Controlling disasters: recognising latent goals after Hurricane Katrina

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Classic sociological theory can be used to interpret the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, which made landfall in the United States on 29 August 2005. The delayed and ineffective response to the storm and the subsequent failure of the levees become more understandable when one considers the latent goals of social control in disaster recovery. Constructing the survivors as suspect or criminal and conceptualising the impacts of the disaster as individual problems occurred in order to justify the emphasis on controlling the survivors of Katrina rather than on assisting them. Parallels are drawn here between the disaster response featuring social control efforts and a recent paradigmatic shift in criminal justice from justice to ‘risk management’. Recognition of the implicit aims of the inadequate disaster response provides a more complete explanation of why post-Katrina efforts failed to achieve the manifest goals of response and recovery. The conclusion suggests ways to ensure more equitable and just disaster responses.

Keywords: disaster, Hurricane Katrina, social control, risk management

Introduction

Controlling disasters typically means preparing for possible events by attempting to prevent or minimise harm to people and damage to property. Disaster control also includes recovery and response efforts, moving and assisting people, and protecting and salvaging property from the effects of a disaster. However, control is involved in disasters in other ways, too. Work has been produced recently on the framing of Hurricane Katrina (August 2005) and its aftermath in the United States (Dynes and Rodriguez, 2007). Framing a disaster shapes how it is viewed, how policy is implemented, and how assistance is given (Tierney, Bevc and Kuligowski, 2006). Constructing and perpetuating disaster myths in turn influence disaster responses (Quarantelli and Dynes, 1972; Clarke, 2002; Tierney, 2003; Tierney, Bevc and Kuligowski, 2006). Also in this vein is the work of Stock (2007) on the ramifications of the media’s use of the term ‘anarchy’ with regard to collective behaviour post-Katrina and the chapter by Tierney and Bevc (2007) on the implications of the trend to militarise disaster response. All of these are examples of efforts to control disaster by focusing on issues of social control rather than on the physical threat or the effects of the event.

Hurricane Katrina scholars have pointed out that the response to the storm, and the subsequent flooding, was shaped by disaster myths (Tierney, 2003, 2006; Alexander, 2006; Kaufman, 2006; Tierney, Bevc and Kuligowski, 2006; Dynes and Rodriguez, 2007; Tierney and Bevc, 2007) that set the stage for the prolonged aftermath. Rather
than argue that the emphasis on the social control of populations following Katrina was the result of overt racism, classism or conspiracy (although some perceive it to be), this paper, completed in June 2008, suggests that the actions and inactions of the disaster response reflect a larger cultural trend of the expansion of ‘risk management’ already evident in the criminal justice system (Garland, 2001; Hudson, 2001).

This work stems from the author’s need to make sense of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. No explanation adequately accounted for the inadequacy of the response, the long delays in providing assistance, and the high number of people forced to migrate to locations across the nation and unable to return home. How could this happen? More important, why did this occur? The explanation that best fits, it is argued here, is that at least some of what were seen as incomprehensible mistakes in the response and disaster relief provision may have had desired, if not consciously intended, consequences. In this light, the endemic flaws in so many parts of the disaster response system reveal a pattern: in times of disaster some populations are seen as posing potential risks and therefore are subject to more social control than others.

This study began with research on community response to disasters, concentrating on the sheltering of people displaced by Hurricane Katrina in rural east Texas (Miller, 2007). From late August 2005 until May 2006, the author was a participant observer in a community that hosted evacuees, watching how the media portrayed Katrina as a tragedy, a crime scene, a war zone (Tierney, Bevc and Kuligowski, 2006). As Krause (2006) states, ‘people inside New Orleans came to be seen by some more as a threat than as a population in need’. Attentively following media reports on the aftermath and the circumstances of those displaced by the storm the author noted that as the definition of the places evacuated shifted, so too did the perception of the people fleeing those areas. Initially the displaced were characterised as people suffering tragic circumstances and devastating loss. Later they were described as suspicious people with dubious qualities and even as potential criminals (Tierney, Bevc and Kuligowski, 2006). The shifts in perceptions were reflected in disaster assistance. Generous contributions by many individuals and organisations were replaced by underfunded and unreliable government assistance programmes (Peek, forthcoming). The end result is that many displaced people did not have the means to return home and are still, more than four years later, struggling to recover from the event (Weber and Peek, forthcoming).

What is presented here is a theoretical framework for understanding Hurricane Katrina. There is now a solid body of literature on the storm and a wide variety of sources are utilised here to support the argument. Some might argue that it is something of a leap of faith to rely on information from research conducted by others, yet this author believes that enough evidence is presented in the literature to warrant a careful look. It is this process of triangulation that gives broader validity to results derived from very specific studies (Stallings, 2006). Consequently, the goal of this paper is to line up the evidence and provide an explanatory lens with which to view it so as to convince readers to ask ‘what if social control was the latent goal of Katrina’s ongoing aftermath?’ It is left to others to attempt to prove or disprove the arguments presented in more systematic ways.
Outlining the theoretical framework

To ground these processes in sociological theory it is helpful to turn to the sociology of knowledge, which has as its focus the social construction of reality (Berger and Luckman, 1967). This paper asserts that the social construction of disaster myths does not result from a lack of empirical knowledge of disasters or inadequate organizational capacity to prepare for and respond to them (although this might also be the case). Rather, it is argued here that the way a disaster is packaged and reported serves a purpose. This is true even if, as Fischer (1998) notes, the reporters believe the message. Some authors have discussed how the images shown after Katrina were chosen because of the organisation of the industry and the nature of the reporting business, which favours startling, newsworthy pictures and stereotypical frames (Altheide, 2002; Tierney, Bevc and Kuligowski, 2006). In the case of Hurricane Katrina, myths were circulated for a number of additional reasons. As Dynes and Rodriguez (2007) point out, Hurricane Katrina was the first major disaster to be covered around the clock by competing cable news channels. The catastrophic scope of the damage also encouraged cataclysmic frames (Dynes and Rodriguez, 2007). This paper puts forward another explanation for the persistence of disaster myths. Following Tierney, Bevc and Kuligowski (2006), it is contended that by creating the frames linking mostly poor, Black evacuees with civil unrest and crime, the media support the control process, even if it is done unintentionally. Despite decades of research disproving largely erroneous views of behaviour during and after disasters (see, for example, Quarantelli and Dynes, 1972; Fischer, 1998; Tierney, 2003), disaster myths regularly resurface because they help to justify the latent goals of disaster response: the management of groups perceived as potential risks to social order.

Identifying the latent goals of social actions allows one to recognise hidden consequences, question their desirability and legitimacy, and, if necessary, prevent them from occurring (Merton, 1949). Mizruchi (1987, p. 9) confirms that ‘raising awareness, or consciousness, regarding society’s essential processes makes it possible to anticipate, recognize, and control their direction’. While this paper highlights the latent goals of social control inherent in the response, recovery and reconstruction that followed Hurricane Katrina, the framework may well be useful when examining a wide variety of disasters.

To sketch a theoretical foundation for looking at the aftermath of a disaster through a social control lens, a modified functional perspective on deviance (Durkheim, 1960; Erikson, 1966) is adopted. This approach holds that deviance serves a positive function in society by reinforcing its normative structure. Where it is not present, it is created. This perspective presumes a consensus on which norms are to be reinforced and which behaviours are to be discarded. A more critical social control orientation suggests that the normative framework is designed to reinforce acceptable behaviour by those with power at the expense of weak and vulnerable groups. Media images focused on examples of deviance, such as looting, and the capture and punishment of looters not only make for exciting coverage, but also reinforce the definition of looting as unacceptable and provide a warning that violators will be punished. The definition of looting was challenged and racialised when two photographs of people...
wading through chest-deep water received different captions despite seemingly identical behaviour. The White people had just ‘found’ food and the Black person had ‘looted’ (Kaufman, 2006). Regardless of actual events, the perception based on these images was that race was a factor in defining crime even under the most extreme conditions. These images appeared as troops had taken over New Orleans, Louisiana, presumably because the large minority population there warranted a dramatic presence of control agents.

The residents stranded in the city and the people displaced by Katrina across the country were treated as a surplus population. In *Regulating Society*, Mizruchi (1987) draws on the control literature to examine how surplus populations are created and controlled. ‘Short-term or long-term imbalances between people and places—and the consequences, real and imagined, of these imbalances—require some response from society’ (Mizruchi, 1987, p. 9). Large segments of the population of New Orleans were already considered to be a problem prior to the storm. High crime rates and concentrated, extreme poverty characterised some urban neighbourhoods and were seen as persistent issues. The following sections show how the definition of a surplus population prior to Katrina was then extended to the evacuees—both those seeking temporary shelter and the long-term displaced.

**Pre-Katrina New Orleans**

New Orleans and many of the communities along the Gulf Coast of the US hardest hit by the hurricane had large minority populations before August 2005. Sixty-seven per cent of New Orleans’ residents were Black and approximately 30 per cent of the city’s populace lived below the poverty level—well above the national average (Faw, 2005). In a study of concentrated poverty in New Orleans and other US cities, Katz (2006) notes that, of the people living below the poverty line at the time of the storm, 84 per cent were African-American. Moreover, ‘poor African-American households were highly concentrated in 47 neighborhoods of extreme poverty—that is, neighborhoods where the poverty rate topped 40 percent’ (Katz, 2006) after the levees broke. All but nine of these neighbourhoods of extreme poverty flooded (Katz, 2006). Poverty was seen as a crucial factor in people’s ability to evacuate (Katz, 2006), as estimates reveal that some 134,000 people in the city could not afford the necessary transportation (Faw, 2005). In addition to the residents of the extreme-poverty neighbourhoods, around 6,000 people in New Orleans were homeless before the storm (Ratner, 2008). According to the definition of Mizruchi (1987), these areas were home to many people who could be classified as members of unwanted or surplus populations.

**Post-Katrina New Orleans**

This view of the city’s poor was aired by prominent officials shortly after the storm. The threat of civil unrest loomed large on television screens. Stranded residents were presented as potential looters and criminals. Dynes and Rodriguez (2007, p. 31)
conclude, however, that ‘images of chaos and anarchy portrayed by the mass media were based primarily on rumor and inaccurate assumptions’. As a result, the National Guard was dispatched to help initially with search and rescue, but rapidly it shifted its efforts toward the need to re-establish order, partly because of rumour and media images (Tierney, Bevc and Kuligowski, 2006; Tierney and Bevc, 2007). The actions of government agencies and the comments of prominent political figures after the event both emphasise the need to control and even to punish. Kaufman (2006) points out that a jail was the first institution to be back ‘in business’ after the storm, even while approximately 25,000 people were still waiting to be rescued. Republican Senator Rick Santorum ‘suggested punishing people who had ignored pre-storm evacuation orders’ (Babington, 2005).

Journalists collected remarks from others pointing to the potentially positive consequences of the devastation. Republican Representative Richard H. Baker stated that ‘We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn’t do it, but God did’ (Babington, 2005). Others mentioned bulldozing part of New Orleans. Although the Secretary of the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Alphonso R. Jackson, did not present the idea of ‘a “whiter” Big Easy’ as a positive change, many viewed the assessment as an improvement to the city.

Any one of these comments could have been taken out of context and distorted. But what emerged from reporting on the aftermath of the storm was a pattern of observations of events and the people involved that defined the devastation as largely affecting poor minority populations. Furthermore, comments tended towards a need for social control and even cast the consequences of the damage and the suffering of these groups in positive terms.

The Katrina diaspora

The large number of people from New Orleans and the Gulf Coast displaced by Katrina constitute a more permanent surplus population. Groen and Polivka (2008) use current population survey data to estimate that 1.5 million people of 16 years of age or more evacuated. These evacuees are representative of the local demographics (Groen and Polivka, 2008). However, there were marked differences in who was able to return within the first two years of the storm (Groen and Polivka, 2008, p. 1). While the evacuees represented every race, ethnicity and all socioeconomic categories, a year after the storm those who had not returned to the city were more likely to be Black and poor. According to a report by the Brookings Institution (Frey, Singer and Park, 2007, p. 1), ‘Compared with “stayers” in the city of New Orleans, out-migrants were younger, poorer, more likely to be black, and more likely to have children. On the other hand in-migrants were more highly educated, more likely to be childless, and more likely to be white’. These demographic shifts are perhaps not surprising given the rhetoric and the selective reconstruction of the city. By 2008, for example, no new public transportation had been built. Child-care capacity in some parts of the city stood at only 30–40 per cent of pre-storm levels (The
Brookings Institution and the Greater New Orleans Community Data, 2008, p. 14). The demolition of public housing, which had been a highly contested issue before the storm, was quickly executed after Katrina for a net loss of more than 2,764 units of affordable housing (Luft, 2007). The mixed-income properties planned, it is estimated, will welcome only about 20 per cent of the former residents of the public housing units (Luft, 2007). With more than 70 per cent of property in the city damaged (Pardee, forthcoming), it is not surprising that rents have risen dramatically (The Brookings Institution and the Greater New Orleans Community Data, 2008, p. 12).

All of these factors contributed to the large number of homeless people, rising from some 6,000 people in 2005 (prior to Hurricane Katrina) to more than 12,000 in 2007 (Ratner, 2008). Note that this was an increase of 100 per cent on pre-storm homelessness in a city that was only half of its original size in 2007 (Sasser, 2007). New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin commented that one solution to the homeless problem would be to ‘give them one-way bus tickets out of town’ (Dewan, 2008). Later, when he tried to dismiss the homeless as outsiders, advocacy groups provided data showing that 86 per cent are locals and more than 50 per cent link their lack of housing to Katrina (Dewan, 2008).

Scattered across the US (Groen and Polivka, 2008, pp. 8–9) after multiple displacements many evacuees still live in a state of limbo, undecided whether to attempt to go back to their former homes or neighbourhoods or to establish new lives where they landed after the storm (Weber and Peek, forthcoming). In this sense, many Katrina evacuees represent a marginally integrated population created by a disaster, eyed with suspicion as different and even criminal. As with the groups highlighted by Mizruchi (1987), displaced people, particularly if they are poor minorities, constitute a population that demands a response. The response will reflect the underlying goals of those managing it and the prevailing perspectives on what and who represents a risk.

Abeyance at work

One way to manage a surplus population according to Mizruchi (1987, p. 20) is through ‘abeyance’. The abeyance process includes ‘the organizational processes that absorb, control, and expel personnel as they are and are not needed to fill status positions in society’ (Mizruchi, 1987, p. 17). The discussion of abeyance by Mizruchi (1987) is linked to the treatment of various groups throughout history. Although he does not focus on disaster survivors, the group he calls ‘the disreputable poor’ shares characteristics with many of Katrina’s displaced, and certainly with those most visible in the media. Garfield (2007) describes how the media framed Katrina survivors as ‘unworthy’ disaster victims, offering a connection to historical perspectives on poverty (Piven and Cloward, 1993). Viewed from the perspective of abeyance, the exceedingly slow rate of programmes ostensibly aimed at returning displaced residents to their former homes and lives takes on another meaning.
Perhaps the length of time served a latent purpose: to keep people in a holding pattern, away from the disaster area. In pre-Katrina New Orleans major changes that disproportionately affected low-income groups were under way. For example, multiple public housing facilities were being closed and earmarked for demolition (Luft, 2007; Pardee, forthcoming). Neighbourhoods had organised to resist these efforts collectively. With the residents displaced or overwhelmed by individual reconstruction efforts since the storm, both of these agendas have been expeditiously furthered.

As in the case of the poor seeking welfare, Piven and Cloward (1993, pp. 147–180) contend that what may appear to be problems in the system actually serve the latent functions of reducing welfare rolls and deterring all but the most desperate and tenacious from attempting to enrol. The same may be true of disaster assistance programmes. Moreover, social control is imposed on those who receive relief in other ways too, since they must adhere to formal and informal rules of behaviour to remain eligible. The work of Lein et al. (forthcoming) on Hurricane Katrina evacuees in Austin, Texas, powerfully illustrates this. Disaster survivors are well aware of the negative stigma attached to welfare recipients and distance themselves from it by electing not to apply for disaster assistance or by adopting behaviours and status symbols to communicate their position vis-à-vis welfare recipients (Fothergill, 2004).

In addition, abeyance may be further understood in two phases: expulsion and absorption (Mizruchi, 1987, pp. 152–153). Expulsion refers to the removal of unwanted surplus populations, either intentionally or involuntarily, without regard for alternative placement (Mizruchi, 1987, p. 153). The latter best fits people displaced by Hurricane Katrina. In contrast, absorption refers to the welcoming of populations in cases where people are needed to fill positions or admitted in an attempt to diffuse social tensions by controlling ‘the dissident or the would-be dissident’ (Mizruchi, 1987, p. 155). Reverend Jesse Jackson and Democrat Representative Maxine Waters interpreted the evacuation of New Orleans’ residents as an attempt to manage would-be dissidents. They charged that ‘relocating evacuees across the country was “racist” and designed to move black people, who overwhelmingly vote Democrat, out of Louisiana’ (The Washington Times, 2005). The treatment of those displaced by Katrina combines aspects of both expulsion and absorption.

Expulsion is the most easily identifiable of the two abeyance processes. All kinds of people were ‘expelled’ by the floodwaters. However, the images of the survivors and evacuees focused increasingly on poor, Black evacuees (Tierney, Bevc and Kuligowski, 2006). As demonstrated above, residents in post-Katrina New Orleans are more likely to be White and better educated (Frey, Singer and Park, 2007). Those who stay ‘expelled’ are the members of groups considered as somehow undesirable or surplus to the requirements of post-Katrina New Orleans. They were moved out without much thought as to where they would go and they are the least likely to be ‘absorbed’ in their new locations because of the same negative perceptions.

The surplus population was removed and dispersed and is the least likely to return. Although many people struggled to be ‘absorbed’ in new communities as fully integrated residents, their very dispersal has slowed their progress. Being a ‘Katrina
evacuee’ evolved into a negative label: one that caused children trouble at school (Fothergill and Peek, forthcoming) and one that made it more difficult to rent an apartment (Pardee, forthcoming) or to be considered for a job (Lein et al., forthcoming). Consequently, although it is occurring slowly, absorption has taken longer than expected.

Another effect of the expulsion process was to diffuse tensions. Except in the relatively few areas that received large numbers of evacuees, Katrina’s displaced have largely faded from view. The daily focus on making their way in new locations, often in places isolated from previous support networks, diverts energy away from attempts at organised, systematic, collective action. The media has largely forgotten them; they are ‘old news’.

Managing post-Katrina risk

Hurricane Katrina-related events can be better understood by examining the policy climate in which they occurred. The work of Hudson (2001) traces the shift in criminal justice systems in the United Kingdom and the US in the late 1990s, from a focus on justice as a guiding principle to vengeance (Hudson, 2001, p. 146; see also Garland, 2001). Today, ‘risk to the law-abiding public “trumps” justice not only to offenders, but also to others who may come into various contemporary categories of suspicion’ (Hudson, 2001, p. 144). In fact, the ‘risk management’ approach (Hudson, 2001) to crime control not only blurs the distinction between violent and non-violent offending, but also blurs the distinction between offender and suspect (Hudson, 2001, p. 154). It is not so much what you have done, but who you are that is judged as unacceptable or risky. Criminal justice now involves the implementation of policies that ‘are very much the policies of containment of the underclass’ (Hudson, 2001, p. 155), thereby controlling the undesired or surplus population.

Despite law and order being part of everyday political rhetoric and the criminal justice system having moved towards risk management strategies, post-Katrina flooding drove hundreds of thousands from New Orleans. The disaster management system at all levels was so overwhelmed and ill-equipped that the military was called in to control the situation. More than 63,000 military personnel (Government Accountability Office, 2006, cited in Teirney and Bevc, 2007) were sent to the region—the largest military mobilisation for a disaster in US history. The first to arrive were engaged in search-and-rescue missions, but the sensational media reports of assaults, civil unrest, looting, murder and rape led officials to redirect military resources away from saving people to emphasising control and ‘securing the city’ (Tierney and Bevc, 2007). Many of the reports were later found to be unconfirmed and unfounded (Dwyer and Drew, 2005; Thevenot and Russell, 2005). Of the reported 200 bodies said to be in the Louisiana Superdome, for instance, only six were discovered. None showed signs of being murdered (Dynes and Rodriguez, 2007, pp. 29–30).
Following Katrina, social control was aimed at controlling the evacuated population for at least two reasons. One was to diffuse the potential for collective action by those abandoned after the storm and subsequent flooding. Evacuees were sent to locations in all 50 US states (Groen and Polivka, 2008) and were isolated from their own informal social networks of family and friends (Weber and Peek, forthcoming). Communication with family, former neighbours or even with other evacuees was hindered by distance, a lack of information about people’s whereabouts, and repeated displacement. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that the hundreds of thousands of people who were displaced were not able to organise themselves into a unified collective unit to demand assistance or reparations for the inadequacy of the disaster relief and response efforts. The second reason was to relieve the government of responsibility for the tragedy in New Orleans and along the Gulf Coast. As the next section discusses, individualising disaster loss goes hand-in-hand with victimisation and criminalisation of the disaster survivors. These similar processes place the blame for their circumstances on their own shoulders. Viewed through this lens, the employment of disaster myths and the lack of progress in assisting people displaced by Katrina or in rebuilding New Orleans are clearly connected.

**Individualising public issues**

The context for the creation of frames is important. As Altheide (2002) shows, the media has been successful in convincing us to be fearful, often of the wrong things. Kaufman (2006) agrees, noting the ‘homicide coverage quadrupled even as homicide rates declined by 35%’ in the 1990s. Moreover, ‘TV characters on primetime are murdered approximately 11 times as often as citizens’ (Kaufman, 2006). How the frames of Katrina were socially constructed to help control the surplus population post-disaster is explained in this section. Evolution of the images is reviewed first, followed by linkage of the process to sociological theory to recognise the mechanisms employed to create ‘the Katrina evacuee’ and isolate him/her further.

After the storm, the dangers associated with the affected area were covered extensively in the media. These featured reports of looting and violence established the survivors of Katrina as suspect and potentially dangerous, contributing to the rationale for charging military personnel with securing the city (Tierney, Bevc and Kuligowski, 2006). ‘Initial media coverage of Katrina’s devastating impacts was quickly replaced by reporting that characterized disaster victims as opportunistic looters and violent criminals and that presented individual and group behavior following the Katrina disaster through the lens of civil unrest’ (Tierney, Bevc and Kuligowski, 2006, p. 60). ‘Later, narratives shifted again and began to metaphorically represent the disaster-stricken city of New Orleans as a war zone’ (Tierney, Bevc and Kuligowski, 2006, p. 61; see also Thevenot and Russell, 2005; Dynes and Rodriguez, 2007).

Even as the suspicious ‘profile’ of the Katrina ‘victim’ was established, media stories individualised post-storm experiences. The distinction between ‘private troubles’ and ‘public issues’ teaches that in order to mobilise people for collective action, an
individual problem must be generalised to a larger population facing similar challenges (Mills, 1959). Framing the consequences of Katrina in ways that highlight social and economic inequality would reinforce calls for increased government intervention and assistance. If, however, the focus is on specific groups of individuals, the aftermath is seen as a series of ‘private troubles’. The corresponding response is individualised, evaluated and processed on a case-by-case basis and government responsibility and assistance are lessened. Consequently, images of poor minorities quickly became the only media images of Katrina evacuees (Tierney, Bevc and Kuligowski, 2006; Dynes and Rodriguez, 2007). Rumours of 200 dead bodies in the basement of the Louisiana Superdome and stories about sexual assault and rampant murder received extensive coverage (Dwyer and Drew, 2005; Thevenot and Russell, 2005).

However, even as the watching world was presented with media images of the worst imaginable circumstances, some blame was directed towards the victims. The explanations offered were that the people stranded in the Superdome were there because they 1) did not heed evacuation warnings and 2) they were ‘guilty’ of being poor. It was not surprising, therefore, when former First Lady Barbara Bush—and the mother of the then incumbent president, George W. Bush—remarked while touring an evacuation shelter that the conditions might be preferable to those that the evacuees were accustomed to at home. Likewise, when former Republican House Majority Leader Tom DeLay visited Reliant Park in Houston, Texas—the initial destination of many evacuees—he spoke with several boys about how their experience was like camp, asking them: ‘Now tell me the truth boys, is this kind of fun?’ (DomeBlog, 2005). The boys reportedly ‘nodded yes, but looked perplexed’ (DomeBlog, 2005).

**Successful failure**

A comparison of the US criminal justice system and the agencies tasked with disaster response reveals similarities in stated goals and latent functions. Reiman (2007) argues convincingly that the US criminal justice system benefits (receives greater support and more resources) when it fails (more criminals, more recidivism). Drawing on the functionalist theory of Emile Durkheim and Kai Erikson, Reiman argues that crime does play a function in society. In fact, society needs crime and creates it. However, crime and criminals do not simply serve to define and maintain proscriptions and prescriptions. Linking to the conflict perspective, Reiman argues that criminals are created and controlled for another reason: to serve the interests of the powerful.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to argue that Katrina evacuees were intentionally defined and treated as ‘surplus’ so that others would gain. Some have asserted, though, that private developers and security contractors were quick to seize the profit opportunity offered by the disaster (Klein, 2007). Furthermore, Tierney and
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Bevc (2007) note how the military greatly expanded its disaster response roles in light of Hurricane Katrina. However, the argument here is not about intentionality, but rather the consequences of the events. The outcome of the botched disaster response has been increased investment in the very apparatus that was so lacking. To the extent that political and economic interests benefit from these rises in budget and resource allocations, the interests of the powerful are furthered.

Interesting in this regard is the concept of a ‘Pyrrhic victory’, a ‘military victory purchased at such a cost in troops and treasure that it amounts to a defeat’ (Reiman, 2007, p. 5). Reiman goes on to examine the inverse situation, developing the ‘Pyrrhic defeat theory’. He argues that ‘the failure of the criminal justice system yields such benefits to those in positions of power that it amounts to a success . . . the failure of the criminal justice system to reduce crime is linked to the benefits that accrue to the powerful in America from this failure’ (Reiman, 2007, p. 5). What is more, the very failure is used to justify increased expenditure, greater investment.

As with the criminal justice system’s continual pleas for additional personnel, more prison facilities and higher budgets, similar frames have been used to justify bolstered budgets for homeland security and disaster response. The budget of the Department of Homeland Security, which governs all disaster- and emergency-related activities, has swelled from USD 40.2 billion in fiscal year 2005 to USD 46.4 billion in fiscal year 2008, an average annual increase of seven per cent, even during an economic recession (DHS, 2009). Klein (2007, p. 306) makes the similarity explicit by noting that the responses to wars and disasters seemed designed to fail, stating that the new disaster response is ‘designed to have no end’. Tierney, Bevc and Kuligowski (2006, p. 76) also highlight that the abysmal response to Hurricane Katrina has precipitated ‘new calls for stronger military involvement in disaster response activities. In Katrina’s wake, disasters are now being characterized as best managed not by civil authorities but by entities capable of using force—deadly force, if necessary—to put down civil unrest and restore order in the aftermath of disasters’.

It is not enough to fail. To constitute Pyrrhic defeat, failure must be framed in certain ways. It must legitimate the current social order, pointing away from the privileged and towards the poor as the source of the problems (Reiman, 2007, p. 5). According to Reiman (2007, p. 5) it requires that ‘the failure of the criminal justice system take a particular shape. It must fail in the fight against crime while making it look as if serious crime and thus the real danger to society are the work of the poor’ (emphasis in the original).

The parallels with the response to Hurricane Katrina are evident. No one would argue now that the disaster was managed in an effective, expeditious way. In fact, it was a monumental failure. In the field of disaster research the reasons have been presented as being linked primarily to organisational theory (see, for example, Perrow, 2006). However, general demands for drastic overhaul of the federal system came from only small groups of people. The blame already had been placed successfully on the ‘victims’. Why had they waited to leave? Why did they not heed warnings?
What was wrong with them? Why are they still complaining? Beyond academic and emergency management circles, these questions circulated more freely than demands for accountability and responsibility on the part of the federal government. Pyrrhic defeat theory can be applied to the failure of the Department of Homeland Security after Hurricane Katrina. It failed to respond adequately to a domestic disaster of staggering proportions, but it was packaged as if the inability to help people was due to the questionable decisions of largely poor, largely minority, people. The disaster response was mostly a failure, yet the coffers of the government structures at fault expanded significantly, at least in the short term.

**Alternative approaches to disaster response**

The response to Hurricane Katrina was shaped by social, political and economic forces that were generations in the making. It would be unrealistic to think that policy suggestions in a short paper could address the trends that resulted in the myriad problems that manifested themselves in the wake of the storm. Furthermore, disasters happen locally. Each geographic, social, political and economic context will provide unique challenges. That said, what is offered here are some guiding principles to help design and implement more equitable and just responses to future disasters. These are not the invention of the author; in different forms, they have been put forth periodically in the disaster literature. However, they are grouped together here for reconsideration in view of the dangers of a social control emphasis in disaster response.

1. Prepare and mitigate first, respond later

Despite the lessons learned from Hurricane Katrina, the consensus among disaster researchers is that there is a trend towards fewer resources for disaster preparedness and mitigation. Instead there is increased investment in disaster response and recovery that many researchers have argued weakens US capacity to respond to natural disasters (Tierney, 2006; Birkland, 2007). In view of the stress placed on security issues following the events of 11 September 2001 and the reorganisation of all disaster-related issues under the Department of Homeland Security, it is not surprising that emergency response and recovery operations would receive the lion’s share of funding. But this is a dangerous trend. A lack of continual preparedness and mitigation efforts results in ignorance and complacency. When ageing infrastructure and increasing population density are added to the mixture, it is a recipe for catastrophe, the magnitude of which may well overwhelm even the most highly equipped and trained response and recovery personnel (Perrow, 2006). Increasingly frequent calls for more mitigation rather than seemingly exclusive resource allocation to response activities are being voiced by disaster experts (Multihazard Mitigation Council, 2005; Perrow, 2006; Fugate, 2009).
2. React to disaster, not myths
When a disaster does occur it is crucial that the response is linked to empirically identified conditions rather than to the fear of disaster myths. While civil unrest, looting and panic are possible outcomes of a disaster, the research literature underscores their rarity (Quarantelli and Dynes, 1972; Tierney, Bevc and Kuligowski, 2006; Dynes and Rodriguez, 2007). In a typical disaster, therefore, an emphasis on security, police and military personnel tasked with controlling people is a wasteful misallocation of resources (Tierney and Bevc, 2007). In fact, public involvement in disaster response has long been considered desirable since fellow citizens often act as the real ‘first responders’. Rather than instigating civil unrest, people generally assist each other when a disaster occurs. Investing in manpower and equipment and providing money for humanitarian pursuits rather than focusing on formal control efforts would result in a more efficacious and equitable response (Alexander, 2006).

3. Focus on human rights: shelter, food, safety
Moving away from the assumption that security forces will be necessary during and after a disaster also is a way of concentrating efforts on safeguarding human rights, notably equal access to food and water, shelter and safety (Nieburg, Waldman and Krumm, 2005; Sjoberg, 2005). Here, safety differs from the security/law-enforcement issues mentioned above. It includes all efforts to preserve people’s health and well-being and encompasses evacuation processes and protection from the negative consequences of a disaster event. This might seem obvious, but it is not. For example, a controversial new policy in Texas would screen people’s residency papers as they board buses if a mandatory evacuation is ordered for south Texas (Gomez, 2008; Taylor, 2008). Many residents of south Texas have friends or relatives who would be left behind as a result. Such a policy seems to view disaster protection as a right of citizenship rather than a guaranteed human right. This is unacceptable. The United Nations Human Rights Committee issued a report in 2006 arguing that the evacuation debacle was a violation of human rights (American Civil Liberties Union of Louisiana, 2006; Associated Press, 2006). A staff attorney with the American Civil Liberties Union of Louisiana stated that ‘The fact that the United Nations highlighted this “disaster within a disaster” in its observations affirms the basic value of all human beings; it is unacceptable to treat any segment of society as “disposable”’ (American Civil Liberties Union of Louisiana, 2006). The provision of basic necessities, including evacuation, should be couched in terms of human rights to ensure their equal distribution.

4. Avoid individualising the impacts of a disaster
Disasters affect people differently and thus disaster preparedness and post-disaster assistance should be tailored to diverse needs. However, availability of funding sources can be facilitated based on the location of the disaster and by streamlining application processes. While fraudulent use of disaster funds is possible, likening the disaster
relief mechanisms to the welfare mechanisms by adding obstacles and shameful degradation rituals is a mistake. Awareness that post-disaster circumstances are shaped by pre-existing inequalities will help to ensure that disaster survivors are less likely to be isolated, marginalised and blamed for their losses (Peacock, Morrow and Gladwin, 1997; Klinenberg, 2002; Bolin, 2006; Barnshaw and Trainor, 2007). Keeping in mind the ways in which people’s location within socioeconomic and political structures shapes the harm inflicted by a disaster, the frames used to report it and the response employed, lessens the potential for individualisation and criminalisation of survivors.

5. Rebuild communities in sustainable ways

If the stated goal of recovery is to rebuild communities, reconstruction plans should entail some oversight. Mileti (1999) is a long-time proponent of the idea of sustainable recovery: rebuilding efforts designed to make communities safer and more equitable places to live. A temporary moratorium on re-districting and re-zoning post-disaster would indicate a commitment by local officials to rebuild with some respect for pre-event demographics, neighbourhoods, infrastructure and services. Dramatic demographic shifts due to a disaster and subsequent evacuation sometimes are used to facilitate controversial changes in local policy. The demolition of public housing units (Luft, 2007; Pardee, forthcoming) in post-Katrina New Orleans is one example. These policies were fiercely contested before Hurricane Katrina largely by neighbourhoods that were depopulated due to the flooding. Zoning laws also are susceptible to major changes after a disaster, as documented by Klein (2007).

Hurricane Katrina has generated some hopeful signs that the US disaster response system is changing. Two of the most significant modifications are:

• the enactment of the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006; and
• the appointment of William Craig Fugate—seasoned emergency manager for the state of Florida—as the new Administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) (Birkland, 2009).

The new legislation mandates that the head of FEMA must be a professional emergency manager rather than a political appointee. The other main provision of the Act is that the new head of FEMA will have direct communication access to Congress and to the president in a time of emergency. Both are important organisational steps towards a more effective disaster response.

The appointment of William Craig Fugate is hailed by the disaster research and emergency management communities as a sign of a dramatic shift in the federal government’s stance on emergency management. Fugate seems to recognise the importance of mitigation and preparedness efforts, which have been considered the stepchildren of disaster initiatives in recent years (Fugate, 2009). He brings also a new approach to people involved in disasters. Most notable is his view that public involvement in various stages of response and recovery is desirable (Birkland, 2009) and not something to be controlled or avoided (Tierney, 2006).
Conclusion

Employing images of ‘dangerous’ people immediately after Hurricane Katrina successfully defined people displaced by the storm as a ‘surplus’ population. With the threat of civil unrest and violence as a rationale, military personnel were deployed in unprecedented numbers and soon tasked with post-disaster roles. The social construction of ‘the Katrina evacuee’ individualised vast collective damage. The incalculable losses were linked to the perceived inability of people to provide for themselves and were couched in terms of moral flaws. In reality, they were public issues resulting from a combination of deep social and economic inequality before the event and serious structural gaps in the US disaster response system.

Individualising the hardships of survivors serves to isolate and criminalise the victims. If their struggles are seen as derived from their own actions, the government’s responsibility for their plight is lessened. In terms of recovery, disaster assistance then is decided on an individual, case-by-case basis, lengthening and complicating procedures for receiving aid. Slowed recovery, or recovery denied, effectively controls a surplus population, keeping its members in limbo—often far from home—and serves the interests of the status quo (in New Orleans in this case). Framing the storm’s aftermath in terms of civil unrest and crime also serves an increasingly militarised disaster response system and a burgeoning criminal justice system. In this light, the post-Katrina confusion and the subsequent inefficiency and inaction during the recovery phase become understandable as latent social control and risk management functions and are even more objectionable.

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