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Can We Create Environmental Justice in a Landscape of Tragedy?
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Given an assignment to answer the question – how do we infuse environmental justice into disaster planning? – I have broken this larger question down into several smaller ones. The first, and perhaps the most important, is how can knowledge of past social injustices guide hazards planning? Certainly in New Orleans social injustices have a history deeper than the recent floods. This has engendered a complex set of resentments, mistrust, and acts of resistance that without question influence responses to extreme events such as Katrina. One story, I think, can illuminate the deep set mistrust of government officials and their disaster plans and expose one of the challenges in ensuring environmental justice there. In the spring of 1927 the greatest river flood of record was surging down the Mississippi River valley, blowing crevasses through the levees the length of Arkansas and Mississippi. As it approached New Orleans, the business elite convinced federal authorities to dynamite a hole in the levee below the city. Experience had shown that when the raging river had an extra mouth, the flood would move by New Orleans faster and lowering the flood crest along the city's levees. After a series of carefully executed explosions, millions of gallons of river water surged through the St. Bernard Parish delta wetlands, drowning millions of muskrats and severely disrupting the parish's primary economic activities. It destroyed the livelihoods of the Isleno trappers and the Dalmatian oystermen (Barry 1997 and Gomez 2000).

The fact of the intentional levee breach has resurfaced as an urban myth after each major recent hurricane flood. Following Hurricane Betsy in 1965, residents of the flooded lower Ninth Ward claimed that the Corps had opened gates in the floodwall along the Industrial Canal that inundated their neighborhood. Similar claims followed the savage flooding in the same neighborhood in August 2005. The flooding was real in both instances, and the causation myth had roots in a deliberate act that caused an environmental injustice. The regular resurrection of this urban lore must be taken seriously. It exposes one of the critical weaknesses of the government's efforts to provide a structural protection system. That weakness is a lack of faith in the organization that built the levees. While people may chose to live in its shadow, suggesting greater trust in the structures than their builders, they remain unconvinced of government claims after failure. This hinders effective restoration. Environmental justice demands citizen involvement and involvement requires trust. Planners must consider repairing both the levees and the trust of the citizens in order to achieve environmental justice.

Disparate ideas about what environmental justice (EJ) means also needs consideration. Can the government's environmental justice program mesh with environmental justice as a social movement? EJ became a fundamental part of government actions following President Clinton's 1994 Executive Order (Executive Order 12898). It mandated that federal actions involving the environment had to consider whether poor or minority communities would suffer an inordinately from adverse consequences. Thus the

government approach, as expressed by FEMA's web page (FEMA 2004), is an exercise in factual demographic analysis. Citizens see EJ as a social movement, a quest to not only identify possible susceptible populations and to prevent undesirable outcomes, but like the civil rights movement, it has a higher moral mission to right old injustices. Disaster planners need to expand their definition to at least overlap with the one embraced by citizens.

How do government organizations incorporate citizen desires in to their planning? One of the great failures of the disjunction of meanings occurred in one of the flooded neighborhoods in the upper Ninth Ward long before Katrina arrived. This incident offers an example of how the government failed to weave citizen desires into their planning. In 1986 the U. S. Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) first calculated a hazards ranking score for a closed municipal landfill and the score was well below the threshold for inclusion on the National Priorities List. In 1995 as part of its newly unveiled environmental justice initiative, the USEPA recalculated the hazards ranking score. The site's score rose to an exceptionally high number – due in part to a new methodology. When these new results were in , the neighborhood demanded to know what risks they faced, and they received conflicting responses. State officials downplayed the risk although the Superfund designation suggested otherwise. When the USEPA brought in a group of citizens from an Arkansas Superfund site neighborhood that had been relocated, some New Orleans residents sought a similar resolution – a buyout and relocation. The USEPA adamantly refused the buyout option (Colten 2001).

The government's program sought an accelerated clean up so that residents would have a safe neighborhood. This was a technical fix familiar to the scientists and lawyers who staffed the USEPA. Some residents, on the other hand, sought to distance themselves from what had suddenly been declared one of the worst hazardous waste sites in the country. They questioned the agency findings, its plans, and its actions. They wanted more than *in situ* burial. Since the neighborhood was developed with federal funds, they felt the federal government had placed them in harm's way and had a moral obligation to assist them recoup their investments and evacuate the shadowed ground (Foote 1997). The agency saw a technical remedy as justice. Neighbors of the old dump had become engaged in a social struggle, and wanted a moral, as well as a technical, solution. Government planners need to understand the moral element of popular environmental justice and add that consideration to their technocratic solutions.

Was there an adequate EJ assessment in terms of preparing for hurricanes in the New Orleans region? The Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) disaster planning calls for an analytic approach to EJ. Step one in the FEMA EJ guideline calls for identifying if there are low income or minority populations in the project area. An assessment of New Orleans would show that in 2000 the city's African American population was about 67 percent – well above the statewide average (32%). The poverty level in New Orleans stood at over 18 percent – slightly lower than the statewide average (19.6 %). This cursory inspection would demand that environmental justice considerations had to factor into disaster planning at least when considering race. Hurricane planning documents, however, seem to largely ignore race and poverty. A key hurricane preparedness document prepared in 1994 listed the gross number of "vulnerable" residents, but did not offer any specific assessment by minority populations (FEMA and

USACE 1994, table 3.1). In a section on evacuation, the report noted that surveys showed that Hispanics were likely to “respond to a hurricane threat in a manner similar to the general population” (FEMA and USACE 1994, 4-5). Vietnamese, however, it concluded, might need a greater effort to mobilize. There were no comparable assessments of African Americans – the most numerous minority group in the city. The study also found that about 15 percent of New Orleans residents would rely on public transportation to evacuate – or about 70,000. Perhaps this can be seen as an indirect measure of poverty. From what I have seen, planning never made EJ a full-fledged component of disaster preparations.¹

Would the mere identification of such neighborhoods have alleviated any of the suffering? Righted any of the environmental injustices? The areas occupied by poor and immobile populations suffered inundation disproportionately according to the Brookings Institution (Brookings Institution 2005). To infuse disaster planning with environmental justice agencies need to go farther than mandated by Clinton’s executive order. What are the deep set suspicions that live in neighborhoods subjected to social injustices in the past? What resistance might they offer in the face of a “mandated evacuation”? The 1994 preparation study suggested the Vietnamese might not evacuate with the same speed as other residents who had lived in the area longer (FEMA and USACE 1994). Language and a supposed unfamiliarity with the meteorological events of the gulf were considered the reasons? Might there have been other cultural reasons?

This brings me to my next question. Are there traditional solutions to hazardous events that minority or low income populations can share that will help the population at large cope with hurricanes? The oystermen of St. Bernard and the lakefront fishermen of the nineteenth century all lived in stilt houses – perhaps more modest than modern day beach houses, but similar in their raised stature. How did they cope with hurricanes in these flimsy structures? Raised houses are not a housing form restricted to marsh dwellers and it is not a new concept in New Orleans. Indeed whole sections of New Orleans are replete with houses that have ground level “basements.” Commonly built in the 1920s, they suffered less damage to living quarters than the modern ranch houses of the newer suburbs in the most recent disaster. FEMA also promotes constructing raised houses in flood-prone areas. Environmental justice depends on simple and economically feasible solutions. When solutions are costly, they lead to injustices. By seeking tools for coping with environmental hazards from the communities who have long faced the risk and devised strategies for surviving, they become participants in the planning and partners in the solution.

Finally, how do we convince the minority and poor populations that solutions will be equitable? This is a particularly pressing question in New Orleans where the largely African American lower Ninth Ward residents were kept out of their neighborhood far longer than those from the largely white Lakeview neighborhood. There have been inequities in access from the outset. There may have been good safety reasons, but unequal treatment only adds to mistrust. Also, if plans, as many propose, cordon off the lowest areas as flood retention basins in New Orleans, how will environmental justice be made part of this realignment of land use? Will the 87 percent white St. Bernard Parish be allowed to repopulate without such restrictions? St. Bernard suffered extraordinary flood damage and many residents are figuring out ways to rebuild as fast as possible. Will restrictions extend to neighboring Jefferson Parish with its 77 percent white population? If

not, are they equitable? Jefferson Parish has already largely repopulated. It suffered modest flooding due more to good luck than any superior preparations. It is just as vulnerable today as it was in August 1st 2005. If the next storm overtops the Cat 3 levee system, it could endure extensive flooding in its below sea level neighborhoods. While it escaped destruction by chance, it may suffer during the next big storm and government authorities will have to answer the question – do we treat Jefferson Parish like we did the lower Ninth Ward and New Orleans East. To provide an equitable answer to that question, the same measures taken in Orleans Parish need to be followed in Jefferson and St. Bernard parishes. If houses are razed or raised in one flood-prone area, they should undergo the same treatment in the comparable areas in the adjoining parishes. This will be a huge political challenge and authorities have largely ignored it to date.

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Endnote

1. I have requested additional information from the FEMA official in charge of Environmental Justice for the Katrina response.