The Havoc of Capitalism
Publics, Pedagogies and Environmental Crisis

Gregory Martin
University of Technology, Sydney, Australia

Donna Houston
Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia

Peter McLaren
University of California, USA

and

Juha Suoranta (Eds.)
University of Tampere, Finland

Havoc of Capitalism brings together an interdisciplinary community of scholars from around the world to contribute to the dialogue about alternative global futures in the current context of environmental crisis, uncertainty and inequality. The contributors to this book provide insight into the havoc wrought by processes of capitalism, colonialism and consumption. Drawing on present environmental matters of concern, such as the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, First Nation perspectives on ecological colonization, and the possibilities for transformation and action, this book makes a timely intervention in debates about accumulated historical debts, ordinary ecological crises and the challenges for sustaining social and environmental alternatives.
The Havoc of Capitalism
Scope

Bold Visions in Educational Research is international in scope and includes books from two areas: teaching and learning to teach and research methods in education. Each area contains multi-authored handbooks of approximately 200,000 words and monographs (authored and edited collections) of approximately 130,000 words. All books are scholarly, written to engage specified readers and catalyze changes in policies and practices. Defining characteristics of books in the series are their explicit uses of theory and associated methodologies to address important problems. We invite books from across a theoretical and methodological spectrum from scholars employing quantitative, statistical, experimental, ethnographic, semiotic, hermeneutic, historical, ethnomethodological, phenomenological, case studies, action, cultural studies, content analysis, rhetorical, deconstructive, critical, literary, aesthetic and other research methods.

Books on teaching and learning to teach focus on any of the curriculum areas (e.g., literacy, science, mathematics, social science), in and out of school settings, and points along the age continuum (pre K to adult). The purpose of books on research methods in education is not to present generalized and abstract procedures but to show how research is undertaken, highlighting the particulars that pertain to a study. Each book brings to the foreground those details that must be considered at every step on the way to doing a good study. The goal is not to show how generalizable methods are but to present rich descriptions to show how research is enacted. The books focus on methodology, within a context of substantive results so that methods, theory, and the processes leading to empirical analyses and outcomes are juxtaposed. In this way method is not reified, but is explored within well-described contexts and the emergent research outcomes. Three illustrative examples of books are those that allow proponents of particular perspectives to interact and debate, comprehensive handbooks where leading scholars explore particular genres of inquiry in detail, and introductory texts to particular educational research methods/issues of interest to novice researchers.
The Havoc of Capitalism

*Publics, Pedagogies and Environmental Crisis*

Edited by

Gregory Martin
*University of Technology, Sydney, Australia*

Donna Houston
*Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia*

Peter McLaren
*University of California, Los Angeles, USA*

Juha Suoranta
*University of Tampere, Finland*
CONTENTS

1. Critical pedagogy “After the Storm” ................................................................. 1
   Donna Houston and Gregory Martin

PART I: HAVOC: KATRINA AND THE CRISIS OF CAPITAL

2. Hurricane Spectacles and the Crisis of the Bush Presidency .......................15
   Douglas Kellner

3. The Media and Hurricane Katrina: Floating Bodies
   and Disposable Populations .............................................................................29
   Henry A. Giroux

4. Katrina and the Banshee’s Wail: The Racialization of Class Exploitation ......53
   Peter McLaren and Nathalia E. Jaramillo

5. Nature in Our Midst .........................................................................................71
   Ville Lähde

PART II: RESILIENCE: INDIGENOUS PEDAGOgies AND THE
CRITIQUE OF ECO-COLONIALISM

6. A Pedagogy of the Dispossessed: Toward a Red State
   of Decolonization, Sovereignty and Survivance ..........................................81
   Sandy Grande

7. Denatured Spirit: Neo-Colonial Social Design ..............................................99
   Norm Sheehan, Janine Dunleavy, Tamar Cohen and Sean Mitchell

8. Fair Go Mate and Un-Australian: Australian Socio-Political Vernacular .....117
   Dale Kerwin

9. Fabricating Reconciliation: Howard’s Forgettable Speech .........................131
   Annette Woods and Gregory Martin

10. Re(a)d and White: Discussing Ethnicities and the Teaching
    of Whiteness ................................................................................................157
    Alison Sammel and Shauneen Pete
PART III: TRANSFORMATIONS: PEDAGOGY, ACTIVISM AND THE ENVIRONMENT OF JUSTICE

   Olli-Pekka Moisio, Robert FitzSimmons and Juha Suoranta

12. Major Intentional Social Changes as a Political Perspective......................195
   Olli Tammilehto

    Alexander Lautensach and Sabina Lautensach

14. Deconstructed Touraine: The Radical Sociologist for the Sake of Social Actors and Society .................................................................229
    Tapio Litmanen

Biography ...............................................................................................................253
DONNA HOUSTON AND GREGORY MARTIN

1. CRITICAL PEDAGOGY “AFTER THE STORM”

Landfall is not just a physical question. Geography is always socially produced. And so every landscape can reveal sedimented and contentious histories of occupation; struggles over land use and clashes over meaning, rights of occupancy, and rights to resources. Katrina churned through historical geographies of extraordinary multiculturalism but extreme racial segregation, of amazing environmental wealth exploited rapaciously, of mythic significance in the American and even global imaginary whose celebrations masked the enduring legacies of poverty and discrimination that they fed off and opposed. (Katz, 2008, p. 16).

This edited collection is about the unfolding “dialectics of ordinary disaster” that has shaped global cultures, pedagogies and environments at the beginning of the twenty-first century (Davis, 1999). Mike Davis in his influential book Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster observed that the radical transformation of the Southern California landscape through flood and fire, understood from the perspective of the region’s deep environmental history, is a relatively ordinary occurrence. For Davis, what is extraordinary about ordinary disaster is how its material production is “largely hidden from view by a way of thinking that simultaneously imposes false expectations on the environment and then explains the inevitable disappointments as proof of a malign and hostile nature” (1999, p. 9). In other words, hidden in the acute shocks of environmental catastrophe are the everyday social, economic and political dimensions that help to make it. What gets erased by media spectacles of extreme “acts of nature” is the extent to which rapacious urbanization, discriminatory housing and planning practice, and bureaucratic cost effectiveness puts vulnerable people and places in “harm’s way” (Davis, 1999).

The question of what is “natural” about disaster is a crucial one because the very act of attributing catastrophe to external Nature hides the all-too-human histories of uneven development and disinvestment in poor and minority communities. After the landfall of Hurricane Katrina, the then US President George Bush commented that, “the storm didn’t discriminate” (Davis, 2005). But the social and environmental injustices piling up in its long wake tell another story. Indeed, well before Katrina begun to transform into a super-storm over the Gulf of Mexico in late August 2005, it was well known that the landfall of a major hurricane in New Orleans would sweep a deadly path across communities already devastated by years of institutional neglect, decaying infrastructure and ecological stress. In the living
memory of many of the older residents of the Lower Ninth Ward in New Orleans is
Hurricane Betsy, the first hurricane in the history of the United States to cost over a
billion dollars in 1965 (Bullard, 2005). Betsy caused the levees in the Lower Ninth
Ward to breach (it was in fact rumored at the time that the levees were breached on
purpose by city officials to protect white areas), flooding houses up to the eaves
and trapping people in their attics. Memories of Betsy in the community was no
doubt one of the reasons why many people in the Lower Ninth Ward kept hatchets
and axes in their roofs to chop their way out in the event of a flood (Bullard, 2005).

SEDIMENTED INEQUITIES AND ORDINARY CRISES

There are other legacies from Betsy too. Debris from the storm was dumped in a
black neighborhood at the Agriculture Street landfill, which is now a Superfund
site. And as environmental justice scholar Robert Bullard observes, this particular
history of toxic dumping in African American communities raises serious concerns
about where the debris from hurricane Katrina will ultimately end up (Bullard,
2005). Indeed, environmental catastrophe in poor communities of color in Louisiana
has been a lived reality in the region for decades. The stretch of the Mississippi
River between New Orleans to Baton Rouge is the site of a massive petrochemical
industrial corridor where over a hundred chemical and oil plants manufacture
plastics, paints, fertilizers and gasoline (Pezzullo, 2003). Local residents (most of
whom are working class and people of color) call this industrial corridor “cancer alley” and tell stories about an accumulative local history of epidemiological disorder in both adults and children living near industrial and Toxic Release Inventory sites. Since the collapse of the sugar and cotton plantations, toxic industries along the Mississippi River flourished during the later part of the twentieth century in a climate of convenience and cheap labor. However, recent years have seen a decline in petrochemical production and weakened the regional economy, leaving in its wake contaminated land and water and nearly twenty-five percent of the city’s population living in poverty (Comfort, 2006). This is an all too familiar story for localities and regions that suffer the predations of environmental racism and injustice that, as Bullard (2001) argues:

…institutionalizes unequal [environmental] enforcement, trades human health for profit, places the burden of proof on the ‘victims’ rather than the polluters, legitimizes exposure to harmful chemicals, pesticides and harmful substances, promotes “risky” technologies, exploits the vulnerability of economic and politically disenfranchised communities, subsidizes ecological destruction, creates an industry around risk assessment, delays clean-up actions and fails to develop pollution prevention and precaution processes as the overarching and dominant strategy. (p. iii)

Along with bearing the brunt of the toxic burden of the environmental injustices of cancer alley, poor and working class black people in New Orleans have been particularly vulnerable to the effects of flooding – a result of the confluence of canal and levee construction, the development of heavy industries, wholesale wetland destruction, urban sprawl and governmental neglect at all scales. In the lower Mississippi Delta, over 15000 kilometers of canals have been dredged for drainage, logging, and for oil and gas development (Day Jr et al, 2007). This has radically altered the hydrology of the region and accelerated the destruction of its wetlands (that act as an ecological buffer to flooding) by saltwater intrusion (Day Jr et al, 2007). In this regard, the “ordinary crisis” of environmental injustice in New Orleans has been considerably worsened by Katrina, which wreaked havoc in areas that have already paid a heavy social and ecological debt in terms of health, livelihood and wellbeing. As Cindy Katz (2008) observes “the hurricane hit at a nadir of a three decades-long deterioration in the social wage; a combination of social relations and policies at the national, state, and municipal scales that eroded virtually every aspect of social reproduction, except those associated with militarism and policing” (p. 17).

Such tangible declines in social and economic wellbeing before and after Katrina starkly revealed the “disposability” of poor and minority people and the places where they work and live (see Henry Giroux, Chapter 3). This disposability was made glaringly visible through racist reporting in the media in Katrina’s aftermath (see Doug Kellner, Chapter 2). But lying beneath the media spectacle that further victimized the city’s most vulnerable populations, resides a pervasive social geography of “organized abandonment” (Lipsitz, 2006). The organized abandonment of New Orleans’ working class people of color has been the result of what George
Lipsitz calls a “hostile social warrant of privatism” propelled by neoliberal economies and cultures (2006). Neoliberalism, he argues, produces a hostile warrant of “competitive consumer citizenship” that threatens to replace forms of citizenship concerned with the public good that emerged out of the civil rights movement. The social warrant of privatism cultivates subjects of self-care and places individual rights and needs over those of the whole social collective. Using the example of education, Lipsitz (2006) explains it this way:

When the social warrant of the civil rights movement secured widespread credibility, support for education increased. If one thinks as a citizen or as a community member, then the more educated people there are, the better it is for everyone. However, if one thinks as an accumulator and as a consumer competing with others for scarce resources, educating other people’s children might place your own in a competitive disadvantage. This approach creates massive inefficiency and misallocation of resources at the societal level. Direct discrimination costs the gross national product from two to four percent a year in lost productivity and waste. Yet what is disastrous at the societal level can be advantageous at the level of the household – at least in the short run. (p. 455)

Organized abandonment thus speaks to the pathology of the free market system that has reigned supreme over the past several decades. In this regard, the hostile social warrant of privatism haunts the future of New Orleans as much as it haunts the past. The deepening economic crisis both in the United States and globally has registered the fragile and ephemeral nature of the neoliberal social contract. But the fundamental question remains: what ought to be done? And as George Lipsitz asks, what can we learn from New Orleans? Now, more than ever, these questions are important to the task of transforming social and environmental injustice. Hurricane Katrina is a poignant reminder of the escalating toxic crisis and the very real problem of climate change. The stories that emerged from the environmental crisis in New Orleans and its aftermath amplify the urgent need for educators, community members and activists to rethink how humans and their everyday environments are intimately interconnected.

LEARNING FROM ENVIRONMENTAL INJUSTICE

The uneven and wounded terrains of environmental crisis are the debt of consumer capitalism lurking on the historical horizon. Walter Benjamin, though writing in the early decades of the twentieth century, famously captured this debt in the figure of the “angel of history.” With its eyes turned to the past, Benjamin’s (1968) angel sees “one single catastrophe” of accumulated threats, consequences and liabilities - everywhere - “in front of his feet” (p. 257). For Benjamin, progress is a storm that “keeps piling wreckage on wreckage” as it “irresistibly propels” us into an unforeseeable future (Benjamin, 1968, pp. 257, 258). Catastrophe is the ongoing crisis of capitalist progress that presses relentlessly forward. This crisis is occasionally interrupted by turbulence and counter-flows, when higher than
expected storm surges whipped up by the winds of Paradise hurl debris at our feet. The economic, political and climatic shocks of the first decade of the twenty-first century have certainly precipitated such turbulence. There is a rising tide of recognition that climate and environmental change is exacerbated by human activities such as the burning of fossil fuels, declining biodiversity as a result of development, and unsustainable patterns of production and consumption amongst the planet’s wealthiest populations. Mining, drilling, agribusiness and construction are all driving this activity, which is further supported by anti-environmental government policies that provide enormous subsidies to these industries (Dirty Metals, 2004). All this while the rich countries attempt to blame developing countries for failing to take action to cut carbon emissions.

But not all is doom and gloom. Shifting through the debris, fragments and wreckage, Benjamin’s angel of history desires to “reassemble” and “make whole what has been smashed” (Benjamin, 1968, p. 257). Moving beyond the disorientating or “shock” effects of catastrophe and the desire to cushion its impact, Benjamin (1968) emphasized the productive potential for actualizing critical awareness and the radical struggle to transform the everyday. Located as we are within the modern corporate university, we argue that this implies a break from the traditional distinction between professionalism and activism. Acting as a high pressure brake on that impetus is the growth of neo-liberal discourses of professionalism or competence that set the limits of the “knowing” subject as well as the form and spatial scale of community engagement (Maxey, 2004, p. 159). As the plug is pulled on state funding, an entrepreneurial spirit is emerging at the individual and group level that is freighted toward market based research and strategies driven by competitive funding and a corporate research culture. This insidious barrier to social activism has led to efforts to reconceptualise professional identity, toward “a new form of professionalism and [activist] engagement” (Sachs, 1999).

Groundwater-Smith and Sachs (2002) write, “first and foremost an activist professional is concerned to reduce or eliminate exploitation, inequality and oppression. Accordingly the development of this identity is deeply rooted in principles of equity and social justice” (p. 352). But strong disincentives and risks exist for developing this kind of activist identity, particularly given the rise of a surveillance and audit culture designed to enhance “performance” in higher education (Peters, 2007). Stepping outside of our comfort zone of institutional privilege and using it to support wider struggles for social justice can also result in our teaching and research being labelled ideologically biased or too partisan, and even subjected to administrative censure or prosecution. Despite operating under difficult contextual conditions, we believe that activist scholars ought to develop a more critically reflexive and engaged orientation toward community to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

This is the grist of Alain Touraine’s argument (see Tapio Litmanen, Chapter 14), who holds that it is important for scholars to be “close to the action” in order to engage in the production of knowledges and practices that are socially useful for collective action. Picking up on this point, we argue that it is political for “trouble making” elements in the academy to act independent of the corporate interests of
D. HOUSTON AND G. MARTIN

the university and to reach out in solidarity to social movements and other civil
society actors in order to integrate their collective demands and concerns into their
work and the wider struggle for environmental and social justice. Unfortunately, in
the reified world of academia, Fuller and Kitchin (2004) lament that:

critical praxis seems to consist of little else beyond pedagogy and academic
writing. Potentially it might consist of calling for changes in policy. It may
consist of research praxis that aims to become reflexive or emancipatory or
empowering (changing the conditions of the research process but rarely
seeking wider social change). But it rarely consists of a marriage between
academic and activist roles, in which one’s private and professional attempts
to change the world are not divided into distinct and separable roles and
tasks. (p. 6)

Having opted for independent action, we propose that activist scholars engage in
a genuine dialogue with those social collectives struggling to enact, sustain, and
inspire substantial change in place-based community contexts. For Freire (1972),
dialogue is not mere communication, talk or “verbalism” (p. 75). Rather, it is a
relational encounter, based in attentively listening to and learning “with” the
oppressed, that is enacted through a diverse set of age-old and evolving practices
including storytelling, music, dance, community arts, street theatre, digital networking
and new multi-media productions (p. 33). Here, dialogue creates the pedagogical
conditions for a critical place-based consciousness that has the power to “name the
world” in order to transform it (p. 76). Such a place-based approach to learning
through the mutual sharing, challenging and questioning of stories, ideas and
meaning offers, from the ground up, the possibility of creating pedagogic spaces
for cross border participation, debate and action, including the development of
perspectives and strategies amongst a wide range of activists, intellectuals, First
Nation groups, NGOs, alternative schools, social movements, the labour movement
and green-left political organisations. This expansion of arenas and the links it
establishes combined with a corresponding shift in activities and priorities, feeds into
an activist agenda that makes political sense, as it is educational, personally
satisfying, and politically relevant. We believe that taking a stand together means,
to put it colloquially, “walking the talk.” Breaking down the false division between
scholarship and activism, this form of praxis intervention engages with the issues of
different communities and movements by asserting the importance of collective
knowledge and resistance, and as such, constitutes an activist form of “public sociology”
(Burawoy, 2004, 2005) or “public pedagogy” (Giroux, 2004). Although often not well defined, such concepts are mobilized to acknowledge the
subjective potential for academic and extra-academic audiences to engage public
issues and problems as sites of transformative learning and action.

Given the effects of what Benjamin (1968) refers to as a history of permanent
“catastrophe” that hangs over the whole globe including recent economic,
environmental and political events, this politically driven agenda for academic
activism constitutes a call for academics to be more socially relevant and to make
a contribution to the real world struggles of real world victims (p. 257). What
matters here, for Benjamin, is that “The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the “state of emergency” in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight” (p. 257).

This requires an embodied and engaged approach to pedagogy, where academics are not afraid to get dirt under their fingernails. We believe that it is incumbent upon politically committed scholars to find positions for themselves within the various grassroots groups, networks and coalitions, social movements, NGOs, and political parties that have arisen as a defensive reflex against the horrors of environmental destruction and human misery (Moss, 2004). “In this [sort of] situation,” as Joe Kincheloe (2008) recently wrote, “we have been touched by Walter Benjamin’s Angel of History in a way that forever changes us, the knowledge we generate, and the reasons we produce it in the first place” (p. 8). The focus here is not on the appropriate degree of immersion or participation but rather on engaging in dialogue, solidarity and praxis with social movements and other groups that are so often out of reach. Such pedagogies are attuned to the histories and activities of those communities that have been marginalized by the onward trajectory of industrial progress and who keep the presence of alternatives alive through their networks of exchange and interconnection.

At a time where contemporary “matters of concern” (to borrow a phrase from Bruno Latour) encompass a whole range of environmental and place-based issues, educational institutions such as universities ought to be deeply involved in this effort. This includes collaborating across disciplinary borders, as well as identifying and analyzing the adverse effects of public policies and other interventions across the nature-society interface. To be effective, a coordinated, principled, multi-level and multi-pronged approach in all these key areas ought to be tied to efforts to raise civic engagement through different forms of community organizing, whereby schools, local communities, and other sites of public pedagogy could serve as catalysts for substantial revitalization. With an emphasis on material empowerment and imaginative transformation, we need to reinvest our purpose with criticality and hope. Here, every ingredient in the political and civic cauldron works to bring about the desired forces of change.

A popular refrain from the recently inaugurated US president Barack Obama is that change is always possible but that it won’t be easy or quick. Even as we might take a moment to reflect on the turbulent storms that have recently passed, new clouds gather on the horizon. The question of how fundamental change might be enacted as a response to what Naomi Klein (2007) calls “disaster capitalism” remains a deeply fraught issue (see also Doug Kellner, Chapter 2). With an outstretched hand, free market ideologues—–with some help from the state—–have cleverly exploited the mayhem, fear and trauma of crisis (terrorist attacks, wars, disasters and other “shocks”) to sell the need for economic reforms that are potentially unpopular and painful. A prime example of this is when Milton Freidman, the ideological Godfather of neoliberalism and free market solutions, argued that the “tragedy” of Katrina, which left “Most New Orleans schools…in ruins” also afforded “an opportunity to radically reform the education system” via a voucher system (pp. 4–5). Yet, as Klein writes, numerous instances exist of “real challenges”
to the neoliberal agenda at different geographical locations and scales (p. 448). And this “backlash”—which has unleashed some reactionary as well as hopeful forces—points to the limits or reversibility of the neoliberal “shock doctrine” of development (p. 448).

What is increasingly apparent, then, is the need to develop new energetic capacities and strategies for engaging in what Klein calls “peoples’ reconstruction” (p. 443). Such collective strategies for reconstruction actively produce strong alternatives to disaster capitalism and create spaces where people forge relationships with each other and with nonhuman nature that recognize the complex material worlds that we all inhabit. Practically, this means working in areas traditionally placed “outside” of educational practice and cultural reproduction. Linked to a wide variety of sites and struggles, what we are advocating is an enlarged pedagogy that engages politically with historical and material registers in contemporary everyday life. Echoing the words of Walter Benjamin, this requires what Giroux (1994) terms “…a discourse of imagination and hope that pushes history against the grain” (p. 42). Benjamin’s angel offers the possibility for redemption amongst the ruins of neoliberalism, carbon-based industrialism and hyper-consumption. It offers the hope and possibility for social and environmental alternatives for living in and sustaining a world shared with others.

This book, we hope, offers a step in this direction. Rather than advocating any particular theoretical approach, the eclectic nature of the chapters included in this volume are intended to demonstrate a diversity of perspectives that shape understandings of the relationalities between pedagogy, publics, politics and environment. In other words, this book works towards an enlarged pedagogy that brings together a diverse set of ontologies and knowledges that share a political commitment to a collective project of transformation and justice.

The chapters in the first part of the book titled “Havoc: Katrina and the Crisis of Capital” highlight the failure of neoliberal ‘free market’ ideology and reveal how race, class, policy and place still matter. The systemic failure at all levels of government to address long term environmental, economic, social and political problems is an example of how public policy renders poor people and people of color ‘invisible’ and vulnerable to environmental injustice and environmental racism. Clearly, there is a geography to neoliberalism and its effects are uneven. On this point, Katrina was a showcase of national humiliation and abandonment, from the destruction of coastal wetlands and the antiquated levee system to the resulting evacuations and institutionalised neglect and vilification of the storm’s victims. But it also meant that there was a resurgence of interest in environmental racism and environmental justice providing the impetus for a number of projects and activities.

The first essay by Douglas Kellner discusses the media spectacle of Katrina that revealed the political cronyism of the Bush Administration and the failure of the neoliberal state to plan and respond to the predicted disaster. Despite a massive White House PR effort, the spectacle of destruction, suffering and despair that followed in the awful wake of Katrina “put on display the glaring inequities of race and class that define the U.S. in the new millennium” (p. 26). Symptomatic of
a larger problem with neoliberal globalization, Giroux argues further that all the Katrina generated debris made visible a new and pernicious form of biopolitics that marks entire populations as disposable. He writes, “The disposable populations serve as an unwelcome reminder that the once vaunted social state no longer exists, the living dead now an apt personification of the death of the social contract in the United States” (p. 42). McLaren and Jaramillo offer a critique of the Bush administration’s response to Katrina and the catastrophic effects of US imperialism (e.g., the War in Iraq) on the domestic front. Ville Lähde, a Finish researcher and activist, makes the case that an autonomous conception of “Nature” is often used to depoliticise disasters such as Hurricane Katrina and the 2004 South Asian Tsunami. With a focus on strategies for change, he argues that “adaptation [is] a vital political issue” that offers the possibility of reshaping political consciousness and human nature relations (p. 75). In summary, what all these pieces on the politics of Hurricane Katrina reveal is that contemporary ecological and social crises have a common historical origin and global character.

The second part of this book explores the theme of “Resilience: Indigenous Pedagogies and the Critique of Neo-colonialism.” The focus shifts to understanding how contemporary social and environmental crises continue to carry the weight of colonial histories, epistemologies and pedagogies. The injustices of colonial history and the Indigenous and local ecological knowledges developed, shared and passed on from one generation to the next in response to the complexities of colonialism or imperialism are often overlooked, if not ignored. This is not just a matter of abstract academic concern and the praxis of the following is to open up spaces for intercultural dialogue, debate and political action as an alternative relational geography. In the wake of Katrina, Grande surveys the real, material effects of the colonial project on Indigenous peoples and lays the epistemological groundwork for a Red Pedagogy that is place-based and promotes decolonization. Although it is not officially recognised in Australian universities or schools, Sheehan, Dunleavy Cohen and Mitchell use Indigenous Knowledge (IK) to track the “relational movements” of predatory colonialism (p. 107). Within the context of social dominance and racism, they propose an Indigenous Knowledge Pedagogy (IKP) that “adopts a [structural] approach to educating for social wellness (p. 113). Writing in the Australian context, Kerwin provides a stinging critique of changes to environmental and cultural heritage policies and the new paternalism of economic rationalism (neoliberalism). Certainly, this is no time for subtlety. Regardless of political party, in Kerwin’s view, “The major problem for Aboriginal peoples around the country is the inability of the political machinery to accept Aboriginal knowledges and beliefs” (p. 125). Woods and Martin provide a discourse analysis of former Australian Prime Minister John Howard’s policy speech on Aboriginal reconciliation to the Sydney Institute. They argue that Howard’s so-called “new statement of reconciliation” pointed to the dominant position of the white majority in Australia, as well as the structural benefits of Whiteness and institutionalised racism. Here, reconciliation is predicated upon an extremely narrow and limiting conception of the nation and responsibility for historical injustices. This is an example of how white sovereignty in settler societies such as Australia remains
invisible, normal, and unmarked. On this point, Sammel a “white middle class girl growing up in urban Australia” (p. 159) and Pete “a First Nations woman from Saskatchewan” (p. 158) share their personal stories of teaching about racism and White privilege in both Australia and Canada.

The final part of the book under the theme “Transformations: Pedagogy, Activism and the Environment of Justice,” explores questions of what ought to be done? Drawing on the historical legacy of the 1960s and its significance for revolutionary praxis, Moisio, FitzSimmons and Suoranta identify the importance of critical education in creating “weather persons” who “have the skills to dissect and to explain the direction in which the wind is actually blowing” (p. 180). Aspects of that contested legacy are highly controversial, as exemplified by William Ayers, a former leader of the US radical group the Weathermen, who became a political liability to Obama in the US Presidential race in 2008. However, it also offers a number of theoretical and practical insights, particularly for critical pedagogy. And as the storm clouds gather, they argue that radical educators have a role in “set[ting] forth curricula for new possibilities and actions that actively involve people in transforming their social and ecological environments with a form belief in the possibility to effect change by their own direct intervention in social and economic settings and practices” (p. 187).

Taking a non-deterministic approach to history and the uneven and unpredictable dynamic of human action, Tammilehto explores the potential of informal relational structures and tactics for articulating demands for social change. In a similar vein, Latensach and Latensach identify the complicity of higher education in the global environmental crisis. To counter this state of affairs, they argue for an educational program of curriculum reform that challenges ideologies of progress and anthropocentrism. To the degree that the global crisis is a world crisis for both human and nonhuman beings, a pedagogy of liberation or critical pedagogy must refocus its myopic lens in order to address anthropocentrism. Indeed, rethinking the central role of humans in critical pedagogy also re-energises issues of ontological diversity and difference across political, ecological and historical borders. Finally, Litmanen argues for the academic and political significance of Alain Touraine’s work. Given the poverty of university specific activism, Touraine’s methods are particularly revealing for scholars who are interested in actively intervening in processes of social struggle and historical transformation.

What all the contributing chapters in this book demonstrate, are many far-reaching lessons to be learnt from Katrina and the media and political frenzy that emerged in its aftermath. The larger story that emerges from this edited collection is that the confluence of poverty, racism and environmental crisis in the first decades of the twenty-first century so viscerally manifested by Katrina, also converge on deeper histories of imperialism, uneven capitalist development and the profound alienation from nonhuman nature that these practices attend. At the same time, the current global financial crisis and economic downturn have prompted a critical re-examination of economic ideas and policy agendas. In this climate, it appears that we are now at a critical crossroads. The contributors to this book point
CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

to the substantive ways in which the often disparate but always collective projects of critical pedagogy can be enlarged to address the material and affective relations of social and environmental justice.

NOTES


REFERENCES


PART I: HAVOC: KATRINA AND THE CRISIS OF CAPITAL
2. HURRICANE SPECTACLES AND THE CRISIS OF THE BUSH PRESIDENCY

On the weekend of August 27–28, 2005, Hurricane Katrina hurtled toward the Louisiana coast. With winds up to 175 miles per hour it was deemed a Hurricane 5, the most dangerous on the Saffir-Simpson scale. The media had been warning that a big hurricane was going to strike the Gulf coast and was heading straight for New Orleans for days prior to its eventual landing on Monday, August 29. Reports had focused on the potentially catastrophic threats to New Orleans, noting how much of the city was perilously below sea-level and how flooding threatened its precarious levee and canal system that protected the city from potential catastrophe. There were copious media speculations that this could be “the big one,” prophesized for years and documented in government and media reports, warning that New Orleans could be devastated by a major hurricane. Accordingly, the mayor of New Orleans and state officials had ordered the city evacuated, while the Governor of Louisiana declared a “state of emergency,” putting the federal government in charge.

Despite all the warnings, there appeared to be utterly inadequate preparation in the days preceding the well-forecast hurricane and for days after it was apparent that this was indeed a major catastrophe. Although the New Orleans mayor ordered evacuation just before the storm was to hit, tens of thousands, mostly poor and black people, remained behind because they had no transportation or funds to leave the city. Tens of thousands of the remaining citizens were herded into the New Orleans Superdome and Convention Center to ride out the storm, without proper food and water, sanitary facilities, police protection, or other basic necessities. Although the crowds survived the storm, which did not strike New Orleans directly, and while the storm was weaker than initially predicted, Hurricane Katrina inflicted tremendous damage when on Monday September 29 the 17th Street Canal levee was breached, others cracked, and 80–90% of the city lay under water.

HURRICANE DISASTER RESPONSE: MIA

Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath unleashed one of the most astonishing media spectacles in U.S. history. Houses and towns along the Gulf coast in Louisiana and Mississippi were destroyed and flood surges wreaked havoc miles inland. New Orleans was buried in water and for several days, the crowds in the Superdome and Convention Center were not given food, water, or evacuation and there were reports of fighting, rape, robbery, and death, some exaggerated as we shall see.
below. Indeed, no federal or state troops were sent to the city in the early days of the disaster, and thousands were trapped in their homes as the flood waters rose and there were widespread images of looting and crime.

Just as President Bush remained transfixed reading “My Pet Goat” to a Florida audience of schoolchildren after 9/11, a spectacle preserved on the Internet and memorialized by Michael Moore in Fahrenheit 9/11, so too was the president invisible in the aftermath of Katrina (as he had been after the Asian Tsunami). Bush remained on a five-week vacation during the first days of the disaster punctuated by a visit to a private event in Arizona where he bragged about how well things were going in Iraq, comparing the war there that he initiated to World War II, inferring that he was FDR. The next day Bush was shown clowning at a fundraiser in San Diego, smiling and strumming a guitar, and again bragging about Iraq and touting his failed domestic policies, leading commentator David Jenkins to exclaim:

The last few weeks have been irrefutable proof that America is being wrecked and mismanaged by the most incompetent, dangerous and out of touch boobs ever to obtain power. Any American with even a tiny amount of conscience who watched those images from New Orleans shook their heads with disbelief and shame that something like this should happen within our own borders in these modern times. As pictures of floating corpses glared at us through our TV sets, we were treated to photo-ops of our supposed leader golfing, blithering about Social Security, eating cake and strumming a guitar. Meanwhile, our Secretary of State [Rice] shopped for shoes and took in a show while the Vice President [Cheney] shopped for a house in a ritzy Maryland neighborhood.²

During Bush’s first visit to the disaster area, he made inappropriate jokes about how he knew New Orleans during his party days all too well and bantered that he hoped to visit Republican Senator Trent Lott’s new house upon hearing that his beachfront estate was destroyed. In a fateful comment, Bush told his hapless FEMA director Michael Brown on camera: “You are doing a heck of a job, Brownie.” Bush’s first visit to the area kept him away from New Orleans and isolated from angry people who would confront him. His visit to the heavily damaged city of Biloxi, Mississippi was preceded by a team that cleared rubble and corpses from the route that the president would take, leaving the rest of the city in ruin. The same day, in an interview with Diane Sawyer, Bush remarked “I don’t think anyone anticipated the breach of the levees” at a time when the media had circulated copious reports of previous warnings by scientists, journalists, and government officials concerning dangers of the levees breaching and catastrophic flooding in the city of New Orleans, much of which was dangerously below sea level.

Bush’s response to the catastrophe revealed all the weaknesses of the Bush presidency: immature frat-boy, good-old boy behavior and banter; political cronyism; a bubble of isolation by sycophantic advisors; an arrogant out-of-touchness with the realities of the sufferings his policies had unleashed; a general incompetence; and belief that image-making can compensate for the lack of public policy.
But the media spectacle of the hurricane, which dominated the U.S. cable news channels for days and was heavily covered on the U.S. network news, showed images of unbelievable suffering and destruction, depicting thousands of people without food and water, and images of unimaginable loss and death in a city that had descended into anarchy and looked like a Third World disaster area with no relief in sight.

The spectacle of the poor, sick, and largely black population left behind provided rare media images of what Michael Harrington (1963) described as “the other America,” and the media engaged in rare serious discussions of race and class as they tried to describe and make sense of the disaster. As John Powers put it:

Suddenly, the Others were right in front of our noses, and the major media predominantly white and pretty well-off — were talking about race and class. Newspapers ran front-page articles noting that nearly six million people have fallen into poverty since President Bush took office — a nifty 20 percent increase to accompany the greatest tax cuts in world history. Feisty columnists rightly fulminated that, even as tens of thousands suffered in hellish conditions, the buses first rescued people inside the Hyatt Hotel. Of course, such bigotry was already inscribed in the very layout of New Orleans. One reason the Superdome became a de facto island is that, like the city’s prosperous business district, it was carefully constructed so it would be easy to protect from the disenfranchised (30 percent of New Orleans lives below the poverty line).

Usually the media exaggerate the danger of hurricanes, put their talking heads on the scene, and then exploit human suffering by showing images of destruction and death. While there was an exploitative dimension to the Katrina coverage, it was clear that this was a major event and disaster, and media figures and crews risked their lives to cover the story. Moreover, many reporters and TV commentators were genuinely indignant when federal relief failed to come day after day, and for the first time in recent memory seriously criticized the Bush administration and Bush himself, while sharply questioning officials of the administration when they tried to minimize the damage or deflect blame. As Mick Farren put it:

In the disaster that was New Orleans, TV news and Harry Connick were the first responders. It may well have been a news generation’s finest hour. Reporters who had been spun or embedded for most of their careers faced towering disaster and intimacy with death, and told the tale with a horrified honesty. When anchors like Brian Williams and Anderson Cooper waded in the water, dirty and soaked in sweat, it transcended showboating. It was the story getting out. Okay, so Geraldo Rivera made an asshole of himself, but I will never forget the eloquent shell shock of NBC cameraman Tony Zumbado after he discovered the horror at the Convention Center.
That CNN could function where FEMA feared to tread undercut most federal excuses and potential perjuries. Journalists who could see the bodies refused to accept “factual” from Michael Brown, Michael Chertoff, or even George Bush. Ted Koppel and Paula Zahn all but screamed “bullshit!” at them on camera.4

BROWNIE AND BUSH CRONYISM

The rightwing Republican attack machine (Brock 2004) first blamed the New Orleans poor for not leaving and then descending into barbarism, but it came out quickly that there were tens of thousands who were so poor they had no transportation, money, or anyplace to go, and many had to care for sick and infirm friends, relatives, or beloved pets. Moreover, the poor were abandoned for days without any food, water, or public assistance. The rightwing attack machine then targeted local officials for the crisis, but intense media focus soon attached major blame for the criminally inadequate public response on Bush administration FEMA Director Michael Brown. It was revealed that Brown, who had no real experience with disaster management, had received his job because he was college roommate of Joe Allbaugh, the first FEMA director and one of the major Texas architects of Bush’s election successes, known as the “enforcer” because of his fierce loyalty to Bush and tough Texas behavior and demeanor.5

Stories circulated about how Allbaugh gutted FEMA of disaster response professionals and packed it with political appointees, such as previous Bush team PR and media people. Joe Allbaugh was part of Bush’s anti-government conservative coalition which cut back funding for FEMA, as the administration would later cut back plans to prepare disaster relief for New Orleans and cut federal funds to boost up its levee system. Allbaugh was FEMA director when 9/11 hit and quickly resigned, going into the public sector to advise corporations on how to deal with terrorism and then set up a business helping corporations get contracts in Iraq and security to protect their employees.

Meanwhile, Internet sources and Time magazine revealed that Brown had fudged his vita, claiming in testimony to Congress that he had been a manager of local emergency services when he had only had a low-level position.6 He had claimed he was a professor at a college where he was a student and generally had padded his c.v. Stories also circulated that in his previous job he had helped run Arabian horse shows, but had been dismissed for incompetence. After these reports, it was a matter of time until Bush first sent him back to Washington, relieving him of his duties, and allowing him to resign a couple of days later. The media then had a field day scapegoating the hapless Brown, who admittedly was a poster boy for Bush administration incompetent political appointees. But the top echelons of FEMA were full of Bush appointees who had fumbled and stumbled during the first crucial days of disaster relief and who were unqualified to deal with the tremendous challenges confronting the country. Moreover, Brown was castigated in the media for a statement that he did not know there were tens of thousands of people left behind stranded in the New Orleans Convention Center without food,
water, or protection after pictures of their plight had circulated through the media, while Michael Chertoff, head of the cabinet level Department of Homeland Security, also made such statements, and the federal non-response could easily be blamed on his ineptness and failure to coordinate disaster response efforts.7

Media images of the thousands left on their own in New Orleans and the surrounding area were largely poor and black, leading to charges that the Bush administration were blind to the suffering of the poor and people of color.8 Revealingly, these individuals were referred to as “refugees” and indeed they appeared homeless and devastated, as in familiar images of people escaping devastation in the developing world, although this time it was happening domestically.

While there was a fierce debate as to whether the federal response would or would not have been more vigorous if the victims were largely white or middle class people, readers of Yahoo news recognized that racism was blatantly obvious in captions to two pictures circulating, one of whites wading through water and described as “carrying food,” while another picture showing blacks with armloads of food described as “looters.” During NBC’s Concert for Hurricane Relief, rapper Kanye West declared “George Bush doesn’t care about black people,” and asserted that America is set up “to help the poor, the black people, the less well-off as slow as possible.” West sharply criticized Bush’s domestic priorities and Iraq policy before NBC was able to cut away to a smiling Chris Tucker.9

While Laura Bush and conservatives claimed that charges of racism were “ridiculous” and offensive, it was clear to many that there were serious issues of class and race concerning who was left behind without resources to evacuate and which neighborhoods were more vulnerable to devastation. Later, serious questions were raised concerning relative strengths of floodwalls in various regions of town and why poorer neighborhoods tended to be devastated by flood waters.10

Bush himself, ever in denial, told Diane Sawyer in a Good Morning America interview that: “I don’t think anybody anticipated the breach of the levees” – an inane response reduced to a blatant lie when later videotape showed a FEMA authority warning Bush that the levees could breach and the city could be flooded. Bush’s mother Barbara also put on display the famous Bush family insensitivity when she said on a visit to evacuees in Houston’s Astrodome: “So many of the people in the arena here, you know, were underprivileged anyway, so this is working very well for them.”

BUSHSPEAK, THE WAVERING MEDIA AND STAGECRAFT

Bush administration operatives deplored critics playing “the blame game,” showing once again how one of the defining features of Bushspeak is to deny reality and refuse to take responsibility for failures of his administration.11 Bush’s presidential ratings continued to plunge as day after day there were pictures of incredible suffering, devastation, and death, and discussions of the utterly inadequate federal, local, and state response. While the U.S. corporate media had failed to critically discuss the failings of George W. Bush in either the 2000 or 2004 elections and had
white-washed his failed presidency, for the first time one saw sustained criticism
of the Bush administration on the U.S. cable TV news networks. The network
 correspondents on the ground were appalled by the magnitude of the devastation
 and paucity of the federal response and presented images of the horrific spectacle
day after day, including voices from the area critical of the Bush administration.
Even media correspondents who had been completely supportive of Bush’s policies
began to express doubts and intense public interest in the tragedy ensured maximum
coverage and continued critical discussion.

The Bush administration went on the offensive, sending Bush, Cheney, Rice,
Rumsfeld, and other high officials to the disaster area, but the stark spectacle of
suffering undercut whatever rhetoric the Bush team produced. Vice President Dick
Cheney was reportedly hunting in Montana and then shopping for a $2.5 million
vacation house on the Maryland shore when the hurricane hit. It was widely
reported that Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was on a shopping spree in New
York buying $5000 plus pairs of shoes when the spectacle unfolded on TV, and her
first press conference during the disaster showed her giddy and bubbly, impervious
to the suffering; to improve her image, she was sent to her home-state Alabama
where photographers dutifully snapped her helping organize relief packages for
flood victims.

Whereas the Bush administration tried to emphasize positive features of the
relief effort, the images of continued devastation and the slow initial response
undercut efforts to convey an image that the Bushites were in charge and dealing
with the problem. Although the Bush team tried to scapegoat the poor, local officials,
environmental groups, and even God, it was clear that only the federal
government had the resources to deal with the immensity of the tragedy and that
the Bush administration had largely failed.

Bush’s claim that he would himself lead an investigation into what went wrong
with the federal response to Katrina was met by ridicule, and although the
Democrats attempted to mandate an independent government commission to
investigate the failure, Republicans resisted and formed a committee of their own
to investigate that Democrats refused to participate in.

RETURN TO THE CONSERVATIVE MEDIA AGENDA

After praising CNN and cable coverage of Hurricane Katrina, media critic Nikki
Finke describes how the U.S. corporate media returned to their conservative agenda
some weeks into the tragedy:

For the first 120 hours after Hurricane Katrina, TV journalists were let off
their leashes by their mogul owners, the result of a rare conjoining of flawless
timing (summer’s biggest vacation week) and foulest tragedy (America’s
worst natural disaster). All of a sudden, broadcasters narrated disturbing
images of the poor, the minority, the aged, the sick and the dead, and discussed
complex issues like poverty, race, class, infirmity and ecology that never
make it on the air in this swift-boat/anti-gay-marriage/Michael Jackson
media-sideshow era. So began a perfect storm of controversy.
Contrary to the scripture so often quoted in these areas of Louisiana and Mississippi, the TV newscasters knew the truth, but the truth did not set them free. Because once the crisis point had passed, most TV journalists went back to business-as-usual, their choke chains yanked by no-longer-inattentive parent-company bosses who, fearful of fallout from fingeri ng Dubya for the FEMA fuckups, decided yet again to sacrifice community need for corporate greed. Too quickly, Katrina’s wake was spun into a web of deceit by the Bush administration, then disseminated by the Big Media boys’ club. (Karl Rove spent the post-hurricane weekend conjuring up ways to shift blame).14

Karl Rove was reportedly put in charge of both the White House PR effort and reconstruction efforts and suddenly Bush was sent down to the disaster area every few days to make an appearance, hugging black people and showing that he cared and was in charge. Of course, these media visits were pseudo-events constructed to make Bush look presidential. NBC anchor Brian Williams’s reported on his blog how he and the residents of New Orleans were plunged in darkness during one presidential visit, when suddenly all the electricity came on and everyone cheered and rejoiced. After Bush’s motorcade passed through to celebratory applause, electricity was suddenly cut, not to be soon restored, causing groans and dismissals of the president who found the political will to have electricity for his safe passage and stagecraft, but not for those still stuck in the city. Another visit showed Bush in Mississippi with shirt-sleeves rolled up, speaking to a man who seemed dazed and lost, wanting to know where he could find a Red Cross station which he had been searching for days. A decisive Bush pointed down the road, declaring “there’s one right down there,” appearing to be on top of the situation. However, it was later reported that the man never made it to that station because it was just a theater prop and that false “Red Cross stations” were popping up all over the South during Bush’s visits, only to disappear the moment the camera left. His “visits” also diverted military and relief efforts to set creation instead of emergency assistance.

Three weeks after Katrina, Bush imagineers concocted a staged spectacle to attempt to make Bush look like a decisive leader. In an evening prime-time address to the nation, Bush was shown striding across the fabled Jackson Square in New Orleans with blue-background lighting and the famed St. Louis Cathedral in the background. The White House had brought generators to produce electricity for the shoot in the blacked out city, and had put up background patches of military camouflage netting to hide the president from the ghostly deserted streets of the French Quarter. But the long shot of Bush walking up to the podium made him look more like a small figure in an Antonioni movie, dwarfed by the environment, and critics damned the speech as failed stagecraft. As Maureen Dowd put it:

All Andrew Jackson’s horses and all the Boy King’s men could not put Humpty Dumpty together again. His gladiatorial walk across the darkened greensward, past a St. Louis Cathedral bathed in moon glow from White House klieg lights, just seemed to intensify the sense of an isolated, out-of-touch president clinging to hollow symbols as his disastrous disaster agency continues to fail.
In a ruined city – still largely without power, stinking with piles of garbage and still 40 percent submerged; where people are foraging in the miasma and muck for food, corpses and the sentimental detritus of their lives; and where unbearably sad stories continue to spill out about hordes of evacuees who lost their homes and patients who died in hospitals without either electricity or rescuers - isn’t it rather tasteless, not to mention a waste of energy, to haul in White House generators just to give the president a burnished skin tone and a prettified background?15

This was typical Bush administration image making: stagecraft over substance, and carefully planned spectacle to attempt to produce an image of Bush as a decisive leader. But the previous three weeks had shown that Bush was not a leader at all, but a front man for a regime based on cronyism, providing spoils from the treasury and government patronage jobs to their supporters and loyalists. Michael Brown of FEMA had been unveiled as totally unqualified for the job and had received it only because he was the roommate of Joe Allbaugh, who himself had dismantled FEMA and filled it with incompetent political appointees. As Douglas J. Amy put it:

Brown is just one example of an ongoing pattern of inappropriate and disturbing appointments by President Bush – appointments that threaten to undermine the basic functioning of many key government agencies. This administration’s guiding political philosophy is that government is a bad thing and should be cut back to a minimum. It has a particular contempt for the federal bureaucracy, which it sees as the embodiment of “liberal big government.” So it is hardly surprising that the administration has not made a great effort to ensure that the best-qualified people are running these agencies. But the situation is actually much worse than this. It is not simply that Bush put incompetent political hacks like Brown in place. He has also been appointing officials who are actually hostile to the agencies that they run. Many of them have political values and views diametrically opposed to the very missions of these agencies. For example, many of Bush’s appointees to agencies charged with protecting the environment have been opposed to environmental regulations in particular, and government regulation in general. And many have come from businesses or conservative organizations that have fought against efforts at environmental protection.16

The Bush administration has combined cronyism with cutting back federal government programs and funding for public works that help people. Bush’s tax cuts for the rich, attempts to privatize social security, and cut backs on environmental and government regulation, constitute an attack on a liberal conception of government itself. Allowing unrestricted economic development in the Gulf coast, cutting back on funds to shore up protection against flooding, and trimming government agencies to deal with crisis, exhibit the Bush administration’s anti-government bias – and its dangers. For Katrina showed that in time of major emergencies and facing serious problems, the federal government has the most resources to deal with problems and if it is undermined the country is weakened and its very national security is threatened.
Not only did the FEMA fiasco reveal how Bush had put political hacks and rightwing ideologues throughout government and carry out an assault on government itself, but it revealed his personal failings and those of his administration’s policies and ideology as well. As Frank Rich put it:

The worst storm in our history proved perfect for exposing this president because in one big blast it illuminated all his failings: the rampant cronyism, the empty sloganeering of “compassionate conservatism,” the lack of concern for the “underprivileged” his mother condescended to at the Astrodome, the reckless lack of planning for all government operations except tax cuts, the use of spin and photo-ops to camouflage failure and to substitute for action.17

BUSH’S RECONSTRUCTION PLANS: A CORPORATE BOONDOOGLE

Bush’s speech revealed one of the most ambitious reconstruction efforts in U.S. history, a two billion plus dollar effort that would provide a bonanza for the corporations and special interests that the Bush administration serve and that provide their financial support. It is an index of the administrations hubris and lack of shame that they instantly started pushing privatization a la Iraq to deal with the Katrina debacle and put arch-rogue Karl Rove in charge of both the PR and the dividing up the spoils for reconstruction, already going out to the usual suspects.18 The boondoggle exemplifies what Naomi Klein describes as “disaster capitalism” whereby crises like Katrina or the Iraq invasion create situations where corporations have profit from catastrophe (Klein 2007). Indeed, Joe Allbaugh, Bush’s former campaign enforcer and first FEMA chief who packed the agency with political hacks, was already getting contracts for his clients, while no-bid contracts were handed out to Halliburton’s subsidy Kellogg, Brown & Root.19 As Weldon Berger put it:

Rove’s overt involvement… marks the death of any hope that the recovery operation will become something other than a cesspool of cronyism and political pandering. The action manuals will be vote counts, the 2006 electoral map and Republican Party campaign contribution lists. The result will be a hedonistic political and fiscal binge Bremer could only have dreamed of (op. cit.).

Berger recalled that under Paul Bremer’s command in Iraq, at least $16 billion of Iraqi oil money was misplaced, there were numerous no-bid contracts to Bush cronies and scandalous over-billing and corruption, and little accountability to the privatization binges and contracts to the politically connected. In his Jackson Square speech, Bush stressed that he would emphasize “entrepreneurship” and market-solutions to the Gulf Coast catastrophe, a code for supporting corporate allies and cutting-back on regulation and oversight of reconstruction. Moreover, the Bush administration immediately began pushing tax cuts for wealthy investors in the area, eliminating minimum wage requirements and environmental regulation, opening the way for pushing through yet another rightwing agenda, as they did after 9/11, and providing copious contracts and financial benefits for political supporters and allies.
As Naomi Klein points out, Milton Friedman and other neo-cons exploited the opportunity of the destruction of a vast arena of New Orleans’ public schools to replace them with charter schools (Klein 2007: 5ff), embodying Friedman’s belief that public schools were a form of socialism. The rightwing reconstruction also gutted New Orleans strong teacher’s union and public housing provided the right yet another opportunity to seize cultural power.

Yet the spectacle of the devastation and the inadequate response of the Bush administration may block or undercut Bush’s attempts to exploit the tragedy for his own political ends. The media continued to focus intensely on the destruction and hoped-for recovery, more and more people and journalists on the front-line were becoming increasingly sceptical of Bush, and his ratings continued to go south after his Jackson Plaza speech and sketched ambitious plan for reconstruction, and would continue to plunge until the end of his administration when he had the lowest ratings in the history of presidential polling.20

Bush continued to insist that taxes would not be raised to pay for the reconstruction and weeks after the event he still would not concede his planned next round of tax cuts for the superrich, his expensive plans to privatize Social Security, or his deceptive Medicare plans that would provide a bonanza to drug companies. Hurricane Katrina, however, would focus attention on his policies and the outrageous level of federal debt they would incur, while benefiting largely special corporate interests and the rich.

Some speculated that the Katrina catastrophe and the failed Bush administration response signaled the death knell of the pro-market laissez-faire politics that had dominated the U.S. for the past years. It was clear that global warming had contributed to the intensity of the hurricanes and other extreme weather that had been plaguing the world for the past several years. While there was a fierce debate whether global warming or cyclical hurricane patterns were the major cause of the extreme weather, it is likely that both are to blame.21 The Bush administration’s dismissal of the science of global warming and blocking efforts to deal with the problem now appear criminally negligent. In addition, the deregulation that characterized neoliberal politics had been responsible for destruction of the wetlands, which traditionally helped buffet hurricanes and extreme weather, as well as uncontrolled coastal development along the Gulf Coast which contributed to the immensity of the destruction (Brinkley 2006, pp. 9ff).

The Bush administration response, led by Karl Rove, trumpeted out the same old neoliberal policies and made it highly likely that there would be major corruption and political cronyism in Gulf redevelopment. But the intensity of Hurricane Katrina, followed by the potentially devastating Hurricane Rita and future possible destruction of the Gulf by deadly Hurricanes, has led many to speculate that something like a new Marshall Plan, focusing on rebuilding the Gulf Coast guided by environmental restoration and a flood control system like Holland’s, as well as providing housing and jobs for the poor, would be needed to deal with the immensity of the tragedy.

As Hurricane Rita gathered intensity in the Gulf, speculation emerged that George W. Bush was the worse president in modern history, or perhaps the worst ever, and that there needed to be a serious discussion about impeachment.22
There were also reports that Bush had started drinking again, and during September 22 when Rita was scheduled for landfall David Gregory of NBC queried Bush whether his planned trip to San Antonio to observe disaster response efforts in Texas would be “disruptive for first responders.” Bush turned away in anger, revealing what appeared to be a wired telecommunication device on the back of his jacket, and then suddenly turned around and told reporters that “there is no risk of me getting in the way, I promise you.” But then suddenly Bush’s trip to San Antonio was cancelled and he went instead to Colorado to monitor reports, and when it appeared that the effects of Hurricane Rita were not as dire for Texas as feared, he flew to Austin and San Antonio for photo events.

Reporting on Bush’s day, the September 24, 2005, NBC News noted that political commentators believed that going to so many places and making so many pronouncements could lead to Bush being seen as a “political opportunist,” and indeed there was an air of desperation to the president’s frenetic activity in response to Hurricane Rita after his much criticized feeble response to Katrina. For those who cared to see, Bush’s behavior indeed revealed him to be concerned with image rather than substance and unable to provide effective leadership and communication.

Although Hurricane Rita wreaked havoc on the North Texas and Southwestern Louisiana Gulf Coast, it did not, as feared, destroy any major cities and was less intense and destructive than predicted. Nonetheless, the cumulative damage of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita were severe and a major battle loomed over differing proposals for reconstruction. In the aftermaths of the hurricanes, the media focused on personal stories of suffering and destruction, moments of heroism, and recovery putting on a back burner again questions of who was responsible and the differing positions on reconstruction. It came out that reports of robbery, rape, mayhem, and death in early days after Katrina were exaggerated and the death toll was less than predicted, although the destruction was evident and overwhelming.

AFTERMATH

On the first anniversary of Hurricane Katrina there were many media retrospectives and analyses and a large majority of articles, TV reports, and commentaries documented how little reconstruction had taken place, with the hardest hit poor areas still rubble. Less than half of New Orleans’s residents had returned, more than one-third of the garbage had not been picked up, and federal agencies had only spent $444 billion of the $1110 billion in congressionally approved funds. Bush’s political popularity began a steady decline with what was perceived as his inadequate response to Hurricane Katrina and continued to spiral downwards into the 30% range never to recover. As Frank Rich summed it up:

The storm… was destined to join the tornado that uprooted Dorothy in The Wizard of Oz in the pantheon of American culture…. The Wizard could never be the Wizard again once Toto parted the curtain and exposed him as Professor Marvel; Bush, too, stood revealed as a blowhard and a snake oil salesman (see Rich 2006, p. 199).
George W. Bush’s entire life has been grounded in monumental failures and perhaps the Katrina spectacles will be seen in retrospect as his Waterloo. The spectacles of Iraq, inadequate response to Hurricane Katrina and the specter of crony capitalism in its aftermath, on-going Republican party scandals involving leaders of the House and Senate and key figures in Bush’s and Cheney’s staff, and the systematic breaking of US and international law through the illegal rendition and torture of suspects, violation of civil liberties, illegal wire-taping, and other crimes of the administration raised the specter of impeachment—but the Bush/Cheney regime survived the ever-erupting and escalating media spectacles of scandal and corruption that have characterized the regime.

Of course, the financial meltdown of Fall 2008 and evident failure of Bush/Cheney administration and neoliberal policies ensure Bush’s reputation as one of the most disastrously failed presidents in U.S. history. Yet whatever the judgment over the Bush/Cheney administration, it is clear that the Hurricane Katrina media spectacle put on display the glaring inequities of race and class that define the U.S. in the new millennium during the rightwing Republican regime. The inability of the federal government to respond to the catastrophe called attention not only to the failures and incompetence of the Bush/Cheney administration, but also the crisis of neoliberalism whereby the market alone cannot provide for the needs of citizens and deal with acute social problems and natural disasters. As Henry Giroux argues (2006), Katrina also called attention to a “politics of disposability” whereby certain people are deemed disposable and not worthy of care and help. Market capitalism in the era of neoliberalism has been increasingly predatory with groups of poor people ready to be disposed and pushed aside. The biopolitics of inequality and disposability was put on full display in the Katrina spectacle and may be one of the most important after-effects of the tragic episode.

NOTES

1 For an excellent initial overview of the storm and the government failed response, see Walter M. Brasch, “SPECIAL REPORT: ‘Unacceptable’: The federal response to Katrina,” September 12, 2005 at http://www.smirkingchimp.com/article.php?sid=22719. For an engaging documentary on Hurricane Katrina, that takes on the question of the breaching of the levees, see Spike Lee, When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts, HBO films, 2006. For a historical overview of problems of storms and flooding in the New Orleans area and day to day account of the Katrina tragedy from August 27 to September 3, 2006, see Brinkley 2006.


5 Mark Benjamin, “The crony who prospered. Joe Allbaugh was George W. Bush’s good ol’ boy in Texas. He hired his good friend Mike Brown to run FEMA. Now Brownie’s gone and Allbaugh is living large.” Salon, September 16, 2005 at http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2005/09/16/allbaugh/index.html. Allbaugh was known as Bush’s enforcer during his stint as Texas governor, allegedly being in charge of sanitizing the records of Bush’s National Guard service that suggested


7 See Jonathan S. Landay, Alison Young and Shannon McCaffrey, “Chertoff delayed federal response, memo shows,” Knight-Ridder News Service, September 13, 2005. The report indicates that Chertoff, not FEMA Director Michael Brown, was in charge of disaster response and delayed federal action. Chertoff was a lawyer and Republican partisan who participated in the Whitewater crusade against Bill Clinton and had no experience in either national security or disaster response when Bush made him head of the Department of Homeland Security.

8 On the issue of race and the history of New Orleans, see Mike Davis, “The Struggle Over the Future of New Orleans,” *Socialist Worker*, September 21, 2005 collected online at [http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?SectionID=72&ItemID=8784](http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?SectionID=72&ItemID=8784).

9 NBC circulated a disclaimer after the show saying that West did not speak for the network and departed from his prepared speech, and also cut the clip from a West coast broadcast three hours later, but the initial video circulated over the Internet and was immediately incorporated into rap songs and anti-Bush websites; see the video clip at [http://politicalhumor.about.com/od/hurricanekatrina/v/kanyewestbush.htm](http://politicalhumor.about.com/od/hurricanekatrina/v/kanyewestbush.htm) (accessed September 23, 2005) and see Chris Lee, “Playback Time. Two rappers use Kanye West’s anti-Bush quote to launch a mashed-up Web smash,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 23, 2005: E1.


11 On Bushspeak, see Kellner 2005.

12 At a National Prayer Service in the Washington Cathedral, aimed to replicate a spectacle held right after the September 11 terror attacks, Bush presented the Katrina tragedy as an act of God. See Amy Sullivan, “Bush scapegoats God; After weeks of blaming others for the disastrous response to Katrina, Bush used the pulpit at the National Prayer Service to blame the biggest scapegoat of all: God.” Salon, September 17, 2005 at [www.salon.com/opinion/feature/2005/09/17/god/print](http://www.salon.com/opinion/feature/2005/09/17/god/print).

13 Bush appointed Francis Fargos Townsend to head a federal investigation which turned out was the wife of his Andover and Yale roommate and a rightwing ideologue; see the discussion in “Fact Check” at [www.cjrdaily.org](http://www.cjrdaily.org) on September 20, 2005.


20 In one of the last polls taken on the Bush/Cheney presidency, Bush’s favorability ratings kicked in at an all-time low 22%, while Cheney’s favorability ratings came in at another record low of 13 percent. See the discussion of the New York Times/CBS News poll in Michael Duffy, “As Dick Cheney Prepares to Depart, His Mystery Lingers,” *Time*, January 19, 2009 at [http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,1872531,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,1872531,00.html) (accessed on January 21, 2009).


On reports and images that showed Bush wearing what appeared to be a communication wire during the 2004 presidential debates and on other occasions, see Douglas Kellner, “Media Spectacle and the Wired Bush Controversy,” Flow, Vol. 1, Nr. 3, at http://jot.communication.utexas.edu/flow/?jot=view&id=473.


REFERENCES


