

Markets of Sorrow, Labors of Faith

By VINCANNE ADAMS

Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013

The United States Constitution was written with the expectation that our government officials serve with integrity. Normative theory of public administration is grounded through the oath of office to uphold the Constitution. When people in the U. S. become victims of catastrophic events, they expect a unity of purpose in the governance process that involves nothing short of the highest standard of ethical behavior.

In *Markets of Sorrow, Labors of Faith* Dr. Adams gives an ethnographic perspective of those whose lives were affected, not just by Hurricane Katrina, but by the second order disaster of failing recovery assistance. The changes that people experienced in these two disasters altered their sense of self and place across socioeconomic, race, gender and age differences. For many of those who were victims of the storm, they became vulnerable to those who held responsibility in assisting with the recovery efforts. The book shows questionable ethical issues and problems related to principal agent theory. The question posed throughout the book: why is there so little accountability and such a lack of coordination that left many people, still to this day, trying to recover from the 2005 event? Adams (2013) points out that the “larger story about recovery that needed to be told was about how market forces involved in recovery were exacerbating existing inequalities, delaying recovery, and creating a new type of economy in ways that were significant not just for those recovering from the disaster but for all of those involved helping them do so as well” (p.18).

There is a belief in American history that when disaster strikes, it would be the community, neighbors and friends that would come to the rescue. Stories have often been told and passed down of how people and local businesses would pitch in and provide materials and labor to help those who have been victimized by a disaster. There seemed to be a moral ethos that we care for our own. Adams is highly qualified as an ethnographical researcher in social sciences, reflecting twenty-two years of experience in anthropology, aging, displacement politics and disaster capitalism, to reflect on the trauma and treatment that victims received post-Katrina. At any time in our life when we experience trauma, we count on assistance to follow moral and ethical principles regarding how we are treated. Our drive to get back to normal is not reflected in victims' desire to benefit from the disaster, but simply to be made whole again.

The eight chapters of *Markets of Sorrow, Labors of Faith* describe how people from different backgrounds and facing unique levels of loss experienced the recovery process. Chapter 1 sets the standard of being a study of a “second order disaster” resulting from the interests of government contractors profiting from those who have lost the most and have so little (p. 1). The study gives insight into future research looking at methods that would facilitate effective, efficient, and ethical public and private disaster aid response. With the intensity of some disasters, clientele may need to reconsider their expectations of the level of government response to individuals in need—in other words, at what level is government capable of responding and what point does the individual need to pursue private sector solutions to the recovery of personal loss (e.g., insurance)? The second chapter describes how we can put off to tomorrow what should be done today. Having empirical evidence that the levee systems were not sufficient to sustain such a large storm, it was the public budget that failed before the storm arrived. Funding was funneled into those projects that carried commercial interest rather than those that would

have stabilized the existing flood protection system. Adams describes recovery effort that was racially profiled. The areas where people lost the most were low income areas and racially segregated. Those areas were also where programs for public housing were eliminated from the redevelopment efforts with no new low income housing accommodations made. The ethical treatment of those who are most vulnerable in our society seems to have received low priority at best.

Arguably, the process of recovery should be one in which reviving the community into an economically functional state would be a priority. Throughout the process, those who were contracted to provide the means of recovery had focused on the interests of the contractor. Those who remained in New Orleans, as well as those seeking to return, were overwhelmed with bureaucratic red tape that tested the patience of residents. In the name of government regulation, action on applications was delayed for months or years only to be denied due to lack of supporting documentation, much of which was lost when public buildings were flooded. Those seeking to navigate the system found that rules were interpreted to reflect different meanings or had been updated with no public notice. Security staffs were more interested in incarcerating people than protecting them, as though New Orleans was a war zone. People were left on their own to solve their problems while having to contend with the impact of the initial disaster.

Adams found that the people and the companies contracted to provide aid were not held accountable. “The federal government resources allocated to the Road Home Program seemed clearly more than adequate to compensate all of the homeowners fully for their losses, especially with figures like \$800 million floating about. But somehow these funds were not making it to the people like Gerald” (p. 82). This system left those who needed assistance vulnerable to con-artists and thieves that would propose to restore their homes or clean out debris for substantial

upfront fees that disappeared as quickly as the offer. Property that was vacant was looted for anything of value. Those contractors that had assumed responsibility for security were not providing services in these residential areas.

The faith-based community groups were often those providing the actual physical labor and often arranged for contributions of materials. Adams states that “[h]elping others in need is a moral virtue, while making profits on this work is seen as equally virtuous” (p. 11). The botched recovery efforts affected people in the African American community in particular. High poverty rates that existed before Katrina, in combination with a lack of employment and skyrocketing rents removed many of the poor in New Orleans (p. 178). Charities working in mixed areas and neighborhoods that found many of the new poor in the city were people who previously had been self-supporting.

According to Adams, a non-profit organization called the Citizens’ Road Home Action Team (CHAT) gathered evidence of the problems and inefficiencies that were synonymous with the Road Home program. Among these problems were repeatedly lost paperwork, continuous changes to the rules, slow payout of grant money, and “unusually lucrative arrangements for contractors despite their poor quality control and inconsistency of grant calculations” (p. 182). Adams contributes much of the problems of private industry acting irresponsibly, ineffectively responding to federal and state subcontracting policies that allowed for profit entities to do relief work. A lack of government oversight might have led to profiteering and mismanagement.

The cost of a recovery effort is estimated to be fifteen times higher than the cost of the proactive planning process needed to manage the effects of a disaster such as wrought by Hurricane Katrina. The success of the nonprofit sector is largely due to the use of volunteers and unpaid labor. Taxpayers paid twice: once in the form of tax payment and the second time

through their own sweat equity [i.e., “on the backs of victims and volunteers” (p. 186)]. Referring to the situation as perverse, Adams expresses that allowing for-profit corporate interests into the sector of humanitarian recovery raises serious ethical issues. The government protects the interests of market oriented businesses even in disaster relief but thereby adds to social suffering. The government, through corporations, provided assistance that drove victims into debt beyond their ability to pay, while protecting the interests of the banking industry (p. 7). Adding insult to injury was the penetration of for-profit corporations (stipulating efficiencies) into the non-profit sector, which limited non-profits’ ability to provide adequate relief. Financed largely through philanthropy, non-profits met the demands for financial responsibility by providing relief without consideration of the degree of loss experienced by individuals.

In the practice of public administration, we remain accountable for the responsibilities of government and the practice of public management. Transparency is paramount if public consumer-victims of aid relief are to retain faith in the equity and ethics surrounding the process of crisis recovery. *Markets of Sorrow, Labors of Faith* is a book recommended for scholars and practitioners exploring the ethical dilemmas surrounding public management in the face of crisis. Is there a point we find that private enterprise is more ineffective and incurs higher costs in providing public services than we are willing to pay? May we conclude that certain public functions do not fare well with profit driven practices? Can we compromise our core values at a time as when we are serving those in the greatest need?

--Nicole L. Cline

University of Utah