

# Critical theory and Katrina

## Disaster, spectacle and immanent critique

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*This paper uses the theoretical and analytical resources of critical theory to explore the processes and conflicts over efforts to present tragic events as spectacles, focusing on a case study of the Hurricane Katrina disaster in New Orleans. Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent government response have intensified uncertainty and unpredictability, disclose a new insecurity in US cities, and showed how a predicted disaster could wreck havoc within the US economy and political system. I first examine the ways in which the logic of spectacle and entertainment permeate a major disaster like Katrina. Next, I investigate how media coverage and political commentary on Katrina insinuates its own immanent critique of racial and class divisions in urban America. Finally, I draw attention to how critical tendencies are immanent to the commodification process itself, in the form of disaster tourism and the production of Katrina souvenirs that embrace spectacle to criticize federal policy and build global awareness of New Orleans's plight. Overall, my goal is to show how the category of immanent critique can play an important role in drawing out the implications of disaster-as-spectacle, illustrating the intersection of race and class in US cities, and highlighting the multidimensional, conflictual and contradictory character of spectacles.*

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### Introduction

This paper undertakes a content analysis of Internet sites, media coverage and political commentary of the Hurricane Katrina disaster to provide insight into the process and conflicts over efforts to construct tragic events as spectacles. This paper follows earlier efforts to develop a critical theory of entertainment and spectacle that highlights conflicts, irrationalities and contradictions between images and reality; and points to avenues to overcome these contradictions (see Gotham, 2002, 2005; Gotham and Krier, 2007). Hurricane Katrina is especially important to study for several reasons. First, Katrina was one of the deadliest and most destructive hurricanes in US history, with over 1000 deaths and estimated

damages ranging from \$100 billion to \$200 billion.<sup>1</sup> Second, the Hurricane caused catastrophic property damage along the Mississippi and Alabama coasts with approximately 90,000 square miles of the Gulf Coast region designated as federal disaster areas, an area almost as large as the UK. In New Orleans, Katrina flooded 80 percent of the city, including 228,000 occupied housing units (45 percent of the metropolitan total) and over 12,000 business establishments (41 percent of the metropolitan area's total businesses). Those who lived in flooded areas included more than 70,000 elderly people and 124,126 children. Third, Katrina forced the evacuation of hundreds of thousands of residents from southern Louisiana and Mississippi including nearly everyone living in New Orleans and the surrounding suburbs. In the weeks

after the storm, the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) distributed aid to over 700,000 households, including 1.5 million people directly affected by the storm. All told, 1.1 million people, 86 percent of the metropolitan population, lived in areas that were in some way affected by Katrina, either through flooding or other forms of damage.<sup>2</sup>

In short, Hurricane Katrina is an unprecedented disaster that has caused catastrophic human suffering, economic disruption and physical destruction. The disaster caused residents to become homeless, unemployed and involuntary migrants, forced to relocate to areas outside the South to obtain housing, jobs and education, among other resources. In addition to leaving hundreds of thousands of people without access to homes or jobs, the storm has separated people from their families, and has inflicted physical and mental distress that will probably last for years. The rebuilding of New Orleans's infrastructure including the economic base, school system, legal system, hospitals, police and fire protection, utilities and other institutions will take years if not decades. In addition, the disaster has exposed to a global audience New Orleans's chronic poverty, strained race relations and intense inequalities. Within a day after the storm, dozens of nations had contacted the US government to offer condolences and monetary support to the victims of the disaster.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, the disaster has reopened long simmering national debates about democracy and social justice, the existence of poverty in a rich nation and the role of the war in Iraq in siphoning domestic resources. Various scholars and commentators have offered diverse explanations for the causes and consequences of the disaster, and debates now proliferate in the national and global media over the role of public and private sectors in rebuilding New Orleans and the Gulf Coast (see Davis, 2005; Kellner, 2005; Social Science Research Council (SSRC), 2005; Dyson, 2006; Hartman and Squires, 2006; Troutt, 2006). More broadly, differences in theoretical

orientation, methods and analytical techniques are leading to alternative ways of conceptualizing Katrina, assessing consequences of the disaster and delineating the effects of the Hurricane on the national economy and on New Orleans.

This paper has two goals. First, I use the tools and resources of critical theory to illustrate the ways in which the logic of spectacle and entertainment permeate a major disaster like Katrina.<sup>4</sup> I argue that, in the contemporary era, disasters are becoming a mode of spectacle in which the characteristic features of entertainment—for example, ephemerality, fragmentation, immediacy and intense drama—determine the representation of tragic events and catastrophes. As transnational corporations, state institutions and social movements struggle to influence the social organization and trajectory of capitalist development, spectacles and entertainment have become major battlefields of contention over the control of imagery, representation and culture. On the one hand, as many scholars have shown, the modus operandi of entertainment is abstraction, decontextualization, implosion and simulation (Kellner, 1990, 2003, 2004; Gabler, 1998; Ritzer, 2005). Insofar as possible, entertainment corporations, organizations and other agents seek to detach images from social life and transform reality into a *mélange* of signs and iconic representations. This process of 'spectacularization' is not neutral but reflects the relentless pursuit of corporate profit as ruled by the dictates of capitalist competition, commodification, and the rationalization of production and consumption. On the other hand, social movements and groups oriented toward more egalitarian, democratic and socially just forms of urban society mobilize to challenge the spectacularization of everyday life and struggle to transform society. Under these circumstances, I want to suggest, spectacles have become both arenas and objects of socio-cultural contestation as a wide range of social forces and interests interact to contest public policy and reconfigure the socio-spatial organization of capitalist urbanization. Clearly,

the production of spectacle has always been a highly charged socio-political process, but its intensity and its stakes have today dramatically increased in a global context of proliferating struggles to control the production of imagery.

Second, I examine how media coverage and political commentary on Katrina insinuates its own immanent critique of racial and class divisions in US society. As a major core of the critical theory tradition, immanent critique is a mode of analysis that embraces a critical focus, a non-positivist epistemology and a commitment to praxis, the fusion of theory and practice. Critical theorists suggest that existing social structures, material conditions and societal ideals are the standpoint for critical thinking and examination. As Max Horkheimer (1982 [1937]) put it, 'the critical acceptance of the categories which rule social life contains simultaneously their condemnation'. Modern society exhibits positive and negative features; forces of immense creativity and widespread destruction; movements that support and sustain capitalism and movements that oppose and negate it. Critical tendencies are always immanent and emergent in the world. Conflict and struggle reveal contradictions and irrationalities that, in turn, give rise to social change and transcendence. The Katrina disaster has unleashed new currents of critique, including widespread opposition to federal urban policies, mistrust and suspicion of US foreign policy, and political mobilization by activist groups dedicated to challenging entrenched inequalities. My goal is to use the theoretical and analytical resources of critical theory to illustrate the intersection of race and class in the contemporary USA, and illuminate the bases of struggle and conflict in political debate over Katrina. Finally, by way of conclusion, I examine the current moment, when local people and businesses are attempting to establish bus tours through devastated neighborhoods and produce and sell Katrina souvenirs. These profiteering efforts embrace spectacle to highlight the devastation of the region and build public

support for rebuilding. My analysis of Katrina provides insight into understanding spectacles as containing both oppressive and negative attributes, and progressive and resistant qualities.

### The concept of the spectacle

During the past decades, the concept of the spectacle has become a major focus of theoretical and empirical work on the spread of capitalist relations to media images, culture, religion, tourism, entertainment and other non-commodified realms of society. Diverse scholars argue that spectacles and spectacular images increasingly shape political and social life though they disagree over their power and influence, extent and pervasiveness. Spectacles take a variety of forms and include dramatic public displays and concerts, theatrical presentations, controlled visual productions, high-profile extravaganzas, mega-events and urban spaces. For George Ritzer (2005), what unites diverse spectacles such as theme parks, shopping malls and casinos is that they are all organized to maximize consumption. Douglas Kellner's (2003) book, *Media Spectacle*, suggests that we now live in a culture permeated by the logic of spectacle whereby megaspectacles such as the O. J. Simpson trial, the *X-Files* television series and Monica Lewinsky increasingly define everyday news coverage of events. Several urban scholars have examined how cities around the world are attempting to redefine themselves as sites of fun, leisure and entertainment (Zukin, 1995; Lloyd and Clark, 2001; Chatterton and Hollands, 2003). This scholarly focus reflects a broader interest in the political economy of tourism, the privatization of public spaces and the latest attempts by urban leaders to provide a package of shopping, dining and entertainment within a themed and controlled environment—a development that scholars have called the 'Disneyfication' of urban space (for overviews, see Eeckhout, 2001; Bryman, 2004). Michael Sorkin and colleagues'

examination of cities-as-theme parks, Mark Gottdiener and colleagues' investigation of Las Vegas and John Hannigan's analysis of the rise of 'fantasy city' all focus on how urban leaders are increasingly devoting more and more resources to the development of enchanting spectacles as expedients to urban revitalization (Sorkin, 1992; Hannigan, 1998; Gottdiener *et al.*, 1999).

Much of the scholarship on the proliferation of spectacle has been informed by the work of French theorist Guy Debord and his colleagues in the French avant-garde group, the Situationist International (1957–1972). In the *Society of the Spectacle* and other essays, Debord (1957, 1994) developed the concept of the 'spectacle' to refer to a new stage in the development of capitalism, a shift to an image-saturated society where advertising, entertainment, television and mass media, and other culture industries increasingly define and shape urban life while obscuring the alienating effects of capitalism.<sup>5</sup> In the spectacle, media and consumer society replace lived experience and active social participation. For Debord, the intensity and extensiveness of social and technological change combined with the speed of the changing images, on television and elsewhere, abstracts events from the realm of affective and lived experience, creating a social condition of chronic ephemerality, fragmentation and discontinuity. In this stultifying condition, people observe and passively consume commodity images but do not live as creative and reflexive individuals (Debord, 1994, #157). Such a society is predicated on compliance, capitulation and inactivity. The spectacle corresponds to the contemporary era where social life becomes 'blanketed by substratum after substratum of commodities' (#42) thereby transforming social relations into representations and appearances. The problem, according to Debord, is 'not just that the relationship to commodities is now plain to see' but that 'commodities are now *all* that there is to see; the world we see is the world of the commodity' (#42, emphasis in original). The

totalization of commodification represents the abstraction and mystification of reality, where people become spectators of their own lives, assigned to roles that subject them to a condition of quiescence and atomization. In addition to describing the expansion of the commodity form, Debord's contribution is to theorize the extension of alienation beyond the sphere of production to that of consumption; the obliteration of use-value by exchange-value; and the development of a consumer society where fragmented and dissociated individuals rediscover their unity as 'consumers' within the spectacle (for an overview, see Gotham and Krier, 2007).

Despite his powerful analysis and prescient insights, Debord's work suffers from several problems. First, in many places in the *Society of the Spectacle* the concept of the spectacle appears ambiguous and tautological. To quote one passage:

'The spectacle is essentially tautological, for the simple reason that its means and its ends are identical. It is the sun that never sets on the empire of modern passivity. It covers the entire globe, basking in the perpetual warmth of its own glory.' (#13)

In other passages, Debord refers to the spectacle as the 'alpha and omega' of separation (#25), an 'efficient motor of trance-like behavior' (#17), a 'permanent opium war' (#44) and 'the pseudo-use of life' (#49). Such vague passages obscure the analytical usefulness of the concept and have led critics to charge that sweeping generalizations and unsubstantiated conclusions plague Debord's work. Second, the concept of the spectacle lacks empirical specificity. Debord derided academic work and scholarship and did not appreciate or commit himself to data collection or verification. Indeed, Debord's abstract and totalizing claims, aphoristic writing style, and paucity of empirical research and analysis limit the explanatory power of his work and concept. Other problems with Debord's work include his overemphasis on class exploitation as the locus of domination in modern society; lack

of reference to other forms of oppression including race and gender; undertheorization of human agency; and incomplete specification of interconnections between macro- and micro-levels to explain the spectacle's diverse manifestations (Jay, 1993, p. 431). In addition, Debord's later work tended toward hyperbole and exaggeration insinuating that sinister and conspiratorial forces lay behind the operations and activities of the major institutions of society (Debord, 1988). Moreover, Debord uncritically accepted the orthodox and naive belief that the proletariat would become a 'class-for-itself' and unite to foment revolution and overthrow capitalism. Finally, Debord never analyzed the crisis tendencies of capitalism and thus failed to identify sources of resistance to relations of exploitation (for overviews, see Best and Kellner, 1997, p. 117; Jappe, 1999, pp. 103–104; Gardiner, 2000, pp. 124–125).

Despite the limitations of Debord's work, I argue that an expanded dialogue with the notion of immanent critique would strengthen the theoretical and analytical dimensions of the concept of the spectacle. The category of immanent critique has several distinctive traits. First, critical theorizing begins with analyzing social organization and relations in terms of the dominant norms, values and ideals of society. In the 1930s, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno developed immanent critique as an analytical tool that took the Enlightenment ideals of freedom, equality, justice and individualism as norms of social critique (for overviews, see Jay, 1973; Kellner, 1989, 1993). Immanent critique proceeds by identifying discrepancies between society's dominant values, beliefs and norms and the reality of domination, exploitation and subordination. A critical theory of spectacle and entertainment would, for example, direct analytical focus on the nature of alienated labor, the fetishism of commodities and reification as manifestations of the contradictory nature of capitalism. These categories express the tendency toward the subversion of human needs to the abstract character of the

labor process and the commodification of reality. A critical theory then would draw attention to the role that entertainment plays a form of commodified pleasure that uses advertising and marketing to constitute individuals as consumers and then exploits consumer desires and preferences for profit. The major sectors of entertainment and leisure project images of happiness, abundance and amusement to entice the consumer to purchase pleasurable commodities and services. Yet immanent critique suggests that when one looks beneath the patina of hype, glitz and entertainment images, one can see the palimpsest of labor exploitation and human suffering.

Further, immanent critique seeks to detect societal contradictions that offer possibilities for progressive social change and the realization of societal ideals. It is helpful to view immanent critique as a strategy of social criticism and a theoretical vehicle for promoting progressive social change (Horkheimer, 1993). Karl Marx's (1969 [1845], pp. 13–15) famous Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach that 'philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways ...; the point, however, is to change it' is a major foundational principle of immanent critique. Such a perspective reflects Max Horkheimer's (1982, p. 44) definition that theory is critical to the extent that it seeks to 'liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them'. Directing analytical focus on the incongruity between the professed beliefs and values and the existing reality is a process of negation that helps to clarify the bases of conflicts and struggles. A critical theory of entertainment and spectacle would, for example, focus attention on how media coverage and political commentary on the Katrina disaster supply what Habermas (1975) calls *legitimations*. These are systems of ideas generated by political and economic elites, powerful corporations and political institutions to support and 'mystify' the political system, to make it unclear exactly what is happening. Legitimations obfuscate reality and have a pacifying, repressive and stupefying effect on

people. At the same time, legitimations are not monolithic but are undetermined, conflictual and contested. Critical theory attempts to aid people in general to see the intentions and organized interests involved in producing legitimations.

In sum, critical theory is explanatory, practical and normative. As problem-identifying and problem-solving, critical theory provides an assessment of the problem, delineates clear norms of criticism and offers practical goals for social melioration (Horkheimer, 1982, pp. 21, 249–250). According to David Held (1980, p. 180), immanent critique ‘starts with the conceptual principles and standards of an object, and unfolds their implications and consequences. Then it re-examines and reassesses the object’ in light of these implications and consequences. Critique proceeds, so to speak, ‘from within’. As a result, immanent critique is multi-faceted: it is an analytical methodology for evaluating society that seeks to reveal the bases of contradiction, resistance and opposition. Immanent critique does not outline some abstract utopia but instead uses society’s dominant values and beliefs as a standpoint for promoting social criticism and social change (for overviews, see Antonio, 1981; Benhabib, 1986; Kellner, 1993; Dahms, 1997). Furthermore, immanent critique neither relies on moral judgments nor the postulation of a realm of transcendental values as bases of social criticism. As a strategy of debunking and demystification, immanent critique seeks, according to Guy Debord and Raoul Vaneigem, to ‘expose the appalling contrast between the possible constructions of life and its present poverty’ (quoted in Gardiner, 2000, p. 123). Reconciling the way actually existing social conditions and lived experience correspond to political and economic developments in society remains a challenging concern for critical theorists. Immanent critique is an extremely suggestive and flexible method of criticism for interpreting the mode of mediation between societal ideals and reality that can shed light on the nature of spectacles and

how these, in turn, relate to the broader social whole.

In this paper, I analyze Katrina as a spectacle to the extent that entertainment codes and framing permeate the news coverage, political commentary and government responses to the disaster. Despite much theoretical work on the concept of the spectacle, scholarship lacks specificity in analyzing the diverse manifestations of spectacle and the contradictions of spectacle that frequently exhibit socially critical elements. I argue that spectacles like Katrina are conflictual and contested with potentially subversive elements and emancipatory tendencies. On the one hand, producers of spectacles aim to distract individuals from their own and society’s serious problems using the trivia of tabloid infotainment, distraction and mass seduction. On the other hand, I want to suggest that spectacles are Janus-faced. The conflictual, contradictory and undetermined of spectacles can sometimes allow opposing movements to offer competing interpretations of reality that challenge the status quo. Producers of spectacles are powerful agents of socialization but they are not omnipotent and monolithic. Viewing spectacles as multi-dimensional, polyvalent and open means that the producers of spectacle can never totally constitute individuals as submissive and compliant. This is because the interpretation of spectacular images is an active process of social construction and negotiation in which context, social location and different life experiences can lead to very different decodings and meanings. Against one-sided and reductive conceptions, a critical theory views spectacles as shot through with conflict where powerful actors and organized interests are often put in the difficult and precarious position of defending views that they would prefer people accept as true. My analysis presents a nuanced and complex view of spectacle that challenges Debord’s assumptions that conformity and ‘non-intervention’ are the very principles of the spectacle. Moreover, in opposition to Adorno’s conception of the ‘totally administered society’ and

Marcuse's (1964) critique of the 'one-dimensional man', I eschew a top-down conception of the spectacle as a totality that controls the masses. I examine the contradictions, conflicts and struggles over spectacles.

### The spectacle of Katrina

For years, scholars, researchers, and many engineers and scientists studied, anticipated and predicted the devastation and destruction a major hurricane would bring to the New Orleans metropolitan area (for a critical overview and summary of studies, see Davis, 2005). In early 2001, FEMA listed a major hurricane hitting New Orleans as one of the three most serious threats to the nation. The other two were a terrorist attack in New York City and a large earthquake hitting San Francisco. Over the years, the Army Corps of Engineers, along with the Louisiana Water Resources Research Institute at Louisiana State University (LSU) and Jefferson Parish officials studied and modeled the effects and consequences of a Category 5 hurricane hitting New Orleans. Models routinely forecasted thousands of deaths, property damage and widespread physical destruction. Numerous articles, reports and documentaries also publicized the risk. In December 2001, the *Houston Chronicle* published a story, 'Keeping its Head Above Water: New Orleans Faces Doomsday Scenario' which predicted that a major hurricane striking New Orleans 'would strand 250,000 people or more, and probably kill one of 10 left behind as the city drowned under 20 feet of water'. The *National Geographic Magazine* published a feature titled 'Gone With the Water' in October 2004 that focused on the destruction of the Mississippi delta's wetlands and the effects that this has on the region's ability to withstand a hurricane, in addition to ecological and social impacts. In June 2002, *The New Orleans Times-Picayune* published an award-winning five-part series called 'Washing Away' that discussed the city's vulnerability, the economic and

environmental consequences of a hurricane hitting the city from the south, and explored the major social problems New Orleans could face in the aftermath of a hurricane. In January 2005, the PBS science show *Nova* aired an episode on the hurricane threat to New Orleans, including interviews with New Orleans officials and scientists.<sup>6</sup> In short, the destruction unleashed by Hurricane Katrina and the corresponding racial and class consequences were foreseen years in advance. Political and economic elites were well aware of the catastrophic effects of a major hurricane hitting New Orleans, including the extent of physical damage and human suffering. Reflecting Hartman and Squires (2006), there is no such thing as a natural disaster. Katrina was a human-made catastrophe.

Hurricane Katrina was the nation's first urban disaster spectacle in which, day after day, massive audiences followed the drama in New Orleans on the Weather Channel, CNN, MSNBC, CNBC, Fox News, all of which provided full coverage, hourly news summaries and incessant commentary on the tragic event. There have been many disasters in US history, but never a televised media spectacle of an entire metropolitan area devastated by a major hurricane. Even the destruction of the September 11, 2001 disaster in Manhattan paled in comparison to the 90,000 square miles of Gulf Coast residences and businesses that Katrina wiped out. During September 2005, television talk shows, talk radio, daily press and tabloid exposés of the city made it possible to immerse oneself totally in the disaster. On the one hand, news coverage provided an array of information about the geography, history, economy and culture of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. Watching the negative consequences of the disaster unfold, one could learn about the nature of hurricanes, tornadoes and other horrific weather disasters that affect people all over the world. On the other hand, news and media coverage revealed how the characteristic features of entertainment—for example, ephemerality,

fragmentation, immediacy and intense drama—determined the representation of Katrina as a spectacle. Newspaper and magazines parceled news about Katrina into small and episodic stories, illustrated by graphs, charts and dramatic photographs. National and local news were saturated by incessant ‘photo-ops’, sensationalizing media coverage and individualized human interest stories that were disconnected from a critical analysis of larger socio-economic trends and developments. Here viewers were repeatedly shown a sensational show of provocative facts and high drama contained in a narrative structure that emphasized instantaneity, appearances and personality. Three examples are noteworthy.

First, news reporting about Katrina presented human suffering in highly charged and episodic sound-bites, as when vaunting Geraldo Rivera appeared on Fox News weeping convulsively about the plight of New Orleans residents stranded at the convention center. Why people were at the convention center and how they got there were tangential to Rivera’s melodramatic presentation. The intent and effect was to focus viewer attention on the personality of the presenter thereby marginalizing the experiences of the residents. Second, the military spectacle of National Guard arriving to save the city revealed the inadequacies of disaster-prevention and -relief policy. The belated arrival of the federal government came not in the form of food or water but military hardware and mobilization to restore law and order to New Orleans. Day after day, viewers around the world were presented images of military personnel patrolling the streets of the distressed city. Rather than compassion and humanitarianism for the suffering, US Army commanders spoke in a tone of combat and authoritarian readiness, maintaining that the federal government was there to ‘take back’ the city from the ‘criminal element’ who had fomented violence and lawlessness. Both of these examples reflect Peter Dreier’s (2006) observation that the media compound urban problems by offer-

ing an ‘unrelenting story of social pathology’ of mounting crime, tension and disorder. In the case of New Orleans, few tales of collective efforts by community organizations and other grassroots groups to address hurricane-induced problems made it into the orbit of newsworthy information. Only when such efforts included high drama, conflict and/or death did the major media typically pay attention.

Third, dominant entertainment values—emphasis on appearance and personality rather than substance and content—permeated the culture and everyday operations of FEMA. During the crisis in New Orleans, Sharon Worthy, a press secretary for FEMA sent her boss Michael Brown an e-mail telling him, ‘Please roll up the sleeves of your shirt ... all shirts. Even the President rolled his sleeves to just below the elbow. In this crises [*sic*] and on TV you just need to look more hard working ... roll up the sleeves!’ Even as the hurricane was coming ashore in coastal Mississippi, Brown got a praising e-mail from Cindy Taylor, his deputy director of public affairs. She told him ‘My eyes must certainly be deceiving me. You look fabulous—and I’m not talking the makeup!’ Brown immediately responded that he’d been shopping at Nordstrom’s. ‘Are you proud of me?’ he wrote. ‘Can I quit now? Can I go home?’ Later that day, Brown e-mailed Taylor, public affairs specialist Michael Widomski and Marty Bahamonde, a regional FEMA director who was trapped inside the Louisiana Superdome with yet another comment about his appearance. ‘If you’ll look at my lovely FEMA attire you’ll really vomit’, Brown wrote. ‘I am a [*sic*] fashion god.’ On 31 August, in response to a message detailing how people were being ‘kicked out’ of New Orleans hotels and that food and water had run out at the Superdome, the city’s primary shelter, Brown responded, ‘Thanks for the update. Anything specific I need to do or tweak?’<sup>7</sup> As these e-mails reveal, FEMA officials were more interested in presenting a favorable image than aggressively responding to the hurricane

disaster. Entertaining appearance and personality over road disaster response and federal officials (unsuccessfully) struggled to present an image of rationalized and controlled danger mitigation.

The above examples intimate the Katrina spectacle as contested terrain and suggest a crisis of legitimacy in the Bush Administration, especially its post-September 11 domestic policy of diverting resources away from social programs to fund anti-terrorism campaigns. The point is not that the media spectacle and military spectacle of Katrina helped to advance the sale of commodities, enhanced consumption or operated to reinforce political legitimacy. Far from it, the Katrina spectacle articulated submerged fears about risk, safety and security in an age when the federal government is withdrawing resources for disaster-prevention and -relief.<sup>8</sup> Broadly, Katrina raised disquieting questions concerning whether US cities are more 'insecure' in the post-September 11 era despite huge amounts of monies allocated to prevent terrorist attacks. Against views of spectacle as a monolithic entity that dupes the masses, the examples above suggest that spectacles can reveal contradictions, focus and project societal discontent, and articulate negative views of government policy. Hurricane Katrina unleashed new political fissures and incited debates worldwide over whether US cities are now less safe from natural disasters, terrorist attacks or major epidemics. The passage of anti-terrorism legislation and the establishment of the Department of Homeland Security have created a situation where cities are forced to expend greater resources to deal with 'security' issues. Yet Katrina shows that US cities are more insecure than ever. Indeed, as Stephen Graham (2005) has suggested:

'the tragedy has remorselessly exposed some of the darker sides of metropolitan USA in the Bush era. It has acted as a window revealing how decades of Federal urban disinvestment, exurbanization and White Flight have helped leave large swathes of the

central cores of US cities demonised, neglected and increasingly abandoned.'

### Race, class and Katrina

Over the years, urban scholars have suggested that the logic of spectacle increasingly pervades urban reality and is colonizing everyday life by permeating work activities, shopping malls, sports, religion and entertainment. In his book *Media Spectacle*, Douglas Kellner (2003, p. xi) suggests that 'the construction of media spectacle in every realm of culture [is] one of the defining characteristics of contemporary culture and society'. For Kellner, the proliferation of spectacle reflects the extension of the commodity form to previously non-commodified realms of society, including consumption, leisure and culture. In his Weberian interpretation of the rise of the 'new means of consumption', George Ritzer (2005, p. 94) argues that spectacles are 'used to overcome the liabilities, especially the disenchantment, associated with highly rationalized system'. Both Kellner and Ritzer make the point that the spectacle is a dual process of commodification and rationalization that obscures relations of domination and conceals power relations. While these points are important, it is also necessary to analyze spectacles in a dialectical fashion that illuminates the contradictions and conflictual elements of spectacles. Spectacles cannot totally hide the nature of exploitation and power dynamics in modern society because they are anchored within and express the discordant and antagonistic relations that constitute modern capitalism. Here I understand spectacles as part of a double-edged socio-political process: they encompass the historical process of capitalist development and the heterogeneous, politically contested interpretations of that ostensibly conflictual process. Thus, spectacles display the most divisive social conflicts and inequalities and, more important, reveal and make transparent the intensely contradictory

fragmentation and polarization of modern urban society.

The spectacle of Katrina provides insight into intersections of race and class in US cities and the ways in which these inequalities became politicized and focal points of media debate and contention. New Orleans has long been known as a city with dramatic and troubling disparities. In 1960, the urban population peaked at 640,000 residents and declined in every decade thereafter. Between 1970 and 2000, the city lost a total of 109,000 people, 18 percent of its population. Since 2000, the city of New Orleans has lost 24,000 residents while metropolitan population growth has stagnated. Over the decades, weak job growth and the loss of jobs in the chemical and petroleum industries have depressed the metropolitan economic base and contributed to an 18 percent poverty rate in 2000, the sixth poorest of the 100 largest metropolitan areas in the nation. In addition, in 2000, New Orleans ranked as one of the nation's poorest metropolitan areas with a median household income of \$35,317, fourth from the bottom out of the 100 largest metropolitan income rankings. The region's class inequalities interlock with racial inequalities. In 1960, whites made up 62.6 percent of the city's population and blacks were 37.2 percent. As of the 2000 census, blacks made up 66.7 percent of the city's population and whites were 26.6 percent. In 2005, blacks made up 84 percent of the city's poor population with a high percentage living in segregated neighborhoods. According to the Brookings Institution (2005), before Katrina, 43 percent of poor blacks in New Orleans lived in extreme poverty (census tracts with at least 40 percent of the population living below the federal poverty levels). In 2000, black median household income in the city was almost half the amount of white median income, \$21,461 as contrasted to \$40,390; black poverty rate was more than three times higher than the white poverty rate, 35 percent compared to 11 percent; and poor blacks were almost four times as likely to

live in areas with extreme poverty, 43 percent of poor blacks lived in concentrated poverty while only 11 percent of poor whites did (Brookings Institution, 2005). As a result, by the time Katrina came ashore, New Orleans had become a place of glaring racial and class inequalities, a place where poor African Americans were segregated and spatially isolated from the rest of the population.

Media coverage and political commentary on Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath reveal the internal contradictions and multiple logics of spectacle. Several examples are noteworthy. First, Katrina provided an explosive class and race spectacle in which the enduring problems of social inequality, disinvestment and poverty were made visible and dramatized before a global audience. Within days of the storm's pounding of the Gulf Coast, websites and news articles noted that many of the victims were poor minorities living in New Orleans. Many websites and researchers wrote eloquent and well-thought out articles that situated the city's race and class inequalities within a larger socio-historical context of entrenched racial discrimination, housing segregation and class exploitation. In early September 2005, the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) organized a web forum with authors posting short essays that 'extended beyond "natural disaster," "engineering failures," "cronyism" or other categories of interpretation that do not directly examine the underlying issues—political, social and economic—laid bare by the events surrounding Katrina' (SSRC, 2005). Other organizations including the National Low Income Housing Coalition, the Center for American Progress and Alternet.com, among others published critical commentary on the impact of Katrina that reached worldwide audiences.<sup>9</sup> This progressive uprising represents one of the contradictions of spectacle, especially in an age where technology allows, but does not always encourage, informational activism through websites, alternative news outlets and blogs.

Second, rather than focus on the mammoth problem of human suffering, early mainstream media coverage of New Orleans obsessed on racial images and mostly unverified stories of rampant violence, rape, crime and looting supposedly perpetrated by African Americans. Indeed, the color of looting was black. Yahoo News published a photo with one man wading through flood waters carrying bread and soda. In another photograph, two people were wading through water with a black bag of items. What garnered attention from viewers were the different descriptions of the photographs. In the first photograph, the person, who is African American, was described as 'looting a grocery store'. In the second photograph, the two people, who were white, were described as 'finding' the items. The photos generated a whirlwind of blog entries and charges that the captions were racially discriminatory and biased.<sup>10</sup> On the one hand, media coverage contributed to building a racialized image of looting with headlines announcing 'The Looting Instinct' (*Boston Globe*, 4 September 2005, p. E11) and 'Thugs Rein of Terror' (*New York Daily News*, 4 September 2005, p. 7). On the one hand, progressives attacked the media's racialization of the looters as the Katrina spectacle played out globally through the mainstream media. To quote Douglas Kellner (2003, p. 101) who analyzes the role of media spectacle in society, the Katrina spectacle

'revealed the mainstream media to be bankrupt in relation to traditional journalistic priorities. It was almost as if the mainstream had given up real investigative reporting, or providing context and insights, in favor of merely transmitting images of media events and "breaking news."'

After a month of melodrama and cheap sensationalizing, reporters from four news outlets—the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), the British *Guardian* newspaper, the Associated Press and the *Chicago Tribune*—found no credible evidence of

mass looting, or mass murders, rape or marauding gangs in the city. 'The news media wrote those reports and I cannot tell you where they came from', according to Capt. Marlon Defillo of the New Orleans Police Department. 'We've not received an official report from anyone regarding any sexual assault that may have occurred ... we haven't received any official coroners' reports regarding any homicides', as Defillo told BBC news.<sup>11</sup>

Third, differential treatment of black and white New Orleanians by the media played into a larger process of stigmatization that focused public attention on residents themselves as the cause of the problems they were forced to endure. Early, evacuees from the city insisted that they were 'American citizens' and not 'refugees', a term usually reserved for non-members and non-citizens of a particular country. In the days immediately following the hurricane, when the city began to flood, tens of thousands of poor residents asked their leaders for food, water and shelter. The local, state and federal governments refused to deliver these basic resources and, in turn, castigated and insulted residents for not leaving their home when they were told. Despite the fact that most poor, sick and elderly residents stayed because they had no means to escape, on 1 September, Michael Chertoff, Secretary of Homeland Security, asserted that 'the critical thing was to get people out of [New Orleans] before the disaster. Some people chose to not obey that order. That was a mistake on their part.' The next day, in a similar vein, FEMA Director Michael Brown told CNN:

'... I think the death toll may go into the thousands. And unfortunately, that's going to be attributable a lot to people who did not heed the evacuation warnings. And I don't make judgments about why people choose not to evacuate. But you know, there was a mandatory evacuation of New Orleans. And to find people still there is just heart-wrenching to me because the mayor did everything he could to get them out of there.'<sup>12</sup>

Former First Lady Barbara Bush, similarly reflected the class and racial biases underlying the government's response to the disaster. During a tour of evacuation facilities in Texas, Mrs Bush told a reporter, 'Everyone is so overwhelmed by the hospitality. And so many people in the arena here, you know, were underprivileged anyway, so this, this is working very well for them.' Such myopic remarks belie the fact that in the evacuation facilities, as reported by John Nichols, 'cots [are] crammed side-by-side in a huge stadium where the lights never go out and the sound of sobbing children never completely ceases'.<sup>13</sup>

The spectacle of stigmatization, racialized images of looting and media coverage of distraught African Americans on rooftops of homes crying for help inevitably made the Katrina disaster an urban race problem, which ultimately revealed intense divisions along color lines. As surveys revealed, members of different races interpreted the Katrina spectacle in dramatically opposed ways. Data from a September poll by the Pew Research Center noted that 85 percent of African American and 63 percent of whites believed that President Bush did not do 'all he could to get relief efforts going quickly'.<sup>14</sup> Two polls from later in the month showed huge racial differences in perceptions of Hurricane Katrina. A Gallup/CNN/USA Today poll showed 6 in 10 blacks agreed that class and color were definitely a factor in the government's slow relief effort while only 1 in 8 whites shared that view.<sup>15</sup> An ABC News/Washington Post poll also found racial disparities, with majorities of whites saying the problems were not an indication of broader racial inequality; although majorities of blacks disagreed.<sup>16</sup> These divided opinions fueled accusations such as those from hip-hop artist Kanye West that 'George Bush doesn't care about black people', and that America is set up 'to help the poor, the black people, the less well-off as slow as possible' (quoted in Frymer *et al.*, 2005). Reinforcing West's criticism, the Pew poll found that more than two-thirds of blacks (66 percent)

agreed that the government response to Katrina would have been faster if 'most of the victims had been white', compared to only 17 percent of whites.

The racialization of the Katrina disaster and the differing survey results described above provide a counter to the argument that spectacles are univocal mechanisms for furthering commodification and pacifying people through the ideology of consumption and entertainment. People are not simply 'spectators' or 'viewers' of spectacles. They are active and reflexive beings who participate in the social construction of reality including meanings and interpretations of spectacle. Reflecting Henri Lefebvre (1991, p. 222), spectacles are sites of struggle where powerful economic and political interests are often forced to defend what they would prefer to have taken for granted. In this conception, spectacles are 'a *horizon of meaning*: a specific or indefinite multiplicity of meanings, a shifting hierarchy in which one, now another meaning comes momentarily to the fore' (emphasis in original). While the disparate responses to Katrina by blacks and whites were in part constructed through media framing and representations, which interpretations viewers appropriated and how they defined the situation depended on their own race, class and other social locations. Like media coverage of other spectacles, television elevated the significance of particular events and actions, producing a racialized spectacle that framed the issues, defined what was important and helped constitute the reality of what was happening in New Orleans.

In short, Katrina put on display the growing impoverishment of poor African Americans living in US cities and revealed that racial and class divisions in the USA are deeply rooted and consequential. Media coverage and political commentary on Katrina transformed race and class divisions into spectacles permeated with images of an on-the-street 'reality' of storm victims who were presented through the mainstream media as responsible for their own plight.

Mainstream newspaper and television coverage of Katrina thus perpetuated a deceptive sense of urban 'reality' from below, ignoring the real material, structural forces of capitalist inequality that urbanized poverty and constrained the life changes for the individuals stranded in New Orleans. As the ordeal unfolded, opposition journalists and progressive critics such as Mike Davis (2005) and Douglas Kellner (2005) attempted to connect what was happening in New Orleans to the structural features of US political economy and public policy, including the decades-long federal effort to redistribute wealth from the poor to the rich, dismantle the welfare state, and recent Bush Administration tax cuts for the wealthy that have provided ideological cover to justify further disinvestment in disaster preparedness and environmental protection. The spectacular coverage of the Katrina disaster provided an opening for dissident groups and organized interests to comment on some of the most frightening aspects of government policy and reform. These include proliferating threats to the natural environment, the erosion of the safety net and public policy support system, and the inability of government to respond to and manage risk and security. Indeed, government response to and media coverage of Katrina exacerbated long simmering fears of security and insecurity and aggravated domestic and international conflicts over US public policy, war and the foreign intervention.

### **Immanent critique and the spectacularization of disaster**

Critical theorists use immanent critique not only as a strategy of critical analysis but also as a tool for clarifying the bases of collective struggles, conflicts and contradictions that offer possibilities for social change. Just as modern society contains both repressive and emancipatory qualities, urban disasters deepen social inequalities as well as provide a political venue for debate and challenge. The

political debate and global media coverage of Katrina's devastation, for example, has opened up new opportunities for critical activity, for challenging entrenched inequalities.<sup>17</sup> In this final section, I want to examine recent efforts to produce Katrina souvenirs and establish bus tours through devastated neighborhoods, a form of disaster tourism. I argue that the commodification process inherent in these profiteering activities insinuates its own immanent critique of federal policy and overall government response to the New Orleans disaster. Such a view eschews a monolithic conception of commodification to explore how people appropriate commodity images to challenge the status quo. For decades, scholars have derided commodity spectacles for their reifying, oppressive and alienating qualities.<sup>18</sup> In Debord's (1994) work, spectacles are ideological extensions of the culture industry that disempower the masses and undermine the potential for democratically organized and political active public spheres. Yet it is important to recognize that spectacles cannot completely reinforce and control the thought and behavior of people because they are embedded within the contradictions inherent in capitalism. Moreover, people are not simply passive recipients of accepted meanings of entertainment and spectacle produced by political and economic elites, advertisers and marketers, and entertainment corporations. They are actively involved in the production of meaning and produce novel meanings, some that are unforeseen by powerful corporate interests. Indeed, the consciousness of people is duplicitous and is marked by mistrust, suspicion and disbelief. All commodities, including places, have symbolic and cultural values, in addition to instrumental exchange-values. While commodification is an extra-local process, the effect and meaning of commodification are expressed at the local level, where particular conflicts and struggles actually occur.

Recent months have witnessed the commodification of urban disaster in the form of bus tours and the production of

Katrina souvenirs and other paraphernalia. Beginning in January 2006, Gray Line New Orleans Bus Tours began offering its 'Hurricane Katrina: America's Worst Catastrophe!' tour through devastated neighborhoods. The bus tour aims to present destroyed neighborhoods as spectacular and entertaining sites to visit. Like other tours and place marketing efforts, Gray Line invests ordinary places with the status of tourist attractions that have historical and cultural significance thereby mobilizing travelers to visit them. In normal and ordinary times, tourists would not flow into otherwise mundane neighborhoods, especially neighborhoods like the Gentilly or Lakeview areas. Gray Line bus tours represents the commodification of viewing neighborhood devastation, restricts access to ability to pay and signifies the cultivation of new opportunities for profiting from tragic events. New Orleans neighborhoods affected by Katrina are remade into abstract representations, with viewers constituted as passive consumers and disaster constructed as a consumable spectacle. What is important is that the constitution of neighborhoods as tourist sites reflects conscious and organized efforts to capitalize on the tourist's desire for the spectacular, extraordinary and the unusual. Disaster tourism depends on the commodification of leisure and the transformation of tragic events into what Urry (1995, p. 132, 2002) calls objects of the 'tourist gaze' where 'places are chosen to be gazed upon because there is anticipation, especially through day-dreaming and fantasy, of intense pleasures, either on a different scale or involving different sense from those customarily encountered'. Reflecting Fainstein and Judd (1999, p. 14), the tourist's gaze 'composes the urban landscape into a collage of frozen images' that are marketed and interpreted for tourists.

The bus tour complements other commodity efforts to produce Katrina T-shirts, buttons and other hurricane souvenirs, all of which feed into a larger process of the spectacularization of disaster. Over the last few months, e-Bay has established a site for

selling Katrina souvenirs, and French Quarter merchants and other small vendors have set up shop along Highway 49 in Louisiana offering travelers a chance to get T-shirts and other products about the catastrophe. Some T-shirts proclaim the wearer a 'Certified Hurricane Veteran'. Others state, 'I survived the big one Hurricane Katrina'. Yet not all people are pleased or amused with these developments. 'It's disgusting', said Mary Ann Martino, whose home was badly damaged and is providing shelter for a dozen friends who also lost their homes. 'People are making money off what we've been through.'<sup>19</sup> The important point is that the purchase of a bus tour or souvenir is a signifier, an indicator that one has achieved (purchased) the Katrina experience, and intimates the disaster as a commodity. Businesses that produce Katrina tours and souvenirs package unfamiliar and unconventional signs, sights and objects within a commodified system that attempts to construct and then satisfy demand for disaster tourist experiences. According to Britton (1991, p. 465), 'tourists are the "armies of semiotics" for whom the identification and collection of signs are "proof" that experiences have been realized'. In this respect, the marketing of disaster 'experiences' becomes an overt and intentional avenue of capitalist accumulation with tie-ins with the buying and selling of other New Orleans products.

The production of bus tours and Katrina souvenirs provides insight into the critical tendencies and potentially emancipatory quality of spectacles. Disaster tourism represents a subtle form of immanent critique to build global awareness of New Orleans's plight, appeal to peoples' empathy and generate public support to rebuild the city. Bus tours use spectacle to showcase physical destruction to transmit information, provide background and context, and expose people to the devastation of urban and suburban neighborhoods. According to Greg Hoffman, vice president and general manager of Gray Line New Orleans, 'We just want to get the point across to the visitors, "This is

what happened, it's severe, it's going to take a while, and we need help from the federal government to rebuild." Initially, Hoffman thought a disaster tour would be in poor taste. Hoffman changed his mind after several US senators toured the devastation in November 2005 and stepped off the tour bus with new pledges of support for rebuilding New Orleans. 'What made me change was the fact that many people from other states in Washington just were not supportive of the rebuilding effort until they came down here themselves and saw what happened', according to Hoffman. 'You've got to see it to believe it.'<sup>20</sup> This example suggests that spectacles are multidimensional and contain progressive qualities. In the case of Katrina T-shirts, businesses appropriate critical slogans such as 'Make Levees, Not War', 'FEMA Sucks', 'Forget Iraq: Rebuild At Home', 'Hey George! Why Don't You Go Wait at the Convention Center', to deride the federal response and the perceived apathy and slow pace of rebuilding.<sup>21</sup> T-shirts and other souvenirs are implicit social protest and critique that exposes government policy as undemocratic and unjust. As an effort to bring critical awareness to people's struggles and conflicts, the production and consumption of Katrina tours and souvenirs uses the language and image of entertainment and spectacle to reveal the reality of physical destruction and human suffering. The point is neither to celebrate these actions as manifestations of an embryonic revolutionary movement nor to denigrate them as superficial and unreflective expressions of the culture industry.

## Conclusion

My analysis of Hurricane Katrina sheds light on the contradictory and paradoxical nature of presenting tragic events as spectacles. As I have pointed out, there are certainly negative aspects of spectacles that strengthen elite political and economic control over groups and individuals, and marginalize democratic

participation. Spectacles consist of hegemonic ideologies and spectacular images—for example, promotional rhetoric, corporate advertising and dramatic displays—that seek to distract and seduce people using the mechanisms of leisure, consumption and entertainment. As the example of Katrina shows, political and economic elites and powerful organizations model disasters as a form of amusement where tragic events are abstracted from the reality of human loss and suffering, and transformed into images that viewers passively consume. Yet I have also suggested that there are possibilities for new expressions of opposition and resistance against social exclusion. Katrina has exposed long festering social inequalities and galvanized progressive movements dedicated to challenging relations of domination and subordination. The intent of most spectacles is to pacify people, ferment political indifference and stimulate consumption. I have attempted to show, however, that spectacles have a Janus-faced quality. They have the potential for creative encounters and enabling social practices. They can also produce a host of unforeseen and irrational consequences, including periodic manifestations of social revolt. Furthermore, there is a utopian expression in media spectacles, as well as the possibility for increased domination by political and economic forces.

One of the advantages of critical theory is that it embraces categories and explanatory frameworks that analyze the ways that inequality and exploitation are built into the structure and operation of spectacles. At the same time, a critical theory recognizes that spectacles contain emancipatory as well as oppressive qualities. Critical theory is thus political, relating theory to practice and suggesting possibilities for progressive social change (Antonio, 1981). Critical theory has a practical interest in gaining knowledge about the social world. Yet critical theory is self-reflective and oriented toward both understanding and explanation. In the later case, explanation does not just refer to identifying causes but clarify the bases of social struggles

and conflicts, overcoming relations of domination and subordination, and promoting social transformation. Karl Marx's definition of critical theory as 'the self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age' suggests that there is a clear political difference between critical and non-critical theories (quoted in Fraser, 1989, p. 31). Critical theory frames its research program and conceptual framework with an eye toward clarifying the causes and consequences of inequality and revealing the operations of power networks and their consequences. Following this concern, I have attempted to critically probe the social relations underlying the production of Katrina-as-spectacle, identify the key actors and organized interests involved in the media framings of the disaster, and interrogate and explain the consequences of the actions of powerful groups. Many social theories do not necessarily embrace a clear and explicit normative dimension, whereas critical theory does, through a notion of immanent critique that highlights the incongruity between the societal beliefs and actual reality.

Finally, my empirical analysis of Katrina helps in the articulation of critical theory as an explanatory, practical and normative mode of social inquiry. Today, critical theory is at a cross roads. On the one hand, a variety of types of critical theories, including modernist, postmodernist and feminist versions suggest the relevance and popularity of normative perspectives that provide critical standards to evaluate the utility of different theoretical and methodological approaches (Fraser, 1989; Kellner, 1993; Agger, 1994, 1998; Calhoun, 1995; Dahms, 1997). Broad-based intellectual efforts are now taking place among Marxists, feminist scholars, critical race theorists and proponents of post-colonial criticism to diversify the meaning of immanent critique and expand its analytical breadth and explanatory power. On the other hand, critical theory faces a situation of increased fragmentation, nihilism and academicization that threatens to marginalize skeptical theorizing,

critical reflexivity and radical politics. In addition, critical theorists are often accused of being weak when it comes to detailed and rigorous analysis. In this paper, I have suggested that the notion of immanent critique not only offers a useful starting point for rigorous sociological research but can illuminate the bases of social and political struggles taking place in society. Rather than embracing the conventional view that media, entertainment and spectacle generate a 'false consciousness' that disempowers the masses, we should direct our attention to analyzing processes of demystification, debunking and de-pacification as elements of an ongoing struggle by people to experience social life as reflexive and acting subjects. What is distinctive about critical theory is the attempt to provide coherent and scientific explanations of historical changes, and to help people understand their lives in a constantly changing world, where as Marx and Engels (1969 [1848], pp. 98–137) tell us, 'everything is pregnant with its contradictory' and 'all that is sold melts into air'. Unlike non-critical theories, critical theories embrace a normative and practical dimension that compels us to consider how we might build more democratic and just societies. The category of immanent critique is promising because it provides a critical and normative reference frame for systematically examining complex social developments while cutting through the ideologies and legitimations that other theories often reflect or reinforce.

## Notes

- 1 Risk Management Systems placed total Katrina-related economic losses in the neighborhood of \$125 billion (available at: [www.rms.com/NewsPresws/PR\\_090205\\_HUKatrina\\_insured\\_update.asp](http://www.rms.com/NewsPresws/PR_090205_HUKatrina_insured_update.asp) (accessed 9 September 2005)). The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP) estimated the cost of Katrina to be \$150 billion (available at: 'Katrina and the Federal Budget', [www.cbpp.org/pubs/katrina.htm](http://www.cbpp.org/pubs/katrina.htm) [accessed 15 November 2005]).

- 2 Figures come from Brookings Institution (2005, pp. 14–15).
- 3 Kirka, Danica (31 August 2005) 'Katrina prompts global support for victims', Associated Press Release, News.Yahoo.com (accessed 7 September 2005).
- 4 Critical theory refers to a broad range of critical theoretical work that is inspired by Karl Marx, the Frankfurt School theorists and the diverse writings of Georg Lukacs, Antonio Gramsci, Henri Lefebvre and Guy Debord, among others. While some theorists equate critical theory with the Frankfurt School tradition, I believe it is helpful to view critical theory as an amalgam of diverse analytical orientations that embrace different assumptions and methods to explain the historical process of capitalist development. Jay (1973), Antonio (1981), Benhabib (1986), Wellmer (1971), Kellner (1989), Wiggershaus (1994), Dahms (1997) and Agger (1998) note the highly diverse works of critical theorists and the variety of thinkers they engage. Critical theory is plural, multidimensional and multidisciplinary, combining perspectives from political economy, sociology, cultural theory, philosophy, anthropology and history. Critical theory includes modernist, postmodernist and feminist versions (for overviews, see Fraser, 1989; Agger, 1994; Calhoun, 1995).
- 5 Originally published in France in 1967, *Society of the Spectacle* contains nine chapters organized into 221 theses composed in an aphoristic style. The book contains no page numbers and the citations to the text that I use refer to the numbered theses. For many years, the book was only available in English published by Black and Red (Detroit, 1970). A new edition appeared in 1983 and a new translation in 1994. I refer to the 1994 translation by Donald Nicholson-Smith.
- 6 Berger, Eric (1 December 2001) 'Keeping its head above water: New Orleans faces doomsday scenario', *Houston Chronicle*; Bourne, Joe K. (October 2004) 'Gone with the wind', *National Geographic Magazine* (<http://205.188.130.53/ngm/0410/feature5/> (accessed 24 November 2005)); 'Washing away' (23–27 June 2002) *New Orleans Times-Picayune* ([www.nola.com/washingaway/](http://www.nola.com/washingaway/) (accessed 24 November 2005)); Public Broadcasting Service. NOVA. 'The storm that drowned a city' ([www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/orleans/](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/orleans/) (accessed 24 November 2005)).
- 7 DeBerry, Jarvis (4 November 2005) 'FEMA chief primped as a city sank', *New Orleans Times-Picayune*.
- 8 See Dreier (2006) for an overview and critical assessment of the urban consequences of federal reductions in funding for levee protection and disaster-prevention.
- 9 See National Low Income Housing Coalition, 'Housing policy responses to Hurricane Katrina' ([www.nlihc.org/news/091305katrina.html](http://www.nlihc.org/news/091305katrina.html) (accessed 30 October 2005)); American Prospect, 'Katrina progressive policy and action guide' ([www.movingideas.org/content/en/katrina\\_policy\\_action.htm](http://www.movingideas.org/content/en/katrina_policy_action.htm) (accessed 30 October 2005)); Flournoy, Alyson and Verchick, Robert R. M. (11 October 2005) 'The unnatural disaster of Katrina', Center for American Progress ([www.americanprogress.org/site/](http://www.americanprogress.org/site/) (accessed 30 October 2005)); see also collections of short pieces on Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath published online by Altnet.com ([www.altnet.org/search.php?term=Katrina](http://www.altnet.org/search.php?term=Katrina) (accessed 3 November 2005)).
- 10 Railli, Tania (5 September 2005) 'Who's a looter? In storm's aftermath, pictures kick up a different kind of tempest', *New York Times*.
- 11 Smith-Spark, Laura (29 September 2005) 'New Orleans violence "overstated"', BBC News Release.
- 12 Quotes from Chertoff and Brown were reported by Reuters and appear in 'Cheney quip adds fuel to Katrina politics', *Raw Story* ([http://rawstory.com/news/2005/They\\_just\\_dont\\_get\\_it\\_do\\_t\\_0910.html](http://rawstory.com/news/2005/They_just_dont_get_it_do_t_0910.html) (accessed 30 October 2005)). See also 'Chaotic scene at convention center: NBC photojournalist describes horrific situation in New Orleans', MSNBC, 1 September 2005 ([www.msnbc.msn.com/id/9160710](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/9160710) (accessed 30 October 2005)).
- 13 Nichols, John (6 September 2005) 'Barbara Bush: it's good enough for the poor', *The Nation* ([www.thenation.com/blogs/thebeat?pid=20080](http://www.thenation.com/blogs/thebeat?pid=20080) (accessed 30 October 2005)).
- 14 Pew Research Center (8 September 2005) 'Two-in-three critical of Bush's relief efforts: huge racial divide over Katrina and its consequences' (<http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=255> (accessed 30 October 2005)).
- 15 'Reaction to Katrina split on racial lines: more blacks view race as factor in federal response', 13 September 2005 ([www.cnn.com/2005/US/09/12/katrina.race.poll/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2005/US/09/12/katrina.race.poll/index.html) (accessed 30 October 2005)).
- 16 Langer, Gary (12 September 2005) 'Bush approval drops: ABC new poll finds that Katrina response ratings worsen', ABC News (<http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/PollVault/story?id=1117357> (accessed 30 October 2005)).
- 17 Dozens of blogs, listservs and electronic forums have covered the Katrina disaster and offered critical commentary and perspective. For information on civil rights and labor activism and Katrina, see US Human Rights Network ([www.ushrnetwork.org/](http://www.ushrnetwork.org/)); LaborNet

- ([www.labornet.org/index.html](http://www.labornet.org/index.html)); Labor Blog ([www.nathannewman.org/laborblog/](http://www.nathannewman.org/laborblog/)); for information on housing activism and Katrina, see National Low Income Housing Coalition, 'Housing policy responses to Hurricane Katrina' ([www.nlihc.org/news/091305katrina.html](http://www.nlihc.org/news/091305katrina.html)); American Prospect, 'Katrina progressive policy and action guide' ([www.movingideas.org/content/en/katrina\\_policy\\_action.htm](http://www.movingideas.org/content/en/katrina_policy_action.htm)); see *Flow*, an electronic journal, for exchanges on social injustice (<http://jot.communication.utexas.edu/flow/>); Alternet Blogs ([www.alternet.org/blogs/](http://www.alternet.org/blogs/)); Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP) ([www.cbpp.org/pubs/katrina.htm](http://www.cbpp.org/pubs/katrina.htm)); for information on mobilization of local groups in New Orleans, see [www.nola.com/](http://www.nola.com/)
- 18 There is a vast literature on the negative aspects of spectacles, including accounts that theorize spectacles as part of the subordination of human beings to objects (including representations, images and signs) they create (e.g. see Boorstin, 1962; Marcuse, 1964, pp. 159–200; Lefebvre, 1984 [1971], pp. 53–54, 56, 94, 116, 1991 [1958], pp. 29, 32, 35; Debord, 1994, among many others).
  - 19 Reeves, Jay (29 September 2005) 'Katrina T-shirts amid rubble', Associated Press Release.
  - 20 Mowbray, Rebecca (9 December 2005) 'Tour to present storm's impact; Lakeview, Gentilly on buses route', *New Orleans Times-Picayune*.
  - 21 For Hurricane Katrina T-shirts, see [www.cafepress.com/hurricanewear/800465](http://www.cafepress.com/hurricanewear/800465) (accessed 12 December 2005).

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