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REVIEW ESSAY: THE SHIFTING SANDS OF POST-KATRINA DISASTER SOCIOLOGY

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Hurricane Katrina and the Redefinition of Landscape. By DeMond Shondell Miller and Jason David Rivera. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008. \$70.00 (hardcover), 171 pp, ISBN 13: 978-0-7391-2146-7.

Hurricane Katrina will forever be remembered as a deadly catastrophe for the city of New Orleans. The storm made landfall along the Louisiana coast on the morning of August 29, 2005 and continues to produce havoc and destruction for communities, families, and individuals throughout the gulf coast. Simply put, the storm is not over and Katrina's sociologically complex aftermath will continue to revictimize survivors in numerous overt and subtle ways well into the future.

Over the last three years a plethora of books and edited texts on Katrina have been published. Initially, descriptive journalistic accounts of the storm and its aftermath flooded the book market. Most notably, books by journalists Chris Rose (*I Dead in Attic*), Jeb Horne (*Breach of Faith*), and Toni Causey and associates (*Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans?*) vividly discussed the carnage and emotional toll unleashed by Katrina. Ivor Van Heerden's controversial critique of the failure of the New Orleans levee system in his coauthored book, *The Storm*, and Tulane historian Douglas Brinkley's well-researched and epic volume, *The Great Deluge*, provided thought-provoking perspectives on Katrina and the failure of FEMA, local politicians, and emergency response in the wake of the storm. Many of these initial books were produced by editors and staff of the New Orleans *Times Picayune* newspaper, which shared a Pulitzer prize in 2006 for coverage of Katrina's devastation. Van Heerden and Brinkley complemented these works with accounts that broadened the social context of Katrina's impacts, as well as the consequences of political ineptitude and the failed levee technology of the Corps of Engineers.

Over time, a series of more sociologically relevant works have begun to appear. As Luft (2008, p. 258) notes, three years post-Katrina witnessed "the emergence of a body of social scientific scholarship that is based on data and draws more systematically from

theory and literature.” Several anthologies have focused on inequality and race (Potter 2007; Bates and Swan 2007), while broader sociological accounts of Katrina grapple with disaster theory, evacuation and institutional change (Brunsma et al. 2007). Indeed, the argument that a sociological understanding of the Katrina catastrophe will inevitably require a new, innovative disaster sociology has been echoed in the sociological literature (Picou and Marshall 2007; Brunsma and Picou 2008). This calls for a third generation of sociological analysis that sets the stage for advancing the study of disasters in new and creative ways.

DeMond Shondell Miller and Jason David Rivera should be viewed as significant contributors to this new generation of scholarship by focusing on the sociological importance of physical landscapes in their recent book, *Hurricane Katrina and the Redefinition of Landscape*. This small text provides a pithy synthesis of the literature on “sense of place,” the “lived topography,” and the sociological response of Katrina survivors; however, Miller and Rivera go beyond these basic parameters and provide a historically informed analysis of Hurricane Katrina and the devastation of New Orleans that includes observations which are controversial in their implications for both future theory and research in the sociology of disaster.

The book consists of an introductory chapter, five chapters that discuss physical landscape, cultural and economic landscape, political landscape and views of changing landscapes, and a chapter on civic trust. The concluding chapter is more of a theoretical essay on the significance of physical landscapes for establishing “interactional potentials” and the use of “reflexive inclusion” for enhancing “place attachment” and “civic trust.”

Miller and Rivera introduce the reader to the social and symbolic character of landscapes by noting that they “can transform a grassy knoll into a suburban enclave with all the amenities that a society values, which symbolically represents the collective culture of its inhabitants” (pp. 1–2). The authors further state that they will “explore how different landscapes contribute to overall redevelopment in the aftermath of disaster...” (p. 2). Disaster landscapes emerge in the wake of natural disasters and redefine a person or community’s sense of place. Extreme damage to the built environment changes the symbolic relations people have with new cultural, economic, and political landscapes. The loss of place and the extremely altered physical landscape complicates community recovery. Miller and Rivera set out to describe changing landscapes and propose a participatory model of citizen participation through “reflexive inclusion” for improving community resilience.

The concepts of “place” and “landscape” are also addressed and it is apparent that the physical destruction of Katrina impacted memories of the past and symbolic images for future generations. After an interesting discussion of the sociological relevance of “space,” “place identity,” and “place attachment,” the authors argue that “disasters alter the interactional potential of a place,” which subsequently produces a type of phenomenological conflict that limits the desires of evacuees to return to their destroyed neighborhoods. After brief descriptions of the San Francisco Earthquake and Fire, the Southeast Asian Tsunami, and the Galveston Hurricane, in the second chapter the authors move on to a more in-depth discussion of the physical landscape of the city of New Orleans. A brief, but accurate, historical account of the physical landscape of South Louisiana and New Orleans includes the critical issue of loss of coastal wetlands and establishes the context for a discussion of the “landscape of risk” and the “landscape of recovery.” The landscape of risk correctly includes a consideration of post-Katrina exposure to a variety of molds, chemicals and hazardous materials that still pose threats to the health of returning citizens and construction workers.

In chapter three, Miller and Rivera address the cultural and economic landscape of New Orleans, noting that in the eighteenth century the city had a significant population of free people of color and only “after the transfer of the Louisiana Colony to the United States” did strict segregation policies become law. As “white flight” began in the 1960s, New Orleans became an extremely poor and segregated city with a failed public education system. This historical trend included an occupational structure that shifted from manufacturing to tourism and service industry jobs. Nonetheless, despite the massive poverty that emerged in the late twentieth century this “misrepresented underclass of individuals . . . contributed to some of the most acknowledged music styles and types of cuisine the nation and the world has seen” (p. 55). Ironically, the cultural landscape that makes New Orleans one of the most unique and enjoyable cities in the United States is threatened by the vast displacement of residents caused by Katrina. In short, the traditional cultural landscape of New Orleans may be drastically changed in the future through *Disneyfication*, a process where the architectural landscape and traditions are transformed to a “marketing-manufactured culture.”

Chapter four addresses the political landscape of New Orleans through a synthetic description of the role played by the federal, state, and local governments for creating a context of vulnerability that haunted the city for decades (Laska 2008; Tierney 2008). Over the years a contradictory ideology was fostered that promoted local

government decisions to encourage development in high-risk areas because of the federal government's willingness to financially compensate residents who moved into these areas. The post-Katrina political landscape is addressed in terms of FEMA's complete response failure, the "insensitivity and delayed concern" of President Bush, Governor Kathleen Blanco's inability to effectively communicate with other agencies, and Mayor Nagin's "inaction and absence from the scene." Miller and Rivera are pessimistic regarding future substantive change in the political landscape of New Orleans. The politics that created a vulnerable physical landscape, maintained a segregated, poverty-stricken metropolis, and failed miserably to respond to Katrina's destruction appears to be the political landscape of the future. This situation does not bode well for 21st-century New Orleans.

Chapter five extends the themes developed in chapter four and addresses "views of changing landscapes." Miller and Rivera note that "the society and culture of New Orleans may never be the same again" (p. 93). They elaborate this continuing argument by stating:

As if the event itself did not cause enough disruption, the post-Katrina disruption—the government bureaucracy, leadership ineptness and (what some consider) utter contempt for those suffering in New Orleans—made matters worse. The lack of an immediate, coordinated recovery called into question the "old order" and the government's ability or willingness to learn from earlier natural disasters of national importance. (p. 93)

The remainder of this chapter focuses on theoretical models and processes associated with postdisaster social change. In fact, the majority of this chapter is devoted to discussions of outcome processes such as "corrosive communities," functional, conflict and interpretative models of social change and very little attention is given to perspectives or data that document substantive demographic or institutional change in post-Katrina New Orleans. As such, chapter five seems somewhat out of order and may have better served the reader as the second chapter of the book.

The last two chapters of the book provide an interesting essay on "Civic Trust" (chapter 6) and a "Conclusion" chapter that addresses and broadens analytical issues discussed in the first five chapters. Miller and Rivera note that the massive destruction of the physical landscape in New Orleans raised numerous issues regarding institutional trust among survivors of Katrina. In fact, they are quite clear regarding the importance of civic trust in their extended admonition that:

The only thing that will foster an environment attractive enough for citizens to want to return and for others to settle there [New Orleans] for the first time is trust in the political institutions and organizations, such as the offices of the mayor and governor and the organizations and agencies responsible for the public safety of all people, in addition to the mitigation technologies, such as levees and pumps. (p. 107)

The issue of trust is discussed in terms of the political landscape of New Orleans, which has historically been blighted by social injustice, inequality, corruption, and purposeful actions of betrayal, such as the 1927 diversion of the Mississippi River to protect the upper class of New Orleans at the expense of the African-American community. This lack of civic trust is related to the emergence of corrosive communities and the corresponding precipitous decline in social capital that logically occurs in postdisaster conditions of collective trauma. Ostensibly, “increased civic trust forms the basis for the place attachment to one’s environment” (p. 124). Miller and Rivera seem to advocate a strict social constructivist perspective by their emphasis on the critical role of citizen’s perceptions of the political landscape.

The final chapter of the book departs from this social constructionist framework and seems to move the reader to a more “geographical realist” position where “the physical characteristics of a place initially define the interactional potential of the society living in that space, *which allows specific interaction patterns to manifest in distinct ways that contribute to their interactional past*” (p. 126; emphasis mine). Indeed, when viewing the various landscapes addressed in the book, Miller and Rivera are quite clear that the “interactional potential of the physical landscape is actually the most influential landscape” (p. 127). Although “the social, economic, and political landscapes are socially constructed” (p. 127), ultimately the physical landscape “... *cannot be controlled* by human society with any degree of certainty” (p. 127, emphasis original). Miller and Rivera argue that the technocratic paradigm, as developed by Gladwin and associates (1995), should be replaced by the “sustaincentric paradigm,” a model that sounds very similar to the “New Environment Paradigm” (NEP) that has served as a measure of attitudinal social change in environmental sociology. The destruction of the physical landscape alters community residents’ “sense of place” and correspondingly, “place attachment.” The rebuilding of “place attachment” must be characterized by “reflexive inclusion,” a process whereby local government engages in transparent legislation, “sustainable equity,” and the development of a “results-based culture” (pp. 134–135). In other words, it requires a participatory model of governance.

Miller and Rivera conclude by noting that as we move from traditional to modern society “a gap has been created between the social and cultural landscapes and the physical landscape” (p. 136). Technology has been the primary mechanism whereby the human footprint has dramatically altered the physical landscape, making communities, such as New Orleans, extremely vulnerable to the forces of nature. By reducing this increasingly widening gap between the physical landscape and the political, economic social and cultural landscapes, a shift in ideology from economic (capitalist?) to more traditional place-based values (NEP?) will reduce vulnerability to catastrophe. This perspective reminds us of the historical importance of natural wetlands and barrier islands for protecting inland areas of Louisiana from tropical storms and hurricanes. The destruction of this natural habitat through petroleum development in South Louisiana and the lack of programmatic attempts to maintain this historical habitat by government agencies provide one source for understanding this “increasing gap” of vulnerability.

Although Miller and Rivera provide an interesting framework for the sociological study of disasters which is anchored in the concept of “place landscape,” it is unfortunate that they fail to consider a significant portion of the extensive literature in Environmental Sociology that has addressed the relevance of the biophysical environment for predicting environmental attitudes and behavior. The contextual significance of the biophysical environment (physical landscape) has been viewed in terms of: (1) assumed contextual variation (Freudenburg 1997); (2) subjective contextual perceptions (Stedman 2003); (3) objective contextual change (Inglehart 1995); and (4) temporal contextual variation (Arcury and Christianson 1990; Marshall et al. 2005). Obviously, Miller and Rivera make a contribution to the latter two areas of inquiry in Environmental Sociology. Although the “biophysical environment” and the “physical landscape” may not have identical operationalizations, the similarity is apparent. The inclusion of this body of literature would have enhanced the theoretical arguments put forth by Miller and Rivera throughout the book.

The primary conclusion of the authors identifies the critical need for an ideological shift in environmental attitudes that would move society to the “sustaincentric paradigm” for future policy directives. Once again their argument would have benefited from a consideration of the research by Riley Dunlap and associates, who over the last 30 years, have developed, researched and documented the existence of two ecological “ideologies,” that is, the

“Dominant Social Paradigm” (DSP), or “human exceptionalism perspective,” and the “New Environmental Paradigm” (NEP), or “ecological worldview” (Dunlap and Van Liere 1978; Dunlap 2008). Anthropogenic environmental degradation has initiated a shift in these socially-constructed ecological worldviews. This movement has resulted in a global concern for establishing a more ecologically contextualized ideology that parallels Miller and Rivera’s call for “a deep appreciation of the historical development of landscapes and the maintenance of place attachment...” (p. 143). Consequently, a consideration of this long line of empirical research which has documented these broader trends in shifting ecological worldviews would have been appropriate. The NEP research focuses on relationships between the biophysical environment and human populations, that is, the “ecological-symbolic model.” There are significant trends in this literature that would reinforce the authors’ call for a shift in the relationship of the physical landscape to various socially-constructed landscapes.

Nonetheless, these concerns do not take away from the significant contributions to disaster research, environmental sociology and the social problems literatures that are provided in *Hurricane Katrina and the Redefinition of Landscapes*. Indeed, Miller and Rivera give the reader an innovative and historically informed account of the complex consequences that Katrina initiated and continues to produce for New Orleans. As such they move the parameters of our understanding of disaster impacts in the modern world and force a more creative disaster sociology that is grounded in the destruction of the physical landscape and the corresponding loss of socially-constructed social and cultural values that are critical for binding people and place. *Hurricane Katrina and the Redefinition of Landscape* would make an excellent supplementary text for courses in Disasters, Social Problems and Environmental Sociology, although the cost of the hard-back edition may be prohibitive for some. Indeed, a second edition, paperback version would be important for classroom use and broadening the evolution of the sociological understanding of the catastrophe that we call “Katrina.”

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