; Hurricane Katrina; civil society; democratic reconstruction; crony capitalism*

I don't want to abolish government. I simply want to reduce it to the size where I can drag it into the bathroom and drown it in the bathtub.

—Grover Norquist (quoted in Friedman, 2005, p. A29)

America's collective relationship to itself, to the Bush administration, and to the world changed again as a result of the events following Hurricane Katrina.² If 9/11 and the Iraq war bookend one cataclysmic phase of the Bush administration, then Katrina marks an equally critical moment. Instead of a single flashpoint moment (Johnson, 2005a, p. 25), the fallout and aftermath of Katrina have unfolded in an infinite series of events and blurred images, including President Bush looking down on the submerged city out of a window from Air Force One.

We...do not have an exact human vocabulary for the loss of...our great iconic city, so graceful...insular...the one New Orleanians always said...that care forgot and that sometimes...forgot to care. (Ford, 2005, p. A11)

Gloria Ladson-Billings (2003): "They sold slaves in this city. They made a tourist stop out the place where they sold slaves!"

Constantine, Erickson, and Tse (2005): "areas [of New Orleans] with significant flooding...black (76%)...white (18)" (p. A13).

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Hurricane Katrina reduced civil society as it had been known in New Orleans to a size at which it was dragged into a huge sinking, stinking outdoor bathroom sometimes called the Big Easy. The erasure of the barriers between the lake, the river, and the city symbolically and materially represented the collapse of the civic structure of the city and the disappearance of all that we want a humane society to mean for Blacks and the urban poor. And the whole world watched in horror.

There is a clear need for a national conversation on the meanings of the aftermath of Katrina. This tragedy offers an opportunity to rethink what a caring, radically free democratic city might look like. Can we build cities that do not hide racism and poverty behind the facades of culture, cuisine, and carnival? Can we include in the reconstruction of New Orleans the full range of voices that extend across the race, class, and gender spectrum?

Fragments: A Montage

THE CORPSE ON UNION STREET

September 7, 2005: On Union Street in downtown New Orleans a corpse in a body bag decomposes for days, "like carrion" (Barry, 2005, p. A19).

Meanwhile, the same day, soldiers aimed guns at the heads of several men suspected of robbing an electronics store, and a man in a car drives by, asking for directions to the interstate (Barry, 2005, pp. A1, A19).

Mayor to holdouts: "Get out." (*The News Gazette*, headline, September 7, 2005, p. 1)

45 bodies found in a New Orleans hospital. (Johnson, 2005b, p. A1)

Anne Rice (2005): "Thousands didn't leave New Orleans because they couldn't leave....They are the poor, black and white....to my country I want to say this: During this crisis you failed us....you dismissed our victims....You want our Jazz Fest, you want our Mardi Gras, you want our cooking and our music. Then when you saw us in real trouble...[you] turned your backs" (p. A11).

Netanya Watts Hart: "We...walked out of the Ninth Ward in about five feet of water and we put all the children...in a flatboat along with a woman with one leg and walked a mile in the water...Then the water went down enough, and we walked about two more miles and all the children were holding hands, singing gospel songs two by two" (quoted in Johnson, 2005a, p. 32).

Bill O'Reilly, of Fox News Channel, on the looting after the storm "speculated, 'A lot of people who stayed wanted to do this destruction' and wondered why they were not being shot on sight" (Alterman, 2005, p. 11).

Barbara Bush, touring hurricane relief centers in Houston, remarked on National Public Radio's "Marketplace" segment, "Things are working out very well for the poor evacuees from New Orleans. What I'm hearing is they all want to stay in Texas. Everyone is so overwhelmed by the hospitality. And so many of the people in the arena here, you know, were underprivileged anyway so this—this [chuckles slightly] is working very well for them."

Narrator: I have a color photograph taken in 1973 of my daughters and my father on the upper deck of a large tugboat on the Mississippi River. Jackson Square and Café du Monde are in the background. A Black jazz band is playing on the river's edge. My father was the captain of this boat, and my daughters were 7 and 8 years old. The wind off the river is blowing their hair. My father has a big grin on his face. The muddy water of the Mississippi River surrounds the boat. There is a smell of rain in the air. A screeching seagull perches on the boat railing, an orange sun fills the sky.

My father died in 1995. Last week, Jackson Square and Café du Monde were under water. The tugboat long gone. My daughters have faded memories of this trip, remembering the split lip one of them got when Grandpa's car was hit by a speeding car in Audubon Park, which was also under water last week.

Today, these memories fade into one another, replaced by this scene. The date is August 16, 1977: I was in the patio of a live jazz bar on Bourbon Street in the French Quarter the day Elvis Presley died. Six Black teenagers sat around a table shucking freshly boiled shrimp. The jazz music stopped and over the loudspeakers came the announcement that Elvis had died. The six young men stood up and cheered.

The king of rock and roll was dead, and in New Orleans, on the back patio of a jazz bar, six representatives of Black America cheered. This is all I need to know today about race in America. There are two Americas: one Black, Brown, poor, and disenfranchised, the other White, propertied, and entertained by the likes of an over-the-hill White rock and roll singer who stole his music from Blacks.

Needed: Democratic Reconstruction

The poor in New Orleans are demanding a democratic reconstruction of their city (Klein, 2005). They are calling for the creation of worker's councils, the formation of neighborhood and local citizen's groups (Schwartz et al., 2005). They want competitions for the design of public housing and the full-scale employment of minority contractors and workers in a new Worker's Public Administration program. This will be a *new* New Orleans designed around and embedded in the cultures of those groups the power structure of the city has for too long exploited.

This will be a New Orleans that truly honors Black and Cajun civic culture. A democratically reconstructed New Orleans will embrace the disenfranchised and the

poor. Its civic culture will transcend the sadness in that famous blues dirge “St. James’s Infirmary.” To steal and paraphrase a line from Billie Holliday, “It will be a new day, what a new morning, what a little moonlight and some loving civic compassion can do!”

Reality: Expedited Contracts

September 13, 2005: “The Army Corps of Engineers will award \$1.5 billion in contracts this week for hurricane cleanup operations in Louisiana....Just last week, FEMA announced the awarding of several \$100 million no-bid contracts....Critics noted that among those receiving contracts were politically connected companies like the Fluor Corporation...and the Shaw Group...which is a client of Joe M. Allbaugh, the former head of FEMA, who now has a private lobbying and consulting firm....Halliburton is also a client of Mr. Allbaugh, who is a close friend of President Bush” (Wayne, 2005, p. C4).

A racially divided, disorganized, violent, falling-apart-at-the-seams New Orleans: this is George Bush and Karl Rove’s gift to America. And as New Orleans rebuilds, crony capitalism rules the day. So much for democratic reconstruction.

Notes

1. Henry Giroux suggested this project. I thank Michael Giardina for his comments on an earlier version.
2. This chronicle of responses to Katrina is confined to the dates August 29 to September 15, 2005.

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