

*Katrina: The disaster and its doubles*¹

Guest editorial by Nancy Scheper-Hughes

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One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later, the Negro is still languishing in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land. [...] I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

Martin Luther King Jr, 28 August 1963

The non-black population was just as devastated, but apparently they were able to get out, while the black population wasn't able to get out. So maybe maybe New Orleans has a half-decent mass transit people and some of these people don't need cars.

Radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh, 1 September 2005

If people know year after year that a natural disaster occurs in a particular place and if people continue to build there and want to live there, should they bear the responsibility of buying insurance or should everyone else bear that responsibility?

Republican Senator Jon Kyl, 4 September 2005

New Orleans is dead, man. It's dead. But [it] was already gone long before the storm hit.

Cyril Neville, youngest of the Neville Brothers, at a benefit performance for victims of Hurricane Katrina, Madison Square Garden, 20 September 2005

At times of crisis and catastrophe, people seek an explanation for what happened. Even a bad explanation can seem better than none at all. As Geertz pointed out many years ago, the one thing many humans seem unable to live with is the idea that the world may be deficient in meaning and that human existence might be absurd.

The Bush administration's spin doctors, especially Karl Rove,² rushed to attribute the swathe of deaths and destruction on the Gulf Coast – some 1200 lives lost – to an act of nature, to God, to inept local Democratic officials who failed to act despite multiple pleas for help, and, finally, to the stubbornness of those (mostly Black and poor) New Orleanians who were too slow and too late getting themselves and their families out of harm's way.³ Ultimately,

then, the 'stragglers' had only themselves to blame for being turned into a population of pitiful 'refugees', a term briefly used by news media and by some public officials before it was quickly picked up and criticized for its unconscious racism, its failure to recognize the dispossessed fleeing in rubber dinghies and rickety rowing boats as bona fide citizens of the USA. Politically correct TV commentators intervened to scold and to instruct viewers that the people fleeing were *not* to be called refugees: 'These are Americans! Not Bosnians, not Kosovars, not Bangladeshis!' I'll return to this collective slip of the tongue at the end of this editorial.

Of course, individuals' exit plans were largely determined by race and class. The poor, heavily concentrated in low-lying districts, were more exposed to high water and had few opportunities to escape. Many did not own road-worthy cars, or any cars at all. Lacking personal computers, they were dependent on TV reports (until the electricity failed) and on radio (until the batteries ran out). Both media were slower than the internet and email in sounding the alarm. Consequently, many poor residents were stranded in their one-storey homes and on their roofs waiting to be rescued.⁴ New Orleans newscaster Dave Cohen captured the poor people's dilemma: 'We got amazing phone calls: a woman in her house with a two-year-old on one shoulder, a five-year-old at her side, no formula, no food. "What do I do?" What can I tell her? I'm just a guy on the radio!'

The wealthy residents of New Orleans live in sturdy two-storey homes in higher-lying districts. A front-page story in the *Wall Street Journal*⁵ the day after Katrina hit captured the difference immediately: 'Ashton O'Dwyer stepped out of his home on this city's grandest street and made a bee-line for his neighbor's pool. Wearing nothing but a pair of blue swim trunks and carrying two milk jugs, he drew enough pool water to flush the toilet in his home.' The affluent had access to early warnings via fax and internet. They could jump into their tank-like 4-wheel-drives and well-stocked recreation vehicles. They had access to fast cash with their high-end credit and debit cards, and they could mobilize extensive and well-equipped personal and public support systems. Finally, the wealthy residents of New Orleans hold insurance policies that will allow them to return and to rebuild if they so wish.

No exit

Once the more 'beloved communities'⁶ were safely evacuated, leaving behind the riff-raff thousands who took shelter in the Superdome, the rumours of mass death – the mayor of New Orleans predicted 10,000 deaths; the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) had ordered 25,000 body bags – of riots, rape and anarchy circulated wildly in the media. The National Guard was deployed to control what was left of New Orleans by military means and to protect private property. Abandoned people who tried to organize among themselves to obtain and distribute water, food, medications and shelter were dispersed at gunpoint by the Guard, who were under orders not to distribute their own water to the desperate. Four days after the hurricane hit, and with basic government aid still delayed, President Bush advised the stranded to seek help from private charities such as the Salvation Army.

Two San Francisco paramedics, Larry Bradshaw and Lorrie Slonsky, who were trapped in New Orleans with the abandoned poor of the city, wrote a chilling report published in the leftist press,⁷ describing police and the National Guard blocking desperate evacuees as they tried to cross the Greater New Orleans Bridge to safety. It evoked a scene reminiscent of Alabama police attacking the Selma to Montgomery Freedom Marchers as they tried to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge in 1965. Here is what the Katrina evacuees, including some with babies in push-

chairs, injured people on crutches, elderly people clasping walkers, others in wheelchairs, met as they approached the bridge they had been told was a route to safety:

Armed sheriffs formed a line across the foot of the bridge. Before we were close enough to speak, they began firing their weapons over our heads. This sent the crowd fleeing in various directions. As the crowd scattered and dissipated, a few of us inched forward and managed to engage some of the sheriffs in conversation. We told them of our conversation with the police commander and the commander's assurances. The sheriffs informed us that there were no buses waiting. The commander had lied to us to get us to move. We questioned why we couldn't cross the bridge anyway, especially as there was little traffic on the six-lane highway. They responded that the West Bank was not going to become New Orleans, and there would be no Superdomes in their city.

The police and National Guard made sure that hundreds of abandoned New Orleanians were prevented from fleeing the city on foot. Contrast this violent scene with the evacuation of thousands of ordinary people from Lower Manhattan in the wake of 9/11, when Mayor Giuliani dispatched his top assistant, Rosie, clad in a florescent jacket and holding a megaphone, to lead panicked people across a bridge and into the safety of Queens – a beautiful and historic moment.

Self-blame and national shame

In the wake of a disaster people tend to ask the question: Why me? Why us, oh God, of all people? Victims collude with those who are all too willing to blame them for their misfortune. Making sense of suffering is a dicey game, a two-edged sword. In his essay on Holocaust survivors, 'Useless suffering', Immanuel Levinas goes so far as to see the search for meaning in catastrophic human suffering as a potent source of evil in the world. Conversely, those who escape a catastrophe experienced by others (especially their own loved ones) tend to ask the opposite question: Why was I spared? Why did I live? – an equally devastating experience of self-blame.

My particular perspective on the Katrina disaster derives from the 18 months (1967-1968) that I spent living and working in Selma, Alabama and its rural environs as a civil rights worker investigating hunger and malnutrition among Black sharecroppers. The reports I wrote for the Southern Rural Research Project (SRRP) – 'Black farm families: Hunger and malnutrition in rural Alabama' and 'The extinction of Black farm families' (both of them scathing attacks on the perverse relations between Black farm families and local agents of the US Department of Agriculture) – were based on a survey of 243 households in several Blackbelt counties of Southwest Alabama. The reports were used in a class action suit: 'Peoples v. the US Department of Agriculture' (US District Court, 23 March 23 1967). We brought three busloads of undernourished adults and children – 130 Black Alabamians ranging from 7 weeks to 75 years old – into that Washington, DC court room, along with a team of doctors (including Robert Coles and Charles Wheeler) to verify the shocking nutritional disorders, ranging from paediatric marasmus and kwashiorkor to the pellagra suffered by many of the adults.

SRRP lost its case against the US Department of Agriculture in the courts but won in the media as newscasters from ABC, CBS and NBC, and reporters from the *Washington Post* to the *New York Times* expressed alarm at the possibility of widespread hunger among the rural Black poor of the American South. Dr Wheeler continued to work with us in documenting the effects of chronic malnutrition on Alabama's sharecroppers. A CBS team came to Selma, Alabama in 1968 to film a segment of the 90-minute documentary 'Hunger in America'. I accompanied the team to the home of a large family of sharecroppers

1. The 'double' refers to the social and political responses to the catastrophe that amplify its disastrous effects to the extent that it is difficult to say which is worse – the killer hurricane or the national response to it.

2. On Friday 5 August the *New York Times* reported that Karl Rove and White House communications director Dan Bartlett had 'rolled out a plan... to contain the political damage from the administration's response to Hurricane Katrina.' The core of the strategy, the *Times* report stated, was 'to shift the blame away from the White House and toward officials of New Orleans and Louisiana'.

3. It was not the rains, torrential as they were, that caused the death and destruction. New Orleanians pride themselves on 'toughing out' major storms. It was the breach of the levees and the government's breach of promise to the city of New Orleans that caused the catastrophe.

4. See, for example, D. Gaines, 'The one that's left behind', *Pacific News Service* 8 November 2005, <http://www.alternet.org/story/25114/>

5. C. Cooper, 'Old-line families escape worst of flood and plot the future: Mr. O'Dwyer, at his mansion, enjoys highball with ice; Meeting with the mayor', *Wall Street Journal*, 8 September 2005.

6. This is an ironic reference to Martin Luther King's search for the 'beloved community' as the Kingdom of God on earth, his vision of a non-racialized egalitarian society. (See Smith, K.L. and Zepp, I.G., Jr., *Search for the beloved community: The thinking of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* Valley Forge: Judson Press 1974). The Katrina catastrophe showed that only part of the afflicted New Orleans community was 'beloved' and appropriately mourned by the US commander-in-chief in the first days of the tragedy.

7. 'Trapped in New Orleans by the flood – and martial law', *Socialist Worker*, 9 September 2005: 4-5.

8. See Kleinenberg 2002.

9. See, for example, J. Shafer, 'Don't refloat: The case against rebuilding the sunken city of New Orleans'. Posted by Slate, 7 September 2005. <http://www.slate.com/?id=2125810&nav=tap1>

10. S.M. Hoffman, 'Katrina and Rita', *Anthropology News*, November 2005: 19.

where Dr Wheeler interviewed a 14-year-old boy named Charles. Of all the images of hunger in America, this one tore at the collective conscience of the American public.

Wheeler asked the 14-year-old sitting across him on a bed covered with a tattered bundle of rags, the only seat in the shack:

'Do you eat breakfast before school?'
'Sometimes, sir. Sometimes I have peas.'
'And when you get to school, do you eat?'
'No, sir.'
'Isn't there any cafeteria food there?'
'Yes, sir.'
'Why don't you have it?'
'I don't have the 25 cents.'
'What do you do while the other children eat lunch?'
'I just sits there on the side.'
[Here Charles turns his face away from the cameras]

But Dr Wheeler continues:

'How do you feel when you see the other children eating?'
'I feels ashamed'. [Charles' voice breaks]

Raymond Wheeler asks incredulously:

'You feel *ashamed*?'
'Yes, sir.'

After the CBS documentary was aired hundreds of letters bearing small cheques arrived at our 'Freedom House' in Selma, Alabama. I answered them all. No American child, these concerned citizens argued, should feel ashamed because they had nothing to eat. And no child should sit by empty-handed while his or her schoolmates ate lunch. This one CBS documentary had enormous impact, leading, ultimately, to Congressional action. Consequently, Charles got his school lunch free, as did thousands of other rural Southern kids like him.

Many years later, when Governor Cuomo made his memorable nominating keynote speech at the 1988 Democratic Convention, he recalled that scene from 'Hunger in America'. Though he did not recall his name, over 20 years later Cuomo evoked the burning sense of misplaced shame in that one hungry American child. For shame, America! was Cuomo's message. Since that time the US has agreed to put an end to welfare (as we knew it), thereby putting an end to childhood (as we knew it). A raw deal replaced the New Deal, contributing to the dangerous material decline of poor urban (mostly African-American) communities, including the quality of transport, public housing and public schools in New Orleans and its environs, anticipating the shameful scenes of public neglect of victims and survivors of Hurricane Katrina. As Illinois senator Barack Obama put it: 'The people of New Orleans weren't just abandoned during the hurricane, they were abandoned long ago.'

Vulnerability of the poor

As Eric Kleinenberg demonstrated in his masterful study of the Chicago heatwave of 1995,⁸ the poor are vulnerable to 'natural' disasters and other catastrophes not because of geography and climate changes (although these set the stage) but because of political lassitude, racism and entrenched poverty, all of these exacerbated by the dismantling of social welfare by both Democratic and Republican administrations that have left them stranded.

In marked contrast to the public response to Katrina, the response to the 9/11 World Trade Center attack was immediate: private companies and public agencies swooped down and into action. Necessary supplies and equipment were put into place with or without contracts. A sense of solidarity united bureaucracies, NGOs and political units. True, there was that long pause, the endless 90 seconds or so that it took George W. Bush to get what had just happened, his deer-in-the-headlights paralysis that was

captured so painfully in Michael Moore's film. But this time the presidential paralysis was days and weeks long. No one in the government seemed ready to push a panic button, despite advance warning from the National Weather Service, which declared Katrina a major hurricane likely to make the targeted area 'uninhabitable for weeks, perhaps longer' (quoted in the *New York Times*, 2005).

The amazement with which people around the world greeted the stark images of dead bodies in the lethal sewage of post-Katrina New Orleans contrasted sharply with the 'What do you expect from sub-citizens who refuse to follow orders, who are looting and shooting and raping and killing?' attitude of Fox TV and its associates. Could it be that while white bodies count, black bodies are merely counted? What explains the absurd miscalculations of 20,000, then 40,000 presumed deaths in the wake of the killer hurricane? The body counts, like the exaggerated reports of mayhem, circulated like an urban legend, based on what? A subconscious wish that it be so, a genocidal fantasy?

Today, the attention of the country and the press is focused on reconstruction and on the 'golden opportunity' afforded to developers by the destruction of New Orleans. Congressman Richard Baker of Baton Rouge greeted the devastation with evident glee: 'We finally cleaned up public housing in new Orleans... We couldn't do it, but God did for us.' Today the media are preoccupied with debates about architectural preservation vs economic development.⁹ There is talk of allowing certain low-lying sections of Black New Orleans to be 'let go' permanently. In one of his columns conservative pundit David Brooks opined that 'people who lack middle-class skills' should not be allowed to resettle in the city. 'If we 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.'

Will New Orleans be rebuilt with higher levees and fewer African Americans? Will the French Quarter be transformed into a permanent watery theme park for college students on holiday? Will African Americans, Creoles, Cajuns and other Louisiana cultural minorities ever again account for two-thirds of New Orleans' population and for nearly 100% of the city's distinctive culture and social history?

* * *

Katrina may have tapped into the collective unconscious, pointing to something that Americans need to confront about themselves and their nation. The 'refugee' Freudian slip might be seen as a feeble step toward acknowledging what Michael Harrington recognized decades ago in his book, *The other America* – that is, the reality of two Americas, one bona fide, the other a step-child nation, the un-American America, refugee America, apartheid America. The term 'refugees' implies that there are American-born Americans without a symbolic passport, without a president, without protection, who live and die outside the political circle of trust and care. Perhaps this is why anthropologist Susanna Hoffman¹⁰ suggested that humanitarian efforts for the victims of Katrina might be understood as 'aid', a term most often associated with people living in other countries (as in USAID).

Perhaps the designation 'refugees' is an unformed way of suggesting that 'normative' America (Amerika?) owes something to the displaced victims of American apartheid, something akin to Jacques Derrida's call for a cosmo-politics based on open cities of refuge and a politics of hospitality based on *human* rights, since the Black and poor population's *civil* rights seem to have so utterly failed them. ●

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SSRC (Social Science Research Council) Katrina site: <http://understandingkatrina.ssrc.org/>

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