Disastrous Social Theory/Lessons from New Orleans I: Acts of God

Joost van Loon and Simon Charlesworth

Contemplating the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina gives us an excellent opportunity to evaluate the 'state of the art' of contemporary social theory. What could social theory contribute to enhance our understanding of what happened before, during and after the events which are best described as 'a disaster'.

Social theory, at least the variant which has dominated the Euro-American academy since the erosion of the disciplinary strongholds within the social sciences, has concerned itself in the recent past with analyses of a host of phenomena which could, theoretically at least, have some relevance to explaining why things turned out the way they did. One could, for example, deploy risk theory to reflect on the way in which the disaster had been anticipated and how crucial decisions, affecting the lives of thousands of people were made (or not). We could go into more detail and deploy Actor Network Theory, for example, to map the various links and translations that took place between the initial forecasts of the experts and the eventual forms of disaster management that were put in place (or not). We could resort to analyses of capitalism, to reflect on the way in which crucial decisions relating to the flood defences, and the subsequent deployment of security forces, seemed to emphasise the short term interests of capital accumulation over longer term interests of social stability, or, to put it another way, the value of property over that of human life. The latter could be further enlightened by deploying the concept of racism as a means to explain why exactly those sections of New Orleans were most abandoned and people left to fend for themselves where there was the largest concentration of African Americans. Finally, we could deploy more generic social theoretical concepts such as individualization and the breakdown of social integration to analyse how in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans gave us a glimpse of what a post-apocalypse urban waste-land might look like.

Yet, we suspect that by and large, the vestiges of social theory, as they are harboured by the prestigious publishers' series of monographs, international journals and conferences, will leave this disaster undiscussed, just as they had no particular interest in discussing the Tsunami of December 2004. This is because, by and large, social theory as an institution is ill-equipped to deal with matters that are of real relevance. Social theory lacks a sense of urgency because it is institutionally produced by people who use institutions to escape the kinds of economic vulnerability that are the condition of the majority in an America, and Britain, forcibly shaped by the same neoliberal economic project for the best part of twenty-five years. The diagnosis of the cultural effects of an economics used for political interests, is clear in the following:

> Supporters of laisser-faire, like Thatcher, Reagan and their successors, are careful in practice *not* to 'laisser faire' but, on the contrary, to leave a free hand to the logic of financial markets by waging total war on trade unions, on the social achievements of the last couple of centuries, in a word against all *the forms of civilization associated with the social state*…Neoliberal policy can now be judged by its results, which are clear for all to see, despite systematic efforts to prove, through statistical sleight of hand and gross trickery, that the United States or Britain has achieved full employment. There is mass unemployment; what jobs there are have become precarious, the resulting permanent insecurity affecting an increasing proportion of the population, even in the middle classes; there is profound demoralization linked to the collapse of elementary solidarities,

especially in the family, and all the consequences of this state of anomie: juvenile delinquency, crime, drugs, alcoholism, the reappearance in France and elsewhere of fascist-style political movements; and there is the gradual destruction of the economic and social foundations of humanity's rarest cultural achievements. (Bourdieu 1998: 126-127).

"The movement toward the neoliberal utopia of a pure and perfect market" (Bourdieu 1998b: 2) was the vehicle through which those whose interests it expressed, stockholders, financial operators, industrialists, conservative or social-democratic politicians, high-level financial officials (Bourdieu 1998b: 2), reclaimed what had been conceded in the post-war consensus. Neoliberal economics, is not the expression of an economic inevitability but of a *political will* (Bourdieu 1998b: 85) that emerges from the constitution of the public realm by the State nobility. Thus, the economic policies productive of inequalities are "part of a *mode of domination* of a new kind, based on the creation of a generalized and permanent state of insecurity aimed at forcing an acceptance of exploitation" (Bourdieu 1998b: 86). By eroding the elementary solidarities of the work-place and instituting conditions of economic insecurity, it eroded not only the capacity to earn a living and provide for others but the very basis of identity and the source of reasons for being and justifications for existing, so that it is hardly surprising that lacking stable patterns of access to recognised forms of association the working class have become less solidaristic and more atomised, precisely the relational conditions neoliberalism aimed to bring about:

> One'r things that happened in' seventies an' eighties, Thatcher had to divide an rule, shi' had to, to brek power of unions, brek up communities. So, instead'r people being closer cos 'r arh 'ard it is, everyone's separate, thi's different education, different trainin', no steady jobs, everybody's separated, the're wary nahr…nahr thi've brought in individuality, fact of bein' alone, even wi' your neighbors your in competition.

Part of the purpose of neoliberal economics was to undermine the foundations of the interpersonal forms of collective decency that once characterized the occupational community, the solidaristic dispositions of industrial production and trade Labourism. These conditions have had a profound effect on the sociality of those who are insecure, creating the interpersonal conditions for the kinds of anonymous violence, against self and others, manifest in the figures on violence and mental ill-health. The neoliberal project aims to realize the social conditions for, a world in which competition produces a struggle of all against all and violence and cynicism appear to be necessities. One of the striking features of the tragedy in New Orleans was the immobilisation of the victims of the neoliberal economic order. They lacked the resources to adequately respond themselves, and they lacked the public value to have resources mobilised for them, but, even more significantly, they were immobilised in their localities by the nature of their own dispositions: many preferred to stay in a locality in imminent danger not merely because of the distances constitutive of 'expert' scientific opinion but because they felt a security in the impoverishment of their own locality. It is a paradox of the labour market discrimination constitutive of such disclocated populations that 'members' of such fractured groups feel the only security or value they have is by remaining within the confines of what they are confined to.

 It is the personal detail of the consequences of this institutionally, economically, organised confinement, that it is difficult to get contemporary social science to address. A central aspect of this problem is that the universities themselves are a central mediating institution of the contemporary class structure. In the UK, unemployment has been progressively hidden by an extension of university education

that benefits the petit-bourgeois intelligentsia administering access to the cultural tokens, heavily signified certificates, that mediate access to an institutionalised economy. In both the US and the UK the universities are key sites of institutional processing that mediate economic access: they are the institutions that secure the means of escape from locality: they ensure those paid for 'teaching' in them do not have to face the economic vulnerability that leaves them without space of movement. Galbraith makes an excellent point, when he writes:

> What is not accepted, and indeed is little mentioned, is that the underclass is integrally a part of a larger economic process and, more importantly, that it serves the living standard and the comfort of the more favoured community. Economic progress would be far more uncertain and certainly far less rapid without it. The economically fortunate, not excluding those who speak with greatest regret of the existence of this class, are heavily dependent on its presence.
>   The underclass is deeply functional; all industrial countries have one in greater or lesser measure and in one form or another…The picture of an economic and political system in which social exclusion, however unforgiving, is somehow a remediable affliction is all but required. Here, in highly compelling fashion, the social convenience of the contented replaces the clearly visible reality. (Galbraith 32-34).

In reality, the contented earn a living producing, for their social convenience, the invisibility of the consequences of their social and institutional games: they live producing representations that function within their international-institutional networks forms of vision, representations, that provide them with the illusion of their social importance and their concern. This is why so much of the everyday, very ordinary, banal suffering of the world's poor go un-evidenced and un-remarked upon: ethnography is shunned, evidence is unnecessary and explanation an illusion constituted amidst this collective constitution of an illusory discursive field that serves the institutional interests, the needs of those instituting this field as a resource. Social science is institutionally anchored in largely self-referential discourses that emerge from the safe and privileged life-worlds of its middle class academic protagonists.

It isn't merely that Social theorists have had very little interest in apocalyptic phenomena that have already happened long before, but that they exhibit precious little interest in the mundane detail of a rapidly changing social world such that it takes a massive and terrible disaster like the one in New Orleans to make present for them the fact that the poor exist and live lives utterly alien to that of the people who live on university campuses. Because academics generate careers through their institutional networks, there primary access to spatially distant realities tends to be representations produced by others. Both of us are part of a generation in the UK for whom access to higher degrees came down to money. We have both witnessed the extent to which access to the credentials to contest social science comes down to being able to afford to pay for and fund seven years of study. Those in social science are not socially representative of the earth's population and they constitute culture in order to deliberately avoid the living conditions of those they exclude. It is a point Lasch makes well:

> Blind to their own prejudices, the children of light could not see that their own world was in many ways just as narrowly circumscribed as the worker's. If the worker spent his days in the company of "people very like himself," so did the educated classes. Their travels took them around the globe, but the internationalization of the professional and managerial mode of life meant that they encountered the same kind of people and the same living conditions everywhere they went: the same hotels, the same three-star restaurants, the same conference rooms and lecture halls. Education gave them vicarious access to the world's culture, but their acquaintance with culture

was increasingly selective and fragmentary, and it did not seem to have strengthened the capacity for imaginative identification with experience alien to their own. Their educated jargon had lost touch with everyday spoken language and no longer served as a repository of the community's common sense. Academic discourse had achieved a certain analytical precision, in law and medicine and the hard sciences, at the expense of vividness and evocative power; while in fields like psychiatry, sociology, and social work, it merely distinguished insiders from outsiders and gave an air of scientific prestige to practices embarrassed by their homely origins. Academic English–the abstract, uninflected, colorless medium not only of the classroom but of the boardroom, the clinic, the court of law, and the governmental bureau–had discarded most of the earthly idioms that betrayed its provincial Anglo-Saxon past, and the spoken form of this English no longer betrayed any hint of regional accent or dialect. The bureaucratization of language indicated what was happening to intellectual culture as a whole: its transformation into a universal medium in a curious way seemed to weaken its capacity to promote public communication. The people who stood at the forefront of the "communications age" had lost the ability to communicate with anyone but themselves. Their technical jargons were unintelligible to outsiders but immediately recognizable, as the badge of professional status, to fellow specialists all over the world. The cosmopolitanism of the educated specialists overcame the old barriers of local, regional, and even national identity but insulated them from ordinary people and ordinary human experience. Priding themselves on the global reach of their culture, the educated classes led what was in many ways a constricted, insular life. Modern conveniences sheltered them from everyday discomforts...Exemption from manual labor deprived them of any appreciation of the practical skills it requires or the kind of knowledge that grows directly out of firsthand experience. (Lasch 1991: 466-467.)

Their poor "capacity for imaginative identification with experience alien to their own" (Lasch 1991: 466) is attendant on their elevation of their own forms to the status of nationally recognisable form of excellence, part of the symbolic power through which they generate the realm of their own competence in such a way that it is necessarily tied to their own forms and thus endlessly inflectable and contestable if ever language does fall into the mouths of those who should not be possessed of its signifying power. Such that their blindness is part of the generation of the protected spaces through which they dignify themselves and make possible the vanities of their expertise. The inadequacy of their attempts to grasp human reality is tied to the embodied institutional procedures through which they instantiate their forms as professional forms and Lasch is right to say that "Academic discourse…in fields like psychiatry, sociology, and social work…merely distinguished insiders from outsiders and gave an air of scientific prestige to practices embarrassed by their homely origins." (Lasch 1991: 466). Academics co-produce what they want, the pleasures of elitism, the pleasures of inner-circles, of being consecrated and recognised and it is attendant on multiplicities of exclusion, and the forms of their discourse, in fields lacking clear criteria of assessment, produce what they need, what Lasch describes is not accidental but necessary, they wanted to frame authorised languages that were "unintelligible to outsiders but immediately recognizable, as the badge of professional status, to fellow specialists all over the world." (Lasch 1991: 467) They wanted to escape the "old barriers of local, regional, and even national identity" (Lasch 1991: 467) and constitute the "cosmopolitanism of the educated" (Lasch 1991: 467).

  The problem is that their cultural constitution of the symbolic tokens they need to dominate particular economic sectors has regionalising effects and unfortunately, despite what they secretly like to think, they are not Gods, free to survey the world *sub specie aeternitatis*, they cannot access the personal detail of lives constituted from a differential relation to the public value they institutionally produce. Moreover, the neo-liberal restructuring of capitalist social formations has had catastrophic consequences for entire sections of the population who in a short time lost not only work and livelihoods but also the very basic conditions of their own humanity,

struggling to maintain a sense of self-worth and social value in relation to an economic realm being restructured to degrade, disempower and dispossess them. However, this has been largely neglected as social theorists proclaimed that 'class was dead'. Instead, social theory was concerned with 'other identities' such as gender, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation which could not be understood through the spectrum of class-analysis as the latter was alleged to be the privilege of (stupid) white men and retarded Marxists. Hence a representational realm was produced in relation to the needs and value of those instituting the field to value their own positionality and all that it was invested in, all it emerged from. Instead of understanding the transformation of modern industrial society as epochal and apocalyptic, social theorists started to indulge in analyses of consumerism, leisure, tourism, hedonism, 'aestheticization', 'reflexivity' etcetera. Even notions such as 'ontological insecurity' and individualization which could potentially be useful in helping to explain the deep-rooted alienated character of social inequality in post-industrial society were by and large wasted on universalising middle class experiences and their institutionally anchored privileges.

Class itself has been turned into a representational phenomena, a memory in the pseudo-autobiographical ramblings of academics who try to justify their current status by pointing out where they came from (e.g. Kirk, 2004; Steedman 1987). However, there is hardly anything representational about the violence which underscores class-relations in post-industrial neo-liberal economic social formations. This violence suddenly resurfaced on the flooded streets of New Orleans as the prevailing 'social order' broke down in the wake of what insurance companies prefer to label as 'an act of God'. However, unlike media reports, we should not suddenly abandon our social-theoretical frame of mind by describing this violence as 'random' or 'senseless'.

The idea that life outside the scope of view of middle class academia is meaningless is only the by-product of its relative neglect of everyday life at the 'edge of civilization'. This is not just a North-American phenomenon. In Europe, especially in the UK, there are many areas in cities as well as so called 'rural communities' (e.g. former mining towns), where – upon entering on an ordinary day - one feels to have entered highly marginalised social spaces. Drugs, alcohol, street violence are territorial markers of what can only be described as 'apocalyptic' social spaces of everyday life.

There is nothing random or senseless about violence in post-apocalyptic settings because such violence is already experienced in the ordinary everydayness of people marked as 'social exclusion'. It is the symbolic violence of that marking, with all its arbitriness that is institutionally naturalised in terms of pastoral power and the discourses of care and response, which have contributed to the reproduction of such social exclusion and the normalization of symbolic violence. People with little or no access to redefine the conditions of their own existence only have two options. They can either comply, and redefine themselves as in need of help, as victims of their own incompetence, or they can resist and reconfigure the meaningfulness of their lives in different terms, for example by accumulating different forms of social, economic and symbolic capital (e.g. upon which drugs-economies are often based) outside the realm of the formal economy and labour market.

We posit that it is the latter which emerged in New Orleans as the dominant logic of a new post-apocalyptic social order. The challenge was directly aimed at the feeble

means by which urbanised consumer capitalism attempted to secure itself. Having very little means to redistribute wealth, post-industrial, neo-liberal economic settlements are inherently vulnerable to opportunistic challenges anyway, and the socially excluded are perhaps the best adapted to do this. And this was not random. The primary targets where white, middle class tourists who – only a few days before – were clearly taking advantage of their dominant position in the globalised world order. However, when the hurricane struck, the spatial anchorage of global domination was blown apart, and a new spatial ordering emerged, one in which the local and local knowledge, provided for superior than the deterritorialised fluidity of global capital and tourism.

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