

# THE LAST LAST WAVE

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## **Abstract**

Hurricane Katrina was a horrible tragedy. Rather than reprising the obvious pitfalls of governmental response or the dire consequences of social inequalities, however, I pose a series of questions. In particular, I seek to highlight the blind spots and silences that the media frenzy generated. These range from the fate of the Native Americans and the complexity of New Orleans' racial history to the explanatory adequacy of the dominant narrative and the unreflective premise of the reconstruction effort. The precarious state of nature and civilization demands a way to think and act beyond short-term palliatives.

**Keywords:** Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans, Disaster, Indigenous People, Native Americans, Mixed Race, Asian Tsunami, Injustice

## **INTRODUCTION**

As I read reports and reflections on Hurricane Katrina, I was reminded of Peter Weir's *The Last Wave* (1977). In the movie the Anglo-Australian attorney David Burton, played by Richard Chamberlain, becomes immersed in the imagined world of Aboriginal Australia and Aboriginal Dreamtime. Burton's wife Annie's comment encapsulates the chasm between the colonial-settlers and the indigenous peoples: "I am a fourth-generation Australian, and I have never met an Aboriginal before." Burton and his people live in material comfort, navigating the built environment that seems impregnable. In transgressing the divides in his mind—Anglo versus Aboriginal Australia, technomaterial culture versus nonhuman nature—Burton repeatedly envisions an oneiric world drenched with irrepressible water. Burton's people are, however, oblivious of his ominous premonitions. Predictably, it all ends badly: a vast tidal wave engulfs the southeastern Australian coast.

The nightmare of a catastrophic wave is a primordial fear and something of a cultural universal. Flood, in the Old Testament, caused the last near total extinction of the human race. The world of folklore and mythology is replete with tales of terrible destruction. Mythical and surreal though the apocalyptic wave may be, it is also a sheer fact of nature, occurring with fairly predictable frequency, at least from the perspective of geological time. This ineluctable fact of nature is the premise of

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the queries that follow. Let me hasten to preface that I write as an outsider. I pose questions in the hopes that thinking about them may be worth your time.

## WHAT HAPPENED TO THE NATIVE AMERICANS?

We all know that New Orleans is a belated beachhead on the Gulf Coast and an aggressive affront to nature. Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne, sieur de Bienville, was convinced of its divinely ordained future, however, and created the capital of French Louisiana in the highland between what came to be known as the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain (Kelman 2003, p. 4). Bienville's theodicy conveniently overlooked dangerous undercurrents: being surrounded by water may facilitate transportation, but it is also conducive to flooding and other attendant ills of a swampy habitat. It is presumably not from ignorance or irrationality that Native Americans hardly settled in the area that came to be New Orleans. Wisdom literature, encapsulated in oral narratives, is empirical insofar as it does not expunge the experience of the past. Unlike the European colonial settlers who were curiously confident in their ahistorical outlook, Native American folklore transmitted tales of past disasters (McKie 2006).

It is ironic, therefore, that some of the less-heralded victims of Hurricane Katrina were Native Americans. Neither the frenzied media nor the laggard FEMA paid much attention to the more than 20,000 Native Americans (including at least six federally recognized tribes) in the New Orleans area (*Democracy Now* 2006). Driven from their traditional habitat, the Bayou Larouche Band of Biloxi-Chitimachas, for example, arrived in the Louisiana bayou only in the mid- to late-nineteenth century. Rooting themselves in the region, some became unwitting and unknown victims. Many Americans, for whom the Katrina disaster was the most discussed issue in 2005, remain oblivious to the blights afflicting the Native Americans in New Orleans. At the very least, I haven't been able to find much information about the fate—or even the past—of the Native Americans of the New Orleans area.

## IS THE SOCIOLOGICAL STORY—AND THE RACIAL GLOSS—TRUE?

*Slate.com* reported that “the media are ignoring the fact that almost all the victims in New Orleans are black and poor”; Wolf Blitzer noted that the victims were “so poor, so black”; and a headline in the *Washington Post* read: “To Me, It Just Seems Like Black People Are Marked” (Leo 2006). Informed journalists readily resurrected the horrible history of the 1927 flood when the politicians and engineers unleashed the accumulated water on the poor and predominantly Black area of New Orleans (Barry 1997). Though no one suspected that the 2005 disaster was as premeditated as the 1927 tragedy, racial inequality seemed to be at once the cause and consequence of the human tragedy. In this sociological story, governmental neglect was the proximate reason of the catastrophe that predictably harmed the less-privileged people, especially African Americans (Steinberg 2000). Far from being an act of God, the Katrina tragedy was a consequence of all-too-human decisions and inequalities.

Is the sociological story—and the racial gloss—true? Here I am not casting doubt on the persistence of racial inequality or racial discrimination in the United States today, but, rather, asking whether we should expect racial inequality inevitably to manifest itself. Many of the refugees and victims were Black, to be sure, but New Orleans is a city of Black numerical majority. The mortality analysis of Katrina-caused deaths released by the Louisiana state government reported that the propor-

tion of Black deaths was lower than that of the Black population in New Orleans (State of Louisiana 2005). This may well turn out to be wrong or misleading. Yet should we insist on the correctness of our assumption—based though it may be on impressions broadcast by network news—to frame our analysis?

### WHY WERE THE PARTICULARITIES OF NEW ORLEANS, INCLUDING ITS RACIAL HISTORY, DOWNPLAYED?

The sociological story and the racial gloss may turn out to be substantially true. However, to pinpoint the meaning of Katrina to the fundamental fact of Black-White inequality would miss some of the particularities of New Orleans and Louisiana.

In the early nineteenth century, New Orleans was highly heterogeneous. As Alexis de Tocqueville, among others, observed, Native Americans were a visible and vibrant presence in New Orleans. They were, in spite of prejudice and discrimination, accommodated within the matrix of New Orleans life. So, too, for Afro-Louisianans, who exhibited considerable linguistic and ethnic diversity (Kastor 2004, pp. 30–31). Indeed, there was even a sizable group of Afro-Louisianan slaveholders who sided neither with the slaveholders nor the slaves in the Civil War (Genovese 1974, pp. 408–413; 748–749).

Furthermore, in spite of significant differences—caste and class, language or ancestry—a distinct Afro-Creole culture, with its own language and culture, existed (Hall 1992, p. 87). Almost unique in the U.S. experience, cultural and population mixing resulted in a hybrid social form that persisted well into the twentieth century. Although Afro-Creole culture had been in decline—having been integrated into mainstream African American or American culture—its particularities and peculiarities manifested themselves in the post-Katrina dispersal of New Orleans Blacks. What made their refugee status difficult was not merely the sheer fact of displacement, but also their consistent conflation into the category of *Black* or even *American*. In the quotidian matter of food, for example, the refugees' preference for Cajun cuisine—as simple as their taste for spicy dishes—was ignored in favor of the bland fare of the Midwest or the Northwest (Sontag 2005).

Racial and cultural mixing also occurred among Whites. Successive waves of French, Spanish, and American occupation had left distinct cultural inflections on the European population. It would be far from satisfactory, however, to regard New Orleans exceptionalism as a matter of French influence or Cajun culture. There was considerable miscegenation among various European groups, and also among Native Americans and Afro-Caribbeans. Even in the nineteenth century, a steady stream of immigrants from Ireland, Germany, and elsewhere washed up in New Orleans (Tregle 1992, pp. 164–165). The reality of movement is true even for the Cajuns, who are widely believed to constitute the core of New Orleans life. In spite of the common belief in their Bayou roots, they are in fact descendants of the Acadians. Thousands of French subjects were deported from Acadie—from the present-day Canadian provinces of Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, and Prince Edward Island—in the mid-eighteenth century when they refused to swear loyalty to the new British authorities (Jobb 2005, pp. 14–15). The ethnic cleansing of the Acadians led many of them to end up on the Gulf Coast. That is, the core White inhabitants of New Orleans were not so long ago exiles themselves, and victims of political oppression to boot.

Given the diversity among both Blacks and Whites, the strict racial hierarchy that reigned in much of the antebellum South did not always hold sway in Louisiana, and especially in New Orleans. The history of the New Orleans area is not a simple

story of a static hierarchy (Kastor 2004, pp. 227–228). Why do we see our racial history in such simple, often dichotomous, terms?

## WHY DO WE ASSUME THAT WE SHOULD RECONSTRUCT NEW ORLEANS?

To mourn the loss of homeland generates a desire to reconstruct the remembered past in its full glory. Relief efforts seek to restore and resurrect the place that existed before the Katrina disaster. It would be churlish—and, indeed, inhumane—to deny people their acknowledged homeland. When a proposal was mooted to move 4000 Cajuns living in coastal towns and villages inland, the reaction of Clifford Herbert spoke for many of his peers: “My grandfather would roll over in his grave if I sold our land. . . . He’d haunt me the rest of my life” (Longman 2005).

The ideology of roots—so cherished among Americans of all stripes—stands in stark contrast to the past reality of branching and breaking out. Even the Cajuns, as we saw, were relatively recent arrivals to the New Orleans area. The long history of human mobility—literally, waves of people on the move—is undeniable, and yet many civilizations, even some on the brink of collapse, cling to their imagined roots. Many people would seem to prefer to dig deeper rather than to deracinate themselves to safety.

The desire for roots often goes hand in hand with a reckless disregard for nonhuman surroundings. In the long stretch of geological time, the true denizens of the place we call *New Orleans* were the waves and the swamp that kept Native Americans from establishing themselves in such an inhospitable environment. Given our wanton exploitation of natural surroundings (can we truly ignore the effects of global warming, of an ongoing environmental degradation?), our coastal existence is everywhere, not just on the Gulf Coast, in peril. What unites the Asian tsunami and Katrina is the simultaneous demonstration of ferocious nature and fragile civilization.

Living precariously, on the precipices of destruction, human beings are almost always oblivious, blithely forgetful of past natural catastrophes and blissfully unaware of ongoing manmade destructions. In *The Last Wave*, Burton’s car radio ominously and prophetically exudes water. What did the flooding projected on the television screen mean to us? Unlike Burton’s tidal wave, any serious account of New Orleans remarked repeatedly on the past floods and the inevitability of a future recurrence. Yet we assume that New Orleans should be restored.

One of the pioneering and prophetic plans for the New Orleans area, Martín Navarro’s *Political Reflections on the Present Conditions of the Province of Louisiana* (1780), called for greater trade and immigration when Louisiana was Spanish. What is interesting is that Navarro wrote the treatise after two horrible hurricanes had devastated the city and demoralized its inhabitants that year (Kukla 2003, pp. 40–43). After a massive fire that destroyed the city of some 5000 people in 1788, Navarro, along with Governor Miró, would write that “one could see nothing more than ruins smoldering and debris” in New Orleans, but they nonetheless went on to conclude that “the loss . . . by the fire is of slight consideration” (Kukla 2003, pp. 36–37). As a mid-nineteenth-century traveler, Henry Murray observed: “New Orleans is surprising evidence of what men will endure, when cheered by the hopes of an ever-flowing tide of all mighty dollars and cents” (Kelman 2003, p. 7). One may very well celebrate the indomitable spirit of the settlers—that is the American way. Whether by divine providence or capitalist imperative, there is always an incentive to build a great city. In so doing, amnesia holds sway. At the beginnings of European civiliza-

tion, after all, lies the myth of Lethe: the meandering stream of forgetfulness. We continue to drink from that rude river, not so differently from when Virgil wrote: “Souls fate/Has destined for other bodies scoop up water/From the Lethe, and drink long oblivion.” Quite clearly, Miró and Navarro drank from Lethe. Why don’t we drink from the river of memory? Why don’t we try to remember and to learn how to avoid the same mistakes?

### **WHY DO WE PERSIST IN RELYING ON SHORT-RUN, PRIVATE RELIEF?**

The sobering reality is that the virtual counter tide of aid and relief often exacerbates the problems at hand. Effective infrastructures cannot be erected overnight; private donations, however necessary, often work at cross-purposes. Aid may, in the worst-case scenario, absolve the negligent leaders and uphold the corrupt systems. In the case of New Orleans, whatever the reality of those who suffered, it seems clear that the well off are in a better position to receive aid. Indeed, a proposal by Mayor Ray Nagin explicitly called for reconstructing the richer areas first (Beaumont 2006). *Reuters* reported that many of the contracts for reconstruction projects were going to firms with ties to President Bush and Vice President Cheney (*USA Today* 2006). In any case, New Orleans cannot count on people’s attention to last much longer. Surely, the American public will turn to other places, other tragedies.

### **FORGETFULNESS IS THE DEGREE ZERO OF DISASTERS**

The high tide unleashed by Hurricane Katrina washed away, at least from American consciousness, the Asian tsunami that destroyed the coastlines around the Indian Ocean in December of 2004 (Human Rights Center 2005). Over 240,000 people died, and a million more were displaced in that disaster. It may be impolitic to compare such grim statistics, but one cannot fail to be struck by the disproportionate attention—both of the media and of aid—that Americans paid to Katrina, with its estimated toll of perhaps a thousand deaths. Each human life is equally worthy and dignified, but this is a principle that is difficult to generalize, especially when cold statistics must compete with compelling stories. It became well-nigh impossible for the tragedy wrought by another sort of wave. The October 2005 earthquake in Kashmir (Pakistan) unleashed a truly monumental destruction, including an estimated 100,000 deaths. However, it registered but a few drops of notice in the U.S. media. Is it that the tragedy was poorly televised? Don’t we care about “dry” waves? Or is it that Muslim Pakistan stretched our sympathy?

### **WHY DO WE COMPARTMENTALIZE DISTINCT WAVES AS DISTINCT PROBLEMS?**

It is true, as Judith Shklar (1990) astutely pointed out, that we tend to differentiate misfortune from injustice. Misfortune, as acts of god or nature, attracts our empathy (it could happen to any of us), but injustice, as acts of man or civilization, does not. In this line of thinking, we are wont to react much more empathetically to natural, not artificial, disasters. But why do we draw such a strict boundary line? Whether we consider the Asian tsunami or Hurricane Katrina, it would be difficult to expunge the human elements that contributed to deaths and destruction. In the disaster-prone history of New Orleans, the single greatest incident of mortality was the 1853 epidemic of yellow fever that decimated the population (Kelman 2003, p. 89). Would

we have been less empathetic about a deadly wave of diseases? Whether the continuing quagmire in Iraq or the devastating genocides in central Africa, I assume that, for the vast majority of hapless victims, the wave of destruction must surely come as something akin to a force of nature.

## WHY DON'T WE RESPOND MORE READILY TO INJUSTICES?

About the only answer I am sure of is that the last wave will not be the last.

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