Domesticating Katrina

Two and a half years on from the storm that captured world attention, the authorities in New Orleans are quietly doing away with the city’s remaining stock of affordable housing – in moves characterized by the UN as violations of human rights. The demolition of public housing in New Orleans will prevent large numbers of very poor and mostly black residents from ever returning home. As homelessness soars, house prices double, and public transportation and public health facilities remain closed, the infrastructure which has supported the existence of low-income residents in the city for decades is being replaced by a set-up designed to attract wealthier, and some say whiter, residents.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the UN’s intervention in February 2008 went largely unnoticed by the global media. Local news outlets effectively dressed up the incident as the pronouncement of a clunky international body remote from and ignorant about the situation on the ground in New Orleans. This treatment fits the trend of viewing Katrina and its aftermath as a predominantly local affair – as at the most a domestic issue of national concern, with few global implications to speak of. While the statement issued by UN human rights officials tells a different story, it is the grassroots organizing that most powerfully captures the international coordinates of the unfolding post-Katrina disaster.

Increasingly, a burgeoning network of community-based organizations in New Orleans are calling for the ‘right of return’, a principle of international law enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. What’s striking about this movement is their mobilization of a rhetoric more readily associated with the conflict in the Middle East and Palestinian self-determination than the plight of US blacks and the underprivileged in the American South. Such a rhetoric shows how far many New Orleanians have come – from initially protesting against the use of the term ‘refugee’ to refer to Katrina evacuees, to deploying a principle usually cited by those for whom citizenship has meant anything but protection.

I suggest that this path can be tracked by considering the way in which Katrina’s significance has been consistently played down in terms of its international implications. This is particularly clear when it is compared to other major events that have highlighted America’s place in the world in the first decade of the 21st century. Katrina did not attract the same levels of public sympathy as did 9/11, and it largely failed to galvanize the American left, as did Iraq. Part of this failure to attract attention, I suggest, derives from a tendency to ‘contain’ the significance of the Katrina narrative, not just inside the borders of the United States but within the confines of a very specific region. This tendency seems to serve the interests of those currently engaged in reconstituting New Orleans.

Before turning to the current situation on the ground, it’s important to understand the way in which Katrina was framed when it did gain widespread media coverage in the storm’s immediate aftermath.

Katrina, 9/11, Iraq
In the midst of the federal incompetence that characterized the initial response to the hurricane in September 2005, 9/11 served as an obvious example against which to
measure the relief effort. This comparison belies huge differences: Ground Zero covered just 16 acres of New York City, whereas 80% of New Orleans was under water following the levee breaches. 9/11 raised the spectre of global terrorism whereas Katrina could be put down to a particularly gruelling episode in the yearly hurricane season. These differences notwithstanding, it is hard not to notice that those who suffered as a consequence of 9/11 were presented to the world as innocent victims, while those affected by Katrina emerged in the media as strangely culpable.

The comparison with 9/11 is instructive not because it yields any obvious similarities with Katrina, but because the two events, and most importantly the people at the centre of these events, have been treated so fundamentally differently. Instrumental to this difference, I suggest, is the way in which the one event has been accorded global significance where the other has not.

Soon after the storm it was acknowledged that what started out as a natural disaster was fast evolving into a social one. It was a social disaster that was from the beginning coded in distinctly regional and national terms: as part of America’s – and particularly the South’s – unfolding story of poverty and racism, largely thought outside the contexts of the global legacies of slavery, colonialism, and the current realities of free market capitalism and climate change. Katrina memorably exposed a source of national shame, but one thought in the terms of a specifically ‘American dilemma’. Yet while Katrina and its aftermath led to the recycling of clichés on US race relations, beneath the rhetoric there ran a recurring sense that the tragedy made only an uncertain impact on the national, let alone international, radar.

Where 9/11 was an incident of global proportions with America at its centre, Katrina’s location was much less clear. Early on recognized as a potent exposé of the state of America’s decaying inner cities, it was not perceived as an ‘American event’ in the way that 9/11 was. In fact much of the early pronouncements on the storm portray it as a regional event peculiarly divorced from the nation, and its ‘international’ resonance seemed to go no deeper than vague parallels to a nebulous conception of the ‘Third World’. This ambiguity marks President Bush’s comments made on 2 September 2005 following his aerial tour of New Orleans – which, as many noted, did not involve him setting foot on Louisiana soil or confronting a single human being affected by the storm. He remarked ‘I’ve just completed a tour of some devastated country’; he also claimed to ‘know the people of this part of the world are suffering…’ People ‘from this part of the world’, Bush insisted, would not be forgotten. The president’s sense of disconnect from the region is clear.

Precisely who lay at the centre of this tragedy was similarly the source of some perplexity. This manifested itself in the widespread media labelling of Katrina evacuees ‘refugees’. Understandably, it was the African American community that reacted most strongly against this label – interpreted as yet another attempt to deny the citizen status of US blacks. By labelling the predominantly black Katrina evacuees ‘refugees’, the media thus enables a racist discourse that has long served the US government in its denial of responsibility towards the nation’s black population. The fact that the victims of 9/11 received direct financial compensation, whereas Katrina victims to date have not, lends credence to the view that the storm victims were somehow less ‘American’ in the eyes of the US establishment.
By casting both the hurricane disaster zone and its victims into an uncertain location, this rhetoric works curiously to deprive understandings of Katrina within wider terms of reference – whether national or international. Comparable only to a largely mythical notion of ‘Third World’ disaster, the storm’s significance is markedly localized. By characterizing Katrina and its victims as somehow ‘foreign’ or ‘placeless’, sectors of the media, the president, and all who engaged in this rhetoric colluded in staging the hurricane as an isolated spectacle largely beyond the realms of identification.

In role as spokesperson for the African American community, on 3 September 2005 Al Sharpton called on the media to stop referring to evacuees as ‘refugees’. He claimed that refugees are ‘some others from somewhere lost, needing charity’. Seeking instead to define the place of Katrina evacuees in American national life, Sharpton insists on their citizenship and their subsequent rights to protection; sarcastically he exclaims: ‘activate the national guard, activate the military. Oh I forgot, they were in Iraq making democracy free for those abroad, while those at home had nothing’.

Certainly the fact that federal forces took five days to reach storm-struck Louisiana points to clear evidence of federal incompetence – like their commander in chief, these forces seemed to have problems locating New Orleans on a map. But it also raises questions about the fact that large numbers of troops were stationed in Iraq. By refuting the de-nationalizing implications of ‘refugee’ status, and by emphasizing national over international imperatives, Sharpton’s comments attempt to reinsert Katrina evacuees back into the identifiable and privileged terrains of American citizenship and identity. In so doing he typifies a trend of African American resistance to the racist discourses unleashed by the storm.

But by emphasizing American benevolence abroad as compared with the neglect of a vulnerable home front, Sharpton reveals the conservative thrust of his own critique – which condemns the war but upholds the government line on it. His message amounts to not much more than ‘charity should begin at home’, and so lays claim to a higher form of patriotism. He thus side-steps a more thorough-going critique of US power in favour of assuming an exceptionalist rhetoric – and in so doing misses the opportunity of interpreting the fallout from Katrina in wider global terms.

An important consequence of the widespread condemnation of the federal mishandling of Katrina by Sharpton and others was that it decisively turned the tide of popular opinion in the US against the Iraq war. Yet while the debate about the occupation of Iraq that resulted has been fierce and ongoing, the aftermath of Katrina has largely dropped out of national conversations. Katrina thus gains its significance here as catalyst for talking about something else.

For some reason Katrina as an event has not lodged itself in the national imaginary as has 9/11 and Iraq – events that centralize America’s place in the world, for better or worse. And it seems that this inability to think the impact of Katrina very far beyond the immediate geography of the region is much to the benefit of powerful forces that are currently seeking to re-shape New Orleans. The fact that much grassroots activism that is challenging current developments in the city is now sounding the rhetoric of human rights and international law testifies to this fact, and offers an alternative line
of resistance to the one represented by Al Sharpton. While Sharpton and others have appealed to an authorizing discourse in many ways far more powerful in the US than that of international human rights – American citizenship – its historical failure to deliver on its promises, particularly for US blacks, makes the opposite tactic of national shaming in the global arena all the more crucial.

**Reclaiming New Orleans: between the local and the global**

Since the storm New Orleans has seen the emergence of a dynamic network of grassroots activism fast learning the language of community advocacy and self-determination. All over the city small protests are currently being staged in key areas: the Lower Ninth Ward, Village de L’Est, and outside the various housing projects that remain standing. The banners held by protestors don’t read so differently from the large billboards plastered all over the city challenging onlookers to ‘Rebuild a better New Orleans’. ‘Reclaim our neighbourhoods’ is the resounding message from much grassroots campaigning, and the fact that developers are chiming in with this kind of rhetoric is part of the problem.

According to government authorities and foundations in the business of awarding and funding building contracts in New Orleans, those currently protesting the demolition of public housing projects come from outside of the state and therefore do not fully understand the dynamics of the region. It is true that since Katrina, the city has been flooded with mostly left-wing or faith-based activists and organizers eager to help with relief efforts. Yet the Loyola Law Clinic, which has been working with displaced residents challenging the demolitions, claim that the idea that these ‘outsiders’ make up the bulk of protestors is manifestly not the case, as do Common Ground Collective, a community-based organization that sprung from the Lower Ninth and which has been protesting against demolitions all over the city.

They claim that the implication that the developers are somehow working in the interests of local people – interests that ‘outsiders’ are not able to understand – is a clever rhetorical trick designed to mask the fact that the developers who stand to profit from these demolitions are themselves from outside of the state. These developers will channel revenues out of Louisiana in line with traditions that go back decades and which have led some to describe the state as a ‘colony of the federal government’, ‘a place to extract resources’.

Where developers are cashing in on the language of local and regional renewal, those challenging their actions are fighting an intensely local campaign with decidedly global coordinates. And it’s precisely this combination of the local and the global that gives this campaign its radical edge – and blows the lid off designs to ‘contain’ the story by presenting the current battle as a polite conversation between various stakeholders in the region.

Many residents were radicalized by an entity set up by Mayor Ray Nagin in the months following the storm, one that similarly exploited the slippery nature of language in order to mask its true programme. The euphemistically named ‘Bring New Orleans Back Commission’ recommended that flood-prone areas like the largely black Lower Ninth Ward and Village de L’Est – known by locals as ‘Versaille’, an area which houses the densest population of Vietnamese people outside of Vietnam – should be converted into ‘green spaces’. Quite apart from bringing New Orleans
‘back’, such plans would have insured against the return of large numbers of the city’s former residents – residents who happen to also fall within economic, racial and national groupings consistently marginalized in the United States.

As Mai Dang, a community organizer working in Village de L’Est, explains, ‘whatever planning process the “Bring New Orleans Back Commission” had, it was definitely behind closed doors, and went ahead and met when residents were evacuated.’ It is difficult not to read hard-headed opportunism, if not malicious intent, in the commission’s timing. What the commission didn’t bank on was the mobilization of the city’s scattered residents – evacuated, following the storm, to far-flung places all over the United States. The commission’s plan was considerably embarrassed by the return of large numbers of residents who pitched tents on their former homes and who presented human barriers to the bulldozers poised to tear down their neighbourhoods.

Ashley Shelton of the Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation says that, ‘it was only the mobilization and the organizing of people of the community that said absolutely not, you will not push me from my home, you will not turn my community into green space. It was this that really pushed a completely different conversation.’

The quality of this conversation though is still considerably undermined by the authorities’ wilful blindness when it comes to the very existence of New Orleans residents. For example, the Mary Queen of Viet Nam Church situated in Village de L’Est, had to encourage its congregation to return to damaged and often devastated homes situated in an area still without water and electricity. Supplies were only restored once the neighbourhood organized a petition to ‘prove’ to the authorities that a sufficient number of residents had returned. Lying at the furthest point of New Orleans East, Village de L’Est is fairly remote from the rest of the city and it seems that the authorities felt that they could lop it off with very little resistance.

The sense amongst the Vietnamese-American community – borne of the trauma of displacement experienced by Vietnam’s Catholic populations following the fall of Saigon – is that they were expected to passively accept the destruction of their hard-won home. On the contrary though, 90% of the Vietnamese-descended community have now reclaimed their homes – a return rate higher than that of any other group in the city. The rate of return to the Lower Ninth is slower – with lower average incomes, these communities have less means to help themselves. It is those who resided in the city’s public housing projects, however, who have proved the most vulnerable.

In spite of the UN’s call for a halt on the demolition of public housing in New Orleans, the destruction continues. The US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO) have come up with some not unconvincing rationales: they say they wish to de-concentrate poverty in areas that were previously hotbeds for crime and drug abuse. They claim that the units are unfit for habitation: not only unsafe due to storm damage but also too cramped to be family-friendly and not green enough to satisfy environmentally conscious planners.
Such arguments need to be measured against the fact that currently the authorities have promised the replacement of only a third of the units available for low-income renters. In this light the authorities’ apparent ‘concern’ – about poverty, about safety, about the environment – is a cynical ploy aimed at defusing the arguments of those that challenge them. This is all an insidious business when you consider the fact that New Orleans, like the rest of the US only on an exaggerated scale, faces an acute housing crisis that is only going to get worse.

At the moment then, New Orleans offers the incongruous spectacles of a burgeoning industry of ‘Katrina tourism’ on the one hand and an increasingly noisy human rights movement on the other. Where Katrina tourism offers the illusion of closure – the hurricane has been neatly packaged in exhibitions and coffee table-type books on offer in the French Quarter – the growing activism refuses this. And again, those cashing in on the storm are insistently focused on local and regional affairs – whether you go and see the Imax feature *Hurricane on the Bayou* or board a Katrina bus, the controversies raised predominantly focus on restoration of the Louisiana Wetlands. This is of course a crucial project – Louisiana’s wetlands, which provide a natural barrier to hurricanes, is the fastest disappearing landmass on earth. Yet while the broader context of climate change does get a mention, it is peculiarly divorced from any discussion of the reduction of carbon emissions, global or otherwise. So while environmentalism sits at the heart of much Katrina tourism, the implication is that a bunch of local planters might solve the problem. By evading the inherently global dilemma of climate change, the environmental leanings of Katrina tourism is almost entirely severed from imperatives of environmental justice, as well as related issues of racial injustice. As Katrina vividly illustrated, environmental catastrophes tend to hit the poorest hardest, and the world over – not just in the United States – this usually means communities of colour.

New Orleans is a multiethnic city, as the existence of the Vietnamese-American community and the growing Hispanic population – to name just two groups amongst many – shows. But like most American cities it is segregated along a stark racial divide which most clearly highlights the black/white binary. Prior to Katrina the black population made up in excess of 67% of the city’s population. Where the white population is down by 37% on pre-Katrina levels according to current figures, the black population is down by as much as 57%. It is hardly surprising then that many see a deliberate racial design in redevelopment policies that are actively discouraging the return of the city’s poorer – and predominantly black – residents.

Speaking in a press conference soon after the storm, Alphonso Jackson, US Secretary of Housing and Urban Development (himself a black man) said ‘Let’s face it – the rebuilt New Orleans is not going to be a majority black city.’ Jackson was forced to resign in April 2008 amidst allegations of corruption – charges specifically linked to the awarding of housing contracts in New Orleans. Many believe that before his resignation Jackson was able to go some way towards fulfilling his prediction that the rebuilt New Orleans would be a whiter city. Some are claiming that redevelopment policies amount to ethnic cleansing.

This is the language used by Brother Willie Muhammad of the Nation of Islam in New Orleans, who sees the current gentrification of the city as an acceleration of policies in place before Katrina – policies that were always more than a little racially
motivated. Willie Muhammad advises people to ‘go and compare the response of this government to disasters that impact whites to that of people of color and see what you find. The issues that impact Blacks are not high on the lists of priorities of this government.’ When Louis Farrakhan accused the authorities of deliberately manufacturing the levee breaches, his charges were widely dismissed. Yet as plans to grass over historically black neighbourhoods became public, and rumours began to circulate that local elections were purposely being held at a moment when the city was vacated of its majority black population, conspiracy theories became increasingly credible in some quarters.

The Nation of Islam, which teaches that US blacks will never gain equal status in an inherently racist country, has long encouraged America’s black population to think about their oppression in wider global terms. Currently in New Orleans not just blacks, but people of all ethnicities, are doing just this by engaging the rhetoric of self-determination and calling for the ‘right of return’. In so doing they lay human rights abuses on the part of the US government alongside those committed by national governments all over the world. Unable to get proper recognition as US citizens, these people are mining the resources of an alternative vocabulary in a way that projects their plight onto a world stage. This is inconvenient for those who would like their work to progress quietly, beneath the radar of public awareness and concern. Human rights rhetoric distinguishes the voices of protesters from those muscling in not only on the physical geography of New Orleans itself, but also on the language of regional identity and communal revival.

The politics of recognition
Non-recognition of the identity of those that suffer abuses is one of the most powerful ways of silencing their protest. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict – where both sides have routinely denied the identity and thus the existence of the other – is a prime illustration of this fact. The situation in New Orleans bears very little resemblance to this one. The rhetoric is similar simply because New Orleans residents, in order to lay claim to their homes, have also had to protest against their invisibility in the eyes of the establishment.

It is important to understand the historical and geographical specificities of what is going on at the moment in New Orleans. Referring to the notoriously corrupt practices of Louisiana state politics, Linetta Gilbert of the Ford Foundation claims that Louisiana is ‘basically run on the basis of an oligarchy’. She explains, ‘the regions where the storm hit the hardest were former plantation societies that had not changed at all that much.’ Audrey Stewart of the Loyola Law Clinic agrees – ‘historically we are a city that is not very far out of slavery.’ Regional contexts are crucial for understanding the post-Katrina rebuilding process, but so too is the way in which such contexts intersect with transnational forces like the legacy of race-based slavery and the international flows of capital. To ignore such contexts is to participate in the view of the US as exceptional.

As Linetta Gilbert suggests, Louisiana could benefit from ‘having a conversation with Mr Mandela, or Bishop Tutu’. In other words Americans, still wrestling with the inequities of a post-slavery society, might learn something from a country in the early and difficult stages of the transition from a race-based regime to a multicultural democracy.
Once a slave port, New Orleans is currently being flooded with largely undocumented Hispanic workers who are providing cheap, exploitable sources of labour in the rebuilding process. Highly vulnerable and traumatized families remain marooned outside the city in FEMA trailer parks, soon to be evicted by the federal government. The Vietnamese-American community in New Orleans East draw historical parallels between their displacement after the storm and their earlier experience of refugee camps. A veritable ‘Katrina diaspora’ of internally displaced persons is scattered across the United States. It is often easy to forget that the wealthiest nation on the planet is home to levels of poverty, suffering and oppression familiar to some of the poorest regions in the world.

Naomi Klein’s *Shock Doctrine* illustrates this point – she shows that an exploitative ‘disaster capitalism’ is as much in evidence in New Orleans as it was in South East Asia following the tsunami. But contrary to Klein’s thesis, what’s happening in New Orleans is not reducible to economics alone. The politics of identity and recognition are playing a powerful part in both constructing and deconstructing the current constellations of power in New Orleans. Federal, state and local government have colluded with large foundations and wealthy developers to contain the story of the hurricane’s aftermath. This has not taken the form of an organized conspiracy but rather is an emerging trend that works to domesticate Katrina and thus limit the scope and importance of the politics surrounding the storm and its aftermath.

Most who are profiting from the rebuilding process readily admit that the storm has thrown up some uncomfortable issues surrounding race relations in America. But the grassroots campaigning that has sought to project these issues onto a global canvass tends to be dismissed out of hand by the authorities. This very fact indicates that there is something rather threatening about comparing the management – or rather mismanagement – of Katrina to the Asian tsunami, or the cyclone that only days ago devastated Burma and which has led to the deaths of tens of thousands of people. The US may be the richest country in the world, but in the aftermath of Katrina it became the recipient of large amounts of foreign aid. Let us hope that the military leaders in Burma will belatedly accept the outside help that they shunned following the 2004 tsunami. In a warming world that is increasingly likely to see catastrophes of this kind, disaster response will be funded by international monies and need to be judged by international standards. Those who have questioned the value of human rights discourses in recent years need only look to post-disaster situations to see the persistent relevance of a much abused language.

The rhetoric of the ‘right of return’ currently being sounded in New Orleans resists the domestication of Katrina and draws attention to the storm’s self-proclaimed ‘refugees’. These ‘refugees’ may have been abandoned by their own government, but their claim to self-determination emerges in precisely the opposite light to that projected by Al Sharpton’s description of refugees as ‘some others from somewhere lost, needing charity’. 
