



There's No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster

By Neil Smith

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It is generally accepted among environmental geographers that there is no such thing as a natural disaster. In every phase and aspect of a disaster – causes, vulnerability, preparedness, results and response, and reconstruction – the contours of disaster and the difference between who lives and who dies is to a greater or lesser extent a social calculus. Hurricane Katrina provides the most startling confirmation of that axiom. This is not simply an academic point but a practical one, and it has everything to do with how societies prepare for and absorb natural events and how they can or should reconstruct afterward. It is difficult, so soon on the heels of such an unnecessarily deadly disaster, to be discompassionate, but it is important in the heat of the moment to put social science to work as a counterweight to official attempts to relegate Katrina to the historical dustbin of inevitable “natural” disasters.

First, causes. The denial of the naturalness of disasters is in no way a denial of natural process. Earthquakes, tsunamis, blizzards, droughts and hurricanes are certainly events of nature that require a knowledge of geophysics, physical geography or climatology to comprehend. Whether a natural event is a disaster or not depends ultimately, however, on its location. A large earthquake in the Hindu Kush may spawn no disaster whatsoever while the same intensity event in California could be a catastrophe. But even among climatic events, natural causes are not entirely divorced from the social. The world has recently experienced dramatic warming, which scientists increasingly attribute to airborne emissions of carbon, and around the world Katrina is widely seen as evidence of socially induced climatic change. Much as a single hurricane such as Katrina, even when followed by an almost equally intense Hurricane Rita, or even when embedded in a record 2005 season of Atlantic hurricanes, is not in itself conclusive evidence of humanly induced global warming. Yet it would be irresponsible to ignore such signals. The Bush administration has done just that, and it is happy to attribute the dismal record of death and destruction on the Gulf Coast – perhaps 1200 lives by the latest counts – to an act of nature. It has proven itself not just oblivious but ideologically opposed to mounting scientific evidence of global warming and the fact that rising sea-levels make cities such as New Orleans, Venice, or Dacca immediately vulnerable to future calamity. Whatever the political tampering with science, the supposed “naturalness” of disasters here becomes an ideological camouflage for the social (and therefore preventable) dimensions of such disasters, covering for quite specific social interests.

Vulnerability, in turn, is highly differentiated; some people are much more vulnerable than others. Put bluntly, in many climates rich people tend to take the higher land leaving to the poor and working class land more vulnerable to flooding and environmental pestilence. This is a trend not an iron clad generalization: oceanfront property marks a major exception in many places, and Bolivia's La Paz, where the wealthy live in the cooler valley below 13,000 feet, is another. In New Orleans, however, topographic gradients doubled as class and race gradients, and as the Katrina evacuation so tragically demonstrated, the better off had cars to get out, credit cards and bank accounts for emergency hotels and supplies, their immediate families likely had resources to support their evacuation, and the wealthier also had the insurance policies for rebuilding. Not just the market but successive administrations from the federal to the urban scale, made the poorest population in New Orleans most vulnerable. Since 2001, knowing that a catastrophic hurricane was likely and would in all probability devastate New Orleans, the Bush administration nonetheless opened hundreds of square miles of wetland to development on the grounds that the market knows best, and in the process eroded New Orleans' natural protection; and they cut the New Orleans Corps of Engineers budget by 80%, thus preventing pumping and levee improvements. At the same time, they syphoned resources toward tax cuts for the wealthy and a failed war in Iraq (Blumenthal 2005). Given the stunned amazement with which people around the world greeted images of a stranded African American populace in the deadly sewage pond of post-Katrina New Orleans, it is difficult not to agree with Illinois senator Barack Obama: "the people of New Orleans weren't just abandoned during the hurricane," but were "abandoned long ago" (DailyKos 2005).

After causes and vulnerability comes preparedness. The incompetence of preparations for Katrina, especially at the federal level, is well known. As soon as the hurricane hit Florida, almost three days before New Orleans, it was evident that this storm was far more dangerous than its wind speeds and intensity suggested. Meteorologists knew it would hit a multi-state region but the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), overseen by a political appointee with no relevant experience and recently subordinated to the Homeland Security Administration, assumed business as usual. They sent only a quarter of available search and rescue teams to the region and no personnel to New Orleans until after the storm had passed (Lipton et. al. 2005). Yet more than a day before it hit, Katrina was described by the National Weather Service as a "hurricane with unprecedented strength" likely to make the targeted area "uninhabitable for weeks, perhaps longer" (NYT 2005). Days afterward, as the President hopped from photo-op to photo-op the White House, not given to listening to its scientists, seemed still not to understand the prescience of that warning or the dimensions of the disaster,.

The results of Hurricane Katrina and responses to it are as of this writing still fresh in our memory but it is important to record some of the details so that the rawness of what transpired not be rubbed smooth by historical rewrite. The results can be assessed in thousands of lives unnecessarily lost, billions of dollars of property destroyed, local economies devastated and so forth, but that is only half the story. The images ricocheting around the world of a crippled United States, unconcerned or unable to protect its own population, receiving offers of aid from more than 100 countries, only reaffirmed for many the sense, already crystalizing from the debacle in Iraq, of a failing superpower. The level of survivors' amply televised anger, bodies floating in the background, shocked the world. Reporters were not "embedded" this time, and so the images were real, uncensored, and raw. As the true horror unfolded, the media were working without a script, and it took almost a week before pre-existing

absorptive news narratives regained control. But by then it was too late. Distraught refugees,¹ mostly African American, concluded that they were being left in the New Orleans Superdome and Convention Center to die; they pleaded for help, any help, as they angrily demanded to know why, if reporters could get in and out, they could not.

When the National Guard did arrive, it was quickly apparent that they were working under orders to control the city militarily and protect property rather than to bring aid to the desperate. Angry citizens, who waded through the fetid city looking for promised buses that never came, were prevented, at gunpoint, from getting out. “We are not turning the West Bank [a New Orleans suburb] into another Superdome,” argued one suburban sheriff. Groups of refugees who tried to organize water, food and shelter collectively were also broken up at gunpoint by the national guard. Numerous victims reported being besieged and the National Guard was under orders not to distribute their own water (Bradshaw and Slonsky, 2005; Whitney 2005). As late as four days after the hurricane hit New Orleans, with government aid still largely absent, President Bush advised refugees that they ought to rely on private charities such as the Salvation Army (Breed 2005). When the first federal aid did come, stunned recipients opening boxes asked why they were being sent anthrax vaccine. “These are the boxes Homeland Security told us to send,” came the reply.

Unfortunately, shocking as it was, the tragedy of New Orleans is neither unique nor even especially unexpected, except perhaps in its scale. The race and class dimensions of who escaped and who was victimized by this decidedly unnatural disaster not only could have been predicted, and was, but it follows a long history of like experiences. In 1976, a devastating earthquake eventually killed 23,000 people in Guatemala and made 1.5 million people homeless. I say “eventually,” because the vast majority of deaths were not the direct result of the physical event itself but played out in the days and weeks that followed. Massive international relief flooded into Guatemala but it was not funneled to the most affected and neediest peasants, who eventually came to call the disaster a “classquake” (O’Keefe et. al. 1976). In communities surrounding the Indian Ocean, ravaged by the tsunami of December 2004, the class and ethnic fissures of the old societies are re-etched deeper and wider by the patterns of response and reconstruction. There, “reconstruction” forcibly prevents local fishermen from re-establishing their livelihoods, planning instead to secure the oceanfront for wealthy tourists. Locals increasingly call the reconstruction effort the “second tsunami.” In New Orleans there are already murmurings of Katrina as “Hurricane Bush.” It is not only in the so-called Third World, we can now see, that one’s chances of surviving a disaster are more than anything dependent on one’s race, ethnicity and social class.

At all phases, up to and including reconstruction, disasters don’t simply flatten landscapes, washing them smooth. Rather they deepen and erode the ruts of social difference they encounter. Within a matter of days, with bodies still uncollected and before the death toll was even approximately known, discussion in the press turned to the opportunity represented by the laying bare of New Orleans. With an estimated half million people excluded from the city, FEMA began organizing mobile home parks to accommodate as many as 130,000 refugee families in far flung state parks, boy scout camps, any plausible tract of vacant land far from the city. On the face of it, this might be a reasonable strategy, except that one has to invest a lot of faith to imagine that the first item of business in New Orleans,

with federal funding from the staunchly pro-market Bush administration, will be to reconstruct public housing so that those most in need can return to the city. Already, in the interlude between Katrina and the reflooding wrought by Hurricane Rita, businesses and homeowners were the privileged who were allowed back through military cordons into the city. It is far more likely therefore that working class and African American New Orleanians will be held on the outskirts for months and years on the grounds that they have no home to go back to, and in the hope or expectation that they will simply disperse in frustration.

In fact, many evacuees from hurricanes Charley and Ivan in 2004 remain in trailer parks in Florida. And neo-conservative *New York Times* editorialist David Brooks wasted no time arguing that “people who lack middle-class skills” should not be allowed to resettle the city: “If we just put up new buildings and allow the same people to move back into their old neighborhoods, then urban New Orleans will become just as run down as before” (Brooks 2005). If it were true that the character of neighborhoods depended first and foremost on who moved into them there might be some truth in this. But if, as several generations of urban theory now argues, the fate of a neighborhood has as much if not more to do with how capital (public or private) invests in a neighborhood (and how it also disinvests), then the spotlight should be less on blaming the victims of this dreadful disaster than on the motives of capital investors. Congressional Representative Richard Baker of Baton Rouge provides little solace in this regard. “We finally cleaned up public housing in new Orleans,” chuckled an unguarded Baker. “We couldn’t do it, but God did” (quoted in Dowd 2005).

The final lesson of environmental geography concerning disasters is that far from flattening the social differences, disaster reconstruction invariably cuts deeper the ruts and grooves of social oppression and exploitation. And so, while abolishing competition by giving no-bid contracts to some of the same companies that operate in Iraq – Bechtel, Fluor Corp., Haliburton – the Bush administration has mandated cutthroat competition among desperate workers by suspending the federal law that requires federal contractors to pay at least the prevailing local wage. Meanwhile, with many of the dead still unaccounted for, developers descended on New Orleans with wallets bulging and chops smacking. In anticipation that the city will be rebuilt with higher and better levees and with many fewer working class and African Americans, New Orleans two weeks after Katrina already looked like a developers’ gold rush (Streitfeld 2005; Rivlin 2005). These people, these developers and these corporations, say many New Orleanians, are the “true looters.” By contrast, those displaced, with no private property to reclaim, face lower wages, escalating costs for scarce housing, and as the initial sympathy wears away, increased stigmatization.

When President Bush insists that “out of New Orleans is going to come that great city again,” it is difficult to believe that good quality, secure and affordable social housing is what this administration has in mind. Wholesale gentrification at a scale as yet unseen in the United States is the more likely outcome. After the Bush hurricane, the poor, African American and working class people who evacuated will not be welcomed back to New Orleans, which will in all likelihood be rebuilt as a tourist magnet with a Disneyfied BigEasyVille oozing even more manufactured authenticity than the surviving French Quarter nearby.

We can look back and identify any number of individual decisions taken and not taken that made this

hurricane such a social disaster. But the larger picture is more than the sum of its parts. It is not a radical conclusion that the dimensions of the Katrina disaster owe in large part not just to the actions of this or that local or federal administration but the operation of a capitalist market more broadly, especially in its neo-liberal garb. The refusal to tackle global warming is rooted in the global power of the petroleum and energy corporations which fear for their profits and which, not coincidentally, represent the social class roots of the Bush administration's power; the New Orleans population were vulnerable not because of geography but because of long term class and race abandonment – poverty – exacerbated by the dismantling of social welfare by Democratic and Republican administrations alike; the incompetence of FEMA preparations expressed cocooned ruling class comradery, cronyism and privilege rather than any concern for the poor and working class; and the reconstruction looks set to capitalize on these inequalities and deepen them further. Not at any point in the next few decades will African Americans again account for two-thirds of New Orleans' population.

There are alternatives. The Kyoto protocols were far from perfect but they represented a lowest common denominator in fighting global warming that the US would not even sign onto. As regards preparedness, both Oxfam America and the United Nations have pointed to Cuba as a plausible model. When Hurricane Ivan stormed through the Caribbean in September 2004, 27 people died in Florida and almost 100 in Granada, yet none died in Cuba which also took a direct hit on its west end. They were not always so successful, but the UN and Oxfam credit their record to several factors. First, Cubans learn from an early age about the danger of hurricanes and how to prepare and respond. Second, before the hurricane hits, local communities organize cleanup to secure potentially dangerous debris. Third, preparation and evacuation are organized and coordinated between the central government and local communities, and transportation away from danger is organized as a social community project rather than left to the private market, as happened in New Orleans and Houston. To prevent fires, gas and electricity supplies are cut off before the hurricane hits. During a hurricane, pre-organized state-sponsored emergency teams guarantee water, food and medical treatment – 2,000 such teams in the case of Ivan. The government also organizes resources for communities to reconstruct (Gorry, 2004).

By contrast, post-Katrina reconstruction in the United States will be dominated by top-down government contracts for tens if not hundreds of billions of dollars to major corporations and by billions of dollars of insurance payments to property owners so that they can reconstruct in the same vulnerable locations already destroyed. Such a solution may be good if measured by the yardstick of capitalist profit—a new buying binge by the Gulf raises all yachts, and, incredibly, insurance company stocks tend to rise following major disasters – but the same private market logic that caused such social destruction spells social and environmental disaster for those not in line to profit from government contracts and property insurance payments.

But there is an alternative. “We will not stand idly by while this disaster is used as an opportunity to replace our homes with newly built mansions and condos in a gentrified New Orleans,” reads a statement from a citywide coalition of New Orleans low-income groups, Community Labor United (Klein 2005). They went on to insist that the rebuilding of the city not be dominated by top-down corporate welfare but that those evacuated from New Orleans have the primary power over how the reconstruction proceeds. The billions of dollars already committed by Congress and the funds raised by

charities belong by rights to the victims. Some will respond that reconstruction is very complicated, and it is, but the record of companies like Bechtel and Haliburton in Iraq are hardly evidence for the defense of a top-down Iraq model for New Orleans.

In the end, the reconstruction question is only secondarily technical. It is in the first place political, and the same corporate and federal abandonment that fostered such a widespread disaster can hardly be expected to perform an about-turn by empowering a disempowered population. Given the visceral response to the hundreds of unnecessary deaths resulting from Katrina, any attempt to impose a top-down solution by force is likely to incite an equally visceral response from below. If the Bush administration's first instinct was to eschew government and trust private charities to help the victims of Katrina, it should follow that instinct as regards the ordinary refugees of New Orleans and their ability to rebuild from the bottom up. There is no such thing as a natural disaster, and the supposed naturalness of the market is the last place to look for a solution to this disastrous havoc.

Endnotes

¹ George Bush has declared that "these people are not refugees, they are Americans." The effort at such a distinction is doubly cynical. It seeks to sanitize the experience of the approximately 400,000 people displaced, evacuated and evicted from New Orleans by bestowing on them some kind of superiority and respect not normally given to "refugees." It therefore also exposes what Bush thinks of the rest of the world, demeaning millions of others who remain merely "refugees," a social category presumably lower than "Americans." That Jesse Jackson should have made a similar argument, albeit in an attempt to establish respect for African Americans at home but at the expense of foreign "refugees," is disappointing.

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