

The Political Wrath of Hurricane Katrina

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Like most people in the United States, I have been transfixed by the horrific images of the death and destruction wrought by hurricane Katrina on the U.S. Gulf Coast. The proud city of New Orleans, the birthplace of jazz and so much of what is original in American popular culture, stands deluged in a combustible slew of devastation, despair, and fury. Americans are shocked by the criminal incompetence of their government, which seeks refuge in the wrath of nature, not in its own ineptitude and indifference. Those of us from Africa are familiar with this script: how drought is used as an alibi for famine. At least African governments can plead poverty, however self-serving and misleading that plea is. The rest of the world watched with surprise, sympathy, and scorn. Many have offered assistance, to America's obvious embarrassment, rather than gratitude. Katrina has sunk New Orleans and America's sense of greatness. The world's lone superpower has become ordinary.

Katrina is the anti-9-11. Nine-eleven stunned the United States into patriotic fervor at home and imperial rage abroad but Katrina has stoked deep national divisions and widespread international derision. Disasters, whether natural or man-made, and Katrina is both, are revelatory mirrors that expose a society's subterranean fissures, the existing socioeconomic inequalities and political pathologies. Katrina has provided a giant and agonizing mirror for America, in the full view of the world it normally despises, forcing it to look squarely in the face, to its profound shock and shame, all those marginalized people it silences with its strange but seductive myths of equal opportunity and the American dream. Race and class, the enduring systemic and symbolic deformities that mark and mock the fantasies of American exceptionalism, have reared their simmering presence in the teeming masses that was huddled in the biotoxic sports arenas, the sweltering patches of broken bridges, or waving desperately from the rooftops of submerged buildings. Many more of them probably remain trapped or buried in their flooded homes, and bloated bodies are floating in the rivers that have overtaken the streets of tourist revelry.

The immediate victims of Katrina's wrath, then, are all those invisible people who are normally hidden in the sewers of the service economy that has grown with the growing de-industrialization of America. They are mostly poor and black, a grim testimony to the limits of the civil rights movement that ended legal racial segregation, but left the seclusions of economic class intact. In fact, the gap between the rich and poor in America has never been wider than it is now. The ranks of those living below the poverty line have swelled, and downward class mobility for the beleaguered middle classes is more likely than upward mobility. Clearly, the ferocious storms of Katrina have ripped open the fault lines of American

society in a way that the furious fires of 9-11 did not and could not. Nine-eleven was an act of terror that could be blamed on evil foreigners. Katrina, as an environmental disaster, could not be blamed on anyone. With no external enemy to focus the nation's anguish and rage, attention has turned inward to the social identities of the victims and the ineffectiveness of state intervention.

Nine-eleven was an assault on the financial and military citadels of America, which not only provoked swift state response, its victims were not marked in terms of color and class because many were white and well-off: racial and class markers are often reserved for the poor and racial minorities. I have been struck, although not surprised, by the derogatory and racist language that has been used in the media to describe the victims of Katrina – the obsession with violence and the different descriptions of whites “helping” themselves and blacks “looting” from deserted shops, and the unflattering, indeed, contemptuous comparisons with the Third World and Africa, that conditions in New Orleans are more befitting those benighted places than America.

This is the rhetoric of denial and dismissal, denial that poverty and the exploitation and marginalization of blacks have always been an integral part of the U.S., indeed fundamental to its growth and development, and dismissal of the African American poor as failed citizens who rightly belong to their underdeveloped ancestral homeland. Indeed, African Americans as a whole seem to suffer from double disenfranchisement: they have yet to be perceived by the larger white society as fellow citizens and fellow human beings. Katrina has shown how deeply embedded both poverty and blacks are in America's social ecology, which no amount of rhetoric about the United States being the wealthiest country in the world or the statistical myth that blacks are no longer America's largest minority - a status supposedly usurped by Hispanics who, however, can be of any race - can hide.

The social dynamics of race and class, and the differences in the nature of the two disasters might explain the relatively slow and chaotic response of the American government to the wrath of Katrina compared to the terrorist attacks of 9-11. But there are two other powerful forces at work: one is Iraq, the costly and disastrous military adventure that links 9-11 to Katrina, and the other is neo-liberal ideology that connects the muddle of the relief effort to the failures of public policy. Nine-eleven facilitated the American invasion of Iraq, while the quagmire in Iraq has fostered America's impotence before Katrina. If Iraq has weakened America's capacity to manage a domestic disaster of the magnitude of Katrina, the latter will most likely weaken America's capacity to prevail in the war in Iraq given the scale of the resistance. The reason for this lies both in the sheer material costs of managing the two disasters, and also the crucial link that, I think, Americans may be finally making between the Iraq war and domestic well-being. America's enemies are likely to draw their own connections as well: already underdrawn by America's military prowess in Iraq they are unlikely to be impressed by its ability to manage large scale disasters at home, both of which might increase America's vulnerability to terrorism.

While it is foolhardy to underestimate the country's economic capacity, let alone the popular will to rebuild shattered infrastructures and communities, the United States does not have infinite resources. The levels of its budget deficits and national debt are unsustainable in the long term. China and cheap energy have helped keep the economic bubble afloat. Oil prices were already rising steeply before Katrina and spiked sharply afterwards because of damage to the region's important oil production and refining industry and if they remain high, the effects will ripple throughout the economy, especially the already troubled airline and automobile industries. This was already turning to be the summer when support for the Iraq war finally tipped and stayed in negative territory, and most of the displaced people - uncharitably and incorrectly called refugees - who were interviewed in the peripatetic media made the link between military

commitments in Iraq and the incompetence and disarray of the relief effort. Interestingly, in both gulfs - the Middle East Gulf region and the stricken U.S. Gulf Coast - salvation is seen to lie in the hands of the military. Indeed, some of the troops being deployed in the areas shattered by Katrina are veterans of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars.

The spectacle of the military as a hurricane relief force raises troubling questions about the capacities of the civilian agencies. Nine-eleven reinforced the militarization of homeland security; Katrina has exposed the impoverishment of human security in an important but vulnerable region. Listening to the befuddled director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) make the rounds of TV interviews, I was stunned by his mendacity and fecklessness and of many other officials from the vast Department of Homeland Security itself to which FEMA belongs. They pleaded ignorance, that they could not foresee the full impact of Katrina, that the levees that keep New Orleans a livable city below sea level would break.

FEMA itself, numerous agencies and studies, had long predicted that New Orleans would be devastated by any major hurricane landing on its shores eroded by developers allowed to usurp wetlands and barrier islands. In fact, in 2001 FEMA had warned that New Orleans presented one of the country's top three most likely catastrophic disasters. I was reminded of those African leaders who feign surprise when drought, which is quite predictable in its regularity strikes, resulting in crop failures and food shortages.

At stake is neither the ignorance of state officials, nor the lethal power, let alone the capricious unpredictability of Katrina. Rather, as the world has since learned, the levees were in a terrible state of disrepair thanks to massive budget cuts, by nearly half since 2001, for funds requested by the corps of engineers to maintain and fix the levees. There were no adequate plans to evacuate the poor and vulnerable who had no means to leave as Katrina roared to the Gulf Coast. Those with resources - from cars and money to the social capital of relations and friends in unaffected cities and states across the region and the country - both black and white, left. Thus Katrina is essentially a crisis of public policy, of the provision of public goods and pursuit of collective action: building and maintaining the public infrastructure in normal times and providing public assistance for vulnerable people in times of disaster.

The effects of this public policy crisis have been seen in the gruesome television images of public disorder and desolation, of people in a major American city stripped of their dignity, and sometimes civility, scavenging for food and water, without shelter and toilets, distraught children too tired to cry, gaunt old people dying in their wheel chairs, and patients in dimly lit hospitals hanging by the thread of empty tubes and the heroic efforts of distressed doctors and nurses. Since the world economic crisis of the 1970s, neo-liberalism has been the dominant ideology of economic policy and management, its ascendancy buttressed by the collapse of actually existing socialism and American post-cold war triumphalism. Africa and other parts of the global South have two "lost decades" to show for the perilous inanities of neo-liberalism, imposed with religious zealotry by the international financial institutions, with all their global capitalist might, cheered on by successive U.S. governments.

The United States has been under the regime of what in Africa we call structural adjustment programs (SAPs) since the advent of the Reagan administration in 1980. The Republican mantra, which Democrats have largely acquiesced to, has been getting the government off people's backs, that is, reducing government expenditures and cutting taxes. For the developing countries, including many in Africa, SAPs have led to the erosion of the developmental advances achieved in the pre-SAP days, growing indebtedness, deepening social inequalities and insecurities, and rising poverty. Under this ruthless

regime of accumulation the relative exploitation and repression of labor and racial minorities in the United States has increased as can be seen in the growing income gaps between workers and executives and the backlash against civil rights.

But given its global power, the U.S. has been able to deflect and "hide" some of the costs of SAPs by importing vast quantities of capital through both direct investments and debt - the U.S. is the world's largest debtor nation. Iraq has dented the facade of superpower military invincibility and Katrina has exposed the underbelly of neo-liberalism in America, the infrastructure and communities that have been neglected for a generation, sacrificed on the altar of a fundamentalist economic and political ideology that punishes the poor and rewards the rich. Since this is a highly racialized country the class dynamics of neo-liberalism are interpenetrated with the unyielding hierarchies of race. Hence, the iconic images of the victims of Katrina are the black poor.

Nine-eleven elevated a selected lackluster president into a national leader; Katrina has severely weakened the recently re-elected president's leadership. Shattered is the aura of a "can do leader" and government competence, and the administration's mask of unflappable confidence often hiding uninformed complacency and ideological fanaticism that does not even countenance the scientific consensus about global warming, which many believe is responsible for the growing strength and frequency of hurricanes. It is easier to lie about the anarchy in far away Iraq than the mayhem within the United States itself, to control the flow of images of the American dead and wounded from Baghdad than the flood of images of the desperate and dying in the Big Easy.

It is tempting to lay the blame for the tragedy of Katrina, which has yet to yield its full horrors from the muddy depths of the flooded streets and homes, entirely on the shoulders of the Bush administration, which brought the imbroglio of Iraq upon itself against the wise counsel of history and anti-war activists that Iraq would not be the walkover dreamt by the neo-conservatives (neo-cons), and diverted much-needed resources that could have facilitated a quicker and better response to the wrath of Katrina. Large amounts of equipment and numbers of the National Guard - one third of Louisiana's and even more from Mississippi - who are often used in state and national emergencies were in Iraq.

President Bush has never been known for his eloquence, or sympathies for the poor or blacks, notwithstanding an ivy-league education and the pretensions of "compassionate conservatism." His approval ratings were already plummeting before the calamity of Katrina, which has become his biggest domestic political crisis, and has the potential to sink his second term agenda in a quagmire of recriminations and mistrust.

The president's initial ineffectual handling of the hurricane may reinforce an already widespread perception that he fancies himself more as a "war" president than an engaged leader, more interested in beefing up military security than social security, pursuing policies that demand sacrifices from the poor but not the rich. But Bush did not invent Reaganomics and previous administrations largely neglected the levees following the New Orleans floods of 1965.

What has happened under the watch of the Bush Administration is that racial neo-liberalism at home, and the imperialist adventurism of the neo-cons abroad, reached their apogee as the massive tax cuts favoring the richest Americans have amply demonstrated. Hurricane Katrina has brought home to Americans the dangers, to their own security and self-image, of this explosive brew. One senses a growing loss of confidence in the ability of the political class and institutions to safeguard the interests that matter, in the daily lives of most ordinary people.

Out of the floodwaters of New Orleans and the gulf coast as a whole, Katrina's political wrath has only just begun. The doctrinaire argument for small government may have lost its seductions. At stake is the future political direction of this country that has yet to fulfill its promises to its marginalized peoples and the rest of the world seeking peace and human security, development and democracy, rather than militarism and imperial bullying.

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