

NEW ORLEANS IS NOT THE EXCEPTION

Re-politicizing the Study of Racial Inequality¹

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Abstract

Although political science provides many useful tools for analyzing the effects of natural and social catastrophes such as Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath, the scenes of devastation and inequality in New Orleans suggest an urgent need to adjust our lenses and reorient our research in ways that will help us to uncover and unpack the roots of this national travesty. Treated merely as exceptions to the “normal” functioning of society, dramatic events such as Katrina ought instead to serve as crucial reminders to scholars and the public that the quest for racial equality is only a work in progress. New Orleans, we argue, was not exceptional; it was the product of broader and very typical elements of American democracy—its ideology, attitudes, and institutions. At the dawn of the century *after* “the century of the color-line,” the hurricane and its aftermath highlight salient features of inequality in the United States that demand broader inquiry and that should be incorporated into the analytic frameworks through which American politics is commonly studied and understood. To this end, we suggest several ways in which the study of racial and other forms of inequality might inform the study of U.S. politics writ large, as well as offer a few ideas about ways in which the study of race might be re-politicized. To bring race back into the study of politics, we argue for greater attention to the ways that race intersects with other forms of inequality, greater attention to political institutions as they embody and reproduce these inequalities, and a return to the study of power, particularly its role in the maintenance of ascriptive hierarchies.

Keywords: Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans, Race, Gunnar Myrdal, Alexis de Tocqueville, Intersectionality, Federalism, Political Science, Inequalities, American Exceptionalism

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INTRODUCTION

On August 29, 2005, the levees in New Orleans were breached after being pounded by Hurricane Katrina, leaving 80% of the city under water. A few days later, more than 7,000 political scientists settled into two conference hotels in Washington, D.C., for their annual meeting. Amidst the hotel lobby chatter about job opportunities, publication travails, and other assorted professional issues, television sets in the background carried news reports depicting the devastation in New Orleans, providing a sharp, even surreal, contrast to the sights and sounds of the conference. As the devastation wrought by the storm and the broken levees became clear, many attendees watched the reports with a mixture of shock, horror, sadness, anger, and helplessness. Others tried to apply their political expertise to attempt to understand the government's response to the disaster, and to devise strategies to help those hurt by the hurricane's aftermath. In many ways, American politics scholars were as taken off guard by New Orleans as were certain members of the Bush Administration by the patterns of extreme inequality exposed by the disproportionate impact of the hurricane on marginalized groups, including African Americans, poor and working-class people, and women.

The hurricane is, in many ways, a dystopian but tailor-made case study that provides gruesome illustrations of seemingly benign concepts such as path dependence, clientelism, "issue-attention cycles," delegation theory, and pluralism that are so central to the study of American politics. But Katrina also offers political scientists an important opportunity to reflect on the tools that we might add to the analytic frameworks that have often emphasized apolitical notions of rationality and instrumentality. For instance, while the subfield of racial politics is thriving in political science, race and racial inequality continue to be regarded by the broader discipline as external to and separate from the "true" objects of political study, such as Congress, courts, bureaucracy, and political behavior. Explanatory and methodological tools that emphasize power and inequality, for example, might have prompted us to anticipate better the scale and scope of the events in New Orleans. The patterns of inequality exposed by the hurricane demonstrate that mainstream political science would do well to de-marginalize and integrate the insights that have been developed by students of the politics of race, class, and gender. In addition, the study of these multiple systems of inequality should itself be re-politicized by connecting it to larger political forces in American life through a recognition that it is through politics that categories such as race are formed, and through politics that racial and other hierarchies are reproduced, maintained, and challenged (Bell 1992; Dawson 2000; Gilroy 1987; Omi and Winant, 1994). Although concepts such as race are indeed artificial constructs rather than scientific categories (Appiah 1996; Gilroy 1987), Hurricane Katrina reminds us that the inequalities resulting from such constructs are real, that they are embedded in the actual workings of political processes and institutions, and that they can have severe consequences. Moreover, while what happened in New Orleans clearly demonstrates that race continues to structure American inequality in significant ways, it also reveals that racial inequality cannot be understood independently of other axes of inequality, such as class and gender. Rather than suggesting that the significance of race has declined (Wilson 1978), an examination and contextualization of the effects of Katrina makes salient the ways in which racial, economic, and gender inequalities are and always have been intertwined in ways that exacerbate the unequal status of disadvantaged subgroups of marginalized groups.

EXCEPTIONALIZING RACE

The scenes of devastation and inequality in New Orleans suggest an urgent need to adjust our lenses and reorient our research in ways that will help us to uncover and unpack the roots of this national travesty. Yet, it is by no means clear that the hurricane will have the long-standing or paradigm-shifting impact that seems warranted. As we write in early 2006, the memory of Hurricane Katrina has already receded in the minds of many both inside and outside the academy. By the time this article goes to print, New Orleans will very likely have had a “successful” Mardi Gras celebration and local municipal elections, signaling to many Americans a certain closure—a positive ending to the horrors of early September 2005. Analogous events in the past that have briefly drawn the nation’s attention to racial inequalities in the United States have tended to fade quickly from public memory. It was only a little more than a decade ago that Americans were glued to their television sets by the events that unfolded in the aftermath of the courtroom acquittal of a group of White police officers who savagely beat Rodney King on the shoulder of a Los Angeles freeway, prompting a violent rebellion that raged for days. Then, as now, media attention to the racial dimensions of the event stimulated a public debate about race and inequality. Just as CNN news reporter Anderson Cooper solidified his reputation by speaking on behalf of devastated New Orleans, ABC’s Ted Koppel had previously roamed the streets of South Central Los Angeles reporting on the vast racial disparities in our urban communities. Just as hip-hop star Kanye West made national headlines when he accused George Bush of not caring “about Black people,” in 1992, Sister Soulja received national attention for telling African Americans to riot in White neighborhoods instead of their own.

The short-lived character of American attention to the inequalities laid bare by incidents such as Hurricane Katrina, the Rodney King beating, or the allegations that many African Americans were disenfranchised in the 2000 election is due in large part to the impulse (within both American society and the discipline of political science) to exceptionalize these episodes. Treated as exceptions to the “normal” functioning of society, such incidents certainly serve as crucial reminders to scholars and the public that the quest for racial equality is still a work in progress. Dealing with these events as dramatic exceptions rather than as signals of enduring and endemic social, political, and economic inequalities, however, suggests that racial, gender, and class inequalities matter, but only sometimes. Treating such events as isolated incidents perpetuates the idea, popularized by Gunnar Myrdal (1944), that racial inequalities are the products of vestigial and irrational prejudices antithetical to the authentic and fundamental tendencies of the American creed of liberalism. By failing to address power or to treat inequalities as integral to the structures and functions of U.S. politics and political institutions, interpreting inequalities instead as exceptions further distances us from devoting the attention, comprehensive efforts, and far-reaching remedies that are necessary to address and eradicate them.

New Orleans was not exceptional; it was the product of broader and very typical elements of American democracy—its ideology, attitudes, and institutions. At the dawn of the century *after* the century “of the color-line” (Du Bois 1903[2005], p. 43), the hurricane and its aftermath highlight salient features of inequality in the United States that demand broader inquiry and that should be incorporated into the analytic frameworks through which American politics is commonly studied and understood. To this end, we suggest several ways in which the study of racial and other forms of inequality might inform the study of American politics writ large, as well as offering a few ideas about ways in which the study of race might be

re-politicized. To bring race back into a study of politics, we argue for greater attention to the ways that race intersects with other forms of inequality, greater attention to political institutions as they embody and reproduce these inequalities, and a return to the study of power, particularly its role in the maintenance of ascriptive hierarchies.

TOCQUEVILLE, MYRDAL, AND THE TREATMENT OF RACE AS AN “ANOMALY”

Though oft debated and heavily critiqued, the dominant portrayal of the United States within political science is that of a nation characterized by its liberal ideological creed and by its deeply rooted support for individualism, democracy, tolerance, and equality of opportunity (Huntington 1981; Walzer 1992). According to this account, popularized by Alexis de Tocqueville (1832 [2001]) and Gunnar Myrdal (1944), racism is a regrettable exception to the otherwise liberal tradition, an exception that is rooted in irrational prejudice among individuals rather than embedded in political institutions, ideologies, or more complex social relations that sustain hierarchies and inequalities. Neither Tocqueville nor Myrdal ignored issues of race and racism, yet both treated issues such as slavery, segregation, and racial violence directed by Whites towards Blacks and Native Americans as exceptions to more fundamental features of American politics.² For Tocqueville, these exceptions were deeply bothersome and warranted many mentions and a separate chapter of his book, but they did not compromise his central story about America as a nation distinguished primarily by its egalitarianism and liberalism (Smith 1993). Myrdal's arguments in many ways followed Tocqueville's, through portraying racism as an exceptional situation to the otherwise liberal and egalitarian American creed. Irrational prejudice, Myrdal argued, led White Americans to abandon their more typical commitments to tolerance and individual equality. Viewing racial prejudice as individual and anomalous, he expected that, with education and awareness, racial prejudice would eventually dissipate and the resulting enlightenment would enable the dominant liberal consensus to triumph. Thus, in the Myrdalian account, the attitudes and behavior of individual actors were the source of America's racial problems, and any solution necessarily involved changing these attitudes. Progress toward equality would begin once White Americans shed their prejudices of the mind and aligned their attitudes and behavior with their professed values.

Myrdal's influence cast a wide shadow in the years after the book's publication, not only in academia, but in U.S. politics and society as well, evidenced by the incorporation of his ideas in the Supreme Court's famous *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision declaring racial segregation unconstitutional. Beginning in the late 1960s, however, Myrdal's thesis was challenged by widespread racial unrest and massive opposition to efforts aimed at advancing racial equality. The report of President Lyndon Johnson's 1968 Kerner Commission, for example, laid less blame for the unrest on racial attitudes than on political institutions and economic inequality, finding that “white institutions created it [racism], white institutions maintain it [racism], and white society condones it [racism]” (National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders 1968, p. 512). Armed with this report as evidence of the futility of changing “hearts and minds” as the solution to racial and economic inequalities, Marxists and Black nationalists demanded radical (rather than liberal) solutions that targeted the core institutions and structures of U.S. political and economic institutions (Horton 2005; Kim 2000b; Omi and Winant, 1994). The report's findings also

helped to open the door to a vibrant literature on urban politics within political science, as a number of scholars argued for a more structural understanding of racial inequality that took account of the potential for Black empowerment (especially in large urban areas) but also accounted for the constraints placed on further advances in racial equality by federalism, de-industrialization, and demographic changes, among other factors (Carmichael and Hamilton, 1967; Holden 1973; Katznelson 1976; Preston et al., 1982; Reed 1999; Walton 1972, 1973).

In spite of these interventions, the discipline of political science largely retained the Myrdalian “race relations” paradigm that emphasized the disjuncture between individual racism and the American creed rather than focusing on institutions, structure, and power as critical sources of America’s racial strife. In doing so, the field has continued to treat racial inequalities as largely psychological phenomena, rather than acknowledging race as a political construct that was created and has been deployed in order to pursue power and maintain control. The same is far less true in fields such as sociology, anthropology, history, and philosophy. Each of these disciplines has come to emphasize processes of racial construction and formation as diachronic changes that have resulted from decisions made by political actors in the pursuit of power (Fields 1982; Foucault 2003; Gilroy 1987; Holt 2000). In doing so, these disciplines have politicized race and racism in a way that mainstream political science has not.

The Myrdalian exceptionalist or “anomaly” thesis (Hochschild 1984) was notable, particularly at the time when it was written, for its acknowledgment of racism and other axes of American inequality in a discipline that often pays them little heed (see, however, Bunche 1936a, 1936b; APSA 2004). Moreover, it is important not to deny or diminish the rhetorical power of exceptionalist arguments as an impetus for civil rights reforms in the United States. It is no doubt for this reason, after all, that activists from Frederick Douglass to Martin Luther King, Jr., to Marian Wright Edelman (and even the American Political Science Association (APSA) Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy) have taken Americans to task by pointing to the gaps between the *theories* of American equality and liberty and the *realities* of U.S. racism and inequality. They have used these arguments to make powerful political critiques of American democracy which have led to important efforts to narrow the gaps between theory and practice (Dawson 2001). But while rhetorically potent and crucial as a strategic political argument, the exceptionalism paradigm is limited as an analytic framework within which to assess and understand the full scope of American racial inequality. As Paul Gilroy explains, treating racism as exceptional suggests that it is “akin to a coat of paint on the external structures of social relations which can be scraped off if the right ideological tools and political elbow grease are consciously applied to the task” (Gilroy 1987, p. 11). If the problem is treated as superficial, structural changes are not seen as necessary.

The exceptionalism paradigm is not limited to examinations of racial inequality; its underlying assumptions inform assessments of most structural inequalities in U.S. society, including economic inequality, gender-based inequality, and the position of gay, lesbian, and transgender people in the United States. For example, commenting on the aforementioned recent APSA Task Force’s report (2004), which found increasing economic and political inequality, Frances Fox Piven reminds us that “none of this is new. While inequalities have increased during the past three decades, they have increased during earlier periods in American history. This is *normal* politics in the United States, sometimes worse, sometimes better” (Piven 2006, p. 43; emphasis added). Economist Paul Krugman makes a similar point in describing the post-World War II American economic landscape, arguing that “the middle-class America

of my youth is best thought of not as the *normal* state of our society, but as an interregnum between Gilded Ages” (Krugman 2002, p. 62; emphasis added). In this view, the inequalities exposed by Hurricane Katrina ought not to be seen as exceptional moments, but rather as an example of the expected results of the “normally” vast disparities within U.S. society. Considered in this way, explaining the brief regimes of greater equality between racial, class, and gender orders becomes a central task, and recent work has made important contributions by explaining why, how, and under what conditions periods of racial equality do actually occur (Klinkner and Smith, 1999; Skrentny 2002).

The race exceptionalism thesis is by no means ubiquitous, and scholars have also engaged in rich, textured, and complex debates over the roots and political meanings of racial and other forms of inequality. Dianne Pinderhughes (1987), Adolph Reed (1997, 1999) and Michael Dawson (2001) have detailed the history and variegated contours of Black political thought and debate from Sojourner Truth, W. E. B. Du Bois, and C. L. R. James to Ralph Bunche and Oliver Cromwell Cox. Their examinations make clear that there have always been alternatives to the political science mainstream regarding notions of racism, liberalism, and democracy, and these alternative accounts reject the Myrdalian notion that racial discrimination is anomalous and antithetical to authentic American liberalism. Their research, as well as new scholarship that has sought to place ideological discourse that occurs inside and external to the Black community within a structural analysis of politics, de-centers the exceptionalist and psychological approaches to understanding inequality (Reed 1999; Thompson 2005; Walton and Smith, 2000). A small but increasing number of political scientists have been informed by interdisciplinary approaches to the study of race and have incorporated ideas about racial formation and the political construction of categories such as race and gender (Kim 2000a; Marx 1998; Nobles 2000; Sawyer 2006). Rogers Smith (1993) and critical race theorists (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Harris 1993; Bell 1992) have shown that illiberal and racially hierarchical ideas and values stem from traditions that are deeply embedded in the basic fabric of American institutions, law, and legal thought.³

EXCEPTIONALISM, INSTITUTIONALISM, AND PUBLIC REACTION TO HURRICANE KATRINA

The differences between an exceptionalist and an institutional or constitutive understanding of the role of race in American politics are reflected in Americans’ responses to the way Hurricane Katrina was handled by the federal government. In particular, sharp racial divisions are evident in public assessments of the Bush administration’s efforts to help Katrina’s victims, and these divisions serve as an indicator of the ways in which broader structural inequalities and political institutions and policies shape Americans’ views of race-based inequalities. Data from a poll conducted by the Pew Research Center soon after the storm show that many more African Americans (85%) than Whites (63%) believed that President Bush did not do “all he could to get relief efforts going quickly.” Moreover, race also shaped perceptions about why the response was as slow and inadequate as it was. The poll results suggest that a vast majority of African Americans, but very few Whites, agreed with Kanye West’s charge that “George Bush doesn’t care about Black people,” and that America is set up “to help the poor, the Black people, the less well-off as slow as possible.” Echoing West’s sentiments, the Pew poll found that two-thirds of Blacks (66%) believed that the government response to the hurricane would have been faster if “most of the victims had been White,” compared to less than one-fifth (17%) of Whites.

The disjuncture between Black and White responses to these questions demonstrates the important role of the institutional and structural determinants of individuals' experiences and perceptions of the government's response to Hurricane Katrina. Perhaps most importantly, these public opinion data point to the racial gaps in the extent to which structural elements are identified as important by members of the public. White respondents interpreted the Pew survey question about the role of race in response to the disaster as a Myrdalian question about whether overtly racist attitudes held by government officials had led the government to ignore Black residents of New Orleans intentionally, leaving them to suffer on purpose. This understanding is captured in First Lady Laura Bush's denunciation of West's allegations as "disgusting," and her statement that "President Bush cares about everyone in our country." Within this line of reasoning, unless President Bush, FEMA director Michael Brown, and the Louisiana National Guard had expressed overt hostility towards African Americans, and unless that hostility had led them to make explicit decisions to avoid helping or rescuing Black victims of the hurricane, no racial discrimination would have occurred, and, consequently, there would be nothing to be learned from an examination of the role of race in understanding the response to and effects of the hurricane.

The responses of African Americans, on the other hand, point to a different understanding. For Black respondents, the role of race in Hurricane Katrina was much broader, more entrenched, and far more subtle than a question of whether individual government officials held racist attitudes and acted in intentionally discriminatory ways. Though not disconnected from concerns about whether government officers harbored negative feelings about Black people, whether intentional acts of discrimination were committed by individuals and government agencies, or from the facts of the hurricane itself, the answers of Black respondents reflect an understanding of the *unexceptional* nature of racism and an appreciation of the causal role played by political institutions in structuring and perpetuating racial inequalities *regardless* of the racial attitudes, motivations, and affect of government officials. From this perspective, the racialized impact of Katrina, though clearly more severe than anything in recent memory, was not exceptional. Instead, the response to and effects of Hurricane Katrina are illustrative of a long history in which political institutions have been structured in ways that marginalize the needs of African Americans, and during which seemingly race-neutral policies have actually been very specifically designed to disadvantage them, whether through provisions that excluded Black workers from social welfare protections or the use of "redlining" and other techniques that served to exclude Black Americans from government subsidies (Katznelson 2005; Mink 1998; Williams 2003). Some of these practices have resulted from the racial animus of individual actors, but many have not, and focusing on the actions and attitudes of individuals, while thinking about the practices as exceptional instances, obfuscates both the role of institutions and the ways in which multiple configurations of structural inequalities shape and constrain the life chances and opportunities of marginalized groups. While these constraints are at work every day in the normal functioning of society, disasters such as Hurricane Katrina lay bare the effects of intersecting and compounded inequalities in a particularly stark and salient manner. It is to this point that we now turn.

INTERSECTIONAL AND CONTEXTUAL APPROACHES TO INEQUALITY

Storms and natural disasters always hit marginal groups in society harder than its other segments. It is notable that President Bush, who had initially resisted acknowl-

edging the disproportionate impact of Katrina on low-income and Black residents of New Orleans, finally felt compelled to recognize “the legacy of inequality” which contributed to the devastating outcome. Similarly, Eric Klinenberg’s (2002) recent book about the Chicago heat wave of 1995 shows the myriad ways in which African Americans suffered most extensively from the record temperatures that summer because of poor housing conditions, lower levels of access to medical facilities, less attention from the police, fire departments, and paramedics, and inadequate levels of urban infrastructure designed to handle such emergencies.

Along similar lines, the compounded effects of the intersection of race and class inequalities were brought most visibly to the fore by the national and international media in the days following Katrina. In the aftermath of the storm, women, many of whom were the primary caregivers for children and elderly parents, were vastly overrepresented among those in New Orleans’ shelters. The gender imbalance in the effects of the flooding reflects both the gendered norms of family relations and the stark empirical reality that women in the United States are more likely than men to live below the poverty line. Similarly, the elderly and disabled faced some of the most severe horrors of Katrina due to poverty, as well as the physical difficulties involved in evacuating quickly. The social devaluation of these populations no doubt also contributed to the fact that a disproportionately high number of them died when rescue missions proved difficult.

An intersectional approach that takes into account multiple forms of marginalization such as race, class, gender, geography, and disability is therefore helpful in understanding the effects of the hurricane. Such an approach recognizes that important inequalities persist between dominant and marginalized groups, but also draws our attention to the social, economic, and political effects of overlapping inequalities *within* marginalized groups (Crenshaw 1991; McCall 2001; Strolovitch 2007). Combining an intersectional lens with structural and institutional analyses allows us to understand the interaction of multiple axes of inequality and power—in particular the different configurations of inequality as they vary along the lines of race, gender, and class—at work in structuring the response to and effects of the disaster in the context of New Orleans’ status as a majority-minority city (67% of residents are African American) dominated by a low-wage, service, and tourist economy in which 28% of residents live below the poverty line. Anticipating the effects of this multi-dimensional and structural problem would have allowed policymakers to arrange for transportation to help the estimated 100,000 car-less residents to leave the city as the storm approached.⁴ Instead, the plight of these residents was not even on the radar screen of most government officials or agencies, from the president down to the mayor of New Orleans. Rather than pinning the blame on race, class, or gender, New Orleans makes clear that all of these dimensions were at play simultaneously in structuring the effects of the hurricane, and demonstrates that we cannot understand the disaster without a truly intersectional, context-sensitive, and multimethod approach (Reed 2005; McCall 2001, 2005).

The intersectional approach also highlights the role of the U.S. welfare state in structuring the effects of the storm. In comparison to those of most other advanced industrialized democracies, the U.S. welfare state is small and ungenerous. This situation is the result of fundamental structural features and inequalities in the American political system. In particular, the combination of the exploitative race and labor system of “Southern paternalism” (Alston and Ferrie, 1999) and the institutional features of an “underdemocratized” American state worked together to exclude African Americans’ political voice and to sustain a one-party system in the South. The result is the least generous welfare state in the Western world (Amenta 1998;

Esping-Anderson 1990). Southern states are even less generous, which contributed to the widespread poverty of New Orleans residents (estimated at 28%, of whom an estimated 84% are African American).

Another example of what comes to light using an intersectional, institutional, and race-conscious approach are the systemic racial and class inequalities in northern industrial cities such as Chicago and Detroit. Cities such as these excluded and discriminated against Black workers for generations.⁵ These exclusions, combined with racially inequitable federal and local housing policies, the structure of local political institutions, political and economic incentives, and demographic changes such as White flight, came together to create extremely concentrated poverty among poor and working-class African American residents (Hirsch 1998; Massey and Denton, 1993; Sugrue 1996; Venkatesh 2000; Wilson 1996). Together, the legacies of race and class inequality, spatially concentrated poverty, and the structure of local political institutions set the context for the inadequate local, state, and federal response to the Chicago heat wave of 1995 (Klinenberg 2002). As was the case in New Orleans a decade later, similar inequalities, political institutions, and policy legacies set the context for the inadequate intervention, resulting in the disproportionate number of deaths among poor and elderly African Americans.⁶

In these ways, combining an intersectional analytical framework with a focus on the structure of political institutions helps to reveal the ways in which patterns of exclusion have hampered the will and the ability of government efforts to respond to crises. U.S. political institutions have played a central role in structuring the capacity of the government to alleviate inequalities and respond to crises. It is to two central aspects of these institutions—federalism and majoritarianism—that we now turn.

RACE AS EMBEDDED IN CONSTITUTIONAL INSTITUTIONS: FEDERALISM AND MAJORITY STRUCTURES

The limitations of Myrdalian exceptionalism are also evident when American political institutions are forced to contend with issues of race and racial inequality. From a Myrdalian perspective, constitutionally mandated U.S. political institutions are widely understood as democratic and essential features of liberalism and democracy. The Constitution is treated as the foundation of democratic equality, and as the source of the central tenets of liberty, equality, and electoral representation. From this perspective, while the Constitution initially included provisions that codified racial discrimination and enabled slavery (such as the infamous “3/5” clause), these provisions were eventually nullified by passage of the Civil War Amendments, and the Constitution was brought into line with its more “essential” commitment to equality.

When these fundamentally democratic institutions are confronted by conflicts over race, these institutions often become strained beyond their capacity. In the most extreme case, such strains led to a civil war, while in less extreme but more frequent cases these pressures have resulted in political realignments. The most common result, however, is the breakdown of democratic processes. As Dianne Pinderhughes writes, “when political institutions handle racial issues, conventional rules go awry, individuals react irrationally, and constitutional rules are violated” (Pinderhughes 1987, p. 261).

The events in New Orleans capture much of this reality. When the levees broke, the state and federal governments quickly became taxed seemingly beyond their respective capacities. FEMA utterly failed, and rescue operations were stalled often

hundreds of miles from those in need, leaving the city occupied by only victims and news reporters, and prompting governments from Cuba to France to offer financial and medical aid. News accounts pointed the blame at many individuals. Federal politicians blamed state and local politicians; the mayor of New Orleans called for the federal national guard; Kanye West blamed George Bush; and just about everyone (except George Bush, initially) blamed Michael Brown of FEMA.⁷ In the end, Brown—someone few Americans had ever heard of prior to New Orleans—became the fall guy for the Bush Administration and for the nation. Subsequent discussions of the events in New Orleans have led to demands for official investigations into the allegations of widespread corruption, incompetence, and lack of political will on the part of politicians.

Few accounts take issue with the claims that the Bush Administration failed to respond to the crisis, and that local authorities were consequently overwhelmed and faced with scarce resources. In the aftermath of the storm, it was also exposed that the Bush Administration had done much in the preceding years to undermine the capacity of New Orleans to survive a hurricane of such magnitude. In addition to exacerbating economic problems through cuts in funding for infrastructure and jobs in cities such as New Orleans, the Bush Administration also dramatically cut spending for federal projects and agencies such as the Army Corps of Engineers, among whose tasks it was to shore up U.S. infrastructures more generally, including the fragile levees needed to protect New Orleans from flooding. Soon after the storm, it was brought to light that public officials had for years ignored repeated warnings by scientists, engineers, academics, and journalists that New Orleans was ripe for such a disaster. Many studies had presented detailed evidence that the levees were not strong enough to withstand a level-four or five hurricane, that efforts to reinforce it had been de-funded, and that the marshlands that had provided natural protection for the region were being degraded by the oil and real estate industries. In 2004, social historian and urban theorist Mike Davis forecasted on a blog almost precisely the chain of events that eventually unfolded in the Gulf. A similarly prescient article appeared on the front page of the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* only three years prior to the disaster. Decades of cutbacks on social spending, environmental deregulation, and urban renewal decapitated the government to the point of inefficacy.

Understanding the role of individual actors is important in order to understand which efforts are most likely to improve conditions in New Orleans and other U.S. cities. It is also imperative to hold politicians accountable for the poor planning, corruption, and disregard for so many individuals in need, which exacerbated the effects of an inevitably devastating storm. Explanations that focus on individual failures, without providing an institutional context, however, obscure the effects of political institutions and the legacies of specific political choices. Many of these legacies are bipartisan and long-standing, and many reflect the structure of American democracy, from its constitutional foundations to the manner in which powers inherent in that structure have evolved over time. They also let the institutions off the hook: to explain the events of New Orleans in terms of individual failures is to ignore how the institutions are themselves culpable. Institutions do not simply have momentary breakdowns during racial crises; they create these crises by structuring U.S. politics in ways that enable the maintenance of racial inequality. Consequently, blaming individuals or even temporary institutional failure does not go far enough in helping us to understand why it was that a disproportionate number of the poor in New Orleans were African American, or that African Americans in New Orleans were disproportionately poor. What we watched unfold on our television sets was not an accident, but the institutionalized result of centuries of concerted decision

making by political actors at the local, state, and national levels, going back to the days of slavery and continuing up to our current political moment.

The inequality revealed in New Orleans was the result of a series of long-term “rational” decisions made by individuals who were following the norms and incentives of the political institutions within which they operated. Some of these decisions were made during critical periods of policymaking by the federal government, particularly during the periods of the New Deal, the Great Society, and the Reagan Revolution, but also during the decades since then and encompassing the current Bush Administration. During the New Deal period, in particular, the federal government created a revolutionary set of government agencies and laws that placed the government squarely in the lives of all Americans. At the same time, these policies were weakened by the need of the Roosevelt Administration to gain the legislative support of conservative southern Democrats, resulting in laws that provided explicit exceptions for the discrimination against African Americans and other racial minorities, in addition to vesting individual states with the responsibility to enforce and interpret many of these laws (Bunche 1936b; Katznelson et al., 1993). By failing to promote a national civil rights standard as they advanced social welfare, labor, agricultural, and housing reform, the programs created significant disparities among the beneficiaries of the policies (Lieberman 1998; Massey and Denton, 1993; Quadagno 1994; Weir 1988). Because they were to be implemented at the local level, many national policies were left open to individual discrimination, and, as a result, Black and minority workers were often excluded from labor unions and welfare protections, while being “redlined” out of the possibility of receiving housing and development loans (Frymer 2004; Lipsitz 1998; Mink 1998; Williams 2003). Hampered by the lack of federal control, these policies quickly suffered from too few resources, poor management, and discriminatory decisions. Subsequent backlash from politicians has since exacerbated the initial problems in policy design by promoting “law and order” at the expense of spending on social welfare. These campaigns have only further exacerbated economic and racial disparities in wealth, leading to increased degrees of racial segregation, and creating vast racial disparities in the nation’s prison populations (Gilens 1999; Wacquant 2001).

Again, none of this is accidental—these policy decisions are products of governing institutions that were initially created and continue to function in response to racial considerations. Some of these institutions were designed to maintain racial hierarchies, and others were designed to avoid potentially divisive national conflicts over race. In either case, our governing institutions reflect the desires of the founders to avoid conflicts over civil rights (particularly for Blacks) and, thus, enable the maintenance of racial inequities. At the Constitutional Convention in 1787, southern Whites maintained an effective veto power over proposals for institutional designs that they perceived as threats to slavery (Finkelman 1996). Although the Civil War ended the compromise between northern and southern interests over slavery, the institutions born of this compromise have proven stalwart. The implications of institutional designs such as the protection of slave-owner interests through the creation of the Senate, the Electoral College, the Full Faith and Credit Provision, and the Commerce Clause all remain significant for explaining present-day inequality.

None of these institutions has been used exclusively to prevent racial equality, and there have been moments where each has proven useful in promoting civil rights. Nonetheless, as the founders intended, such features continue to place significant limits on the extent of civil rights and economic redistribution in the United States. Over two hundred years after their creation, these institutions continue to prevent confrontations over—and solutions to—inequalities, particularly those based

on race. They provide opponents of civil rights with a powerful, legitimate, and seemingly “race-neutral” narrative through which to stymie progress on this front. Moreover, because these institutions continually privilege White (and often specifically conservative White) voters, they persistently enable a discourse and political agenda that prioritizes White interests. To illuminate the close relationship between race-based inequalities and political institutions, we need to look not only for when race is on the public agenda and seemingly the source of disruption, but also when institutions—following their original design—successfully keep race off the agenda. The inequality that we saw in New Orleans was in many ways a long-term result of institutions performing as they were originally designed and, as a result, working to inhibit efforts that attempt to remedy inequality. Below, we focus on two institutions—federalism and majoritarian electoral laws—to illustrate how the underlying features of these two seemingly benign structures continually serve to limit significantly efforts to eradicate racial, economic, and gender inequality.

Federalism

Many prominent scholars have emphasized federalism’s significance for civil rights, specifically for African Americans, but also for women, LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people, and the poor. The powers of individual states under federalism to restrict the national government from acting to regulate many (and arguably any) aspects of society that are not specifically enumerated powers of the national government have enabled local elites to resist federal efforts to promote social welfare provisions (McConnell 1966), as well as national standards of labor and civil rights. During the civil rights movement of the 1950s and ’60s, the impediments of states’ rights led William Riker (1964) to emphatically declare that federalism’s chief purpose was to deny civil rights to African Americans. Certainly during the twentieth century federalism has served as one of the principal terrains on which civil rights proponents and opponents fought. These battles led to a series of compromises that provided a legacy of bifurcated public policies that were “universal” in some areas of the country and race-specific in others (Mettler 1998; Brown 1999; Lieberman 1998). Southern segregationists continually defended inequality under the guise of the Tenth Amendment and demanded constitutional protections for states to enforce their own versions of civil rights. Only in the 1960s did supporters of national policies seem to attain the upper hand, helped by Supreme Court decisions that enabled Congress to prohibit discrimination in private settings by relying on a nationalist interpretation of the Commerce Clause (e.g., *Katzenbach v. McClung* 1964). More recently, however, the issue of “states’ rights” and federalism has been resurrected by conservatives who desire a rollback of the New Deal and Great Society policies. Numerous states in all regions of the country—from the South to California—have led efforts to reverse civil rights and redistributive programs in the areas of welfare, affirmative action, and school and housing desegregation.⁸ The concern that this has for racial equality has recently led Congressional Black Caucus member Jesse Jackson, Jr., to introduce constitutional amendments that would provide protections in areas including education and voting rights, among others, in order to guard these rights from opponents who invoke states’ rights to advance their causes (Jackson, Jr., 2005).⁹

If states’ rights were merely a contemporary problem impeding efforts to eradicate inequality, it might be easy enough to resolve in the short term. Federalism, however, has been embedded with issues of racial hierarchy for much longer. Whether or not the national government should have the capacity to intervene in state and

local affairs was an issue of primary importance at the nation's naissence. At the time, clashes over race and labor—specifically, debates about the slave trade, the maintenance and expansion of slavery into American territories, and the status of Blacks more generally—were the *sine qua non* of the conflicts between federalists and anti-federalists at the founding of the nation (Rakove 1996). Southern political elites argued that the federal government should have no authority over the governance of state institutions and culture; these arguments were constitutionally protected in the Tenth Amendment. After the Civil War, these rights were reasserted and their defenders were victorious in their attempts to defeat federal efforts to promote racial equality through a series of civil rights laws and the creation of the Freedmen's Bureau. In decisions such as the *Slaughterhouse Cases* (1873) and the *Civil Rights Cases* (1883), the Supreme Court relied on states' rights narratives to impose a vision of the Constitution that provided liberty through local autonomy. An important reason that the states' rights agenda succeeded in the Supreme Court, Pamela Brandwein (2000) argues, is that its supporters could point to constitutional and institutional definitions of the freedom as embodied in the Tenth Amendment and in Supreme Court precedents; in contrast, pro-civil rights advocates had to invent a new American tradition, one that was easily portrayed by opponents as "radical," invasive, and antidemocratic.

States' rights largely held their sway, from the time of the infamous decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) just before the turn of the twentieth century up until the Warren Court decisions in the 1950s and '60s. As mentioned above, even the national efforts of the New Deal era were conducted within the limits of state autonomy. The Roosevelt Administration recognized that it would not succeed in promoting its New Deal policies if it challenged southern apartheid and political hierarchy. With the Supreme Court silent on such matters, New Deal policies excluded approximately two-thirds of Black workers, as well as large numbers of women, by not covering job classifications such as domestic and agricultural workers (Katznelson 2005; Mettler 1998; Mink 1990; Strolovitch 2004). When the Warren Court did legitimize challenges to Tenth Amendment protections during the 1960s, it did so in a manner that implicitly reinforced the legitimacy of state authority by holding that, in order to justify national intervention at the state and local levels, the federal government needed to find an explicit act by a state that actively denied a civil right. Consequently, as Cheryl Harris (2005) has argued, the primacy of state autonomy remained the norm, and federal intervention remained acceptable under the law only for exceptional purposes. The Supreme Court has persisted in interpreting this to mean that, unless the state explicitly commits an act of racism, the federal government lacks the authority to intervene. Thus, in cases where it is the *lack* of action by state government that has led to racial inequalities, the Court has refused to allow the federal government to take action. This has been true even in cases in which the long-standing inequalities can be traced to the legacies of slavery and legal segregation, as well as in situations where the intersection of racial with economic and other inequalities made the specific violation too ambiguous (in the Court's mind) to warrant federal intervention (e.g., *Palmer v. Thompson* 1971; *San Antonio School District v. Rodriguez* 1974; *McCleskey v. Kemp* 1987).

In the last two decades, defenses of federalism have only been further empowered as the Supreme Court has been aggressive in curtailing congressional power in the areas of commerce and the Tenth Amendment. None of these cases has dealt "on its face" with a civil rights matter, but they all deal broadly with questions of intersectional forms of inequality, whether in the quality of school education, disability rights, violence against women, or, most recently, the issue of same-sex mar-

riage. The legacies of racial and economic inequality, from slavery and segregation to the exclusionary nature of federal aid, remain evident in every southern state, and yet there is currently no legal or political authority that can be invoked in order to use the federal government as a counterforce. Federalism has helped empower opponents of equality to frame arguments in a language that resonates with existing democratic values and is seemingly consistent with the historical tradition of the Constitution.

But while it might resonate with traditional ideas, there is nothing fundamental about states' rights. Instead, it is a strategic idea that has been deployed opportunistically by political elites to advance their interests and agenda. For example, southern conservatives have often invoked states' rights to resist federal intervention, but they have also been quick to disregard this principle when it has suited their needs, as they did in the 2000 Presidential election (*Bush v. Gore* 2000), or in 2005 when they asked Congress to overrule a state court that allowed the removal of Terri Schiavo's feeding tube. Such inconsistency has historical roots that reveal how invocations of the Tenth Amendment have far more to do with protecting political power than with enduring concerns about states' rights to protect themselves against the national government. Nonetheless, what is critical for understanding New Orleans is how debates over federalism, many of which are seemingly "raceless," have been and continue to have consequences for civil rights and inequality. This institutional legacy needs to be actively challenged, and its links to racial discrimination made clear, if political actors and institutions are to confront the continuing legacy of racism and inequality.

Majoritarian Institutions

Hurricane Katrina drew national attention to issues of racial inequality after a decade of near silence on the issue. In the last three presidential elections, for instance, issues of race and civil rights have been addressed only briefly and usually in symbolic ways that have largely circumvented questions about structural inequality. No major presidential candidate has made race or poverty a central campaign issue in almost four decades. Although in his 2004 campaign (unsuccessful) vice presidential candidate John Edwards spoke passionately about the "two Americas"—one for the rich and powerful and the other for everyone else—not since Jesse Jackson's presidential bids in the 1980s has a presidential candidate led a sustained discussion about racial and economic inequality during the primaries.

It is surely a sign of some progress that few recent candidates have actively engaged in race-baiting (Mendelberg 2001) and that most candidates now feel compelled to make symbolic efforts to promote diversity. Bill Clinton, who Toni Morrison argued was the "first Black president," made symbolic yet earnest appeals for a dialogue on national race issues, and was arguably the first president to have close African American friends. George W. Bush is more tolerant of and comfortable with racial diversity than presidents such as Lyndon Johnson and Abraham Lincoln, who were leaders in fights for civil rights for African Americans but who were, by most accounts, far from racially egalitarian in their personal ideas about African Americans. The contemporary civility around issues of race and the mandatory lip service to the value of diversity have come, however, at the expense of dialogues and debates about inequalities and the political interventions that might help to alleviate them.

Majoritarian institutions contribute significantly to the absence of dialogue about inequalities in the United States, as they provide individuals seeking election with incentives to downplay issues of race and to avoid attempts to represent the interests of African Americans and other minority groups. The institutional features of Amer-

ican political institutions and electoral processes that have led to the development of the “two-party” system were designed explicitly to alleviate the effects of conflicts over race and slavery. These features continue to have subtle yet significant implications for modern-day race relations, by regulating the degree and substance of racial discourse on the political agenda. Two-party dominance of American electoral politics was first consolidated in the 1820s, when political leaders believed that such a system could effectively side-step divisiveness over slavery and concentrate national attention and party competition around moderate voters through appeals to patriotism and economic populism (Aldrich 1995; Frymer 1999). Party leaders at the time recognized that institutional engineering could determine what issues Americans would think about and act on politically. As a result of majoritarian party coalitions, each party needed to appeal to centrist voters (who did not feel strongly about slavery) in order to win the election. In his discussion of the formation of the Democratic party, John Aldrich argues that

the assurance that no one person or faction could become dominant also meant that no one region, even one holding a majority of the nation, could dominate. . . . “States’ Rights” in the structure of the Democratic party meant controls to ensure national unity in the party, and in particular, controls to keep the “peculiar institution” of slavery off the national political agenda for as long as institutionalized partisan politics could do so (Aldrich 1995, p. 125).

Andrew Jackson, the first president to be elected in a two-party system, was the perfect candidate for avoiding such a conflict. He was personally popular, unspecific in his ideas, and a war hero that moderate Americans could unite around (Aldrich 1995, pp. 109–110).

The supposed unity promoted by two-party domination came at a cost, however. Most other nations that have developed party systems around racial and ethnic divisions have created systems where each group is mandated to have some kind of voice and power sharing. In the United States, however, the party system was designed instead to deny voice to southern Whites and northern abolitionists (most African Americans were also excluded because they lacked voting rights at the time). In designing the system in this way, conflict was avoided through the creation of a fiction of national unity around a self-imposed, truncated, and purportedly non-ideological political spectrum. This institutional dynamic has been used to create and maintain this consensus on a national scale.

Like the role of federalism in perpetuating racial inequalities, the effects of majoritarianism are not historical artifacts that have been maintained by accident. Party leaders today are acutely aware that raising the salience of racial issues would prohibit close two-party competition, while denying a salient role to racial issues encourages close elections. The contemporary party system is well equipped to handle a society when it is generally unified around political goals, but it continues to provide strong incentives to political actors to manipulate issues of race. As a result, both parties will face resistance and electoral costs in their efforts to represent African Americans in a society deeply divided over race (Frymer 1999). Features of the electoral system, including the ballot system, the rules governing the number of votes needed to win the election, and the number of parties favored by such rules, play a significant role in determining which issues are discussed during political campaigns. Because races are often very close, in order to win elections, politicians must cater to the preferences of swing voters, and, in recent U.S. elections, it has been deemed “political suicide” for national politicians to discuss racial inequality

because “swing constituencies” such as “Reagan Democrats,” Perot supporters, “soccer moms,” and “NASCAR dads” purport to have little interest in these issues. Instead of proactive discussions about issues of inequality, politics are conducted defensively. Democrats appeal to members of racial minority groups by invoking issues that are calculated to keep Blacks in the party, and Republicans try to avoid taking positions on issues that will make them seem racist to the moderates they are trying to attract. The result is that discussion of race by both parties is minimal and centers largely on symbolic issues. Issues of racial inequality have been excluded from the electoral arena, creating a huge void in American politics. It is for this reason that, even those political actors who support the expansion of racial, gender, and economic justice have had to make political calculations that work against such goals.

CONCLUSION

Almost half a century ago, Robert Dahl (1961) wrote *Who Governs?*, a defining work of political science that dominated the intellectual arena for decades. Dahl argued powerfully that American democracy, while hardly ideal, was functional and open to all, as long as one was willing to take an interest in and fight for participation. His conclusions were based on an extensive multimethod empirical study of the city of New Haven, Connecticut, and he found that African Americans had the means to participate and be represented successfully in city politics. The Black community, Dahl reported, was disadvantaged, but he was optimistic about their abilities to promote political and economic reform through democratic channels.

Six years after the book's release, the city of New Haven was the site of one of the most widespread racial riots of the era, an uprising that required the National Guard to quell it after four days of looting and fires. In response, the field of political science found itself in a scholarly debate about why extant theoretical paradigms failed to predict such events, and these debates led to new paradigms and research agendas. The study of power became focused extensively on the more subtle ways in which politicians and elites maintain their positions in spite of their minority status in a democracy. Critiques of pluralism, and examinations of the more subtle forms of power maintenance—from agenda-setting to ideological hegemony—once on the margins of political science, became a central point of the discipline (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962; Gaventa 1980; Pinderhughes 1987).

Much like the New Haven uprising's influence on academic discussion about pluralism, our hope is that the very real and devastating effects of Hurricane Katrina will spark a vibrant intellectual and empirical debate about the ways in which enduring and fundamental structures of ascriptive inequalities interact with each other, with political institutions and processes, and how all of these together shape political attitudes, policies, and outcomes that are detrimental to marginalized groups in American society. It is crucial, then, that the hurricane and its aftermath not be treated as an exceptional moment or chain of events. Hurricane Katrina exposed the persistent economic and racial inequalities that exist in the United States, the implicitly racist exaggerations of violence and lawlessness among starving African Americans in search of food and shelter, and the federal government's disregard for a constituency that was in dire need but outside the party's base. Moreover, New Orleans also exposed the limits of dominant understandings—both popular and academic—of the ways in which inequalities structure and are structured by U.S. politics. If social scientists, policymakers, and the public heed the lessons of Katrina,

and make efforts to study and address the structural and institutional sources of American inequality, perhaps the brunt of future disasters will not be borne by those who are the least able to endure their costs. If we incorporate the lessons of Katrina into our scholarship and teaching by de-exceptionalizing racial as well as class and gender inequalities, we stand to gain a much more accurate and nuanced understanding of American politics.

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NOTES

1. Thanks go to Regina Kunzel and Sarah Walker.
2. Indeed, Alvin Tillery, Jr. (2006) has recently argued that Tocqueville was far more sophisticated on race, and was an intellectual precursor to critical race theorists. Similar arguments have been made about Myrdal's book, one that was influenced by the intellectual contributions of Ralph Bunche and others who both wrote and researched significant portions of the two-volume treatise. Our point here is less to make a textual critique of Tocqueville and Myrdal than to illustrate how the conventional understanding of their work has been reproduced in modern understandings of race and American politics.
3. The psychological perspective remains popular in contemporary debates about racial inequality, which it traces to the abnormal and irrational racist attitudes of individuals that are in direct tension with the normality of liberalism (e.g., Sears et al., 2000). In a less benign form of this paradigm, however, racial animus is blamed not on the hearts and minds of prejudiced Whites, but rather on the supposedly deviant behaviors and values of members of racial minority groups, behaviors and values that are said to conflict with fundamental American values such as individualism, self-sufficiency, hard work, and law and order (Sniderman and Piazza, 1993). Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1965), for example, recognized the existence of antipathy towards racial and ethnic minorities, and understood racism as a significant problem in American political and social life. Like Tocqueville and Myrdal before them, they viewed racism as incidental to American political life and argued that it could therefore be eradicated without fundamentally altering the structures and practices of American politics and society. Unlike Myrdal, Glazer and Moynihan contended that racism would dissipate not when Whites overcame their irrational prejudices, but instead when racial minority groups themselves abandoned their supposedly dysfunctional behaviors and assimilated into mainstream "American culture," adopting liberal behaviors such as economic self-sufficiency.
4. Indeed, race and class were important in determining who was able to evacuate before the storm. Middle- and upper-class residents of all races, and many more Whites were able to escape via private transportation often to "second homes" in other Gulf Coast states. A *New York Times* article, for example, described the situation of one family—the "Whites"—who fled to their second home in Florida (Higgins 2005), without noting the irony of the name of the family featured.
5. Workplace inequality based on race and sex affected Black women and men differently, though both still deleteriously. See Reskin (2003).
6. Of course, as an empirical matter, the specific local political institutions, policies, and spatial concentration of race and poverty unique to New Orleans contributed to the context for the aftermath of Katrina.
7. Indeed, in the initial aftermath of the hurricane, President Bush exclaimed in front of news cameras, "Brownie, you're doing a heck of a job" (Bumiller 2005).
8. However, in the case of redistributive social policy, it is worth noting that many progressive groups have enacted successful "living wage" ordinances on the local level or increased the minimum wage through state-wide referenda (for example, in Nevada and Florida in 2004) over the last decade. In states and locales with significant numbers of low-wage women workers and workers of color, these policies won at the state and local levels have a disproportionate effect on these groups of marginalized workers' living conditions and quality of life (Gertner 2006).

9. Other amendments include abolishing the Electoral College and direct election of the president and vice president, in addition to securing the constitutional rights to health care, clean environment, affordable housing, and equality for women.

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