

The Intersection of Race and Class as Exposed in Hurricane Katrina

by Katie Bell

When it reached landfall, Hurricane Katrina was a category four storm, ripping across the Gulf and taking countless homes, belongings, and lives with it. Horrific media images swept through the nation in the wake of Hurricane Katrina's wrath, shocking audiences as they endured endless footage of the flooding that followed the collapse of the levees. Arguably the worst natural disaster to ever strike U.S. soil, this hurricane did more than devastate a city and displace thousands of families along the Gulf Coast. The storm unearthed weaknesses, inequalities, and prejudices that were present throughout the Gulf Coast and U.S. society long before the storm (Levitt 2). By unveiling the black poor of New Orleans, Hurricane Katrina had the potential to become a turning point that would force the United States to take another look at race and class relations in a supposedly "post-racial" and "democratic" society, spurring brand new conversation about the structural racial and classist intersections from which societal inequalities and institutionalized racism are produced. However, this hurricane did not become that turning point, and we were instead steered back to our ideological bases while we watched the unending coverage of the crisis. We were able to see the destruction from the storm, and yet we quickly moved on without really delving into what the storm was showing us about poverty and power in our country. By looking at pre-existing ideologies and the intersection of race and class in America, as well as the media's framing of the disaster, we can see how pictures were displayed and stories were worded in such a way that allowed us as a nation to grieve, turn the TV off, and accept Hurricane Katrina as a natural disaster rather than a societal catastrophe.

In order to understand our country's reaction to Katrina, one must first take a look at the systemic ideologies that exist in the U.S. today. Race and class are inherently and undoubtedly intertwined, and through investigating Katrina and its aftermath, we become aware of the hegemonic power relations behind the mask of the American Dream. For quite some time, we have operated under the idea that America is "post-race" and "classless," ignoring how cultural capital is maintained through institutionalized racism. For over two hundred years, economic opportunity and the potential for upward mobility have formed the basis upon which we have created meaning in America (Sawhill). The idea that anyone can achieve wealth, happiness, and success regardless of their original social standing, the glorification of the individual, and the image of social mobility all exert a positive image of America and the endless possibilities that are present in a classless society. This ideology serves as a screen behind which lies poverty and

racism, but this is the side of the United States that the public is hidden from and prefers to ignore. Almost all Americans agree that all citizens are entitled to political equality, and that everyone in our nation deserves equal opportunities (Hochschild 55). Paired with the image of maintaining the one, true democracy, the United States has constructed a picture of a nation in which equality prevails, and the government solely serves the interests of the people, regardless of race, class, or gender. Everyone, despite their family background, personal history, or physical appearance can achieve this notion of the American Dream through the control of their own actions (Hochschild).

In addition to the provision of the American Dream, the central racial ideology at the start of the 21st century in the United States was that of “color-blindness,” with the idea that, post-Jim Crow, race simply did not *matter* anymore (Bates 107). The national presumption continues to be that racism cannot exist unless an individual racist actor instigates it (Hartman 66). This ideology is a political strategy, feeding the reasoning behind the American Dream. If race is no longer an issue, racial segregation or economic inequality can now be tied to coincidence, individual responsibility, or even dysfunctional behavior on the part of the individual rather than societal failures. As a result, whites are seeing a smaller amount of discrimination in societal interactions. However, blacks are experiencing just the opposite, feeling themselves the objects of an *increasing* amount of discrimination (Hochschild 56). The contradiction here makes obvious the fact that we have become victims of a hegemony that obscures the reality of race and class in this country. This misrecognition of structural obstacles hindering advancement of specific groups of people distracts from America’s pervasive inequality (Brown 37). If we can believe that the United States is still the land of opportunity, then there is no need for responsiveness from government policy makers to smooth out the unevenness of capitalism (Sawhill). In essence, we believe, or at least want to believe, that racism is dead, paving the way for the silent exercise of power in which a small, wealthy, white elite benefit at the expense of America’s minorities and the poverty-stricken.

Initially, Hurricane Katrina did challenge the status quo in that the devastating damage that was densely concentrated around the poor (and primarily African American) sectors of New Orleans could not be hidden. Prior to the coverage of the disaster, imagining the hardships of the poor in our nation was quite difficult, as the media did a good job of tucking poverty away, or making it hard to identify with the poor that were shown (Hartman 86). There was no prior

discussion of how race influenced the social, economic, and political factors that came together before the storm (Hartman 64). Poverty remained more of a thing that we collectively knew was there....somewhere. However, it was never *here*. When the images in the aftermath of the hurricane began plaguing television screens, newspapers, and magazines, one thing was certain: these people were not middle class; they were poor and they were black. The following exemplifies the realization of this previously invisible population as images plastered our news outlets:

If we had forgotten that poor people still lived in the land of SUV's and hedge funds, we could no longer ignore that reality - not with the powerful news footage coming out of New Orleans. There they were, on our television screens the storm's more desperate victims - disproportionately poor and black, wading through the muddy water, carrying children and plastic bags containing a few meager possessions" (Bates 95).

The reality of these images filled Americans with unease. Hadn't the black residents of New Orleans received the same warning to evacuate as everyone else? These images began to expose the existence of an Other in the United States to many Americans. The American Dream had to be reexamined, as the hurricane blatantly showed that not everyone had the means to escape, and the majority of those who were unable to leave were African American.

The devastation of the storm contested normative perspectives on race and class in the United States, and picture after picture shattered the image of a color-blind society (Marable 132). All of a sudden, race and class lines mattered and were beginning to unveil an increasingly withered democracy. Society began to lose faith in the ability of the government to actually help its people when it mattered most which came as a disturbing reality to viewers (Bates 101). National discomfort ensued as the realization was made that an entire group of people was left to fend for themselves, and we were unable to explain how African Americans and poor communities were disproportionately affected by the storm (Hartman 59). The incompetence of FEMA and the corruption of government contractors and the public sector angered the nation as we began to chip away at the fairytale image of the all-powerful, disaster-proof, rescue-the-suffering, American nation (Marable 275). A nation that had spouted a commitment to democracy was suddenly unable to deliver to those who needed a voice: poor minorities. The prevalence of class in America became suddenly obvious, and deeply unsettling at a time of such

economic prosperity. A wake-up call was given to America that poverty truly does exist in the nation of plenty, opening the door to new thoughts on the issues of class and race.

The fact that over 62% of the dead and 80% of those stranded on rooftops in New Orleans were black was not coincidental, but rather suggests the significance of race in the catastrophe of Hurricane Katrina (Levitt 255). In fact, Hurricane Katrina interrupted a social disaster that has dominated U.S. cities long before the storm hit, and continues to exist in urban centers across the nation. Blacks were concentrated in the center of New Orleans where the floods were the worst. One of the most predominant factors that the storm revealed was the fact that social capital, a resource most unevenly distributed by race and class, played a powerful role in who was able to escape the storm (Marable 274). With the knowledge that a very small percentage of the black poor of New Orleans actually owned a car, the fact that the storm was predicted ahead of time and the possible damage was discussed prior to the devastation begs the question as to why the evacuation plan was framed around people leaving in their own vehicles (Hartman 65).

Had anyone really been concerned about African Americans and other poor residents of New Orleans, they would have anticipated the fact that many did not own cars and would have arranged for transportation to help them leave the city as the storm approached (Frymer).

This plan assumed that everyone in New Orleans could afford to leave and had a place to go. In essence, a marginalized group of people was *placed* in harm's way. Most white Americans don't like to discuss "white privilege," because it violates our sense of individuality and makes us feel like we did nothing to deserve our current state. However, the structural issue of class as tied to race is difficult to ignore in this example.

The intersectionality of class and race in America, therefore, is undeniable when we look at what a predicted disaster reveals about institutionalized racism and structural corruption in the U.S. The American people were exposed to this discussion of the relation between class and race as a result of the media images of the black poor that made New Orleans look like a Third World city (Levitt 1). The truth is, buried beneath popular ideology and the hegemonic power of the American Dream, this "Third World" exists within the United States, unbeknownst to most of the middle and upper classes. Intersectionality theory focuses on how when race comes together with other factors of social identity such as class and ethnicity, differences emerge that allow power to be allocated in such a way that benefits one group over another.

As seen in the hurricane, this power was allocated long ago so that those in authority, the white upper class, were able to manipulate the image of America through the creation of ideology. The vision of democracy in America was able to hold true until the Katrina unexpectedly revealed the structural racism that exists in institutions such as schools, healthcare, and realty. In analyzing the production of power between gender, race, ethnicity, and class, Intersectionality analyzes social and cultural hierarchies within different institutions (Knudsen 62). Institutionalized racism has existed for years in the United States masked behind the curtain of democracy. All throughout U.S. history, people of color have been under the control of policies in every institution of society in the form of racial segregation and forced relocation (Dill 8). Poverty, then, is the inevitable result of the unequal distribution of wealth and resources into the hands of the few (Dill 8). The concentration of blacks in impoverished areas such as the Lower Ninth Ward was not at all accidental, but in fact ties back to slavery and the segregation that followed its abolishment (Jones 256). What came as such a shock to most Americans, however, was the fact that America's racial inequality and levels of poverty were tied to the vulnerability and sudden dislocation of African Americans, and the devastating consequences of structural racism and classism became apparent to the world almost immediately (Levitt 3). The fact was African Americans populated the lowest grounds of New Orleans, which was by no means an accident.

The Hurricane did not allow any excuses; the facts were clear. The group that was predominantly victimized by the storm was black, and they were poor. The relation between the two could no longer be overlooked. That said, one factor did not cause the other, nor was one more prominent than the other. They exist together in our society, bound to structural issues of power and hegemony that allow racial and class privilege to go unnoticed behind dominant ideologies. This system of class and power relations is able to exist because we operate under the thought process that we are "post-race" and "classless." This post-racism is both a cultural condition and a political strategy that serves to distract from the reality of class politics (Ono 227). Whenever possible, mainstream media avoids conversations about race because of the political baggage it carries (Hartman 63). Confusion over what this disaster meant for the ideological perspectives of what it means to be American led to apprehension that covered the lives of everyday citizens. What the public was still unable to see, however, is that this hurricane stood not simply as an issue of pointing fingers trying to determine why there was a slow

response for recovery. What remained obscured was that poverty is a deep, structural issue that reveals our values, the reality of our economic institutions, and the appropriate role of the state (Bates 96).

Americans have historically used various means to deal with political and ideological threats that have masked differences in gains made by distinct groups (Brown 69). According to Joe Klein of *Time* Magazine, Katrina had the power to “spark a reconsideration of what became a causal disdain for the essentials of governance and our common public life” (Arlinghaus 10). The rhetorical effects of the media’s depiction of the disaster on the public, however, did not allow for such an outcome. While the images were accurate, they didn’t tell the totality of the story which allowed for the return to our post-race and classless beliefs when all was said and done. The need for a quick story that would gain audience attention over the clutter of the other channels led news stations to the information that was readily available to them (Izard 27). Thus, the images of what was happening became more important than in-depth stories of what caused the concentrated destruction. Because we weren’t physically there, we relied on the media to construct a reality for us as an audience in order to make meaning of the event. These photographs and images made a new, permanent reality that moved us away from looking at the institutional structures producing racial and economic inequality (Hartman 60).

Unable to deal with the unappealing nature of the disaster, the media turned to images and captions that criminalized the black poor. First we saw pictures of African Americans on their rooftops, wading through the water and bodies piled high in the midst of rubble and destruction. Brokenhearted and shocked, the nation was moved to feelings of angst, anger, and discomfort as our government failed to issue a timely response to the disaster. All we could do was watch, and we were placed on the edge of our seats as help and recovery arrived at what appeared to be a snail’s pace. In the week following the Hurricane, our anxiety was somewhat lifted as our attention was shifted to stories of looting, gang violence, drug use, murder, and rape inside the SuperDome (Marable 131). The *Washington Post* proclaimed in a headline, “A City of Despair and Lawlessness,” describing thieves and carjackers “running rampant” (Izard 11). But research shows that many of these stories were fabricated and exaggerated, and didn’t happen to the extent that the media led people to believe (Sommers 6).

Yahoo News broke out with a very controversial set of photos that showed the racism that was prevalent in various media representations. While the African American man in one

photo was described to be returning from looting a grocery store, an almost identical photo of a white man and woman was accompanied by a caption that described them as having “found” food. Similar depictions of the black poor were represented in several stories while journalists photographing white individuals decided to give them the benefit of the doubt (Sommers 6). The implications of this cannot be ignored, as the media constructed reports for viewers revealing their context within a structurally racist society (Booth). The same sources that had been criticizing the government for the lack of preparation for the storm were circulating images of out of control, wild, brazen thugs. These negative descriptions were assigned to black residents who lacked the resources to evacuate prior to the storm. The description of the city as “lawless and in despair” didn’t highlight America’s racial divide, but instead focused on the faults of the African Americans. Our attention as viewers was suddenly directed away from the institutionalized poverty that had placed these people in such dire conditions and instead linked our automatic assumptions between “black” and “criminal,” drawing on preexisting racial stereotypes that have long existed in the United States. It worked in such a way that rendered this group as disposable, forgetting about the white privilege that allowed others to evacuate (Berger). An image of the uncivilized African Americans who sat and watched as the white population left the city was composed. By criminalizing the black poor, we were able to hang onto our racial and class privilege by making it look like “us” and “them,” reinforcing existing negative stereotypes of African Americans as criminals and poor instead of thinking about what structural issues left them abandoned in this state of “lawlessness and despair.” We could feel sorry for them but justify their plight with their violent and criminal acts. We could, in essence, “sit back and relax,” because “these people” were now too dangerous to go help.

In addition to the criminalization of the black poor through the media’s images, the language in the news stories assessing the hurricane often described New Orleans as “Third World,” and the storm’s evacuees as “refugees.” For example, a CNN article entitled, “Katrina: When New Orleans went from developed world to Third World” was launched online in the days following the storm (Koinage). Additionally, 1,040 stories used the word “refugee” when describing the storm victims (Sommers 2). The biased racial undertones in these phrases are undeniable, as the descriptions allowed the sufferers of Katrina to appear as less than full-fledged citizens (Jones 262). This creates an automatic association of viewers with the “in group,” and the “refugees” as part of the “out group.” A Third World-type category draws attention to what

continues to be a major axis of economic and political inequality, and carries with it images of the underdeveloped Eastern nations (Randall 53). This terminology had significant rhetorical effects on the American public as we used the media to access the reality of the storm. By using the phrases “Third World” and “refugee,” poverty and racism were automatically removed from something that could happen in the United States. The resulting injustice and racialized discrimination of Hurricane Katrina’s victims became the exception to America’s post-race society. This type of racialized catastrophe doesn’t happen in the United States, and race and poverty surely are not American problems. Thus, the hegemony of white supremacy could continue, and the public was able to fall back on the belief that it was the hurricane itself that caused the despair of the storm and not the long-existing structural poverty.

The term “refugee” is usually used referring to a group that crosses international borders, coming from the outside. We forget that these “refugees” in the coverage of Hurricane Katrina were actually Americans, entitled to the same protections and rights as white citizens. We didn’t have to own up to the false idea that this type of disaster could never marginalize a group in this way in America, and thus we were able to slap another label of “Third World” onto the problem without damaging America’s democratic ideologies. We were able to look at the victims and feel compassion as we do when we see commercials for starving children in Africa begging for sponsors on television, but we couldn’t identify with them as Americans -- as part of our own country. We were overcome by our subconscious definitions of Third World politics: instability, conflict, and corruption. Suddenly, the outcome had an explanation, and we were able to study them, the African American “refugees,” as a separate group (Randall 45). “They” were now a disconnected group of helpless, uncivilized individuals, and their predicament was completely removed from everyday American culture. Maybe they didn’t have the intellectual capacity to leave beforehand, or they were too naïve to assess the dangers of leaving their little plots of land behind as the disaster loomed.

Audiences could neither feel guilty nor look at their racial privilege and its contribution to the outcome of the storm. They could not make the connection that the same institutionalized racism that led to the annihilation of the black poor in New Orleans exists all over the United States. They could, however, swoop in at the right time, when the uncivilized violence and rampant crime had died down, and perform their perfect role as the White Savior. The ability of media images to show Americans what happened in all of its wretchedness, misery, and

desolation, and yet allow the nation to move on without addressing the hegemonic power of the ideologies that constructed the Hurricane's outcome is really quite remarkable. We, the rest of the nation, were able to watch what was happening in the aftermath of the hurricane, and were able to ignore the fact that Hurricane Katrina did not make the Gulf a Third World country, it existed with these conditions long beforehand.

The compassion that was wrought by the blunt images of poverty and destruction was unable to be transformed into social justice, as the Othering of New Orleanians that continued through the media served only the perpetuation of hegemonic power, serving the interests of the white middle and upper class viewers. Coverage continued to criminalize the black poor in an effort to reframe the disaster in such a way that would do as little damage as possible to the status-quo (Bates 188). This ability to make an audience "feel bad for" Katrina victims and maintain the idea that "another world" existed along the Gulf Coast created detachment from the disaster. This allowed the media to uncover the troubles of the black poor in New Orleans, but simultaneously prevented identification with the poor in a way that allowed the media to eventually move on, leaving the conversation on race and class to fall back below the surface of discourse in American politics.

Hurricane Katrina had the capacity to reopen discussion about race and class in a country where the "post" has perpetuated the silence of poor minorities. In the United States today, race, ethnicity and geography matter, and all determine who will have access to social capital and resources (Dill 8). Katrina gave us a new chance to investigate how race and class intersect, and how that intersection creates a link between justice and equality, and the allocation of political power in the United States. Although Hurricane Katrina openly revealed to us the institutionalized racism that exists in our nation, we were unable to read the disaster as an example of a tragedy that is occurring in countless cities spanning the nation. The false images of a "classless" and "post-race" society were upheld in spite of images of Katrina, as the media's framing of the disaster allowed for America's ideological foundations of the American Dream and a respectable democracy of "colorblindness" to continue to thrive. Race and class inequalities are able to go unnoticed behind hegemonic influences of power, and the story of Hurricane Katrina as a natural disaster rather than a societal disaster prevailed. Any objection to the status-quo was silenced, and the intersection of class and race as a producer of inequality was swept back under the rug.

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