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***Framing Katrina:
Dominant Media and Damage Control in the
Wake of a Not-so Natural Disaster
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Guest Commentator***

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The Personal and the Structural

The brilliant and prolific left sociologist C. Wright Mills once said that the core purpose

of meaningful analytical work on social and political affairs was to make relevant connections between individual pain and structural inequality. The point of such work, by Mills' reckoning, was to de-atomize personal difficulty and relate it to broader contextualizing forces of class, race, bureaucracy, and unjust power and authority.

The dominant authoritarian and neoliberal ideology of our time works in the opposite direction. It tells us to separate the personal from the societal. It expects us to think of ourselves and others as purely autonomous sole actors – a veritable mass of self-produced Robinson Crusoes (with Crusoe's slave Friday deleted from the formulation), each living on his or her own island of possessive-individualist economic rationality and "personal responsibility."

To be sure, we are occasionally expected to leave our private islands long enough to engage in certain selected collective acts and rituals of mass obedience, consumerism, and power worship. We are encouraged more to sing the national anthem at the weekend battle of the football gladiators; to ooh and ahh at the militaristic Air and Water Show (where the chance to be personally shocked and awed by the murderous B-2 Stealth Bomber and the A-10 Warthog is supposed to make us "proud to be Americans"); to stand in line to vote for one or a few among a strictly limited business-friendly spectrum of candidates in occasional, staggered, and corporate-crafted "election extravaganzas" (Noam Chomsky) that systematically de-emphasize popular moral-economy, structural inequality, and social justice; to join the consumer debt-addicted throngs at the shopping malls during the Christmas season and throughout the year; to grieve

collectively when "anti-American" terror or some other selected tragedy (a natural disaster, a Space Shuttle disintegration, or a celebrity plane–[John–John's plunge, for example] or car– [Princess Dianne] crash, etc.) strikes (all too mysteriously, no matter how predictable such occurrences may have been) the "greatest country in the world," understood to be the headquarters and homeland of "freedom" and "democracy;" to mail in our taxes every April 15th to help the federal government wreak vengeful havoc on those who "hate America" and to let it perform other key functions even as that government rolls back taxes on the privileged few in the "advanced world's" most unequal and wealth–top–heavy nation (the U.S.). Those collective moments and acts are relatively rare, however, and are dedicated to preservation of the fragmented and privatized social and cultural order of officially disassociated and self–made individuals.

"Equal Opportunity"

If some of those individuals just happen to be extravagantly wealthy and powerful while a much larger number of individuals are poor and defenseless, the ruling doctrine tells us, that is simply because of characteristics internal to each personally self–generated individual. By the standard common–sense conventional wisdom imposed by the "power elite," America is the land of "equal opportunity" where every individual is free to climb as far as his or her peculiar combination of ability and drive will take them.

If a disproportionate number of people in the privileged category happen to be white and a disproportionate share of the folks in the under–privileged category happen to be black, that's simply an unfortunate indication that too many blacks lack the personal drive and/or innate ability exemplified by such virtuous and hard–working blacks as Condaleeza Rice, Clarence Thomas, Colin Powell, and Oprah Winfrey. It's proof that large numbers of blacks are personally, culturally, and/or (in the most toxic variant of not–always–so–"New Age" Racism) biologically unfit to individually (as so many whites have supposedly done) advance in a noble, color–and class–blind nation where all of us are equally free to turn our personal islands into either a Gold Coast or a Slum.

"Exposed in New Orleans": a "Chasm of Race and Class"

How interesting to watch dominant American corporate media – the leading institutional architect and guardian of authoritarian homeland ideological security – working to fit the square pegs of "Tropical Storm Katrina" into the round holes of the nation's atomistic, state–capitalist, and neoliberal doctrine. As I noted in a Dissident Voice article last week ("An All–Too American Tragedy: Empire, Oil, Inequality, and New Orleans," DV, September 6, 2005), the flooding of New Orleans and the subsequent marooning and severely delayed rescue of much of that predominantly black city's disproportionately non–white poor population was in many ways the natural and predictable outcome of a number of structurally entrenched socioeconomic and sociopolitical problems reflecting the dialectically inseparable evils of American empire, inequality, racism, and petroleum–addiction.

The richly interconnected problems include: racial apartheid and black hyper–segregation; a transportation infrastructure built around the expensive and climate–heating (carbon–spewing) personal and family automobile; economic racism; environmental collapse; and the broad diversion of American public resources from civil infrastructure (including flood prevention), civil rights, and social health (including poverty–reduction, education, and health–care) to pay for war and empire (including more than 700 military bases located in nearly every nation in the world) abroad and plutocratic tax–cuts at home.

At the most immediate level, the New York Times acknowledged on the front page of its September 9th edition that "race and class were the unspoken markers of who got and who got stuck" in New Orleans." Two days later, Times reporter Jason DeParle noted that "what a shocked world saw exposed in New Orleans last week wasn't just a broken levee. It was a chasm of race and class, at once familiar and startlingly new, laid bare in a setting where the suddenly amounted to matters of life and death.

Hydrology joined sociology through the story line, from the settling of the flood-prone city, where well-to-do white people lived on the high ground, to its frantic abandonment."

Since the 1970s, DeParle noted, New Orleans "has become unusually segregated," so that "the white middle-class is all but gone, moved north across Lake Ponchartrain or west to Jefferson Parish – home of David Duke" (and of higher ground). In a society where the atomistic auto trumps public transit, "evacuation was especially difficult for the more than one third of black New Orleans households that lacked a car." While race and class have always been "matters of life and death" in the American experience, of course, Katrina's tragic aftermath has provided perhaps the most graphical and literal illustration in the way that American societal arrangements apportion "freedom" – a term that George W. Bush beats to death but never bothers to define and whose limits and contested meanings and complex meanings he never (of course) appreciates – in racially and socio-economically selective and unequal ways. We all know who got "left behind" (to take two words [themselves looted from the Children's' Defense Fund] from Bush's regressive educational "reform" program) to rot in a living Hell in one of the nation's great, historic cities.

Media's Job: Put the Lid Back on the Race-Class Can

Dominant media authorities are not generally stupid. They know very well that a commentary like DeParle's touches on just part of the remarkable extent to which recent events have "exposed" some of America's core societal disparities and perverted priorities. As they certainly grasped during the early moments of maximum revealed and racially disparate crisis, Katrina was lifting some of the lid from atop the ugly, oil-soaked can of class, race, and empire that lurks beneath official doctrines of "equal opportunity" and "color" – and class-blindness. Given their well-rewarded position atop the corporate-crafted, Robinson-Crusoe-fied mass culture and its underlying, heavily racialized socioeconomic regime (wherein media black net worth is equivalent to 7 cents on the white dollar), we can expect them to quite naturally frame Katrina and its aftermath around a number of privilege-friendly and power-preserving concepts within an authoritarian, selective, and diversionary narrative crafted to contain the storm's radical potential. Their job is ideological damage control: putting the lid on the race-class-empire can.

Reactionary Narratives

While I have yet to undertake a detailed media content analysis, here are some of the key conservative concepts and narratives that I have gleaned so far from admittedly anecdotal sampling of dominant electronic and print media in the U.S.:

1. Katrina as essentially a "natural disaster." The richly and darkly "sociological" nature of the tragedy was too "suddenly" and uncontrollably obvious to entirely delete and ignore. Two weeks after the levees were breached (thanks to racist-plutocratic-imperialist "benign neglect" of the need to prepare for a long-predicted catastrophe), however, hydrology and meteorology can be expected to progressively supplant "sociology" (especially left, C.Wright Mills– or Pierre-Bourdieu-inspired sociology) in corporate media's efforts to shape collective memory of the disaster.
2. A focus on "incompetence" in disaster relief management as the main socially constructed factor to merit attention. Here corporate media moves beyond a purely natural interpretation. It fails, however, as it must, to address the roles of competently and routinely imposed racial and class inequality, empire (which feeds domestic inequality and exactly numerous other and related costs at home), and petro-addiction in the construction of Katrina's occurrence and outcome.

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However "incompetent" and qualified the officially shamed Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) chief may have been in (not) responding to Katrina, his job performance has nothing to do with the hyper-segregation of poor black Americans in the most flood-prone sections of New Orleans. The FEMA figurehead hardly compelled the White House to fold his critical agency into the cumbersome new Department of Homeland of Security or to switch the agency's core mission from natural disaster response to preparation for terror attacks that seem all-too predictable in light of the president's imperialist foreign policy. Nobody at FEMA made the hard-right business party in power steal funds from flood-prevention and disaster management to give its leading fat cat sponsors and constituents gigantic tax reductions even as it called for "good Americans" to make a shared "sacrifice" in the "war on terror."

Always ready to meet the ideological needs of his upper-class comrades and concentrated power, legendary former NBC anchor man Tom Brokaw recently (on the morning of September 9th) told NBC "Today Show" host Matt Lauer that Americans are now facing three principal enemies since 9/11: "terror," "nature" (hurricanes, especially), and now "incompetence" (his take on the bungled government response to Katrina). Trumpeting a "World War II Museum" he recently sponsored in New Orleans (to glorify the "greatest generation" of World War II veterans he has been speaking and writing about in recent years) with his "good friend" the late reactionary and plagiarist historian Stephen

Ambrose, Brokaw was in no frame of mind to reflect on how the White House's imperialist exploitation of 9/11 has contributed to Katrina's terrible totality. It has done so by stealing resources – including the human resources of thousands of deep South National Guardsman who were stuck in illegally occupied Iraq as their regional cohorts drowned without adequate rescue services in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama – from civil engineering and disaster relief and by increasing the likelihood of terrorist attack at home. The latter consequence has encouraged the federal government to shift its focus and resources away from hurricane preparedness to terror preparedness.

After recommending the hurricane victims embrace the no-nonsense "greatest [WWII] generation" spirit of "Iwo Jima" and "Normandy", Brokaw noted that his museum was "looted, incidentally."

3. "This Can't Be America". "It's more like a Third World nation" like Bangladesh or Baghdad." This frequent comment (and different versions thereof) on the part of numerous incredulous corporate media commentators and reporters minimizes the extreme levels of inequality, poverty, and related racial disparity and public sector starvation that have combined to produce desperate, practically "Third World" living conditions in places like New Orleans' Ninth Ward – turning race and class into "matters of life and death" in such communities without the "sudden" intervention of inequality-exposing "natural" forces. More than a generation ago, of course, the self-proclaimed democratic socialist Martin Luther King, Jr. tried to warn Americans about the supreme dangers involved in the surrounding of "Negro cities" by "white suburbs." He also spoke passionately against what he called the "triple and interrelated evils" of racism, militarism-imperialism, and economic exploitation/capitalism. Long before Katrina arrived to momentarily and partially dislodge the lid on the imperial race-class can, those "triple evils" combined to consign much of the "world's greatest nation's" black citizens to sub-"First-World" circumstances in isolated, invisible, inner-city eyes of the world-capitalist hurricane.

4. An obsessive focus on real and alleged black "looting" in the hurricane's wake. Of course, "breaking in" to the privately (and corporately) owned stores that happen to warehouse commodified means of survival was the only way for many marooned New Orleans' residents of different racial background to stay alive as the federal government took five days and more to send basic provisions. Besides adding enormous toxic racist insult to racist injury, this revealing media focus conveniently turns attention away from privileged and imperialist

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"elite's" looting of the public fiscal commons – a regular and ongoing "stick–up from the top down" – to pay for its terrible wars and tax–cuts. It was darkly interesting, of course, to see white New Orleans hurricane survivalists described and portrayed by dominant media as "finders," not "looters" when media cameras caught them in the act of stealing provisions to live.

5. A special taste for individual coping and survival stories. Engaging stories along these lines obviously carry strong "human interest" appeal. They also turn attention away from the structural and societal forces that created the collective, racially disparate disaster which made harrowing, heroic, and solitary survival stories necessary in the first place. The richly socially constructed hurricane drama is individualized – Robinson Crusoe–fied – again and again in numerous news accounts that bring it all down to the purely personal level. A related spin on this personalizing angle is added by dominant media's special taste for covering the intervention and feelings of celebrities like "New Orleans' own" Harry Connick, Jr., who seems to have found a television career as a handsome hurricane helper.

6. A disproportionate focus on evacuation hold–outs and the efforts of public authorities to "convince them to leave their flooded homes." This recent favored narrative encourages a marvelous Orwellian inversion in reader and viewer perceptions, for the real and far more statistically significant story is that most of the trapped New Orleans residents were left behind against their wishes by government's "benign neglect." Thanks to recent coverage of the overblown "holdout" problem, countless white Americans are currently muttering to themselves and each other about "stupid and stubborn" inner–city blacks "who don't want to be helped even when you try to assist."

7. Folding discussion of how the American System created Tropical Storm and Societal Failure Katrina (TSSFK) into the categories of "political grandstanding" and "partisan finger–pointing." Along with alleged mass black "looting," "raping," "shooting," "killing," and "pillaging," this is a major theme in the post–Katrina ravings of such powerful hard–right corporate media talking–heads as Rush Limbaugh, Bill O'Reilly, and Sean Hannity. For his part, Hannity sees a "sick" and "selfish" desire to "advance one's leftist political agenda" by "tearing down America" and (of course) "the president" in the commentary of those who criticize the federal government's response to "a hurricane of unprecedented magnitude." Beneath the ongoing battle between and among privileged individuals atop the two wings (Republican and Democratic) of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Party, however, the relevant radical critique of TSSFK goes far beyond limited bourgeois electoral division to include core authoritarian institutional and ideological structures and forces that serve and are sustained by Democrats and Republicans alike.

With these and other reactionary, privilege–friendly narratives, dominant media is doing its best to close the American mind to the many ways in which Katrina might educate the populace about class, race, Martin King's "triple evils," and the perverted priorities of empire and inequality. C. Wright Mills would be impressed.

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