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Privatization, Marketization, and Neoliberalism—The Political Dynamics of Post-Katrina New Orleans

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Conclusion: Bringing the State Back In (Again)

It is worth returning to the rhetorical question at the start of this essay. Obviously, the early-twenty-first-century United States is just the sort of society that would allow one of its major cities to drown in full view, then content itself with deeply inadequate recovery measures.

In contrast, a morally decent society would have acted swiftly to restore the city as a viable entity, made good the losses of all its residents, and acted aggressively to take preventive measures against future disasters.

A society with serious aspirations to words like *democracy* and *justice* would further have acted in a way that treated all New Orleans residents as subjects and the proper co-authors of their own fates rather than as objects for social experimentation, would have acted to mend the gaping inequalities that Katrina exposed, and would have undertaken reconstruction with a due appreciation for the importance of place and neighborhood in individuals' lives and in the life of a healthy democracy.

Meeting either the minimal or the more ambitious goal would require competent state actors capable of effective, large-scale action, actors who recognize the necessity of putting public resources and democratic processes at the center of the recovery effort. But as Jane Mansbridge points out in her recent essay "On the Importance of Getting Things Done" (*PS: Political Science and Politics* 45 [no. 1, 2012]: 1–8), the importance of effective and legitimate state action has too often been neglected in contemporary democratic theory. The difference between political science and philosophy is that the former considers not only moral ends but also the instrumental means required to achieve those ends. The neoliberal assault on the state, as so vividly and tragically illustrated by Katrina, has served to weaken and, in some cases, disarm the primary institutional vehicle for realizing social justice in a modern, complex society.

New Orleans Exceptionalism in *The Neoliberal Deluge* and *Treme*

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New Orleans is a place of many names and slogans. Most trade off the city's reputation for pleasure and festivity ("The City That Care Forgot"; "The Big Easy"; "The Great Southern Babylon") and seemingly all hint at the distinctiveness of local culture ("Only in New Orleans"; "Naturally N'Awlins"), including those manufactured by a tourism industry whose very existence depends upon the uniqueness of the city's offerings ("We're Jazzed You're Here!"; "You're Different Here!"). From the fictionalized accounts of Tennessee Williams's *Streetcar Named Desire* or Disney's *The Princess and The Frog*, to everyday conversations with my colleagues at Tulane University or the local musicians I study, there is something resembling a consensus that New Orleans is an exceptional place.

The claims for New Orleans exceptionalism have recently been bolstered by the television series *Treme*, which was created by David Simon and Eric Overmeyer in 2010 as a follow-up to their acclaimed series *The Wire*. The show has excelled at portraying, with startling intimacy, the lives of workaday musicians participating in the city's most distinctive musical traditions: jazz funerals, second line parades, Mardi Gras parades, Mardi Gras Indian gatherings, school marching bands, and African American styles of popular music (blues, jazz, R&B, soul, funk, hip-hop) that have retained a strong presence in venues for live performance, especially clubs and festivals. The show can be interpreted as an extended homage to the idiosyncratic nature of local culture, and has been widely praised and occasionally criticized for its immersive "insider's" view of what, for many, is uncommonly exotic and mysteriously elusive.

As I write, the members of the American Political Science Association attending the 2012 conference are no doubt anticipating their own participation in the culture of festivity that distinguishes New Orleans, including music and, one might presume, a few other entertainments. On their minds will also be the specter of Hurricane Katrina, which has managed to redouble the city's reputation as an exceptional place. In *Treme*, for example, Katrina vies with culture as the protagonist and ultimately conjoins with culture to create a kind of Southern Babylon-meets-Atlantis übersite of exceptionality. In its presentation of Katrina as an unprecedented catastrophe in an extraordinary place, *Treme* reinforces the notion that New Orleans and the Katrina disaster somehow stand apart from America.

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Meanwhile, several political scientists and their colleagues in related disciplines have put forth a compelling counterargument to visitors, residents, researchers, and anyone else who has uncritically accepted New Orleans as *sui generis*. “[Focusing] on cultural exceptionalism detracts attention from how New Orleans conforms to broader patterns in American urban development,” writes Cedric Johnson in the introduction to his edited volume, *The Neoliberal Deluge* (p. xxxviii):

Although its unique history and culture serve as its most precious form of capital, New Orleans is not exceptional. In fact, the problems faced by its residents and civic leaders before and after Katrina are those that confront most American cities albeit in more dramatic form . . . population loss, joblessness, poverty, dead commercial corridors, an eroding municipal tax base, the prioritization of downtown tourist and investor interests over neighborhoods, failing schools, and the specter of real and imagined crime.

In the case studies that follow, New Orleans appears not as an oddity at the periphery of the nation-state but as a prime laboratory for centralized experimentation. There is a long precedent here—including national debates over the right to accession territory (the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 enabled access to the port of New Orleans and passage on the Mississippi River); the constitutionality of segregation (post-Reconstruction New Orleans was the testing ground for the landmark 1896 Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson*); and the challenge of enforcing integration (*Brown v. Board of Education* was implemented first in New Orleans, when federal marshals escorted Ruby Bridges through a white mob on the steps of the William Frantz school in the Upper Ninth Ward neighborhood)—and the book extends this underrecognized legacy to the present, as the rupture that was Katrina has allowed neoliberal doctrine to be actualized in a series of “reforms” in public housing, education, health care, and more. If we start from David Harvey’s premise that neoliberalism privileges “private property owners, businesses, multinational corporations, and financial capital” at the expense of citizens’ rights, and does so by way of “deregulation, privatization, and withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision,”¹ then the response to Katrina is at least as much “Politics American Style” as it is “Naturally N’Awlins,” and this is the muddy ground that the authors of *Neoliberal Deluge* trudge through.

In the chapter “Black and White, Unite and Fight? Identity Politics and New Orleans’s Post-Katrina Public Housing Movement,” sociologist and activist John Arena discusses the demolition of public housing projects by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO) and the unsuccessful attempts of grassroots organizations to defend, expand, and improve existing housing. Beginning in 1995, the “New Orleans power elite at the state and corporate levels identified public housing, partly due to its

location in highly valued parcels of the central city, as a key impediment to its class project of developing and expanding the main engine, and source of profit, for the local corporate elite—tourism” (pp. 155–56). Arena’s case study of the Iberville project adjacent to the French Quarter traces how a multiracial movement blocked the demolition and privatization of the Iberville projects in June 2005, then successfully fought to reoccupy the Iberville after Katrina, but ultimately failed to stop the project’s privatized redevelopment into deconcentrated, mixed-income housing. While the author’s focus is on identity politics and intramovement impediments, his study can be interpreted as a prolonged argument against New Orleans exceptionalism in the pre- and post-Katrina struggle over public housing: “The drive to destroy and privatize New Orleans’ public housing was one key component of an overall neoliberal capitalist restructuring effort to further dismantle and shred the United States’s remaining public services and civil liberties” (p. 177).

Johnson’s chapters (one coauthored with Geoffrey Whitehall) confront the housing problem through studies of two private-sector efforts to offer affordable low-income housing, Brad Pitt’s Make It Right Foundation development in the Lower Ninth Ward and Magna Entertainment Corporation’s “Magnaville” in rural Simmesport, Louisiana. Johnson coins the term “benevolent neoliberalism” for the way that these projects “obviously entail an ethical component to those in need but simultaneously promote market-centric approaches to disaster relief and seek to manage inequality through the inculcation of neoliberal technologies” (p. 71). As an outgrowth of government outsourcing, they demonstrate the neoliberal state’s increasing reliance on market-based remedies to inequality and social need.

Adrienne Dixson evaluates the radical restructuring of New Orleans’s public schools into a privatized charter system through the lens of critical race theory. The state, which had been threatening a takeover of low-performing city schools since 2003, acted swiftly to pass legislation firing 4,700 teachers and dissolving their union, then converting public schools into charters with restrictive admissions policies that Dixson finds racially biased. As Naomi Klein has argued, the calamity that transformed New Orleans into a giant laboratory for housing and educational “reform” was not an aberration but a tenet of disaster capitalism: “waiting for a major crisis, then selling off pieces of the state to private players while citizens were still reeling from the shock, then quickly making the ‘reforms’ permanent.”² The privatization of education, just like the reduction and deconcentration of public housing, are neoliberal experiments that have utilized post-Katrina New Orleans as a model for replication elsewhere.

Many of these structural problems are acknowledged and threaded through the *Treme* series, but they are presented as peculiarly local phenomena, disconnecting

government corruption, police negligence, and the deconcentration of public housing, for instance, from policies and patterns at the level of the nation-state. Even though we come to understand the withdrawal of prisoners' rights in the tumult of the storm, and we meet good cops and bad cops, there is no sense of where they reside in a national prison-industrial complex that has quintupled in three decades and will incarcerate one out of every six black men.³ We hear of corruption in local government but nothing about the hundreds of millions in no-bid contracts that went to companies in which the sitting vice president and secretary of defense continued to hold stock. (Bechtel contractors don't get to eat red beans and rice or dance to jazz alongside the characters in *Treme*.) Since these stark realities do not enhance the viewer's immersion into local color, they remain mostly off-screen.

In its commitment to New Orleans exceptionalism, *Treme* casts Katrina as a disaster exacerbated by precarious geographies and regional idiosyncrasies, rather than as a national bellwether for the dangers of what Johnson terms "neoliberal sovereignty," when "the practices that constitute, condition, and cajole citizenship are no longer the sole purview of the state and instead occur within the express logic of the market" (p. 69), which led to the financial meltdown of 2008. And by presenting New Orleans through a close-up shot of local culture, *Treme* is able to hone in on the distinctiveness of the city while blocking out the infrastructural machinations that reveal it to be so thoroughly representative of contemporary urban America.

Yet *Treme* is at least making a serious attempt to engage with New Orleans's celebrated cultural traditions—the pivot upon which the city's exceptional reputation rests—which cannot be said of the political scientists and other contributors to *The Neoliberal Deluge*. If *Treme* surrenders itself to the notion that New Orleans's identity as a distinct place is grounded in music, food, and other forms of festivity, *The Neoliberal Deluge* simply surrenders; in order to cast Katrina and New Orleans as exemplary rather than exceptional, culture is virtually subtracted from the neoliberal equation, and the distinctive cultural richness of New Orleans is virtually bleached out of the picture altogether.

This is a shame because music and culture are not mere symbols of distinction and autonomy; they are social processes that are integral to political and economic infrastructures. A case study of culture reveals as much about governance as studies on race, social control, labor, education, or other topics that form the core of political science because culture is entwined with—not isolated from—these forces.

For example, the entertainment zones that Paul Passavant systematically deconstructs as defensible spaces of social exclusion in his chapter, "Mega-Events, the Superdome, and the Return of the Repressed in New Orleans,"

were founded on the premise that local culture could lure consumers into their relatively secure boundaries and are sustained by uninterrupted cultural production. The study *Louisiana: Where Culture Means Business*, commissioned in the year prior to Katrina by Lieutenant Governor Mitch Landrieu and conducted by Mt. Auburn Associates—the same firm hired to measure the development potential of the World Trade Center site in the aftermath of September 11, 2001—determined that cultural tourism was the city's largest industry, creating 85,000 jobs and accounting for 35% of the city's annual operating budget.⁴ Following Katrina, and especially since Landrieu was elected mayor in 2010, the resourcefulness of local culture has only increased, as the return of culture workers—particularly those who perpetuate what tourism promoters call "the trinity" of music, food, and architecture—signaled to potential visitors that New Orleans, a "damaged brand" in the words of tourism professionals, was now "back in business."⁵ Conventions and conferences such as the APSA meeting have begun returning to New Orleans, and if my participation on local arrangements committees for the American Anthropological Society (2010) and the Society for Ethnomusicology (2012) conferences are any indication, members arrive in New Orleans with the expectation of consuming local culture.

A massive service industry workforce is ready to meet their expectations, and among them are musicians whose livelihoods depend upon tourism. For instance, the brass band musicians who uphold the centuries-old traditions of jazz funerals and second line parades—community processions that wind through back-a-town neighborhoods to the beat of the bass drum—are also hired to perform in convention center lobbies and hotel conference rooms, providing an authentically New Orleans experience from the perspective of enthusiastic visitors. These musicians are portrayed in media accounts and promotional campaigns as living symbols of the vitality and resiliency of local culture, and their everyday lives are equivalent to those of service workers whose job happens to be providing pleasure to audience-consumers on and off the tourist map. These cultural icons do not simply *resemble* the excluded public housing residents, neglected students, and underpaid and uninsured workers whose ghostly silhouettes populate the chapters of *The Neoliberal Deluge*; they *are* those New Orleanians, marching into full view from backstreet to center stage.

In a recent *Washington Post* advertisement sponsored by the Convention and Visitors' Bureau, a picture of a smiling young couple festooned with beads, standing on Bourbon Street sipping cocktails out of "go" cups with straws, carries the caption: "Right now in New Orleans, there's a brass band playing on Bourbon and a jazz combo jammin' on the corner." In actuality, the New Orleans Police Department has begun disbanding performances in public spaces,

enforcing a city ordinance that protects the rights of property owners and places of business. Black musicians—some of whom were raised in housing projects now demolished, many more having attended schools that no longer offer an integrated music curriculum, and virtually all unable to qualify for group health insurance—now risk arrest for parading without a permit or simply playing their instrument in public. At once celebrated as culture bearers and marginalized as potential criminals, they are living proof of both New Orleans exceptionalism and the global neoliberal order that Johnson defines as “socially disruptive, inherently crisis-laden, and predicated on pervasive socioeconomic underdevelopment” (p. xxiii).

In conclusion, I would suggest that those members of APSA who will be visiting New Orleans, and have an opportunity to evaluate their encounters with musicians and other service providers in New Orleans, do so through the dual lenses of cultural exceptionalism and neoliberalism, which would require both a degree of reflexivity and an acknowledgment of complicity. Recognize, first, that you are the ghostly figures who populate the charts and graphs of the state report *Louisiana: Where Culture Means Business*. You are members of a society whose decision to hold a conference in New Orleans was based, in part, on the distinctive cultural offerings available for consumption, and your participation in systems of exchange marked by ambivalence, alienation, imbalance, and other hallmarks of neoliberalism is virtually compulsory. Second, recognize that among the musicians and other service workers you meet are the ghostly “refugees” of neoliberalism referenced throughout *The Neoliberal Deluge*, appearing as real citizens before your very eyes. They, like myself and all other New Orleanians, face decisions such as where to send their children to school, what housing they can and do live in, and how they might go about consuming culture. Lastly, upon leaving this place and its allure of exceptionalism, ask yourself if you bring that level of self-awareness into the more mundane spaces of your everyday lives. The reflexive position of the cultural consumer and neoliberal citizen is an anxious one, predicated on an admis-

sion of culpability, but it can also be a productive place from which engaged scholars set about charting the pervasiveness of neoliberalism, even as it leads us into our own backyards.

This New Orleanian, for one, is happy to roll out the red carpet and welcome you into our laboratory. We’re jazzed you’re here!

Notes

- 1 Harvey 2005, 3, 7. See also Leland 2009.
- 2 Klein 2007, 7.
- 3 Wacquant 2009, 58–69.
- 4 “Louisiana Department of Culture, Recreation & Tourism 2006–2007 Marketing Plan” 2007, 8.
- 5 Spitzer 2006.

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