Race, Poverty, and Policy in the Wake of Disaster: 
Post-Katrina Views

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Hurricane Katrina has produced a substantial body of literature. Here, I examine one of the first and most widely read books on the social consequences and implications of the storm by Michael Eric Dyson, and then look at some of the most recently published volumes on this topic. In general, the authors ask good questions and sometimes even have good answers, but there are also many important questions that they do not ask.

From the perspective of inequality, the perspective that dominates the works discussed in this essay, the demographics of pre-Katrina New Orleans showed a place of striking differences in opportunity and advantage, especially on racial grounds. In 2000, over two-thirds of the people in the city were African American, but African Americans constituted 82% of the city’s poor. Children were disproportionately represented among the poor and among the city’s majority black population. One-third of the black residents were younger than 18 years of age, compared to only 14% of the smaller white group, and an estimated 94% of poor children in New Orleans were African American. While there were certainly low-income whites and wealthy African Americans in the Crescent City, the group-level income gaps were striking. New Orleans whites in 2000 had a median family income of $46,600 and a median household income of $52,500. The black median family and household incomes were half of those: $23,300 and $25,750, respectively (Ruggles et al. 2010). Behind these stark

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inequalities was a long history of discrimination, with overt racially discrimina-
tory city and state laws well within the memories of people still living. There are
clearly good reasons for thinking about the impact of the storm and the official
responses to it in terms of the social inequalities in the city and in the nation.
However, other demographic facts should remind us that there are other legiti-
mate perspectives.

Before the storm, the City of New Orleans had an abundance of poor peo-
ple, and this was a problem not just for those individuals, but for the city itself.
According to census data, 30% of the people in New Orleans lived below the
poverty level in the year 2000 (Ruggles et al. 2010). One should not blame the
poor for their plight, especially considering that so many were children. How-
ever, one does need to acknowledge the fact that the poor were able to make
relatively few active contributions to the economic life of the community. Most
not only did not work, but were also entirely outside the world of work: 63% of
poor men and 56% of poor women aged at least 25 and younger than 65 were
not in the labor force. Another 12% of poor men and 9% of poor women were
in the labor force but unemployed. Eight out of 10 poor household heads in
New Orleans did not own homes, compared to 44% of the nonpoor. Those who
did not own homes did not pay property taxes, a critical source of income for
this as for other cities. Among the poor of the city who did own homes, 9% paid
no property taxes and most (55%) paid less than $150 per year. Most poor
household heads (55%) had no available vehicles, a serious handicap not only
for their economic participation, but also for their ability to take charge of their
own evacuations in the face of a coming hurricane. Low-income people in New
Orleans may have been culturally vibrant, but they clearly could not support
themselves, transport themselves, or produce the revenue that any community,
however just or unjust, must have to function.

The overwhelming majority of children (83%) in the poor households of
New Orleans lived in single-parent households, with most (78%) living with sin-
gle mothers. Nearly half (46%) of people over age 25 below the poverty line had
less than high school educations (Ruggles et al. 2010). Although spending per
student was roughly equal to the rest of the state (due to the infusion of state
and federal funds) (Louisiana Department of Education 2006), New Orleans
had the worst public school system in Louisiana and one of the worst in the
nation. In the months before the hurricane, the state legislature had already
begun preparing to take over the majority of the city’s schools, which were
failing.

As a native of New Orleans who grew up on the outskirts of the city, I saw
it transformed from my early adolescence, when I could safely travel to almost
any neighborhood within Orleans Parish on public buses, to a major urban
crime center. According to Uniform Crime Reports, in 2004, the year before the
storm, New Orleans had a murder rate 10 times higher than the rest of the
nation (56 per 100,000, compared to 5.5 per 100,000). The city also had much
higher rates of robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, and motor vehicle theft, as
well as significantly higher rates of rape and ordinary theft. Low-income, minority citizens were the most likely to be victims.

Not surprisingly, given all of these problems, the city had been losing population for decades before the storm. From 1970 to around 2000, it lost white residents, but during the 2000s it also started to lose African American residents, while nearby suburbs, especially north of Lake Pontchartrain, grew, at first in white residents, but later also in black and other residents. There were many reasons for this prestorm suburbanization, but one is that many people were fleeing or avoiding a place that, for all its historic charm and appeal to tourists and hipsters, had become a concentration of poverty and socioeconomic dysfunction.

How can a declining city support a huge dependent and economically unproductive population? When that city’s people are forced to flee to other locations, how can its imperfect government organize transportation for thousands who have no vehicles of their own? After the storm, how can policy makers help citizens return and rebuild when so many citizens lack resources of their own? If New Orleans was a severely dysfunctional community before the storm, should it be brought back as it was? If not, what should be changed? How can the effort to create a more workable city be reconciled with the interests of its historically disadvantaged and most severely impacted citizens? These were a few of the questions that occurred to me as I read some of the recent books on the social significance of Hurricane Katrina.

Michael Eric Dyson’s popular *Come Hell or High Water* provides a good place to begin thinking about Hurricane Katrina as a social problem. Dyson’s book is not a work of social science but an impassioned polemic. Reading his book, one should recognize that he is making a partisan political case, not investigating a social phenomenon and certainly not reflecting on his own perspectives and biases. I think he makes his case well; it is strongly argued and clearly written. It is, however, the type of argument one would expect from a prosecuting attorney. He does not discuss his methods, but the book is apparently based mainly on media reports and a little over 30 interviews with selected individuals. At the core of his argument are two main points: the administration of George W. Bush responded poorly to the disaster and the impact and aftermath of the hurricane reveal major racial inequalities in contemporary America. I think he is correct on both of those points, although, as I suggested at the beginning of this essay, there are other important considerations. In one chapter, Dyson also rebuts those who interpreted the hurricane’s devastation to divine punishment of the sinful and unworthy. I agreed with his arguments here without reservation, although I am not a theologian and have never (as far as I can tell) enjoyed a revelation, so I will pass over this part of the book as beyond my competence.

The outrage directed at the former president now seems a bit dated, although the historical consequences of the Bush presidency do deserve evaluation. While I think that Dyson is generally correct that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) became less efficient under President George W. Bush, and I agree that this was one of the failings of the Bush administration, it does seem to me that objectivity requires qualifying Dyson’s unequivocal
condemnation of the former president’s oversight of the agency. Following the events of September 2001, the attention of the government and the nation concentrated on matters other than domestic disaster, and FEMA received less emphasis and support than other parts of the newly organized Department of Homeland Security. One does not need to agree with the decision to respond to the September tragedy by invading Iraq or to approve of the way FEMA dealt with Hurricane Katrina to recognize that when governments or individuals look in one direction, they look away from others. The unsatisfactory response of the agency to Katrina did apparently lead to an effort to improve it, though, and I think one might argue that under Bush’s successor FEMA responded somewhat more effectively to Hurricane Sandy in 2012 because it had the Katrina example.

Without making any real effort at fact-checking, I spotted some egregious errors. Dyson identifies one of Louisiana’s two senators, Republican David Vitter, as “David Witter” (p. 67). In his remarks on how the hurricane affected racial and ethnic minorities other than blacks, it becomes clear that Dyson does not have much of a grasp of the demographics of the area. Citing an advocacy-oriented website as his source, Dyson claims that “nearly 40,000 Mexican citizens who lived (mostly in trailers) and worked in New Orleans were displaced” (p. 142). According to U.S. Census estimates, there were only 14,000 people of Latin American origin in New Orleans the year before the storm and few then lived in trailers. Many more (close to 36,000) lived in neighboring Jefferson Parish, not New Orleans, but mostly in apartment complexes or free-standing housing. After the storm, large numbers of people of Mexican and other Latin American origins did move to the metropolitan area to help with reconstruction, but most of them settled in Jefferson Parish, not New Orleans, never reached 40,000, and they were not “displaced” by the storm, but moved there for jobs made available by it. Several paragraphs after the passage on the Mexicans, Dyson refers to “a large contingent of Filipino American shrimpers, part of the oldest Filipino community in North America” (p. 143). There is no “large contingent” of Filipino Americans among today’s Louisiana shrimpers, and that oldest Filipino community (formerly located south of New Orleans) disappeared before World War II and today exists only in the memories of some of its highly intermarried descendants, none of whom, to the best of my knowledge, works on a shrimp boat. Dyson is correct that there were many Vietnamese American shrimpers, but there certainly were not “50,000 Vietnamese fishermen who labored on the Louisiana coast” (p. 143), that number being greater than the total Vietnamese origin population of the state.

Despite mistakes that make it clear Dyson does not write as a scholarly expert, Come Hell or High Water does effectively introduce the problems with policy responses to the hurricane and the interaction between social inequality and disaster experiences. The book is a good place to begin an examination of the social effects of the hurricane and of how these effects have been considered in academic circles.

I have never met Michael Eric Dyson, but I do know many of the other authors of the works in this review essay. Several are friends, as well as
colleagues, and I hope that will still be the case after this appears in print. *The Women of Katrina*, an edited volume, brings together reports, essays, and analytical articles all dealing with the effect of the storm on women.

Because I like to take my scholarship straight (no slogans), I found the first part of the book “In Protest,” the least interesting. I did think, though, that the chapters by Joni Seager, Elaine Enarson, and Loretta Ross made the valid point that women were particularly hard hit by the storm in multiple ways. The second part, “Testimonials,” was my favorite section because its seven chapters gave voice to the actual experiences of women during and after the hurricane. This was valuable, among other reasons, because of the variety of women who spoke in these chapters. Chapter 8, by Ruth Berggren, gives a fascinating, but depressing, account of events inside Charity Hospital during the storm. The personal stories of Houma Chief Brenda Dardar Robicheaux and the Latina worker given the name “Antonia” give nice ethnographic insights into the sheer variety of women who suffered through the storm, and into their problems.

The third section of the book considers how disadvantages related to gender, race, and class before the storm were magnified during and after the storm. This is a good point, and one that I think should be central in all disaster research: catastrophic events generally do not change trends and tendencies so much as intensify them. The most useful chapter in this section was the simple statistical analysis by Beth Willinger and Janna Knight, which compares population compositions, employment, labor force participation, and earnings across race, gender, and socioeconomic categories in 2005, 2006, and 2008. Willinger and Knight did establish that those who were in relatively disadvantaged categories before the storm tended to be even more disadvantaged afterward and that some of those relatively advantaged categories ultimately came out with economic benefits. The authors do not, however, do much in the way of analyzing why and how these developments came about or what, if anything, could and should have been done differently in policy.

Other chapters in this section do make some policy suggestions, but these are often vague, including recommendations that policy makers should listen to women and include women, especially poor women, in disaster planning. I am not sure what such recommendations would mean in practice, although I do think that one could plausibly argue that low-income women could have planned at least as well as local, state, and federal officials did (although probably no better). When the authors do have more definite policy recommendations, these seem to express extraordinary faith in the capacity of Comtean social planners to meet the needs of dependent consumers of public services. Megan Reid, in her article on the experiences of displaced black single mothers, for example, suggests that “[p]lacing someone in ‘housing’ also means placing someone in a school district, a neighborhood, a location in the public transportation system, a job market, and oftentimes a social network,” and that policy makers should therefore ensure single mothers with “easy access to transportation, jobs, social services, and social support networks . . . “ (p. 115). I think if one asks officials in Houston and other cities dealing with the sudden influx of refugees, one will find that
the officials were stretched to the limits of their resources and abilities just covering basic maintenance.

The fourth part of the book looks at how women organized themselves for recovery after the storm. This Tocquevillian angle somewhat offsets the expert disaster management orientation that dominates many of these pages. Judith Rosenbaum’s chapter on the responses of Jewish women to the disaster offers an interesting illustration of how a common sense of identity through religious tradition can motivate cooperation and collaboration. Given my own research interests, I greatly appreciated Ginnie Thi Nguyen’s chapter on the role of Vietnamese women in building coalitions to oppose an environmentally harmful landfill for hurricane debris, located on the edge of the New Orleans Vietnamese community.

At the end, in the section on disaster theory, practice, and research, the authors focus more on the policy questions that I mention above. They recognize that disasters take place within broader social environments, and many of their suggestions aim at dealing with gender issues in those broader environments. In her chapter on “Gendered Disaster Practice and Policy,” Brenda D. Phillips lays out a long list of initiatives (too long to detail here) she would like to see for creating a national gendered disaster policy. Many of these initiatives are worth considering and debating. However, I did wonder if she and the other authors throughout the book not only put too much faith in the problem-solving capacities of committees and councils, but exhibit a dedication to managerial mandates that is fundamentally hostile to messy, nonegalitarian, and eternally compromising pluralistic democracy.

Of all the books discussed here, I thought Displaced: Life in the Katrina Diaspora was the best. It deals with the understudied issue of the scattering of the population of this major city. I remember that as I was setting out on my own period of nomadism, I looked out my car window at all the other vehicles headed away from the coast and thought, “Well, it is one thing to tell more than a million people to get away from the Gulf, but where can everyone go?” The contributors to Displaced try to answer my question through research in New Orleans and 12 receiving locations in seven states around the country. At the beginning of the book (p. 3), there is an informative map of the Katrina diaspora, based on FEMA assistance applications. Although post-hurricane residents were most heavily concentrated in the region around New Orleans, substantial numbers went to places as far-flung as San Francisco, Seattle, Minneapolis, Chicago, Detroit, and Boston.

The editors have organized the volume into three sections: examinations of the receiving communities, discussions of the role of formal and informal networks among evacuees, and a single-chapter case study of the work of the People’s Hurricane Relief Fund, an advocacy and support effort affiliated with radical Black Liberation activists. Lori Peek, one of the editors, begins the section on receiving communities with an examination of “Katrina fatigue” in Denver, a city that initially welcomed evacuees from New Orleans but gradually began wishing the guests would leave. Peek does a good job of documenting this
development, common not only to other cities in the wake of Katrina but to refugee-receiving locations throughout the world following every disaster. She is probably right to some extent in interpreting the fatigue as a mood of compassion giving way to preexisting prejudices and inequalities. But I would argue that over time group conflicts between residents and newcomers also exacerbated racial and socioeconomic tensions and preconceptions. Having worked with international refugee programs, I would say that receiver community fatigue, resentment, and intensification of traditional group stereotypes are nearly universal responses and not products of a uniquely racist, classist American society.

The other chapters in this section on receiving communities deal with the major difficulties of the poor in the diaspora. A chapter on the “basement” of extreme poverty describes how evacuees in Austin moved from being poor and near-poor in New Orleans to even more desperate circumstances as they lost their established living strategies. Jessica Pardee considers the inadequacy of the political economy in South Carolina for supporting the Katrina newcomers. Lee Miller examines the mostly positive reception of the displaced from New Orleans in Huntsville, Texas, and suggests that in future disasters those in receiving locations should question the common assumption that the new arrivals will be quickly returning home. Alice Fothergill and Lori Peek discuss research with displaced children and observe that the displacement has left them psychologically unsettled and in a state of “permanent temporariness.”

Following the section on receiving communities with one on the social networks of evacuees is a logical way of thinking about displacement. The coherent organization was one of the many things I liked about this book. Elizabeth (Beth) Fussell gives a good analysis of the functioning of social networks following a catastrophe, and illustrates how network concepts can be applied to disaster research. Through her interviews with a group of young African American women, she found that their connections enabled them to exchange information and resources just after the storm, but the utility of their network was limited by homophily: they were all similar people in the same situation.

Chain migration is a familiar network concept in immigration research. Jacquelyn Litt’s chapter applies this concept to evacuation dynamics, describing how New Orleans African American women organized a chain to resettle network participants in Baton Rouge. Litt, like Fussell, finds that a homophilic network eventually comes up against the limits of its resources. Beverly J. Mason further examines these ideas of network supports and limitations in resettlement in her chapter on the resettlement of nine older African American women in a trailer park in Baker, Louisiana.

Cynthia M. Garza’s excellent piece on the New Orleans Honduran Garifuna resettled in Houston was one of my favorite chapters. The Garifuna are members of a Caribbean ethnic group of Carib, African, and West African ancestry. I did wonder about Garza’s statement that “New Orleans Garifunas [before the storm] were not settled centrally in one neighborhood, parish, or part of town” (p. 205). Because I have only met members of this group along the Caribbean coast, I do not know anything about their settlement in the New
Orleans area. However, that kind of scattering would be unusual for any set of immigrants. Moreover, I do have some familiarity with the wider Honduran population of New Orleans, which before the storm was indeed geographically concentrated: primarily in the northern part of Kenner on the East Bank of Jefferson Parish and secondarily in clusters on the West Bank of Jefferson Parish. I am surprised that the Garifuna were not in these Honduran ethnic areas, which would have been relevant to the processes of their evacuation. Apart from this uncertain quibble, though, I found Garza’s discussion of the double removal first from Honduras, in many cases as a result of the earlier Hurricane Mitch, and then from New Orleans very insightful. Her account of the role of a religious mission in the Garifuna resettlement in Houston is a particularly useful contribution to the literature on formal organizations in migration networks.

Pamela Jenkins also investigates the function of formal religious organizations in maintaining social connections and enabling the adaptation of evacuees. Looking at the role of religion among African American hurricane refugees in Baton Rouge, she compares the Black Church after Katrina to the Black Church during the civil rights era. The comparison is apposite, since religion in both eras provided identity, mobilization, and assistance.

I was not entirely sure what to make of Rachel Luft’s final chapter on the People’s Hurricane Relief Fund (PHRF). Luft tells us that the senior leadership of the PHRF was “composed of . . . lifelong organizers with political roots in revolutionary, nationalist, and/or communist movements” (p. 236). This made me question whether it is reasonable to describe the programs of a group led by exotic fringe extremists as “charting a path forward” (the section title). I find it difficult to see how either a communist or a black nationalist revolution could offer a plausible or a desirable “path forward” for anyone. Tellingly, the political organizers do not seem to have had much influence on events, and the Fund’s positive contributions appear to have consisted mainly of providing material support. The central theme of the chapter was intriguing, though. This was the tension between the PHRF’s efforts to use the storm for political mobilization and its attempts to provide services to the scattered evacuees. Complicating this tension, the political movement leaders tended to be men and the service providers tended to be women.

Following the storm, evacuation, and diaspora, many residents of New Orleans began returning. Their abilities to do so depended on their resources and, perhaps most critically, on their access to housing in the city. John (Jay) Arena’s Driven From New Orleans considers housing policies in New Orleans following the storm. Here, I should acknowledge another personal connection. The author was a graduate student when I arrived at Tulane, was still a student some years later during my time as Director of Graduate Studies, and continued his studies into my period as departmental chair. Full disclosure requires that I also acknowledge that he and I have occasionally disagreed on professional issues over the years.

Driven From New Orleans essentially argues that private developers have long wanted to take over public housing sites in New Orleans because these were valuable and potentially profitable pieces of property. Local government has
collaborated with these mainly white developers and the rise to office of African American officials simply provided black intermediaries for the former. Social scientists have served the development agenda through the “concentration of poverty” argument. Nonprofit activist organizations, putatively devoted to serving the poor, were co-opted by rewards from government and business. Similarly, official tenant leaders within the housing developments sold out to the development/government/nonprofit collaboration to maintain their funding and benefits. Hurricane Katrina gave the neoliberal conspiracy the needed excuse to demolish housing development, seize the valuable properties, and move residents to mixed-income housing, which had insufficient places for all. The author and his allies engaged in protests and other forms of struggle in their valiant efforts to protect the working class from the depredations of the bourgeoisie. The true working-class heroes were unsuccessful, but the larger struggle continues.

This book has several strengths. Arena is a longtime community activist. He was deeply involved in the protest movement against the transformation of public housing in New Orleans and this gives a richness of detail to his work. His book gives a well-informed, if somewhat tendentious, history of public housing in New Orleans. He understands that we can only interpret post-Katrina events as consequences of the long pre-Katrina history of the city. I found the latter half of the book in which he describes his efforts and those of other activists to fight to maintain public housing especially informative. Read as an advocate’s insider view of a sociopolitical campaign, the book gives valuable insight into one side of a major controversy on how New Orleans should be rebuilt.

Despite these strengths, though, the book is undoubtedly the most questionable of those discussed here. Part of the problem is that the paint-by-the-numbers theoretical portrait of Marxist class struggle does not fit very well. Describing people who are mostly outside the workforce as a “working class” is patently absurd. Whatever the arguments for or against public housing may be, it is clearly not a means of production but a government-provided consumer good.

Chief among the weaknesses, though, is a “which side are you on” orientation that casts every action either as heroic resistance to oppression or as service to regressive and racist capitalists. Taking the story of public housing in New Orleans as a stark ideological morality play renders the author unable to consider the complex and often contradictory motivations of political leaders, real estate developers, nonprofit agencies, New Orleans residents and homeowners, and public housing tenants. This orientation apparently lies behind his unquestioning assumption that those living in publicly subsidized residences have an absolute right to live forever on property they do not own and that housing authorities may never decide to make any other use of that property. Under rental laws in most locations, including Louisiana, although a renter may challenge whether a lease is terminated in a manner consistent with a contractual agreement, the landlord, whether private or public, always has the ultimate right to decide how a piece of land or building will be employed. Even more seriously, the need to see and present everything from the perspective of a class struggle
between a virtuous proletariat and a sinister bourgeoisie has led him to deny the reality that New Orleans was a poverty-stricken, crime-ridden disaster before the storm and that its situation was getting worse.

Arena acknowledges that his views are at odds with the “concentration of poverty” perspective of mainstream sociology shared, in differing ways and with different emphases, by such influential scholars as William Julius Wilson and Douglas S. Massey. This in itself is not necessarily a problem. Widely held analytical approaches to social issues should be open to criticism and debate from those on the intellectual margins. I think, though, that there is a more fundamental difficulty with Arena’s theoretical orientation. It is contrary to basic common sense. To attack all efforts at improving property values in a deteriorating city as “gentrification,” to reject the pursuit of every private economic interest as evil “neoliberal” plotting, and to maintain that the foundation of policy planning should consist of maintaining and expanding housing and other services to a chronically poor population living mostly outside the labor force is not just breathtakingly unrealistic. It is a prescription for civic suicide.

Any clear-headed discussion of public housing in New Orleans should begin by recognizing what a serious problem it has been for its residents and for the city as a whole. In the beginning of the 1980s, just before going overseas, I worked for a time on a research project for the New Orleans Historic Collection, recording epitaphs on tombstones in historic cemeteries. When we worked in the old St. Louis cemetery, next to a major housing project, we had to have an armed guard with us at all times because residents of the project were regularly assaulting and robbing anyone unprotected, including and especially the tourists on whom the city depends for much of its livelihood. In an article on March 31, 1989, the Times-Picayune noted that “the city’s deteriorated and crime-ridden public housing has been under attack since the 1970s. Its 10 projects and scattered-site housing, home to about a tenth of the city’s population, have been classified by HUD as ‘troubled’ for more than nine years” (Feeney 1989:B3). This was not an isolated observation, but one made over and over again throughout the years. Picking at random from the reporting, on July 6, 1990, then police superintendent Warren Woodfork decried the city’s exploding murder rate and observed that 32% of the murders had occurred in public housing projects, which were home to only 10% of the population (Philbin 1990). On September 25, 2003, to move closer to the hurricane, a murder task force of the New Orleans Police Department identified a swathe of territory that included the St. Bernard, Iberville, and Lafitte public housing complexes as the most violent part of the city (Philbin 2003). One can reasonably debate whether razing the housing complexes was the best policy for dealing with this deplorable situation (the murder rate did not go down after developments were closed). But to fail to acknowledge that policy makers were struggling with a huge problem at the core of the city’s existence is not simply to take a different perspective from that of mainstream sociology on the effects of concentrated poverty. It is delusional.
As I read through these efforts to understand the storm, the displacement, and the gradual and partial returns, I find that they agree on a fundamental underlying idea. The disaster revealed and intensified existing inequalities. This is true, and these texts do valuable work in exploring the different forms and implications of these inequalities. But the storm also cast into high relief other aspects of modern urban life. One of these aspects is the city as an economic entity. No city can provide services to the needy or to anyone else unless it has a working economy. It is a basic and unavoidable fact of life that a working economy requires investment and business activities. The goal of sustaining the least advantaged and that of attracting productive commerce are often what Isaiah Berlin described as “incommensurate goods.” New Orleans, like many other cities, was finding it difficult to balance these conflicting ends before the storm. Since economic revitalization was essential to rebuilding the city and the needs of the poor both became much greater following the hurricane, the balance became all the more problematic and the conflicting goals drove many of the poststorm policy debates.

Another, related, aspect of urban life is that cities consist of multiple actors pursuing multiple and frequently contradictory interests. Some actors, of course, have more power to realize their interests than others do, but even those who hold relative power do not constitute monolithic blocs. The victimology approach to social analysis oversimplifies the pluralistic, shifting nature of civic life and, insofar as it considers comparatively influential interest groups at all, it substitutes a cartoonish portrayal of these groups for careful and dispassionate analysis of motivations and pressures. With regard to New Orleans, an interest group analysis would look, for example, at how public, corporate, and governmental forces interacted historically to push real estate development into low-lying, flood-prone areas, such as New Orleans East. It would probably need to include the desires of lower-middle and middle-income mostly African American citizens to get away from the poor. Following the hurricane, this type of analysis would look at how these same forces shaped the debate over where to rebuild, with results that did not completely satisfy anyone.

A third major aspect concerns the functioning of local government, which is affected by economic resources and interest-group pressures, but also by the broader civic order. A long tradition of political theory holds that the civic order underlying effective liberal democracy derives from a large and engaged middle class. From this point of view, the late-twentieth-century exodus of much of the middle class from New Orleans and other cities, leaving behind a growing number of poor and a small number of rich, hollowed out the urban civic order. I would argue that this was one of the most important reasons that New Orleans government was so remarkably inefficient on the eve of the hurricane. Whether one agrees with this argument or not, the failure of the city to provide means of evacuating its least self-reliant citizens in 2005 should probably not have surprised anyone who had previously tried to do anything through City Hall. Local officials did develop better hurricane emergency transportation plans after the storm, although these have fortunately not yet been fully tested. I am not sure
how well we can expect governments to cope with sudden and unusual circumstances. Perfect competence is beyond any human institution and even adequate competence may be beyond many. Social scientists can try to examine the social conditions that make elected administrations more or less effective, though, and they can look at disasters as stress tests of effectiveness.

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Before September 11 and Beyond September 12: Space, Social Relations, and Recovery in Battery Park City

Karen Albright


In the years since September 11, 2001, volumes have been written about the attacks’ impact on American culture and policy. But how does recovery actually happen within a community, and what are its consequences? These are among the questions at the heart of Gregory Smithsimon’s September 12: Community and Neighborhood Recovery at Ground Zero, which examines the aftermath of the attacks in Battery Park City, a New York City neighborhood adjacent to the World Trade Center site. Smithsimon’s intent is not to generalize the recovery process; he does not argue that what happened in Battery Park City is representative of even the rest of the city, let alone the rest of the country. To the contrary, he argues that Battery Park City’s post-9/11 experience differed significantly from that of other areas precisely because of its proximal geographic location—as well as, importantly, its physical isolation from the rest of New York City and its considerable socioeconomic advantages. Cut off from the rest of the city by West Street, Battery Park

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