

to off-duty subordinates—what the US attorney general called the “aorta of corruption” in the police.<sup>3</sup> In a political dynamic that would appear to characterize many similar ring-fenced satellites, the police and their neighborhood allies have become vocal advocates for crime prevention and security districts, making it unlikely that they can be rolled back. Other satellites that might fall into the same category of ring-fencing include development districts, neighborhood improvement associations, and business and entertainment districts.

The authors in *The Neoliberal Deluge* describe the ideology and policies that have dominated most areas of New Orleans public life in the years before and after Katrina. They lament the victory of an upper-class attempt to renew a highly unequal model of capitalism, while dispensing coercive social control to excluded populations, who are portrayed in the pages of this book as heroic, if occasionally weak and fragmented, defenders of alternative frameworks. The book will serve as a useful tool for those interested in New Orleans and will remind all of us that our anger at the racial and class injustice exposed by Katrina was not misplaced. In fact, we should be angrier than ever, as much post-Katrina political struggle produced deepened opportunities for accumulation by the few while intensifying social control on others.

### Notes

- 1 Schattschneider 1960, 30.
- 2 Available at: <http://nolasatellitegovernment.tulane.edu> (accessed March 23, 2012).
- 3 U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division 2011, xvi.

### References

- Schattschneider, E. E. 1960. *The Semisovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy in America*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston.
- U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division. 2011. *Investigation of the New Orleans Police Department*. Washington, DC: Department of Justice. March 16. [http://www.justice.gov/crt/about/spl/nopd\\_report.pdf](http://www.justice.gov/crt/about/spl/nopd_report.pdf) (accessed February 6, 2012).

### Thad Williamson

doi:10.1017/S1537592712001132

What kind of society allows a major city to drown in full view, then leaves it to a patchwork of volunteers, non-profit organizations, and entrepreneurs (some socially minded, some opportunistic) to pick up the pieces?

According to editor Cedric Johnson and his co-contributors to *The Neoliberal Deluge*, it is a society that has systematically devalued both the public sector and the very idea of a public good, in favor of market-oriented solutions to every social problem. This is the ideology of “neoliberalism.” As the book persuasively illustrates, in the case of New Orleans neoliberal ideology interacted with old-fashioned classist and racist prejudice toward the African American poor to devastating effect, not only during the buildup to Katrina, and not only in the immediate aftermath of the storm and the levees’ collapse, but in the slow, tortuous, and hopelessly inadequate process of rebuilding the city in subsequent years.

This is a challenging volume with an ambitious twofold agenda. On the one hand, it seeks to document the specific ways in which neoliberal ideology has impacted New Orleans, on matters ranging from media coverage of the fateful event itself to the bold experiment in converting public schools into independent charters to public-housing privatization to the mechanics of the rebuilding process. The authors do not settle for targeting obvious villains such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency, George W. Bush, and the state and local elected officials. They also argue that even widely lauded initiatives, such as the work of actor Brad Pitt’s Make it Right Foundation, though premised on the idea of a moral right of return for displaced residents, fail to challenge the neoliberal presumption of market-led redevelopment. On the other hand, the volume is a critique of neoliberal ideology itself, intended to illustrate its deleterious and profoundly antidemocratic consequences.

On the whole, the volume is quite effective in carrying out this twofold agenda. But it also leaves room for debate, both about its account of the New Orleans case and its broader analysis of neoliberalism. In this essay, I call attention to several themes that might have been taken up, themes that could have enriched the analysis, and I draw at points on my own work and that of colleagues to develop a coherent alternative to neoliberal politics.

### *New Orleans: The Missing Progressive Alternative*

Implicit throughout the volume—and explicit in a few of the essays, particularly those by Johnson as well as John

---

*Thad Williamson is Associate Professor of Leadership Studies at the University of Richmond.*

Arena—is the notion that recovery and redevelopment in New Orleans could have proceeded in a very different manner than it actually has. At no point, however, does the volume lay out in depth just what such a democratic alternative might have looked like.

Presumably, however, it would have involved an active and energetic public sector—led response combining a massive, New Deal—scaled influx of resources, close attention to the distributive consequences of recovery policies, and ample scope for democratic participation. The authors suggest that the idea of a “right to return” might have been used as a guiding moral framework for policy development. Arena cites the Civil Works Administration of the 1930s as an example of using “direct government employment” to get things done.

Thus, instead of relying on thousands of college students and others to provide volunteer labor to perform initial clean-up work such as gutting houses, the federal government might have hired thousands of workers at solid, livable wages, thereby both getting the work done faster (and saving many homes from avoidable ruin resulting from months of neglect after the storm) and jump-starting the economy. Government might have provided generous buyout terms to homeowners in the Lower 9th Ward and elsewhere not inclined to resettle or rebuild, rather than allowing speculators to gain control of some properties at cut-rate prices while others stood neglected, a standing obstacle to efforts to rebuild coherent neighborhoods. Renters might have been treated on equal terms with homeowners in disbursing relief funds.

Above all, policy need not have proceeded from the assumption that the storm presented an opportunity to literally flush out concentrations of poverty and embark on neoliberal experimentation. Two interlocking issues are in play here: first, the question of how to understand the causes of concentrated poverty, and second, the question of how to best respond to it.

Conservative mythology presented concentrated poverty as a product of welfare dependence, lack of individual initiative, and excessive government, with no scrutiny of the structural economic conditions in the New Orleans labor market or of the specific local history, which concentrated low-income African Americans into particular places in New Orleans. More liberal views, such as those expressed in a controversial post-Katrina petition circulated by Xavier Briggs and William Julius Wilson, appealed not to such blatant prejudices but to social science evidence that pointed to the deleterious impact of living in high-poverty neighborhoods on low-income individuals’ likelihood of escaping poverty. Both views suggested that there is little inherent value in attempting to restore the integrity of low-income neighborhoods in New Orleans, and lent sanction to efforts aimed at dispersing low-income and public-housing residents.

Such views gain plausibility, even from a progressive humanitarian perspective, if one does not believe that there is a legitimate possibility of undertaking a serious place-based, people-enhancing approach to the remediation of poverty. In a 2002 book (*Making a Place for Community: Local Democracy in a Global Era*), David Imbroscio, Gar Alperovitz, and I articulated a place-based policy approach organized around the concept of full employment in the community. Our book predated Katrina, but had in mind many other examples of “throw-away” cities resulting from deindustrialization and capital flight, sometimes—as in Cleveland, Detroit, and St. Louis—on a massive scale. We called on local governments to deploy multiple strategies, from local import substitution to encouragement of worker-owned firms to direct municipal ownership, in order to stabilize capital and jobs in place over the long term, and further called for state, regional, and federal policies that in effect guarantee to cities what I have termed in recent work a “right to capital.” (Imbroscio has further developed the argument in direct debate with Briggs and related scholars in a series of journal articles, as well as in his 2010 book *Urban America Reconsidered: Alternatives for Governance and Policy*.)

Johnson gives clear indication at various points that he would be sympathetic to this agenda, such as the call for including worker cooperatives as part of the reconstruction process. But in my view, the volume does not make sufficiently clear that what needs to be challenged is not just neoliberal ideology but the lopsided distribution of capital defended by the ideology. It is the systemic lack of adequate employment and locally based capital in American cities that leads politicians of both parties to adopt business-friendly policies and to make many (sincere) boosters of cities believe that their favored place’s best hope lies in recruiting new investment from mobile private capital. Seen in this light, “neoliberalism” is not really the most important target but, rather, the way urban political economies are structured in the United States, with places perpetually in competition with one another for scarce capital.

If one accepts this diagnosis, then it becomes clear that effective social criticism and the forging of an effective new politics cannot depend only on the critique of dominant ideologies, but must also engage in the constructive work of articulating and fleshing out a systemic alternative. In the absence of such an alternative vision, persons of goodwill and many progressives concerned to do something to help almost inevitably will (at best) end up retracing Brad Pitt’s footsteps: sponsoring in or participating in projects that may do some concrete good, without seriously challenging the prevailing redevelopment paradigm.

### ***The Critical Role of the Middle Class***

Here is where things get difficult. If the aim is to constructively provide an account of how the United States and its urban areas could and should be organized differently, we

must recognize and take seriously the facts that a) most Americans are not self-described progressive activists with strong egalitarian commitments, and b) in no major American city is it now possible to have a majority coalition of working-class and low-income voters that can implement an unabashedly progressive agenda. The upshot of these observations, in my view, is that a) a stable progressive governing coalition, in both particular cities and in the United States more generally, requires the support of significant segments of the middle class, and b) an important obstacle to the formation of such a coalition is the skewed, biased view of poor people held by many middle-class people and the consequent unwillingness of much of the middle class to identify with the needs and interests of the poor.

At several points in *The Neoliberal Deluge*, contributors reference this latter problem (i.e., the willingness of middle-class whites to believe that the fundamental problem of low-income African Americans is some character or cultural flaw), but little is offered by way of a constructive response. Moreover, the volume almost goes out of its way to avoid acknowledging certain realities that tend to reinforce those biases—such as the reality of an extraordinarily high rate of violent crime in post-Katrina New Orleans (murder rates in the city were 12 times the national average in 2011), a dreadful injustice that is not discussed at all.

That omission represents a missed opportunity, one with political significance. I suspect that the contributors may have worried that acknowledging the high rates of crime in contemporary New Orleans might have reinforced white stereotypes about unruly youth of color. But as usual, while the violent crime rate continues to hamper the city's recovery in a variety of ways, its primary victims are the poor and marginalized.

Rather than avoid the issue, the authors could and perhaps should have presented the problem as Exhibit A in the failure of the neoliberal recovery model in New Orleans. It is predictable that in the absence of a serious effort to create jobs and bring tangible economic opportunities to all residents, the shock of displacement, combined with the lack of adequate employment, combined with thousands and thousands of damaged and abandoned buildings, would create a breeding ground for crime, which in turn is a direct threat to any notion of a "right to return" worth defending.

This is an important point in itself, but one with broader significance for those concerned with crafting a serious alternative to neoliberalism: Just because the middle class cares about an issue does not mean that it is unimportant. The continued violent crime in New Orleans, if not understood as a symptom of failure of the recovery, will instead inevitably be interpreted as further evidence of the inherent dysfunction of low-income communities of color and justification for aggressive (if not paramilitary) policing strategies.

Likewise, the volume's critique of neoliberalism targets many nonprofit and philanthropic efforts as inherently inadequate, with the further suggestion that every good deed done by such groups in New Orleans has also created its own punishment: further legitimation of neoliberal ideology ("Look, we don't need government to do it"). A more productive rhetorical and political stance, however, would have been to ask what it would have taken to shift the Brad Pitts and similar characters from individual "do-gooders" to highly politicized, prominent public advocates for a genuinely community-oriented reconstruction approach. It also would take seriously the positive aspects of at least some of the interventions by outside groups, such as a Cornell University planning team that, within the first year of Katrina, initiated a participatory planning process in the Lower 9th Ward that was a genuine attempt to model inclusive planning.

Such a positive rapprochement with the do-gooders would, in my view, have three requirements: clear articulation of an alternative redevelopment strategy guided by democratic rather than market logic; a place made within that strategy for contributions from nonprofit groups and organizations of local residents, especially those that engage in community participatory planning; and acknowledgment of the goodwill and positive practices of those local organizations that already exist. In short, the alternative to neoliberalism cannot simply be a statist model of redevelopment. It also has to make space and give leeway to nonstate actors—particularly when those actors may more accurately reflect the views and needs of residents than the actual state.

Stephen Elkin, himself a prominent critic of corporate business bias in urban political regimes, has compellingly argued that in any plausible account of a significantly reformed political regime in the United States, the middle class inevitably must play a pivotal role. If they are not part of the governing coalition, there will not be a progressive governing coalition. That analysis is a difficult pill to swallow for radical analysts, who have pointed out how susceptible the biases of many middle-class people against the poor and the nonwhite are to manipulation by leaders who craft narratives designed to appeal to these biases and who promote a fundamentally nonsociological analysis of society that interprets social problems in terms of individual character failures.

Both Elkin and the radical critics of the middle class are right. The conclusion that follows is by no means novel, and by no means unique in American history, but still worth stating explicitly: Crafting a strategy that can move beyond that impasse and persuade the middle class to side with the working class and the poor and not with the entrepreneurs of neoliberalism is an absolutely central prerequisite for forging a serious progressive politics in the twenty-first century.

### ***Conclusion: Bringing the State Back In (Again)***

It is worth returning to the rhetorical question at the start of this essay. Obviously, the early-twenty-first-century United States is just the sort of society that would allow one of its major cities to drown in full view, then content itself with deeply inadequate recovery measures.

In contrast, a morally decent society would have acted swiftly to restore the city as a viable entity, made good the losses of all its residents, and acted aggressively to take preventive measures against future disasters.

A society with serious aspirations to words like *democracy* and *justice* would further have acted in a way that treated all New Orleans residents as subjects and the proper co-authors of their own fates rather than as objects for social experimentation, would have acted to mend the gaping inequalities that Katrina exposed, and would have undertaken reconstruction with a due appreciation for the importance of place and neighborhood in individuals' lives and in the life of a healthy democracy.

Meeting either the minimal or the more ambitious goal would require competent state actors capable of effective, large-scale action, actors who recognize the necessity of putting public resources and democratic processes at the center of the recovery effort. But as Jane Mansbridge points out in her recent essay "On the Importance of Getting Things Done" (*PS: Political Science and Politics* 45 [no. 1, 2012]: 1–8), the importance of effective and legitimate state action has too often been neglected in contemporary democratic theory. The difference between political science and philosophy is that the former considers not only moral ends but also the instrumental means required to achieve those ends. The neoliberal assault on the state, as so vividly and tragically illustrated by Katrina, has served to weaken and, in some cases, disarm the primary institutional vehicle for realizing social justice in a modern, complex society.

### **New Orleans Exceptionalism in *The Neoliberal Deluge* and *Treme***

**Matt Sakakeeny**

doi:10.1017/S153759271200093X

New Orleans is a place of many names and slogans. Most trade off the city's reputation for pleasure and festivity ("The City That Care Forgot"; "The Big Easy"; "The Great Southern Babylon") and seemingly all hint at the distinctiveness of local culture ("Only in New Orleans"; "Naturally N'Awlins"), including those manufactured by a tourism industry whose very existence depends upon the uniqueness of the city's offerings ("We're Jazzed You're Here!"; "You're Different Here!"). From the fictionalized accounts of Tennessee Williams's *Streetcar Named Desire* or Disney's *The Princess and The Frog*, to everyday conversations with my colleagues at Tulane University or the local musicians I study, there is something resembling a consensus that New Orleans is an exceptional place.

The claims for New Orleans exceptionalism have recently been bolstered by the television series *Treme*, which was created by David Simon and Eric Overmeyer in 2010 as a follow-up to their acclaimed series *The Wire*. The show has excelled at portraying, with startling intimacy, the lives of workaday musicians participating in the city's most distinctive musical traditions: jazz funerals, second line parades, Mardi Gras parades, Mardi Gras Indian gatherings, school marching bands, and African American styles of popular music (blues, jazz, R&B, soul, funk, hip-hop) that have retained a strong presence in venues for live performance, especially clubs and festivals. The show can be interpreted as an extended homage to the idiosyncratic nature of local culture, and has been widely praised and occasionally criticized for its immersive "insider's" view of what, for many, is uncommonly exotic and mysteriously elusive.

As I write, the members of the American Political Science Association attending the 2012 conference are no doubt anticipating their own participation in the culture of festivity that distinguishes New Orleans, including music and, one might presume, a few other entertainments. On their minds will also be the specter of Hurricane Katrina, which has managed to redouble the city's reputation as an exceptional place. In *Treme*, for example, Katrina vies with culture as the protagonist and ultimately conjoins with culture to create a kind of Southern Babylon-meets-Atlantis übersite of exceptionality. In its presentation of Katrina as an unprecedented catastrophe in an extraordinary place, *Treme* reinforces the notion that New Orleans and the Katrina disaster somehow stand apart from America.

---

*Matt Sakakeeny is Assistant Professor of Music at Tulane University.*