NEW ORLEANS AND THE DIALECTICS OF POST-KATRINA RECONSTRUCTION

A. Kathryn Stout

For a majority of Americans, the events of September 11, 2001 represented the abrupt beginning of a whole new era marked by deepening military involvement, a heightened security state and a prolonged economic dislocation. For those of us living in the New Orleans area, a traumatic second wave came with the arrival of Hurricane Katrina in August 2005. The disaster uprooted every aspect of our lives and so we were especially ill-equipped to deal with the “relief efforts” that would soon reach proportions of another disaster in its own right.

Even before the waters had completely receded, the official response to the catastrophe was being viewed as a mostly bungled affair. Riddled with faulty planning and a clear lack of preparedness by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the situation unfolded in a fury of bureaucratic ineptitude and a deeply flawed inter-agency coordination of emergency responses. The whole process would eventually blend into a perverse medley of government indifference and greedy business opportunism.

Many critical theorists have analyzed the far-reaching implications of the events of 9/11, showing how it served in so many ways to justify a reordering of domestic and international politics. In this chapter, I assert that something very similar happened after Katrina attacked the Gulf Coast region. Though more localized in its scope, it was all pervasive in its impact over the surrounding area. Critical sociology has only recently begun to turn its attention to the skewed, militaristic, and elite interests-driven response to the Katrina recovery and subsequent rebuilding process. Scott and Katz-Fishman (2007: 2) discuss the “creative chaos” harnessed when the capitalist establishment allows a preventable disaster to unfold in order to pave the way for a round of unscrupulous profiteering. Naomi Klein (2007) refers to “disaster capitalism” as the modality of utilizing either natural or humanly created disasters to accelerate the violent imposition of neoliberal capitalism in stubborn, more resistant areas of the world where cultural obstacles confront capitalist expansion. This is indeed the case
in New Orleans where “deep South” culture has long defied a smooth shift to “McDonaldized” development.

As in other areas, organized resistance to neoliberal impositions in New Orleans suggests a dialectic that inevitably places new demands on the system as it plays out over time. To fully capture this historical process, critical sociologists must not only grasp the social class character of “disasters” and their political utilization by the state, but also interpret the influence that emergent social movement activity may exert from time to time in challenging the profit-driven logic of capitalist expansion. In this chapter, I present some theoretical suggestions about how these issues can be placed under analysis in view of the contradictory dynamics that are unfolding in post-Katrina New Orleans.

**Understanding Capitalist State and Social Movement Responses to Natural Disasters**

Natural disasters can provide textbook examples of how the cumulative structures of social injustice, particularly in social service delivery, can conspire to leave people unprotected, unassisted and unaccounted for (Stout and Dello Buono, 2008). This well-known sociological fact has long been apparent in the Third World where international relief agencies work with “vulnerability maps” to warn of impending disasters in regions of identifiable risks (Disaster Resource Network 2007). Natural scientists generally seek to predict how the accumulating effects of long term trends and/or a sudden wave of predictable adverse conditions can trigger a catastrophic loss of life and large scale impact upon human populations. From Sumatra to Guatemala, the abrupt and devastating forces of nature associated with tsunamis, hurricanes, volcanic eruptions, and others have produced dramatic dislocations of entire communities that invariably affect the poorest social sectors in a disproportionate manner.

A similar pattern has prevailed in the more developed countries and has been especially pronounced in the “underdeveloped” regions within them. The resulting social consequences of these natural disasters have been well-documented by memorable case studies that seek to detail the “chain reaction” of social devastation that accompanies the physical damage caused by “natural” disasters. In the widely read study *Everything in Its Path: Destruction of Community in the Buffalo*