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Constructing crime, framing disaster : Routines of criminalization and crisis in Hurricane Katrina

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PUNISHMENT
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Constructing crime, framing disaster

Routines of criminalization and crisis in Hurricane Katrina

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Abstract

This article argues that the media frames utilized in the first month after Hurricane Katrina legitimated punishment as disaster policy through lurid reports of individual crime. The application of prevailing state policies led to a quick embrace of punitive policing and incarceration, and journalistic routines ended up supporting this process. Although journalists openly expressed their disgust with state neglect, news conventions nonetheless criminalized much of the New Orleans population and suggested militarized policing and imprisonment as fundamental to restore order. Lacking credible sources, reporters relied on rumors and helped create a racialized 'looter class' that aided state efforts to regain control through existing policies of mass incarceration rather than mutual aid or state welfare. Even though various media outlets recanted the more extreme elements of this coverage, the tropes they employed created a lasting effect. Building off Stuart Hall et al.'s (1978) analysis of a moral panic over mugging in 1970s England, this article examines both the conventions and consequences of this crisis coverage. The result, I argue, bolstered the existing crisis of incarceration.

Key Words

criminalization • Hurricane Katrina • journalistic authority • looting • moral panic

When the levees protecting New Orleans broke and flooded the city during the landfall of Hurricane Katrina in late summer of 2005, the rushing waters washed away any pretense that the United States was without significant structural inequalities. As numerous observers, academic and otherwise, have pointed out, the hurricane exposed numerous power imbalances in society (e.g. Dyson, 2006; Horne, 2006; Mann, 2006; Sothern, 2007). In moments of crisis, media stories and the practice of public safety provide literal and symbolic manifestations of power relations. While the media suffered their own crisis of journalistic authority during and following the storm, the question

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of who should provide what sort of public safety emerged as a dominant theme defining both the lived reality and mediated representation of post-hurricane New Orleans.[1] This merger of journalistic crisis and state breakdown involved, among other things, mutually reinforcing notions of a crime-and-punishment spectacle that demonized much of New Orleans' population that weathered the storm. It is a spectacle with numerous and significant consequences for the Gulf Coast and beyond.

Examining the first month of Katrina's presentation in the national media reveals the myriad ways criminal justice issues defined the governmental responses to the disaster. Studying the initial media coverage of Katrina exposes a persistent law-and-order thread characterizing the State's response and its mediation. Building off the established policies and entrenched ideologies that define poor urban black populations as dangerous, both the mainstream media and neo-liberal state created a feedback loop that framed criminality as a salient paradigm for making sense of the flood-ravaged city. Such coverage was by no means the sole defining trope.[2] Still, I argue, this coverage had both material and discursive impacts: it inserted black criminality as a cause of what was said to be pervasive chaos, thereby lessening criticism of government neglect; it bolstered militarized policing – by local cops, National Guard and Blackwater mercenaries – as a relief effort, which increased Louisiana's sprawling but already disheveled criminal justice system; and it helped normalize newly privatized structures of housing, labor and education (Calhoun, 2006; Flaherty, 2007). As with other crises in what journalist Naomi Klein (2007) calls 'disaster capitalism', Hurricane Katrina opened the door for free market ideology to manifest in austere reforms that became (semi-)permanent, or at least routinized, while civilians adjusted to living with the crisis.

Of course, such practices do not materialize from thin air; the sullied state of New Orleans' pre-storm political economy determined what the hurricane destroyed as much as it structured the competing visions of what should be built in the storm's wake. In Katrina, as in disaster capitalism more generally, police and prisons played a crucial role as the main state agencies dedicated to restoring a basic public order.[3] Identifying policing and incarceration as two primary state-sponsored activities does not negate the valuable role individual police officers may have played in securing public safety, nor does it excuse all the property crime which transpired during the storm. It does, however, identify the State's governing wisdom – the State's vision of its role and responsibility in responding to disaster in a political climate where policing remains one of the enduring forms of state governance. Police officer and jail guard are two of the few areas of statecraft to have expanded in recent decades (Parenti, 2000; Simon, 2007a).

Media play a crucial role in this process, and Katrina shows both the anomalous and the typical elements of this coverage. While free-market ideology has wreaked its own havoc on the media (see, for example, McChesney, 2004), Hurricane Katrina reveals a more complicated view into the routines of mass media than can be simply summed up as 'neo-liberalism'. Media coverage of the hurricane marked a moment of intense questioning of the Bush administration in the pages and on the screens of the USA's media outlets (as well as globally). Yet mixed in with the initial anger were stories decrying the chaos said to be governing New Orleans – coverage many media outlets subsequently retracted as exaggerated, if not outright fictitious. The coverage exhibited a certain schizophrenia: palpable anger at governmental malfeasance combined with news values that perpetuated a narrative of lawlessness and demanded increased state

intervention at the level of policing. To investigate this practice, I draw from auton-omist Marxism and British cultural studies to interrogate the journalistic rituals and frames of analysis deployed in such a moment of crisis. Hurricane Katrina affords the chance to unpack the varied ways in which media coverage is enmeshed in the uneven, evolving and complicated relationships between lived realities, economic ideologies and state policies.

Crises present ruptures, breaks in the norm that provide opportunities to exacerbate or overturn existing ideologies and practices. Deployed in this environmental crisis, routine journalistic practices channeled enduring stereotypes about black criminality, challenged an openly neglectful state and corroborated the prevailing reliance on prison as panacea. This dizzying mix reveals the strengths and limitations of media power and practice in moments of crisis as they interact with existing structures of criminal justice. What the Government lacked in evacuation plans and commitment to social services, the mainstream media lacked in credible sources and reliable information in the immediate aftermath of the storm. The two are related. The State's lack of preparation ruined the credibility of the media's usual sources. The hurricane exposed the 'gap between the national press and its erstwhile official sources' (Durham, 2006: 81). Yet this gap did not fundamentally transform routine journalistic practice. Instead, journalists relied on rumors from both officials and laypeople. Despite the anger, then, Katrina followed a familiar pattern of media coverage in contentious situations, whereby news reports allow officials to serve as the primary definers of crisis (Hall et al., 1978). Even though journalists from a variety of media outlets chastised the State's non-response, government officials were still looked to as sources; one of the noticeable yet ironic things about Katrina's coverage is that journalists visibly directed their anger at representatives of the State. While this presented a departure of journalistic composure in the face of authority, it was a scene made possible by journalism's structured allegiance to state officials for news. Authorities dominate initial reports of crisis situ-ations, even if these elite voices ultimately fade in dominance, giving individuals and nongovernmental organizations a chance to help frame particular issues (Edy, 2006: 15). Studying the coverage of Katrina's immediate aftermath is therefore crucial in identifying some of the structuring conceptual themes, which persist in policy even if somewhat challenged in discourse.

Structurally positioned to identify the parameters of discussion, officials at all levels of government complained of the chaos, even as they were forced to lament their own slow response. Yet, what seemed like solid fact at the time proved to be exaggerated or imagined. As a result different media outlets often fumbled through the Katrina story with an entrenched trope of widespread crime and violence which – when dovetailed with existing structures of racism, class bias and a national reliance on mass incarcer-ation – hurt the ability to provide much needed relief. As I explore in more detail below, the coverage curtailed rescue attempts and evacuations by helping foster the belief that widespread chaos, carnage and crime ruled New Orleans. Such reportage shifted blame from being primarily institutional to being jointly individual and institutional. In so doing, media coverage created a demand for the military, the police and the prison. (It is quite telling that New Orleans became such a battle zone *discursively* that the military was deemed necessary to restore order.) It was, to be sure, one of several conceptual frames emerging in the Katrina story, and it competed with narratives depicting the

immense governmental neglect as well as a frame arguing that African Americans had a 'legitimate claim on the nation-state' (Harris and Carbado, 2006: 92). Although not hegemonic, the crime narrative was highly detrimental to relief efforts at the time and subsequent survivor-led reconstruction of the flooded city (Flaherty, 2007; Klein, 2007: 406–423). Crime became an instrument of governing, whereby measures offered to curb crime also re-organized the practice and structure of politics (Simon, 2007a). And because governing also happens in and through the media (Cook, 2005), news reports featured prominently in this example of governing through crime.[4]

Such a 'crime frame' (Simon, 2007b) made opportunistic depravity a central culprit in destroying the city, alongside flooding and government neglect. With Katrina, the often obscured criminal justice system achieved a measure of prominence and praise. The public display of punishment has long roots, going back to public execution as a form of asserting state sovereignty or regimenting the working classes to new, austere forms of labor relations (Foucault, 1995; Linebaugh, 2006). In each case the public display of punishment was central to enacting sweeping structural change to which people at least tacitly concede and internalize, putting their faith in government so as to not be killed by it (a process Foucault referred to as governmentality). Katrina made punishment public, here through mass communication, as a way of reasserting the power of a State that had seemingly forfeited its duties and, with them, its control. It was, in short, a moral panic constructed discursively by political officials and the national news media, and impacting materially the efforts to save New Orleans. To restore order, various officials expressed the need to curtail the attacks on private property that were taking place. Believing the attacks to be far more predatory and widespread than they were, local, state and national law enforcement agencies deemed stringent penalties, especially in the form of incarceration, as a necessary response. The economic and political, the social and spatial, elements of New Orleans have been fundamentally altered in the process.

A review of newspaper articles from major papers (focusing especially on the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*) as well as CNN news in the month during and following the storm yielded the persistent representation of individual crime and criminality as key features of the Hurricane Katrina story. The below analysis focuses both on elite discourse and journalistic routines in the construction of Katrina as an example of crisis. I examine how media coverage, calling upon the pre-existing crisis of mass incarceration, positioned jail as a necessary solution to the hurricane's damage and the effect this course of action had on the State's ability to rescue those in need. Although news stories consistently and sharply challenged government malfeasance, coverage ultimately bolstered the fundamental authority of state power through a persistent depiction of New Orleans as governed by chaos. Relying heavily on rumor and conjecture, the media suffered a crisis of journalistic authenticity amid an apparent comeback from years of kowtowing to an administration whose policies had left New Orleans so ill prepared for the storm that analysts had long predicted would wreak havoc on the region (Dyson, 2006; Reed, 2006). This crisis of journalistic authority was not, as some have suggested (Dynes and Rodríguez, 2007: 33), fundamentally or even primarily the result of a ratings-hungry media. Journalistic authority has long been precarious: it rests on journalists' ability to position themselves as objective truth-tellers while also relying on elite sources for access to and information

on the events we consider 'news' (Hall, 1982; Zelizer, 1992). While downsized news departments have exacerbated this position (McChesney, 2004) – making official's press conferences and other forms of news management central to news – journalism's long-standing routines of professionalism are more to blame than the recent market shifts (Carey, 1986). If, as Klein (2007) and others argue, existing ideologies help narrate and make sense of crisis situations, then Hurricane Katrina confirmed American journalism's reliance on tropes of both government accountability and law and order (Gans, 1979).

None of this is to suggest that there was no 'real' crime in post-Katrina New Orleans, a city with one of the highest murder rates in the country prior to the storm. Frailing and Wood Harper (2007: 65) report that *pre-storm* crime rates in New Orleans were higher than the average crest of post-disaster crime. Yet most people there exhibited tremendous solidarity and nonviolence amid the storm, even though all levels of government had abandoned them (well before the storm, argue Frailing and Wood Harper). And, despite journalists' palpable anger at the situation, media frames helped normalize a criminalization process amid a widespread information vacuum that celebrated jail as unnecessary solution to the disaster of Katrina. Such a seeming paradox exposes the crisis of journalistic authority revealed by the storm: even though the hurricane provided a rare moment where journalists beat the State to the scene (Bennett et al., 2007: 165–9),[5] reporters still yielded a certain definitional power to official sources. Pilloried by journalists for their absence, federal government representatives were still given space to explain their negligence. While the response was often embarrassing – recall then-FEMA director Michael Brown saying he had just learned that Superdome was being used as a shelter, despite it having been widely reported – journalistic conventions afforded them definitional power while governmental routines sent in the troops.

The local and state governments were more present, with Mayor Ray Nagin and police chief Eddie Compass proving consistent, often emotional, sources about the crime said to be ruling their city.[6] In the immediate aftermath, Compass was even joined on CNN by John Walsh, host of *America's Most Wanted*. This law and order pair promised to 'hunt down' the city's post-storm criminals (Kaufman, 2006). Such testimony on cable news and in venues like *Oprah* affixed national attention on federal neglect of New Orleans but in the process leveraged a demand for increased policing as the only thing able to stop criminal anarchy and restore public order. It also enabled local and state officials to act as primary definers in the national news a bit longer without the high level of scrutiny greeting federal officials and which would later face the local and state elites as well. Examples like these illustrate Stuart Hall's (1982) claim that western media are politically non-partisan but ideologically pro-state. That is, the media do not favor a particular political party, but their conventions are oriented to the maintenance of the status quo. In Louisiana, as in 21st century United States, prisons constitute a vital element of business as usual.

NEW ORLEANS AND THE CARCERAL STATE

Crime and prison are potent examples of the ways politics and economics revise, renew or rewrite the social, cultural and geographic landscape. While the United States has witnessed the rise of mass incarceration since the 1960s (Parenti, 2000; Simon, 2007a),

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its roots lie more generally in the function of incarceration itself. Michel Foucault (1995) argued that imprisonment not only pacifies the incarcerated but acts as a bludgeon against any notion of social transgression. As society internalizes such discipline, according to Foucault, those in power retain and reinforce their sovereignty. Similarly, Peter Linebaugh (2006) demonstrated how widespread criminalization and the public display of punishment through execution was a form of primitive accumulation accompanying the rise of capitalism in 18th-century England. By introducing increasingly austere laws, the emergent capitalist state disciplined the working classes into accepting lower wages and fewer material goods, in the process also turning presumed rights into bestowed privileges. Punishment, all the way up to and including state-sanctioned murder, was an elite strategy to pursue shifting class relations and property definitions. Thus, Linebaugh (2006: xxii) writes, hangings both 'renewed the power of sovereignty' (as Foucault also suggests about capital punishment) while also 'repeat[ing] the lesson: 'Respect Private Property'. Such messages were repeated and adapted as the production, uses, laws and value governing private property shifted.

The dialectic between capitalism and crime continues to inform the postmodern political economy. Parenti (2000: 214) sees the mid-20th-century mass incarceration binge in the United States as an equivalent process of 'class war from above', complete with 'a generalized buildup of police power, hardware, and organization' (2000: 12), that joins increasingly austere laws and a spike in prison construction. Between 1976 and 2000, writes H. Bruce Franklin (2004: 3), 'the United States built on average a new prison each week', and the number of incarcerated people in the United States in that time period has increased by six times (Wagner, 2003: 5). The result is a prison population, mostly black, exceeding 2.2 million – the highest incarceration rate in the world and accounting for one-quarter of the world's prison population (Dixon, 2005). The flip side of this prison build-up is the increasing privatization and surveillance throughout the nation's cities as ever more restrictive suburbs embrace a well-fortified politics of fear (Simon, 2007a).

Louisiana occupied a central place in this prison regime well before the storm: the state incarcerated more people, both per capita and in absolute terms, than the prison-heavy state of California: 173,000 out of 4.5 million versus 170,000 out of 35 million (Mann, 2006: 114–15) – making it the state with the highest incarcerate rate. The main facility in New Orleans, the Orleans Parish Prison, housed 6500 before the storm, making it the ninth largest jail in the country. Louisiana's largest and most notorious prison, Angola, is on the grounds of a former plantation (Dyson, 2006: 8). Its track record as a rough prison found it 'under federal oversight for nearly 30 years because of widespread violence and inhumane treatment' (Vega, 2005: A15). Its tortured history was offered as the model for the new New Orleans; a hand-written sign posted in the temporary jail declared the makeshift institution 'New Angola South'. The original Angola also played a part in the hurricane aftermath: about 130 miles north-west of New Orleans, Angola held more than 2000 people over capacity immediately after the storm to accommodate displaced prisoners (Caputo, 2005: A16).

Shortly after the storm, the Government's response to New Orleans embraced two of the three features that political scientist Marie Gottschalk (2006) attributes to 'the U.S. carceral state': mass incarceration and harsh penalties.[7] Widespread arrests, incarceration in makeshift jails and general criminalization of survival activities characterized the State

response to the hurricane. Those imprisoned before the storm were stranded for days without food or water before being transferred out of town. And the media played a prominent role in the establishment and maintenance of a law-and-order frame that came generally at the expense of most of New Orleans' pre-storm residents.[8]

People soon learned that the Government had neither plans to nor intentions of quickly rescuing them. A late evacuation order by city and state officials, who did not provide any vehicles, did not help matters. People were shuttled into makeshift shelters at the Superdome and the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center, eventually being evacuated haphazardly around the country. Five days after the storm, National Guard units were deployed to the city to restore order – but given the lurid reports of widespread rape, murder and property destruction, the primary task was one of punitive policing and incarceration. As quickly as 31 August, the mayor ordered New Orleans' 1400 police officers to 'cease rescue operations and control widespread looting' (Applebome et al., 2005: 25). When the National Guard arrived on 2 September, Louisiana Governor Kathleen Babineux Blanco publicly gave them carte blanche to kill in restoring (property) order:

> These troops are fresh back from Iraq, well trained, experienced, battle-tested and under my orders to restore order in the streets. They have M-16s and they are locked and loaded. These troops know how to shoot and kill and they are more than willing to do so if necessary and I expect they will. (quoted in Dyson, 2006: 114)

CRIME AND PUNISHMENT IN A CATASTROPHE (OR, JAIL TO THE RESCUE)

Before New Orleans had any gas stations, grocery stores, mail delivery or hospitals, the US Justice Department and Louisiana district attorney appropriated the local bus station to create a makeshift jail amid stories of ubiquitous crime and with the normal jails flooded (Berenson, 2005). Those incarcerated before the storm were shipped to other prisons in the state, so Camp Greyhound, as it was dubbed, was reserved for those arrested in the storm's wake and primarily as a holding spot before people were sent to other jails for arraignment and detention (Johnson, 2005). With help from the Bush administration, Camp Greyhound opened four days after the storm. All levels of government were involved in Camp Greyhound: the staff included guards from Angola and other prisons throughout Louisiana and the local sheriff's office, corrections officers from Kentucky and New York and members of the FBI, ATF and DEA (Berenson, 2005). The prisoners held in the bed-less, outdoor prison were charged mostly with property crimes. It was a true panopticon: the portable toilet in each makeshift cell had neither a roof nor a door, allowing full view of the prisoners at all times.

Run by Burl Cain, the folksy but tough-talking warden from Angola prison, the jail was part of the State's aggressive reconstruction effort utilizing prisons as panacea. A sign on the front door drew clear lines of citizenship, proclaiming 'We Are Taking New Orleans Back' (Filosa, 2005c: B2) – the not so subtle implication being that every incarcerated body brought the city one step closer to equilibrium. Not surprisingly, given both national trends and New Orleans demographics, a Reuters reporter (2005: 38) found that those incarcerated were 'almost all black men aged 18 to 35' – and that 'most of those being held are looters'. The presence of so many young black men in

New Orleans' makeshift jail for property crimes presented a clear message that the sanctity of private property was of paramount concern.

Camp Greyhound warden Cain – 'passionate about the jail', said CNN (2005c) – provided the face for an underlying draconian relationship to property crime, telling a CNN reporter that a jail was prerequisite to reconstruction in New Orleans. Cain repeatedly insisted that the people in his jail were hardened criminals who did not appropriate food or drink but drugs and electronics. Cain went so far as to say that he would not allow people arrested for stealing food in the jail (CNN, 2005c; Day, 2005). The claim was awkward, given that wardens do not evaluate the veracity of charges against those held in their custody, nor are they in a position to unilaterally declare what types of people will be held there. Although CNN did not respond to the veracity of Cain's claims, newspaper reports all asserted that most of those held at Camp Greyhound were being charged with property crimes. But such assertions, which Cain repeated in numerous stories, discursively established Camp Greyhound as fundamental to restoring order against the depravity of New Orleans' poor and black. Almost a week after opening, Camp Greyhound claimed 229 prisoners, 178 charged with looting. The others were charged with anything from violating the 6 p.m. curfew in effect to loitering to attempted murder, although Cain spoke broadly about all of them as a collective engaged in 'shooting and looting and causing havoc' (quoted in Caputo, 2005: A16).

Grouping together a small number of allegedly violent offenders with a majority population of property offenders, Cain's claims meshed with the days of coverage depicting New Orleans as governed by chaos. By the time CNN reported on the jail (12 September), it had been open a week and the subject of stories in several newspapers. Viewing the jail as a necessary step toward restoring order, the coverage seemed almost to enjoy the ironic location of the jail's existence: an institution meant to be a site for people passing through now became a space of confinement. In reporting on the jail, what he called 'a masterpiece', CNN reporter Ed Lavandera laughed several times at the folksy charm of Cain and other jail officials' description of Camp Greyhound as a step toward 'normalcy'. CNN anchor Anderson Cooper called the jail 'an ingenious solution to a very difficult problem, I suppose'. Echoing Cain, the *USA Today* called the jail 'among the first signals that authorities were gaining their footing against the looting and violence that plagued New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina hit' (Johnson, 2005: 3A). Similar sentiments, either in quotes by Cain or in the omniscient language of the reporter, were repeated in the other media outlets I examined.

In providing the breadth of charges for those interned at Camp Greyhound, reports elided that appropriating property was the primary offense of New Orleans' newly incarcerated population. An early report in the *Times-Picayune* web edition, the first to report the jail's existence, was particularly brash:

> State officials have set up a temporary booking and detention center in New Orleans to deal with those accused of killing, raping, looting and otherwise terrorizing the tens of thousands of people who were trapped in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and awaiting evacuation. (Filosa, 2005a).

The consistent coverage of crime in New Orleans led President Bush, fresh back from vacation, to declare an official policy of 'zero tolerance of people breaking the law during an emergency such as this' (quoted in Coates and Eggen, 2005: A1).

Like any zero tolerance policy, the one deployed in the streets of New Orleans collapsed much-needed distinctions. Beyond equating survival deeds with crimes endangering public safety, zero tolerance made policy out of rumor mill. It also revealed the problems of punishment absent social welfare. Many impoverished residents of the Gulf Coast did violate existing laws in attempts to find supplies during the flood. But such transgressions against property emerged predominantly in response to the absence of any government strategies for relief and, by most accounts, consisted almost exclusively of appropriating needed supplies. One person, arrested for stealing a car in his attempt to flee the flooding city that had yet to see any government assistance, cried foul, saying that 'government officials had encouraged residents to evacuate by any means necessary' (Berenson, 2005: 20). Cain related the story to a CNN reporter with a smile, noting that the man received his ticket, just not the one out of town.

Treating legality as the dividing line sublimated life survival to accepting the hegemony of property and state. The focus on chaos and individual depravity implied that simply the State's presence, even if only in punitive form, was necessary to ensure survival or even basic human decency. The constant refrain from authorities and reported in the media that the National Guard and Camp Greyhound – that policing and incarceration – were the vanguard forces 'restoring order' obscured that it was the lack of storm-readiness initiatives that yielded such autonomous action. The specific accounts recorded in the media did not provide evidence for the overarching narrative it put forward in the repeated but vague references to lawlessness and depravity, the hazy mentions of random gunfire and ubiquitous street crime. Details belied grand narratives, and images contradicted words, showing as they did social solidarity or misery but not mass predatory violence (Simon, 2007b).[9] Arguably, the most violent images CNN aired in this first month were of heavily armed police and National Guard enforcing the mandatory evacuation order.

Yet the pervasive specter of crime-fueled chaos served to mobilize the state machinery to view incarceration as a necessary step toward restoring order. At stake was not only preventing further chaos, but defending the legitimacy of incarceration as a normal policy response. 'This is a step toward normalcy', US Attorney Jim Letten said of his quick efforts to file federal charges against certain suspected law breakers, in tandem with Camp Greyhound's christening. The federal charges, reported the *Times-Picayune* on 2 September, ranged from carjacking to murder in what the paper characterized as a climate of 'terror'. 'Make no mistake about this: The federal criminal justice system is alive and well', Letten continued. 'The entire criminal justice system is alive and well. . . . We're moving rapidly toward business as usual' (Filosa, 2005a). Camp Greyhound revealed that business as usual meant incarceration. But the crime narrative had another factor as well: it diverted rescue efforts away from relief and toward punishment.

MORAL PANIC: MEDIA FRAMES AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES

The Government and the mainstream media formed an echo chamber, where lurid rumors of wanton violence were repeated and reinforced ad nausea so as to become fact,

fueling an increasingly militarized presence on the ground. The lack of clear information gave rumors added currency; even though newspaper and television reporters scoured the city, they were still reliant on authorities and eyewitnesses who lacked reliable information. Frames of chaos and carnage were established early, even if they were subsequently challenged. But there were consequences to such widespread reports of chaos. Six days after the storm hit, police opened fire without provocation on Danzinger Bridge, killing two men, one of them disabled, and wounding four who were trying to flee the hurricane-wracked city (Filosa, 2005b). And six weeks after the storm, with police still feeling embattled after the immediate chaos of the storm had subsided, two video cameras captured several officers beating 64-year-old Robert Davis (Hauser and Drew, 2005).[10] Overworked, understaffed and as influenced by media coverage as anyone, the New Orleans Police Department, whose members lost family and property in the storm like the rest of the city's residents, reacted swiftly and sometimes violently amid the breakdown in infrastructure (Sims, 2007).

Mediated discourse continued to have a big impact for the on-the-ground response in New Orleans.[11] This ideological role of language was most evident in the creation of a looter class. Such constructions have deep roots. In analyzing the mugging panic of 1970s England, *Policing the crisis* describes the news media–government feedback loop which, following familiar ideological scripts, led to widespread criminalization of young black and immigrant men. England's 'muggers' of 30 years ago were the 'looters' of Hurricane Katrina: a moral panic born of crisis that served to bolster the hegemony of police, prisons and property on the backs of already marginalized populations. Hall et al. (1978: 16; emphases in original) define a moral panic as what happens when:

> the official reaction to a person, groups of persons, or series of events is *out of all proportion* to the actual threat offered, [and] when 'experts,' in the form of police chiefs, the judiciary, politicians, and editors *perceive* the threat in all but identical terms, and appear to talk 'with one voice' of rates, diagnoses, prognoses and solutions.

That the hurricane was a genuine disaster, accompanied by a palpable breakdown in State control, offers a vital difference between New Orleans' moral panic and the one which gripped England 35 years prior. Still, the 'agencies of public significance and control' (Hall et al., 1978: 52) – police, courts, media – followed a similar process of helping create and amplify the panic to which they also respond. Just as real incidents of people being robbed then became proof of a 'mugging crisis', so too did real incidents of people expropriating items prove that New Orleans was subject to a regime of looters. In New Orleans as in England, police were active at both sides: as sources for the news stories which defined and amplified the crisis, and as the agents responsible for ending the crisis. And, in both places, print and television media outlets similarly helped construct as well as reflect the crisis. While each media form contains its own particularities – the need for compelling images and real-time interviews exerting a stronger pull on television, the greater depth possible in newspapers of record, the terseness of tabloids – the coverage was more remarkable for what it shared across media than for how it differed between media forms.

CNN mentioned looting as a mark of 'anarchy' and the lack of 'public safety' in its reports as early as 30 August, with a repeated image of people fleeing an unnamed store with full arms and, on 1 September, rumors of 'hard' or 'crazed' armed men who 'beat

back' police, 'targeted' tourists and 'tried to rape young women' (reported a voice over images of people milling about the Superdome and Convention Center). 'Anyone who walks the streets of New Orleans is taking their life into their own hands', CNN journalist Chris Lawrence said, quoting an unidentified police officer he had spoken with earlier. A moment later, over images of people milling about the Superdome, Lawrence again cited another unnamed officer saying that there are no 'normal' people left in New Orleans: only armed ones, notwithstanding the images showing otherwise (CNN, 2005a). 'Everything is slowed by the lawlessness', CNN anchor Aaron Brown reported, expressing confusion at the report that snipers were shooting at hospital helicopter evacuations (CNN, 2005c).

In this ideologically laden enterprise, news stories translated looting from a verb, something people did, to a noun, something one was. News reports described, for example, the first instance of appropriation by saying 'looters broke windows' to enter stores (Dwyer and Drew, 2005: A1) – signifying that one broke windows *because one was a looter*, rather than for the *purposes of looting*. The labeling of such activity as distinctive translated impact into an identifiable and objectionable problem, a vital step in the creation of a moral panic (Cohen, 2002). Such discourse permeated people's perceptions of reality within New Orleans as much as it helped inform those outside the city. This looter class, in fact, quickly became a dominant actor in the Katrina story – depraved, impoverished, pathological, black.[12] Stories still chronicled efforts to rescue and evacuate people, yet were almost immediately joined by stories decrying that relief efforts were stymied by the threat of gangs and armed looters.

This construction of a looter class occurred amid a real environmental and human catastrophe, and its deployment curbed relief efforts. 'The fears changed troop deployments, delayed medical evacuations, drove police officers to quit, grounded helicopters' reported the *New York Times* in its criticism of media coverage (Dwyer and Drew, 2005: A1), echoing claims the *Times-Picayune* made three days earlier in its own criticism of Katrina coverage (Thevenot and Russell, 2005). It was a self-fulfilling prophecy: based on rumor and conjecture, on the ground but especially in the media, about the level of sadistic violence, the relief efforts became quickly and heavily militarized policing efforts. The real incidents of violating property relations joined phantom tales of children being raped, seniors being stabbed and police being shot at with all manners of weaponry (CNN, 2005d; Thevenot and Russell, 2005).[13]

As a result of this coverage, some rescue operations were called off entirely, while others increased their weaponry and decreased their boat size to boost the security of those still engaged in rescue missions (Chasnoff and Christenson, 2005). CNN followed police officers and National Guard soldiers on their evacuations with guns at the ready. For some units, the task was more eviction than evacuation (CNN, 2005b). One news story told how emergency medical services personnel told a parole and probation official to help an injured person. He begrudgingly refused service to her because 'that's not our job today. Our job today is crowd control and inmate control' (quoted in Slevin, 2005: A1). Police resources were consistently withdrawn from relief efforts; following incessant reports of crime at the Superdome, a dozen members of the SWAT team were dispatched there to 'rescue' only the wife and relative of a Jefferson Parish police officer who faced no greater danger than any of the other people stranded there (Haygood and Tyson, 2005). Explicitly responding to news coverage, more than 60,000 National

Guard troops were deployed to New Orleans to quell what had been presented as an urban insurgency (Tierney and Bevc, 2007).

Perhaps the most dramatic example of the consequences of these frames came from Gretna, a New Orleans suburb where the police chief ordered his officers to prevent any evacuees from entering. The police fired in the air and used dogs to block one of the main evacuation routes from New Orleans in order to prevent that city's presumed depravity from entering his middle class town (Harris, 2005). To this example can be added the various news stories from cities such as Houston, San Antonio and elsewhere that large numbers of evacuees were sent, wondering whether the recent population influx would bring with it a dramatic spike in crime (see, for example, Davila, 2005). The answer across the board: no.[14] The constant crime chatter did, however, lead to an unparalleled demand from gun stores throughout the region 'for small revolvers, semiautomatics, shotguns and stun guns, many being purchased by women and first-time gun owners, despite police denials that the crime rate has jumped' (Falkenberg, 2005: A16).

The Government exhibited a particular concern for tourists, reflecting an interest in protecting not only property but the propertied. Police superintendent Edwin P. Compass repeatedly called attention to tourists being systematically preyed on, beaten and raped (see, for example, Applebome et al., 2005), although this proved to be as inaccurate as most allegations. Compass, who called New Orleans 'the single safest city in the United States' due to the presence of 'heavily armed military patrols' (Varney, 2005: A1) one week after the storm, was forced to resign on 27 September for his role in propagating such hysteria over the city's supposed depravity (Varney and Perlstein, 2005).[15]

Regardless of the personnel change, Compass was partially right: New Orleans was a heavily fortified city. Tierney and Bevc (2007) argue that Katrina provided cover for some in government to enact militarized disaster relief as social policy. And it is not just disaster relief; increased police presence has been necessary to secure the area amid a great housing crisis (Crowley, 2006),[16] an increasingly privatized education system (Adamo, 2007), and a more complete turn to a tourist economy (Bond Graham, 2007; Gotham, 2007) with the concomitant deflated wages among workers in both service industry and construction jobs (Donato et al., 2007; McLaren and Jaramillo, 2007). Law enforcement literally policed labor relations following the storm. After President Bush temporarily repealed the Davis-Bacon Act – that is, minimum wage – for areas affected by Katrina (Edsall, 2005), non-union, largely immigrant labor was central to reconstruction efforts. According to a report by the Advancement Project, police officers and employers coerced a largely immigrant workforce under threat of arrest or deportation into certain jobs and labor conditions – and, in some cases, to forfeit wages (Browne-Dianis et al., 2006).

Various columnists and pundits used New Orleans to argue that future disaster management plans must take widespread looting into account, in effect calling for massive militarization as a first response to future catastrophes. Several sociologists, however, argued that crisis situations such as Hurricane Katrina generally do not produce widespread looting of non-essential items, pointing to 'a well-documented history of misinformation during disasters – and a general human tendency to misread crowds, even violent ones, as more malevolent than they really are' (quoted in Shea,

2005: E1). Sociologist Kathleen Tierney told the *Boston Globe* that Katrina was the most 'egregious example of victim blaming' that she had seen. Tierney said the worst possible option would be to put a city in a disaster situation such as New Orleans on lockdown via militarized policing. The priority should be 'on getting food and water to needy resident and organizing residents, who know the area, into rescue parties' (Shea, 2005: E1). The media published this sociological wisdom as part of their self-criticism for what had been lurid coverage. By the time these stories emerged, however, such reconsiderations did little to overturn entrenched tropes. As Hall Jamieson and Waldman note (2003: 22), the 'dramatic narrative can thus drive out relevant facts' – and individual crime was as dramatic a narrative as state neglect, even if the facts alone would lend themselves to an almost exclusive focus on the latter.

CONCLUSION

The coverage of Katrina was so inaccurate that scholar David Perlmutter (2006: 79), then based in New Orleans, wrote that he would like to chair a truth and reconciliation committee studying the media coverage and assigning blame. The frames established during and immediately following the hurricane defined social control not only as restoring services and infrastructure destroyed by the storm and flooding, but as stopping individual lawlessness. The threat or actualization of incarceration achieved such punitive restoration, based both on rumor and the portrayal of what crime did occur as wholly antisocial rather than survival-based. Beginning weeks later, journalists revisited or challenged some of the initial tropes, including the treatment of prisoners during the storm. Several human rights organizations sued the State for ill treatment of internees (see, for example, Rohde and Drew, 2005). Simultaneously, however, the city also moved to create a 'looter patrol' (Perlstein, 2005: A1), cementing the ideologically laden label in policing at the same time that the discourse moved to reflect a gentler understanding. Judges followed suit: in a tough crackdown on so-called looters, three people convicted of stealing alcohol were sentenced to 15 years each (McLaren and Jaramillo, 2007: 207).

The Katrina story faded to the background of national news, the way crisis stories frequently do: neither forgotten nor a focal point, but only occasionally a national story – over anniversaries of the storm, the return or continued dispersal of the city's residents (noted especially around holidays) or dramatic shifts in policy. When Hurricane Gustav threatened New Orleans in the summer of 2008, the specter of Katrina once again reared its head. The Government's desire to avoid the embarrassing failure of Katrina led to a much faster and more action-oriented response. Yet the Katrina story continued to outstrip its reality, as fears of looting once again inspired a display of vigilante force by some (white) New Orleans residents – a reaction evident in the response of all manner of politicians, and duly reported in the pages and screens of the American media. In the run-up to Gustav, reported the *New York Times*, Mayor Nagin boasted that the police force was double its size during Katrina and pledged that looters would 'go directly to jail' (quoted in Nossiter, 2008: A1). As the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* reported, Governor Jindal preemptively declared a state of emergency and promised to protect fleeing residents' property (Pope et al., 2008). The front page of the 1 September 2008, *Times-Picayune*, under a headline proclaiming that Gustav might

spare the city, featured a picture of armed National Guard soldiers patrolling the streets with guns at the ready.

A media system embedded in the ebb and flow of governing remains at least partially ensnared in its ideological grip. Even when critical of the Government, media outlets often remain a step behind the State – needing to report on governmental policies and lacking sufficient independence for routine alternative sources and frameworks. Yet as the story moves from news to memory, the immediate response to the hurricane is increasingly described as the epitome of state neglect (e.g. Brinkley, 2006; Horne, 2006). While such an alternative frame is welcome relative to a law and order approach, it may also overlook the fact that Katrina revealed punishment to be viable disaster policy. It still remains to be seen how the new New Orleans will deal with these situations and rebuild a criminal justice system that was in shambles long before it was in ruins.

Notes

1 Katrina's impact was felt throughout the Gulf Coast, including Mississippi and Alabama as well as elsewhere in Louisiana. But New Orleans was Ground Zero for the hurricane: it received the most attention from the storm and in the coverage, and is therefore the focus of this article.

2 Neither of the two respected sociology texts on Katrina make use of crime as a central analytic prism: *There is no such thing as a natural disaster* (Hartman and Squires, 2006) has no articles about crime, whereas *The sociology of Katrina* (Brunsma et al., 2007) includes an article about crime frames but little about incarceration or other elements of criminal justice involved in the hurricane. Critical legal scholars have stepped in to fill the void; see, for instance Harris and Carbado (2006); Russell-Brown (2006); McLaren and Jamarillo (2007); Simon (2007b).

3 And here, too, they were privatized: the Government hired private security firm Blackwater to help police post-storm New Orleans (Scahill, 2006).

4 Because it transpired during a genuine ecological disaster, Katrina is not the archetypal model of governing through crime as Simon defines it. Put another way, Katrina combines the model Simon identifies with disaster management. Governing through crime is an entrenched political practice built over decades. The response to Katrina demonstrates how, beneath the anger of the moment, prevailing routines shape responses from both state and media in crises.

5 Bennett et al. argue that Katrina coverage is an exception that proves the rule of news media reliance on official sources: informing vacationing officials of the city's plight, journalists had clearly trumped officials and saw the story without the filters of the federal government. But the ability of government officials to verify or spread rumor as news, combined with the fact that such officials were always sought out as sources, illustrates the depths to which the media are embedded in statecraft and unable to extricate themselves from state filters. It makes Katrina less of an exception than Bennett and company suggest.

6 Dynes and Rodríguez (2007: 25) point out the hypocrisy of Nagin and Compass giving interviews to any media outlet – in order to say that New Orleans was 'a disorganized city on the brink of collapse, less from the storm than from its residents.'

7 The third feature she mentions is the death penalty. While it has not characterized the State's response to the hurricane, one can see the threat of an extralegal death penalty, through vigilantism rather than jurisprudence, as can be witnessed through the widespread posting of homemade 'You loot, we shoot' signs by business owners in the French Quarter and reports of actual white vigilante violence operating immediately in the hurricane's wake (see, for example, Rahim, 2005; Slevin, 2005).

8 New Orleans before the storm was 67 percent African American, of which 35 percent were considered poor by federal standards (a family of four earning less than $19,307 a year). Overall, according to the Census Bureau, the city's poverty rate was more than 23 percent, as compared to less than 13 percent nationally (El Nasser, 2005; more generally, see Barnshaw and Trainor, 2007).

9 The gap between words and images took on a racial sheen in a pair of well-circulated Associated Press images. The two pictures both show adults in their 20s or 30s wading through water carrying foodstuffs. The only difference evident in the pictures is race – one picture features a black person, the other a white couple – and the caption: the black 'man' is said to have 'looted' a grocery store, whereas the white 'residents' had 'found' food (Harris and Carbado, 2006). The awkward distance in news discourse between Katrina's images and words – pictures failing to show the crime-induced chaos reports spoke of – is typical of the troubled relationship between verbal and visual modes of information relay. The verbal and visual components of news need one another, yet are often contradictory (see, for example, Berger, 2007).

10 An officer fired for his role in the beating was subsequently cleared of any wrongdoing. See Maggi (2007).

11 The language reporters used also came under fire: civil rights groups criticized journalists for calling Katrina survivors 'refugees' (see, for instance Dyson, 2006: 176; Rodriguez, 2007).

12 This propensity to think of crime as racially innate found its most loathsome articulation about a month after Katrina when conservative radio host William Bennett declared that aborting all black babies would decrease the crime rate (Fletcher and Faler, 2005).

13 CNN, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* all followed the *Times-Picayune*'s lead in criticizing the inaccuracies that information-strapped authorities told journalists, who then dutifully reported such rumors. While these critical appraisals appeared elsewhere, the *USA Today* called for journalists to retain their objectivity and resist emotional involvement in the stories they cover (Rubin, 2005). Overseas, the British *Guardian* had printed a story critical of the rumor-based news stories one week after the storm (Younge, 2005). This critique of the media by the media put forth a vital re-appraisal of the early coverage, yet it remained abstract to the extent journalists lamented what 'the media' did based on what 'officials' told them. There was, however, little direct mea culpa for what particular publications did. CNN's coverage of this media self-criticism, for instance, consisted of Aaron Brown interviewing *Times-Picayune* reporter Brian Thevenot on the analysis he did for his paper.

14 At least in the short term; more work needs to be done to track the longitudinal effects of Katrina, displacement and crime. There are other aspects of violence in need of study, including post-traumatic stress disorder and interpersonal violence or suicide. Tracking the long-term impact of the storm is vital, though it is beyond the scope of this article. Still, it remains the case that the initial fears of increased violence by displaced residents as part of a general New Orleans curse proved as phantom outside the city as in. And yet, both New Orleans and evacuation cities witnessed increased policing based on this fear.

15 Compass was forced out by New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin, an equally brash public figure promoting the criminalization narrative.

16 Some delighted at the chance to reconstruct the city's housing: 'We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans', said Richard Baker, a Republican congressman from the city. 'We couldn't do it, but God did' (quoted in Klein, 2007: 4). Klein goes on to describe the 'fresh start' ethos among corporate executives and politicians in the state.

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