

# KATRINA

## *Unmasking Race, Poverty, and Politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

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*We fool ourselves when we argue that whites do not know what racial subordination does to its victims. Oh, they may not know the details of the harm, or its scope, but they **know**. Knowing is the key to racism's greatest value to individual whites and to their interest in maintaining the racial status quo.*

—Derrick Bell, “Racism’s Secret Bonding,” *Faces at the Bottom of the Well* (1992, p. 151)

In his allegorical tale “Racism’s Secret Bonding,” legal scholar Derrick Bell imagined the occurrence of fourth of July “racial data storms.” During these storms, the consciousness of each and every White American was flooded with full information about the slave trade, slavery, lynching, Jim Crow, and contemporary discrimination, as well as a powerful emotional appreciation for the human suffering entailed by these conditions. Bell’s “racial data storms” created great turmoil, anxiety, and demands for action. These demands focused on preventing future waves of “racial data storms” but also sought significant progressive policy intervention against discrimination and inequality. Bell mused that by the time the “racial data storms” had stopped, they “left behind them the greatest social reform movement America had ever known” (1992, p. 150).

Many had hoped, in a similar fashion, that Katrina would be America’s real “racial data storm.” The televised images from Katrina were read in some corners as an unmasking of problems of racial segregation, hard-core poverty, and long-standing political indifference. The hope for this racial data storm was that the televised images of tens of thousands of desperate U.S. citizens stranded for days without food, potable water, or adequate shelter, amid festering floodwaters and the great hurricane’s detritus—including human bodies—would make it hard for any government or society to go back to business as usual.

In the immediate aftermath of Katrina it seemed not just plausible but positively the right thing to do to suggest that this racial data storm had exposed and shattered some of the basic myths that America had come to live by (Bobo 2005). What were these myths? The first is that the United States no longer needs to focus attention on poverty and economic inequality as major social ills. The second of these myths is

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that we have largely solved the race problem in America and can now do without much of the legal and social policy apparatus aimed at achieving racial justice. And the third of these myths is that there are few collective needs—societal obligations if you will—that are the enduring obligations of an effective federal government (beyond military defense and national security, that is). To wit, Katrina could be read as unmasking the fact that American society is still deeply marked by class inequality and deep poverty, that we still suffer from a great and poisonous racial divide, and that there are some duties and services which only an adequately resourced and responsibly managed federal government can hope to deliver to its citizens.

A sense of obligation to help victims of natural disaster has been important to major political reform efforts of the past. Indeed, just this sort of sense of obligation played a part in the development of New Deal social welfare policy. Noted legal scholar and sociologist Michele Landis Dauber makes a strong case that a discourse of “disaster” and “disaster relief” was critical to building support for Roosevelt’s New Deal social policies (Landis 1998, 1999). In particular, the analogy made to *natural disasters*, which carried the clear moral obligation for society to help those in need, was often an element of the case for new policy designed to alleviate the hardship of an *economic disaster*.

Certainly many media commentators and even President Bush were compelled to discuss race as an aspect of the Katrina disaster. Though, as always, race can affect the meaning of being a disaster victim, as the remarks of recording artist Kanye West epitomized. Recent social science research speaks directly to this point. For example, work by the eminent media and politics scholar Shanto Iyengar (in collaboration with Richard Morin of the *Washington Post*) showed that how media portrayed Katrina disaster victims strongly influenced the amount of assistance that their fellow Americans thought victims should receive. Thus, they found that “Americans are more willing to provide extended government assistance to white victims of Hurricane Katrina than to African Americans and other minorities, particularly blacks with darker skin. Overall, the ‘penalty’ for being black and a Katrina victim amounted to about \$1,000” (Morin 2006; see also Iyengar and Morin, 2006).

To be sure, significant federal help did finally arrive for the victims of Katrina. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) did provide housing assistance for many of the displaced. The clean-up and rebuilding efforts continued even as this essay was being written. President Bush felt Katrina and New Orleans politically important enough to make more than a handful of trips to the region. Extraordinary charitable giving and voluntary efforts have taken place. The struggles of the displaced for jobs, for housing, for political rights and voice in the future of New Orleans, and for a return to their communities continue to make the news.

But the sort of deep democratic dialogue (Thompson 2006) about poverty, racism, and the obligations of government that many had hoped for in Katrina’s wake has not come about. The *Du Bois Review* dedicates this special issue to a focused examination of the many political, sociological, and moral questions raised by this very American disaster. We do so, in part, because the moral force of the moment crystallized by the searing images from New Orleans at the close of the summer of 2005 is not yet spent. We do so also, however, because many social scientists have fruitfully assembled systematic data and analytical perspectives on how to bring meaning to the racial data storm of 2005. We are thus very pleased to publish in *DBR* this wide-ranging collection of articles that spans the perspectives of economists, ethnographers, historians, linguists, public policy analysts, political scientists, and sociologists.

Katrina raised powerful questions about American democracy and the racial divide. In this issue, the noted political scientist Robert Lieberman examines the

implications of Katrina for the long-standing U.S. ideological tension between race-consciousness and color blindness in social policy. He suggests that, although Katrina seemingly forced a moment of politically unexpected recognition of racial inequality and discrimination from the Bush administration, it did not significantly dislodge the putatively race-neutral ethos that otherwise dominates the United States in the age of *laissez faire racism* (Bobo et al., 1997; Bobo and Smith, 1998). Likewise, Paul Frymer and colleagues call for students of American politics to heed a critical lesson of Katrina: namely, the analytically central importance of race and racial division to American political dynamics (see also Dawson 2000; Kim 2000; Lee 2002; Bobo and Tuan, 2006).

In a cogent essay, economist Sheldon Danziger and public policy analyst Sandra Danziger offer an assessment of how current antipoverty policies helped to set the stage for Katrina's "unnatural disaster." In particular, they document how trends in labor market conditions contribute to enduring high rates of poverty and racial inequality. In response, they propose a strategy for post-Katrina antipoverty policy reform. At the center of this strategy is an emphasis on assuring that full-time work pay a true living (i.e., above poverty level) wage and that government take a variety of steps to cushion workers against and better prepare them to adapt to ongoing labor market transformations.

Will the public endorse such a set of new antipoverty strategies? Did Katrina create greater public desire for major new policy initiatives? Sociologists David Grusky and Emily Ryo take a careful look at whether public opinion on poverty and economic inequality changed in the wake of Katrina. Their analyses of data from two national surveys, one pre-Katrina and one post-Katrina, do point to a small increase in concern about poverty. However, there is little other evidence of significant movement, suggesting that most Americans responded to Katrina on the basis of existing attitudinal, ideological, and political predispositions. This absence of profound change in response to dramatic events connected to major social cleavages is consistent with other major episodes in U.S. race relations. It fits findings with regard to the impact of the use of federal troops to desegregate Little Rock High school in 1957 and to the King assassination in 1967 (Riley and Pettigrew, 1976). It is also largely consistent with the impact of the 1992 Los Angeles riots following the acquittal by an all-White Simi Valley jury of the four White police officers who beat Black motorist Rodney King (Bobo et al., 1994). If Katrina exposed America's "dirty little secret" of persistent poverty and racial inequality, the data suggest that most Americans rather quickly got over any politically significant sense of discomfort or embarrassment.

Are race and racism what really organize public thinking and the political response (or lack thereof) to Katrina? Social theorist David Theo Goldberg situates Katrina as an exemplar of modern racial dynamics and the success of a larger conservative political project. In particular, he draws attention to a new or "born-again racism," what he labels *racial americanization*. Accordingly, race and overtly racial discourse and social policy are de-legitimated at the same time that race and institutionalized racial inequalities are allowed to operate at the level of individual preference within market dynamics, in addition to being used for the "profiling" of potential criminal and terrorist threats. This new dominant ethos with regard to race forecloses the possibility of a critical discourse about and recognition of the real dynamics underlying what happened in New Orleans.

In several respects, the research reported in this volume points to the critical importance of race, and potentially of racism, to reactions to Katrina. Political scientists Leonie Huddy and Stanley Feldman provide a detailed examination of public opinion following Katrina. They find substantial Black-White differences in

sympathy for the hurricane victims and in support for government programs to assist Katrina's victims, with Blacks expressing greater sympathy and policy intervention support than do Whites. Importantly, they find that these race differences persist even after extensive controls are introduced for social class, and for political value and identity factors that might have been thought to underlie such polarized views. Such results point to the historical emergence and persistence of distinctly racialized identities and relations in the United States (Zuberi 2001). In a similar view, noted sociologist Cedric Herring analyzes data from a survey of survivors and finds comparable evidence of a highly durable racial divide in opinions about Hurricane Katrina. Tyrone Forman and Amanda Lewis suggest that generally rising expressions of racial apathy not only mask underlying racism, but may explain the political context that made an event like Katrina possible in the first place. Likewise, Kathryn Sweeney conducts a detailed analysis of website discussions of Kanye West's claim that racism was at the root of the slow response to Hurricane Katrina. She, too, points to a discourse of meritocracy and color blindness in much of the public response to Katrina.

Essays in this volume remind us that, in addition to making us face up to poverty, and to race and racism, Katrina compels us to attend to history, place, gender, and ethnicity as factors affecting who fell victim to the storm. In a provocative essay, distinguished linguist John Baugh reminds us of three interconnected and critical considerations: (1) the importance of slavery to creating, in a path dependent fashion, the circumstances many African Americans faced in New Orleans; (2) the need to think in a more rigorous and complex fashion about the degree of historical hardship that particular individuals, groups, and communities have faced; and (3) the risk of oversimplification from analyses of racial dynamics that fail to consider the two previous points. Sociologists William Falk, Matthew Hunt, and Larry Hunt remind us of the special sense of place that is generally a part of our social identities, perhaps especially so for residents of New Orleans. They develop a careful set of projections based on prior demographic composition and information on those displaced to conclude that the rebuilt post-Katrina New Orleans will almost certainly be whiter, smaller, and more affluent than pre-Katrina New Orleans. And, in what is arguably the most poignant of the essays in this volume, historian Barbara Ransby examines the powerfully gendered vulnerability to the hurricane. Single mothers and poor and elderly women were among the most readily visible victims of Katrina. In the prominent discourses on poverty, on race and racism, and on government incompetence, the extent to which women, especially African American women, bore the brunt of the storm's wrath is all too often an overlooked feature of the story of Katrina.

Alford Young makes a case for thinking about Katrina in the light of recent trends in ethnographic research, a trend that strongly cautions against a view of the minority poor as deeply dysfunctional, alienated, and threatening. Educational and stratification sociologist Grace Kao focuses our attention on how Katrina affected the Asian and Latino populations of Gulf region. John Lie surfaces some of the distinctive history of New Orleans, its ethnic richness, and especially the effect of the hurricane on Native American populations.

My co-editor, eminent political scientist Michael Dawson, concludes this important set of essays by raising some profoundly troubling observations about the long-term implications of Katrina for African Americans and for those with progressive political aspirations in the United States more generally. Having done some of the most innovative work on the racial divide in public opinion generally (Dawson 2001), he turns his attention to the sharply different lens that Blacks and Whites

brought to Katrina. He finds not only sharply racially polarized assessments, but a series of troubling political challenges. Dawson concludes that the only way to sensibly understand such large and recurrent differences in political opinion is to recognize that Black and White Americans inhabit, borrowing vocabulary from theorist Jürgen Habermas, separate *lifeworlds*. But the alternative or “counterpublic” discourses within Black America about race generally, and about an event like Katrina, more specifically, are not achieving effective political expression or impact. Furthermore, he suggests that this failure is in part attributable to mounting signs of weakness in the institutions of civil society within Black America. This weakness is deeply problematic, for it underlies an inability to rise to exploit political opportunities when they occur (e.g., the attention to poverty and racial inequality occasioned by Katrina) or to effectively meet serious ongoing challenges to community well-being (i.e., electoral disenfranchisement, mass incarceration). Without succumbing to Pollyannaish hopes for quick solutions, Dawson underscores the need to keep alive a political analysis of the situation focused on race and for serious re-dedication to the task of mass political organizing and action.

As with many events that encapsulate race and inequality in America, the legacy of Katrina is more a paradox or series of dilemmas than it is a simple, unencumbered, linear narrative. Katrina was a racial data storm that, at least for a moment, compelled saturation media coverage, intensive mass public engagement, and begrudging political recognition at the highest levels. At the same time, Katrina highlighted the many forces, conditions, and processes that systematically reproduce poverty, widening economic inequality and persistent racial hierarchy in the U.S., as well as sustaining the effective hegemony of a small government, anti-taxation, pro-market logic in government and social policy. Katrina both unmasked these conditions and yet left the many fundamental dynamics of inequality unchanged.

In the concluding remarks of “Racism’s Secret Bonding,” legal scholar Bell suggests that deep racial inequality is a hidden, unmentioned but curiously central “secret” of American civic life and culture. And like most deep and important family secrets, many energies and processes are mobilized to prevent “the secret” from rising to a place of steady and gravely discomfiting prominence or attention (even if the occasional embarrassing unmasking event might sometimes happen). Will this be the story of the racial data storm of 2005? As we reach the first anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, do we as a nation return to a posture of relative inattention to the facts of poverty, racial segregation, discrimination, and hierarchy, and of a stultifying and incapacitating conception of the proper role of government in assuring the well-being of its citizens? The clear message from the research and analyses offered in this issue of the *Du Bois Review* is that we allow this to happen—again—at our collective peril. Many of the critical building blocks of an alternative analysis of the situation, of directions for future social policy, and the tools to move toward Phil Thompson’s notion of “deep democracy” are assembled here.

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