Pedagogy and Praxis in the Age of Empire
Towards a New Humanism

Peter McLaren and Nathalia Jaramillo
Pedagogy and Praxis in the Age of Empire...
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We dedicate this book to Rachel Corrie and Iman Darweesh Al Hams.

We want to acknowledge the courageous struggle of compañera/os around the world who are working to build a better tomorrow.
Pedagogy and Praxis in the Age of Empire
Towards a New Humanism

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THE RISING TIDE OF BELLIGERENCE

PELLEY: Do you think you owe the Iraqi people an apology for not doing a better job?

BUSH: That we didn’t do a better job or they didn’t do a better job?

PELLEY: Well, that the United States did not do a better job in providing security after the invasion.

BUSH: Not at all. I am proud of the efforts we did. We liberated that country from a tyrant. I think the Iraqi people owe the American people a huge debt of gratitude, and I believe most Iraqis express that. I mean, the people understand that we’ve endured great sacrifice to help them. That’s the problem here in America. They wonder whether or not there is a gratitude level that’s significant enough in Iraq.

PELLEY: Americans wonder whether . . .

BUSH: Yeah, they wonder whether or not the Iraqis are willing to do hard work necessary to get this democratic experience to survive. That’s what they want.

Retrieved January 15 2007 at:


THE SOCIAL HISTORICAL PANORAMA UNFOLDING BEFORE US IS IN TUMULT, ranging from confused and paranoid to lethally vengeful. It is as if all of human decency has been sucked into a vortex of political imbroglio. The Bush oligarchy—poster children for torture and endless war—has become an agglomeration of dangerously co-habiting parasites, enforcers, ‘deciders’, tyrants and calumniators—Captain Queegs with Blackberrys—operating out of a den of McCarthy-era redivivus. Here in the U.S. the aroma of corruption is as pungent as the flopsweat that graced the storied jowls of an on-camera Richard Nixon. Fear has become the big stick to wield in the service of patriotism, priming us with images and expectations of imminent attack, blurring the distinction between the imagined and the occurrent, desultory and carefully orchestrated threats, and producing through a sultry atmosphere of impending doom political lassitude among the hapless multitude. De-politicization has become the official hallmark of patriotism, presaging a quickening of fascism. Condi Rice with her team of Kobolds circles the globe, reveling in her new found ‘warrior princess’ role as she unsuccessfully assures her sepoys around the world that the United States
government does not use torture and is protecting the interests and integrity of the free world.

An air marshal guns down a fleeing mentally ill patient who claimed he had a bomb and Fox News commentators salivate over how well Homeland Security is doing its job. During a visit to Vietnam, President Bush announces that he wants to apply the lesson the United States learned after its war on Vietnam to the war in Iraq—that this time we shouldn’t quit until we win. Doesn’t our leader realize that the peoples of the so-called Third World are fed up with occupying armies undertaking a high-tech pillaging of their resources under the specious cover of valiant attempts by the United States (or other foreign nations) to ‘export democracy’ to underdeveloped states (underdeveloped in this sense meaning ‘overexploited’) struggling to break the chains of tyranny? He probably does, but then again, as John Bellamy Foster points out, “even the likelihood of being caught up in a long-term civil war, may be considered ‘worth it’ to a ruling elite playing a high-stakes gamble for control of world oil and global hegemony” (2006, p. 6). The mainstream media don’t cover the real story—they dare not. They hold up the public face of the war, shamefully refusing to address for the American people the larger geopolitical issue of securing the Middle East and its oil for the empire of capital. You don’t have to be a Marxist to figure it out. As John Bellamy Foster reveals, “U.S. and British corporations are now positioned to gain control over the production of, and to reap huge profits from, the Iraqi oil reserves through so-called “production sharing agreements,” which will give them rights to the exploitation and sale of the bulk of Iraq oil reserves for decades to come—even allowing them to book this oil as ‘assets’ in their accounts” (2006, p. 3). Not only is the global-imperial projection of U.S. power—a type of U.S.-centric imperialism in a unipolar world—a brute reality after the demise of the Soviet Union, but it is now directed at potential future rivals (Foster, 2006, p. 5).

It wasn’t that long ago that Americans discovered that maintaining the free world comes at a large financial as well as ideological cost. Earlier in the year, it became alarmingly evident that the Bush administration paid conservative pundit Armstrong Williams $240,000 while he served as a media “talking head” to help persuade African-Americans to back President Bush’s No Child Left Behind law. More recently it has been made clear that purchasing journalistic mercenaries is not only a major part of a larger and well-fueled government scheme to blur the line between legitimate news reporting and political propaganda here in the United States (as part of PSYOPS operations within the homeland itself), it is also an integral part of the so-called democracy-building efforts in foreign countries such as Iraq.
It has been recently disclosed that the Pentagon hired a propaganda-making firm to cultivate in the Iraqi media an impression of grass-roots support on the part of the Iraqi people for the American occupation. Mr. Rumsfeld may have closed the Office of Strategic Influence, but he kept it functioning covertly by outsourcing work to contractors such as the Rendon Group and the Lincoln Group, which won additional multimillion-dollar Pentagon contracts for media analysis and a media operations center in Baghdad, including “damage control planning.” Jacob Weisberg (2005) draws the distinction between propaganda (“a calculated and systematic effort to manage public opinion”) and spin (i.e., “lying and routine political dishonesty”). He notes that “when the Bush administration manufactures fake ‘news,’ suppresses real news, disguises the former as the latter, and challenges the legitimacy of the independent press, it corrodes trust in leaders, institutions, and, to the rest of the world, the United States as a whole.”

On the European front, young people of African and Arab descent have recently given the ‘bien nacidos’ of France the political megrims in their chosen response—the torch—to decades of criminal misrule, the ghettoization of immigrant youth and the imperialist practices of entitlement carried out by the capitalist elite. Back home, capitalist exploitation, and its loyal ally, racism, while unwanted guests at the banquet known as the American Dream, are still the primary reasons why the poor are excluded from eating at the same table as their more economically fortunate counterparts and forced to scramble for whatever scraps are made available to them elsewhere. Whites are likely to forget why more folks of color don’t join them at the table of good fortune unless a crisis of national proportion occurs. And such a crisis has occurred and continues still.

Pedagogy and Praxis in the Age of Empire is a collection of essays that we have written during such a time of crisis in the United States and in capitalist societies worldwide, what we could call a crisis of global capitalism. We call it a crisis of global capitalism because, as Foster argues, “Since the 1970s the dominant reality of the U.S. and world economy has been that of stagnation and financial explosion…the general condition of the U.S. economy and world economy as a whole has been slow growth and rising unemployment/underemployment and excess capacity” (2006, p. 7). We have described in these pages the condition of neoliberalism that includes stagnating wages, an economic surplus at the top, a redistribution of income and wealth toward the upper classes, limited profitable investment opportunities within production as a result of overcapacity in key industries worldwide, a shift toward financial speculation and the financialization of the global economy—a condition that Foster explains from the perspective of monopoly capital theory, and which he calls the phase of
global monopoly-finance capital (Foster, 2006, p. 7). We agree with Foster that “capitalism, as witnessed particularly its naked imperialism abroad, is increasingly degenerating into a kind of barbarism, where war, brutality, torture, misery, superexploitation, all sorts of draconian measures against the poor, border security, anti-immigration, gated homes, racism, extreme environmental devastation threatening whole populations and even the globe, nuclear proliferation (and hence the danger of more terrible wars), etc., are on the rise” (Foster, 2006, p. 9). We have been able to gauge (modestly) such a crisis not only during our various journeys over the past five years of working together—which took us to Palestine, Israel, South Africa, Cuba, and numerous times to Venezuela, Colombia and Mexico—but also during our visits with radical teachers, scholars and social activists in the United States and Canada. We view the bulk of our work not as grist for advancing our careers in the academy but as a way of participating in a wider political project in which we attempt (to echo Henry Giroux) to make the pedagogical more politically informed and the political more pedagogically critical. We have included some photos of various moments in our work.

When Hurricane Katrina struck the coast of Louisiana and began to devastate the city of New Orleans, we began to see this event as metonymical of the crisis of race and class in the United States, and watching the coverage of Katrina was a pedagogical lesson in itself for us and for our compañeristas and students. We wrote about this event for several publications and then decided that it would make a good introduction to our book in so far as it provides an expansive context for many of our arguments about the persistence of racism and class warfare in the United States. We decided to begin our book with our commentary on Katrina because, while we agree with Lawrence D. Bobo, writing in the *Du Bois Review*, that “Katrina raised powerful questions about American democracy and the racial divide,” we also concur that “the sort of deep democratic dialogue...about poverty, racism and the obligations of government that many had hoped for in Katrina’s wake has not come about” (2006, p. 2). Bobo remarks that “Americans responded to Katrina on the basis of existing attitudinal, ideological, and political predispositions” resulting in an “absence of profound change in response to dramatic events connected to major social cleavages”—a situation that is unfortunately and tragically “consistent with other major episodes in U.S. race relations” (2006, p. 2). As Bobo also notes, media and politics scholars have shown “how the media portrayed Katrina disaster victims strongly influenced the amount of assistance that their fellow Americans thought victims should receive” (2006, p. 2). Lack of expedient government assistance to the victims of Katrina certainly impacted
how African-American women “bore the brunt of the storm’s wrath” and contributed to how single mothers and poor and elderly women would become the most “readily visible victims of Katrina” (Bobo, 2006, p. 4). In many ways the response of the U.S. government to the victims of Katrina is emblematic of the fate of those oppressed by the racist and imperialist practices of global neoliberalism.

We are not surprised to learn that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has reported that millions of Americans who cannot put food on their table—who describe their condition as a state of hunger—are to be (euphemistically and shamefully) re-named as existing in a condition of “very low food security” (Williamson, 2006). The term “hunger” has been expelled because, according to a sociologist for the USDA, it is “not a scientifically accurate term” (Williamson, 2006). Hunger, after all, refers to a “potential consequence of food insecurity” due to a “prolonged, involuntary lack of food.” Welcome to the future.

**KATRINA: EMBLEMATIC OF AMERICA’S WAR WITH THE POOR**

On Sunday, August 28, less than 48 hours before Katrina struck, residents of New Orleans were starting to get antsy. While they may not have been prepared for that devastating *rara avis* among mother nature’s storehouse of storms, they were even less prepared for the human callousness that would follow in its tremulous wake—especially those among the 112,000 people in New Orleans who were without any private form of transportation and had to bear the full brunt of the havoc wreaked by the category 4 hurricane (at one stage a category 5 just prior to making landfall). While they were angry at remarks made by David Brooks in the *New York Times* that “most of the ambitious and organized people abandoned the inner-city areas of New Orleans long ago” (Bacon 2005a, 14), implying that those who could not leave deserved their fate, they were hardly surprised.

Coiled like a viper in the hurricane’s eye, the Specter of Capitalism unleashed its pent-up supply of hell upon its historically most vulnerable victims: impoverished African-Americans (before Hurricane Katrina, the unemployment rate among Gulf residents was among the nation’s highest, with 18 to 30 percent of people in the region living under the poverty line — twice the national rate— and with Blacks in New Orleans suffering 35 percent poverty rate; Bacon 2005a). In the 1950s and 1960s Americans witnessed attacks on African-Americans by lynch mobs, police dogs and fire hoses; but the assault on African-Americans during Hurricane Katrina was of a different sort. It was an attack on hope: Hope that the United States had overcome its historical legacy of racism, hope that educated
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journalists had moved beyond portraying life in the United States with brutally overt or subtle racist stereotypes, hope that capitalist democracies had made necessary headways in ending poverty, hope that the government could muster whatever it took to care for its poor and dispossessed in a time of emergency. Katrina sounded the death-knell of such a hope, a hope born in the crucible of the civil rights movement of earlier—and seemingly much more unreal—times. Not only has the immoral geography of the country been illuminated for the world to see but the very meaning and purpose of American capitalist democracy has been called into question. Of course, there was no absence of media pundits (such as Kathleen Parker of the Orlando Sentinel and Jeff Jacoby and Kathy Young of the Boston Globe) eager to defend Condolezza Rice’s condemnation of the idea that the slow response to Katrina had to do with racism (Bacon 2005b, 13).

Despite the protestations of Condi and the Bush gang, many of the most cherished American values have imploded in the sinkhole of global capitalism. More than just a series of untenable contradictions accumulated in successive moments of bureaucratic neglect, Hurricane Katrina has become emblematic of white supremacist free-market democracy, prompting an international reassessment of the status of the American Dream. Much of this reassessment echoed The Human Development Report, an independent report commissioned by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). Its 2005 edition (370 pages) written by Kevin Watkins, the former head of research at Oxfam, investigates inequalities in health provisions inside the US as part of a survey of how inequality worldwide is retarding the eradication of poverty. We learn, for instance, that the infant mortality rate has been rising in the US for the past five years—and is now the same as Malaysia. We learn that America’s black children are twice as likely as their white counterparts to die before their first birthday and wealth creation does not necessarily mean eradicating or even lessening poverty, because eradicating poverty means providing people with full access to health, education and other social provisions. What we don’t learn is that we have known about similar conditions for decades and longer and we still seem incapable of overcoming them. It’s much easier to blame and demonize the victims, and that’s exactly what happened in the case of Hurricane Katrina. One stunning illustration of political naiveté and lack of even a rudimentary understanding of the relationship between race and class can be found in remarks by journalist Kathleen Parker of the Orlando Sentinel:

Parker…expressed surprise that an African-American woman told her ‘matter-of-factly’ that Bush doesn’t care about people ‘who look like me’ because the woman was ‘an elegant professional woman clearly not of the Al Sharpton school of reactionary politics’ (Bacon 2005b, 13).
The act of God that began like a susurrus of wind in the eerie darkness swelled into the piercing, piteous wail of a banshee, a blackened sky draped over the city of New Orleans like the funeral cowl of the unshriven dead. The gale force winds seemed to arch the stars across the horizon like a diadem of death. For many, all would soon be lost in the impending chaos.

A moral panic ensued when the public was fed horror stories about what it was like to be trapped in the inferno of black anarchism, stories refracted in the cesspool of racism and fear that lies deep within the structural unconscious of a nation founded upon violence, slavery and genocide: African-American ‘wildlings’ gang- raping women and children, looting stores of liquor and drugs, shooting at ambulances, police patrols, and rescue helicopters, and throwing the city into a vortex of violence and anarchy—stories that were later confirmed as untrue. (We are not arguing that no looting took place but we challenge the sentence recently handed down by a judge who condemned three convicted looters—who stole beer, liquor and wine—to 15 years of prison.). Fox News correspondent Steve Harrington described New Orleans as the “Wild West”, while Fox News correspondent Phil Keating characterized a fire visible in some news footage as being set “perhaps for no apparent reason but just for the joy of arson” (Yassin 2005, 11). An article in USA Today was unembarrassingly headlined “The Looters, They’re Like Cockroaches” (Yassin 2005, 10). Fox News’ Viagra posse leader, Bill O’Reilly, revealed that it was not blood running through his veins but the muck that lined the city’s drainpipes when he repugnantly opined in the Florida Sun-Sentinel on September 10, 2005:

That ‘the suffering’ of ‘the poor in New Orleans’ should be a lesson: ‘Connect the dots and wise up. Educate yourself, work hard and be honest…If you don’t…the odds are that you will be desperately standing on a symbolic rooftop someday yourself. And trust me, help will not be quick in coming.’ And in O’Reilly’s view, help should not necessarily be offered…: ‘The white American taxpayers are saying: “How much more do we have to give here?”’ (Bacon, 2005b, p. 13)

For all the descriptions in military terms about New Orleans being bruited about like “war zone”, and “theater of operations” where marauding hordes of looters supposedly overturned every act of human civility, it is interesting to note the Seattle Times’ report concluding that there was no more violence in New Orleans during the aftermath of Katrina than in any other typical week (Bacon 2005b, p. 14). Many stories of violence—such as snipers firing at rescue vehicles and police being attacked by mob violence—were later discredited (Bacon 2005b; Yassin 2005). The New Orleans Times-Picayune, on September 26, 2005, discovered an official count
of only four violent deaths citywide for the entire flood period, which was typical of a city that anticipated approximately 400 homicides in 2005 (Yassin, 2005, p. 9). According to Jaime Omar Yassin (2005),

As the Washington Post observed days after the hysteria began to die down (9/15/05), National Guard troops were surprised to encounter ‘virtually no violence’ at the Convention Center made infamous by countless unsubstantiated media reports of raped babies and wanton murder. Likewise, on the streets, correspondents such as Nick Robertson (CNN Daybreak, 9/5/05) seemed almost disappointed that ‘I haven’t been asked to wear a bullet-proof vest’ by authorities. While there had been some violence, and looting that could only have been motivated by profit, there were apparently no raping/murdering/looting gangs, nor was there any substantial devastation wrought by violence and looting. (p. 12)

In contrast to many prevailing media reports at the time, it would have seemed that the only way to enter the urban hell to help the wayworn victims of Katrina without turning into stone would be to send in Snake Blisken with a rogue team of ex-convicts specially trained in urban warfare. In fact, food was actually airlifted and dropped into the city when, because of the exaggerated media stories of violence, it was deemed too infested with criminals for rescuers to enter New Orleans safely. The New York Daily News retorted that because “anarchy, Mogadishu-style, is just around the corner if they’re not stopped,” officials “must do whatever it takes to curb the hardcore, armed, violent felons who are making it impossible to save the city,” and who are “a very different breed from desperate citizens who are trying to get food and water” (Bacon 2005b, 14). Of course, it is hard to tell which citizens were trying to acquire food and water when a white couple was described in media reports as “finding provisions” while a black man was described as “looting” (although Jonah Goldberg admitted: “I don’t know what’s in the bag the black guy is tugging along behind him. Perhaps he really did loot the grocery store for more than mere essentials? The white couple found the bread and soda ‘from’ a local grocery store. Did they go in it?”; cited in Bacon 2005b, 14) It is telling that the Daily News evoked the image of Mogadishu (Somalia), one that the American public associates with ‘Blackhawk Down’ fame, a place where eighteen U.S. soldiers were killed in a rescue attempt, and where U.S General Boykin claimed to have taken a photograph of a satanic presence over the city before he went on years later to proclaim George Bush Jr. as God’s choice for the presidency, and to announce triumphantly that the US army sent to occupy Iraq was a Christian army fighting the evil followers of Islam (see McLaren 2005).
Right wing journalist, Jonah Goldberg, who recently replaced leftist columnist Robert Scheer in a conservative putsch at the *Los Angeles Times*, described the survivors of Katrina in the *National Review Online* blog as a different species and inhuman, as a mutant breed that had infested the Superdome—what Goldberg dubbed a “Mad Max/Thunderdome/Waterworld/Lord of the Flies horror show” (Bacon 2005b, 14). Goldberg advised those still trapped in the floodwaters of New Orleans to “hoard weapons, grow gills and learn to communicate with serpents,” “find the biggest guy you can and when he’s not expecting it beat him senseless,” and “protect any female who agrees to participate without question in your plans to repopulate the Earth with a race of gilled supermen.” Allan Breed’s report in the *Cincinnati Post* described “naked babies wailing for food as men get drunk on stolen liquor” and a crowd “whose almost feral intensity” prevented a helicopter from delivering water to victims (Bacon 2005b, 14).

It’s not difficult to imagine William Bennett, America’s former Drug Czar and now popular radio host and television personality, staying home all week, strangely transfixed by the televised images of the looting and chaos, shaking his head in self-righteous contempt, his obscene racist fantasies about bringing crime rates down by aborting the fetuses of New Orleans’ African-American population coursing like a riptide inside his pious brain soured by a frat boy’s impish self-hatred. We imagine that his heart began to palpitate with racial pride upon hearing Governor Blanco’s assurance to the ruling class that they would be saved from savagery: “These troops are fresh back from Iraq, well trained, experienced, battle-tested and under my orders to restore order in the streets. They have M-16s and they are locked and loaded. These troops know how to shoot and kill and they are more than willing to do so if necessary and I expect they will” (Blum 2005). Even New Orleans Mayor, Ray Nagin, ordered the city’s police force of 1500 strong to abandon search-and-rescue missions in order to guard the city from the looters (Blum 2005).

There is never any mistaking the priority given to property rights in capitalist societies. A *Fox News* reporter “boasted that the National Guard and other armed forces, arriving days after the humanitarian crisis had reached critical levels, [and] were ‘highly proficient in the use of lethal force’” (Yassin 2005, 11). CNN’s Wolf Blitzer could hardly contain his excitement that the cavalry had finally arrived when he announced: “eight convoys and troops are on the ground at last in a place being described as a lawless, deadly war zone” (Yassin, 2005, 12). This news also pleased conservative pundit Peggy Noonan, who, writing in the *Wall Street Journal’s Opinion-Journal.com*, announced: “I hope the looters are shot” (Bacon 2005b, 14). Not many Americans knew that members of Blackwater, America’s infa-
rous mercenary army, were also patrolling the streets of New Orleans. Never one to be outdone when it comes to protecting the ruling class from barbarism, Tucker Carlson remarked: “Maybe [the National Guard] should have shot people but they didn’t” (Bacon 2005b, 14). Ann Scott Tyson of the Washington Post on September 6, 2005, wrote a piece called “Troops Back from Iraq Find Another War Zone” that allowed the public to hear from the National Guard itself:

‘Just the smell and feel of a war zone in the city put the soldiers on edge.’

The article, subtitled ‘In New Orleans,’ ‘It’s like Baghdad on a Bad Day,’ featured young Guard soldiers boasting, ‘If we’re out on the streets, we’ll fight back and shoot until we kill them’—though the worst first-hand example of the “violence and looting” that ‘shocked’ the Guard protagonists was the sight of ‘70-year old women in new Nike high-tops’ (Yassin 2005, 12).

Watching images of African-Americans on CNN through Bennett’s “dead seeing eyes” (Henry 2004) confirmed not the common humanity of all those facing overwhelmingly perilous conditions but only his own whiteness and his palpable and pure racial supremacy, signaling to him how horrifying it must be to be non-white.

When, in an unscripted NBC benefit concert, rapper Kanye West exclaimed: “George Bush doesn’t care about black people, ...[America was organized] to help the poor, the black people, the less well-off as slow as possible”, his remarks hit a nerve with people of color throughout the country and they underscored the truism that the poor hit the hardest are disproportionately African-American. They also echoed the observation of philosopher Paget Henry (2004, p. 200), that the condition of African-Americans in the United States reflects a “persistent and long-term inability to recognize the humanity of people of African descent” among the “dead seeing eye of the Western master self” (2004, p. 201). Henry argues that the African does not even qualify as a genuine “other” in the Western dialectic of the master/slave relationship. Hegel made it clear in his own phenomenology that the African is without self-consciousness and was located outside of history and was thus not able to confirm the humanity of the imperial master (Henry 2004).

Despite repeated pleas from Governor Blanco for emergency relief—500 buses, 40,000 more troops, ice, water and food, base camps, staging areas, amphibious vehicles, the return of the Louisiana Army National Guard’s 256th Brigade Combat Team (then deployed to Iraq), mobile morgues, rescue teams, housing, airlift and communications systems—little materialized the week that Katrina made landfall. The situation was so bad that Rep. Charlie Melancon (D-La.), having been pressured to spend time in public
relations stunts with President Bush, wrote Blanco’s staff that Bush’s “entire effort on behalf of the federal government has been reflected in his and his people’s nonchalant attitude to the people of Louisiana. You may give him this to read” (Warrick, Hsu, and Hull 2005).

Those African-Americans who had begged in vain to be rescued on floating rooftops, those who drowned in their attics, those who were abandoned and perished in hospitals and nursing homes, those whose bloated corpses floated down the waterlogged boulevards—all of them bore witness to the reverse mirror image of the violence that was directed at their ancestors, but this time dressed up as an ‘ineffective response’ to an act of God. According to faith-based political theory it was not the place of those affected by the hurricane to question, much less attempt to interfere with an act of God. A number of fundamentalist religious leaders took to the pulpit and declared Katrina an act of holy vengeance against ‘southern decadence.’ According to Rev. Bill Shanks, pastor of New Covenant Fellowship of New Orleans:

“New Orleans now is abortion free. New Orleans now is Mardi Gras free. New Orleans now is free of Southern Decadence and the sodomites, the witchcraft workers, false religion—it’s free of all of those things now, Shanks says. “God simply, I believe, in His mercy purged all of that stuff out of there—and now we’re going to start over again” (Brown and Martin 2005)

Anti-abortion activist Steve Lefemine likened the satellite map of Hurricane Katrina to “the image of 8-week old fetus” and clamored that “God judged New Orleans for the sin of shedding innocent blood through abortion” (Cooperman 2005). Citing “Providence” and judgment against “national sin” Lefemine and his kin washed their hands of the moral and social responsibility to assist our citizens in times of tragedy and rather utilized Katrina to advance their own fundamentalist ideology—a set of beliefs and practices that are increasingly becoming the norm in an evolving ‘Christian America.’

We can imagine an old jazz musician sitting on the damp street corner, unaware of the impact that mold would have on his wheezing lungs in the weeks ahead, staring at a waterlogged saxophone case bobbing in steamy sewer like a bloated corpse that had risen up from the river Styx. We imagine his relatives, working in public sector jobs, being denied a living wage when they are finally allowed to return to the city and then being hit with massive layoffs if they are lucky enough to find a job in the casualized work zone of part-time positions (according to The Bureau of Labor Statistics, as late as October, 500,000 of the 800,000 people evacuated had yet to return home; see Bacon 2005b).
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For those that do manage to return to their eviscerated homes, and who take a close look at the fine print of their hurricane damage insurance policies, they will notice that the policies cover only for wind damage, not water or flooding. So the policies that they paid into in good faith will be virtually useless for many. But for those fortunate enough to have escaped to Texas, well, we have words of consolation from former First Lady Barbara Bush. After visiting the Astrodome stadium in Houston, Texas, where thousands of evacuees from New Orleans and other affected areas were being housed, Barbara Bush chuckled prior to exclaiming: “So many of the people here, you know, were underprivileged anyway, so this is working very well for them...What I’m hearing, which is sort of scary, is they all want to stay in Texas. Everyone is so overwhelmed by the hospitality. Almost everyone I’ve talked to says: ‘We’re going to move to Houston’” (Parry 2005). This was subtle racism, to be sure, but journalist reports of black inner-city residents and white suburban residents offered a disturbing contrast:

There was …a more subtle racism at work in much of the coverage of the actions taken by whites and African-Americans after the hurricane...the response of the poor black victims was consistently portrayed as at best selfish, and at worst antisocial and criminal. Commentators were much more generous in their assessment of non-blacks. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution (9/1/05) and the Pittsburg Post-Gazette (9/13/05), for instance, portrayed residents and business owners from Matarie, Louisiana, a mostly white suburb of New Orleans, as grateful, enterprising and generous. (Bacon 2005b, 15)

We’re not so sure, however, that the actions of the residents of the mostly white suburb of Gretna could be described as “grateful, enterprising and generous” while they forcibly turned away evacuees, sending them back by bus into the city, and firing warning shots in the air. This seems more like the surfacing of Jim Crow’s ugly head than the actions of Mayberry’s Aunt Bee. And the police force was behaving anything like Andy Taylor and Barney Fife. Jacqueline Bacon (2005b) asks why “turning one’s neighbors away when they are in need—even physically threatening them—[is] not deemed selfish, antisocial behaviour” (p. 15).

How many survivors of Katrina were mercifully oblivious to the possible connection between global warming and the intensity of the hurricane, to the racial politics of why a preventative infrastructure was not in place, to the blaming of the victims because they did not heed the warning to evacuate, to the all out war by conservatives against the poor whom they felt were encouraged to remain poor by liberal programs in the first place, to the high stakes politics swirling around them in the national arena,
unleashed by the federal system of “dual authority” established by the US Constitution incorporating both national and state sovereignty? How, centuries later, this recycled quarrel over the division between state and national power would impact the politics of disaster relief was something few could have imagined.

A major hurricane in New Orleans had been listed as one of the most likely major catastrophes to strike the United States, but what occurred when the hurricane struck was as shocking as the hurricane itself. Much of the equipment (high water vehicles, refueling tankers, and generators) that would have been used to help New Orleans was already deployed in Iraq to help slaughter the Iraqi resistance to the occupation. Instead of being used to help the people of the United States during a time of crisis, these men, women and machines were conscripted into the service of Bush Jr.’s bloody war for oil that has brought about for the people of Iraq a free-market ‘democracy’—a malediction that some Iraqi leaders have described as a worse situation than during the rule of Saddam. Noam Chomsky noted that

Bush funding cuts in 2004 compelled the Army Corps of Engineers to reduce flood-control work sharply, including badly needed strengthening of the levees that protected New Orleans. Bush’s 2005 budget called for another serious reduction—a specialty of Bush-administration timing, much like the proposed sharp cut in security for public transportation right before the London bombings in July 2005.

Just six days after Katrina hit, a coalition of low-income groups—Community Labor United—in New Orleans stood resolute and emboldened, demanding that a committee of affected evacuees “actively participate in the rebuilding of New Orleans” (Klein 2005). Concerned that a pack of corporate hyenas would descend onto the area and use federal relief funds to “replace our homes with newly built mansions and condos in gentrified New Orleans,” Community Labor United refused to have its citizens victimized twice over, neither instance which could be attributed to a sacrosanct act of God or the result of minor bureaucratic mismanagement. The citizens claimed rights to the land they once inhabited. As Naomi Klein (2005) observed:

It’s a radical concept: the $10.5 billion released by congress and the $500 million raised by private charities doesn’t actually belong to the relief agencies or the government; it belongs to the victims. The agencies entrusted with the money should be accountable to them. Put another way, the people Barbara Bush tactfully described as “underprivileged anyway” just got very rich.
INTRODUCTION

Unfortunately, but perhaps predictably, reconstruction efforts in the devastated area have not actualized the hopes of the people and we are witnessing—yet again—a return to ‘profit over the people’ in cases when the afflicted expect capitalism’s ardent supporters to at least powder their faces with a bit of humanity. Shortly after the dead calm, the Bush administration declared the region a “Gulf Opportunity (GO) Zone” an ominous designation at best, indicative of the very same policies put into effect immediately following the fall of Baghdad and subsequent criminal occupation of Iraq.

Measures to support the Republican agendas included “suspending rules that require payment of prevailing wages by federal contractors and providing displaced schoolchildren with vouchers—another underhanded blow at the public school system. They included lifting environmental restrictions, ‘waiving the estate tax for deaths in the storm-affected states’—a great boon for the population fleeing New Orleans slums—and in general making it clear once again that cynicism knows no bounds” (Chomsky 2005). The Davis Bacon Act’s protection for workers’ wages (a statute that hails as far back as 1931 that mandates payment of prevailing wages on federally funded construction projects) that the Bush gang had suspended was reinstated only after the AFL-CIO and many community groups organized massive protests throughout the region and the threat of a congressional vote prompted Bush to back down. Similar protests from labor groups have emerged following the department of Homeland Security’s easing of sanctions against employers who hire undocumented workers, unleashing yet another fierce firestorm in the Hurricane’s wake. As a result, the big fat cats of enterprise—Halliburton, Kellogg Brown & Root, and Bechtel—have cashed in on cheap and oftentimes free immigrant labor. Untold numbers of immigrant laborers are being stiffed, going weeks without pay. Non-payment of wages is a violation of federal law but when it affects workers rendered invisible because of their immigration status, no one seems to pay much attention.

The politics of immigration is most definitely affecting immigrant workers now doing reconstruction on the Gulf Coast and they might also inflame existing racial divisions. According to David Bacon (2005a),

the racial fault lines of immigration politics threaten to pit Latinos against Blacks, and migrant laborers against community residents hoping to return to their homes. Community organizations, labor and civil rights advocates can all find common ground in a reconstruction plan that puts the needs of people first. But flood-ravaged Mississippi and Louisiana could also become a window into a different future, in which poor communities with little economic power fight each other over jobs.
Anti-immigrant politicians and common citizens alike are quick to blame immigrant workers for exploiting reconstruction efforts in the washed out region, for cheating the poor and unemployed residents of New Orleans and Biloxi from the much needed opportunity to work, and for changing the racial, cultural and economic demographic landscape of the area. And yet, while the US eagerly accepted assistance in the form of military engineers, doctors and nurses from a Mexican military convoy—the first Mexican military unit to operate on US soil since 1846—dozens of displaced Mexican immigrants from the Katrina’s wake seeking shelter in the safe confines of church basements have been deported with nothing to show for their extended stay in the land of freedom and economic success than the haggard and fetid water-soaked clothes on their backs. The steady flow of people-swapping taking place across states and the US-Mexico border can be perplexing to some. As US border control agents steadfastly hunt down displaced immigrants and shoo them out of the country, hundreds of others from bordering states and Mexico are making their way to the “GO zone.” Within this context immigrant laborers are conceptualized as actively responding to environmental forces and maximizing their individual interests, a view which fails to recognize the state’s role in creating and recreating the conditions for immigrant labor (Burawoy 1976).

Guest worker programs will exploit immigrant labor, and force wages down and communities of color will be forced to compete with each other, sharpening existing race and class inequalities. American Enterprise Institute researchers Kathryn G. Newmark and Veronique de Rugy (2006) celebrate the entrepreneurial opportunities that Katrina has created for the capitalist overhaul of education. A $20.9 million dollar grant from the federal No Child Left Behind charter school program, combined with assaults on the teachers union, can do wonders in bringing about the neoliberal wet dream of a private sector takeover of public education. When proposed tax-free zones for businesses and school vouchers for students take effect, conditions that further enable the exploitation of the poor will have intensified.

Our understanding of Hurricane Katrina needs to be situated within the disciplinary practices of capital and its process of valorization through unsustainable capital-fueled growth and development, overproduction, resource depletion, and ecosystem destabilization and destruction within the capitalist marketplace. We cannot shift our focus away from capitalism’s devastating consequences for the ecosphere as well as the global division of labor and its racialized social relations. Depletion of non-renewable resources, disruption of natural cycles, and waste and pollution are intrinsically connected to capitalist relations of production which in turn have their