

Katrina: 10 years after

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I was sitting in a small town Greyhound bus station when I first saw images from Katrina. Happenstance, in retrospect, was so apropos. Bus terminal stations throughout America (so often) being lachrymose warehouses for the poor, the vulnerable, the mentally ill, the psychologically worn down and the just plain penniless –hostels of the many with vagabond destinations. The station held any number of “the kinds of people” who knew what it was to go elsewhere, oftentimes meaning anyplace but the places they’re at. I sat among America’s disenfranchised classes.

All eyes fixed on the overhead television set. The scenes. Abandoned rooftop families. Watery chaos. “I guess they should have left” somebody darkly whispered. A women (probably mentally ill) began performing a kind of spastic interpretive dance. I suspect under other circumstances she might have had security called to remove her. But on that day the mood – I would call it the mood of real identification– was so thick it infected the security personal, who “let it slide.” America was absorbing the news. The facts were still coming in. But my fellow Greyhound travelers understood that many of them could have been residents of the Lower Ninth Ward. There was no lack of empathy because they intuited the real story was a tragedy of the ne’er-do-wells and the expendable. It revealed the worst that can happen in America, if you can’t afford to stop it.

Katrina – from beginning to end – described America’s usual relationship with the poor; first, they were “set up for failure” by land and housing patterns that put them in high risk; secondly, perfunctory and indifferent systems of government bureaucracy worsened the toll; and finally the capitalist hierarchy deflected focus away from its responsibility by the usual means – classism and racism.

Weren’t the poor the least equipped to leave New Orleans under the threat of the hurricane? Besides which generations of the poor had been forced by economics to live in New Orleans’ most dangerous death traps, the “low ground.” It was a nightmare for the residents who had bought into the American dream, by buying homes in the perilous Lower Ninth, trusting in insurance policies and the Army Corps of Engineers expressed commitment to upkeep the levee system. On August 28th and 29th this assurance proved to be like so many promises made to the poor – a con. The shoddily maintained levee system collapsed like pipe dreams (under winds which had diminished to a category 2 or 3 hurricane)

Then a human calamity followed a manmade catastrophe. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) botched the rescue effort so badly that Geraldo reached the New Orleans to film a sensationalistic TV show, while FEMA presumably could not. The Bush administration handled the rescue effort as irresponsibly as it had ignored urgent warnings, and cut necessary funding to restore the levees. Three weeks later, when Bush finally addressed the carnage, he merely opined “Americans have every right to expect a more effective response in a time of emergency.” He stated the obvious. “As all of us saw on television, there is some deep, persistent poverty in this region. And that poverty has roots in a history of racial discrimination which cut off generations from the opportunity of America. We have a duty to confront this poverty with bold action.” Again, the obvious.

“As all of us saw” (but some of us lived) elided the real harm, weight or damage of forms of social, economic, or physical oppression. (So many more Americans than Bush allows for live in or close to conditions of poverty and economic stress–for them they are not armchair reality television.) But Bush referred to the silent accusation inherent in Katrina, the TV melodrama. Every lost soul crying,

pleading and suffering in the Lower Ninth Ward's death trap was a Black woman, child or man. This crack in America's imaginary Norman Rockwell revealed the racist Hieronymus Bosch beneath. It revealed who really subsisted at the bottom of America's socio-economic ladder under an enterprise which had functioned by exploiting race, racism and race privilege since slavery till today's for-profit prisons and the school-to prison pipeline.

Then the victim blaming began which exhibited why racism remained capitalism's most effective social marker. Conservatives "played dumb" regarding the levee failure. Blame Mother Nature. Or rather, blame slow-witted Blacks for living in the hazard zones in the first place. "The failure in New Orleans was a failure of character" wrote columnist Michael Graham, who withheld the least sympathy for Katrina's "government dependent victims." During the first days after the hurricane hit rumors (later shown to be false or exaggerated) circulated that New Orleans had fallen into the hands of gangs of looters and roving rapists. Media bias was such that while federal assistance was slow-in-coming a white couple scavenging to stay alive in New Orleans was described as having "found food" and assistance, while blacks were invariably "looters." Katrina coverage proved a high point in the lowly American tradition of personifying Blacks as animals.

Bush commiserated sympathetically on TV. But by the time he spoke Katrina coverage was so entrenched in racist connivance, innuendo and fearmongering that his speech was notable for all that he didn't say. He didn't criticize the stereotyping of Katrina victims. He didn't abhor the enthusiasm that a Louisiana representative had already expressed for the idea that Katrina would provide a pretext to roll back public housing. His lack of offense winked in the eye that the rebuilding of the Gulf Coast would be market-driven, gentrification-friendly, and (particularly in New Orleans) a scheme to eliminate the dispossessed poor.

I was able to visit New Orleans nine months after the hurricane hit, while the city was still partially in wreckage. I spent weeks there interviewing the excess numbers of homeless New Orleanians and participating in the activist movement which was vigorous at the time — because New Orleans' spirit was still strong. The poor suffered from a basic lack of housing and resources (not character). Progressives from across the country responded by inundating the area with volunteer activism. Thousands locally and afar contributed to making post-Katrina New Orleans an experiment in hands-on cooperative living. They lived in bunk beds and often relied on power generators, but for a brief moment in history "government dependent" New Orleanians and volunteers experimented with a cooperative living microcosm. The work they accomplished was by any measure was more successful than the botched FEMA assistance. This was also a time of extreme hostility towards the federal bureaucracy, which had few local defenders.

New Orleans became the focus of a movement that demanded the federal government take full responsibility for the levee failure by repatriating New Orleanians on the basis of "human values" — renters' rights to affordable housing and homeowner's right to rebuild based on actual costs, not pre-storm property values. I have never forgotten a slogan that was popular at the time, a rallying cry, a summation of the heart of the movement. "Solidarity. Not Charity." The banner "Solidarity. Not Charity" was also a response to various "non-political" charitable organizations which provided assistance, without mentioning rights. Charity and gift giving was insufficient (even condescending) without acknowledging how racism, indifference and capitalist economics had abrogated New Orleanians' rights (and extracted a cost in lives.)

Ten years since (because this year marks Katrina's watershed 10th anniversary) New Orleanians have achieved legalistic moral victories. In 2009, a federal ruling blamed the extent of the destruction on the Army Corps of Engineer's negligence. (The caveat is that a later ruling granted the Corps legal immunity, regardless of the prior verdict.) In 2010, a housing advocacy group won a ruling that federal rebuilding grants have been racially discriminatory. (This ruling came with the

caveat that no retroactive compensation would be made to the thousands of Black homeowners who had already accepted grants at discriminatory rates.) These moral victories marginally impacted the preordained end results — New Orleans today is a much whiter and heavily gentrified city. Hopefully a percentage of the Lower Ninth's displaced poor chanced on "better lives" elsewhere. The majority have probably been reshuffled to less inconvenient ghettos.

I will sum up Katrina's legacy, like this. Sometime ago I and a small group of economically disadvantaged friends speculated the impossible. We imagined a hypothetical political party in Citizens United USA whose platform prioritized the interests of America's poor — literally, a Poor People's Party. Yet all of us eschewed this name. The title "Poor People's Party" seemed a concession to too many racist and classist stereotypes. ("Poor" and "worthless" seemed inextricably ideologically linked.) I suggested "The Solidarity, Not Charity Party" inspired by the movement in New Orleans which championed the un-American idea that the poor have rights. The condescending cliché is that the poor have dignity -but they also have rights. These included rights immediately related to Hurricane Katrina and beyond -rights to environmental safety, housing, healthcare, quality education, quality public services, and beyond. Respecting rights (and protecting rights) required public policy to meet higher standards than providing "charity" "safety nets" or "welfare." The Solidarity, Not Charity Party was enthusiastically embraced.

Katrina's 10th year anniversary legacy rests in remembering the poor by embracing Solidarity, Not Charity — by protesting cuts to nutritional assistance, and state governments which refuse to accept Medicaid expansion. It lies in all the nagging questions related to the possibility of justice - in particularly the bleak possibility of justice for the poor — under a capitalist system.