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# HOW TO PLAN A DISASTER: POLITICS, NATURE, AND HURRICANE KATRINA

Camden Burd

**Andy Horowitz**, *Katrina: A History, 1915–2015*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020. 296 pp. Photos, maps, notes, and index. \$35.00.

The Atlantic Hurricane season lasts only a few months. Spanning from early summer through autumn, the season is limited by varying environmental conditions. Winds crossing over the African continent move westward, passing over the seasonally warm waters of the Atlantic Ocean. As the water evaporates and rises into the atmosphere, it cools and condenses to form large clouds that continue to billow across the Atlantic basin. The combination of cold air at the top of clouds and the warm, humid air below creates an unstable cloud mass, in which the settling cold air descends only to be sucked up again in a swirling, thunderous storm. The vortex expands; wind speeds increase; torrential rains ensue. The hurricane is seemingly unstoppable—until it hits a landmass where the storm loses its warm, watery fuel.

Before its demise, however, a hurricane will often leave its mark. The torrential rain, whipping wind, and massive swells can remake an entire landscape in just a few hours. This seasonal pattern is something of a meteorological ritual for those who have built their lives amid the well-established pattern of the Atlantic hurricane season. They know—are convinced—that by the winter months, the equatorial waters will have cooled, bringing an end to the hurricane season and providing momentary respite from the storm’s massive power.

The timeframe for a disaster, however, is different. There is no such thing as a catastrophe season. No calendar can neatly mark the beginning and end of a calamity. This fact is made evident in Andy Horowitz’s *Katrina: A History, 1915–2015*—a text that argues that in order to understand the history of a disaster, one must take into account a variety of factors including economic forces, political decisions, and social bias. “I begin the story of Katrina in 1915 in order to pursue a different idea,” he notes, “that disasters come from within” (p. 3). Rather than focus his attention on the immediate impacts of one of the nation’s most historically significant hurricanes, he takes readers back nearly a century before the storm crashed into the southern coast of Louisiana. This temporal sweep, he argues, helps us to reimagine disasters

as a culmination of various contingencies over a much longer period of time. "Seeing disasters in history, and as history, demonstrates that the places we live, and the disasters that imperil them, are at once artifacts of state policy, cultural imagination, economic order, and environmental possibility" (p. 3). The history of Katrina is not a story of environmental anomaly or even an act of God, as some contemporary politicians argue. Instead, Horowitz demonstrates that the "disaster" that developed around Hurricane Katrina was designed by a series of separate but interrelated economic and political decisions.

Horowitz divides the monograph into two sections, before and after Katrina. This architecture is meant to "emphasize that it is what happened before and after the levee failure after the levee failures that gave Katrina its significance" (p. 8). In the first section, the author finds the origins of the 2005 disaster in the political aftermath of a 1915 hurricane. After disastrous flooding and the failure of the nearby levees, politicians sought new ways to control floods. The Louisiana state legislature pursued the creation of spillways by destroying levees that, until the 1915 flood, were seen as the preferred method to control the river and open lands for economic development. The new flood lands, called "waste weirs," came under control of the state of Louisiana after levee boards bought out—or forced out—longtime residents who now lived in the spillways.

After a short-lived boom, the state's fur industry gave away to a new commodity that would define Louisiana for the remainder the 20th century—oil. The discovery of oil, however, created a conflict of environmental interests for Louisiana politicians. "The same marshes that had been designated waste weirs, suitable for sacrifice during times of flood, were now among the most coveted pieces of real estate in the South" (p. 30). By choosing to drain the weirs in search of oil, politicians favored economic development over a reliable form of flood control.

The new era of oil transformed politics and the unquestioned leader of this new Louisiana was Leander Perez—a crooked, self-serving, white supremacist with unjust influence throughout the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. In a series of creative legislative moves, Perez gave himself oversight of the levee boards, sold mineral leases to his shell company (incorporated in Delaware), and began subleasing the same lands to oil companies. He couched his corruption in the popular rhetoric of the post-war south, "states' rights." A vocal Dixiecrat whose politics blended support for local control for natural resources, racial segregation, and an expanded welfare system for white Louisianians, Perez maintained support in the state, especially in the southern parishes where oil deposits were richest. Canals crisscrossed Perez's subleased lands and the subsequent installation of pumps drained the swamps. The development of Louisiana's oil fields laid the key foundations of the 2005 disaster. Without

regular flooding, the Mississippi River deposited soil sediments directly into the Gulf of Mexico, bypassing usual flood plains. Louisiana began to sink.

For many observers, none of this seemed to be a problem. In fact, white Louisianians understood this as progress. It was white Louisianians who mostly benefited from the infusion of oil-industry jobs and the federal program subsidies that encouraged suburban development in New Orleans and St. Bernard Parish. The same Louisianians who championed “states’ rights” arguments in order to fight regulation, federal oversight of offshore drilling, and undermine civil rights legislation, readily accepted federal monies to build homes and, in the case of Hurricane Betsy in 1965, provide direct financial relief. This did not make them hypocrites, necessarily. After all, the central motivating politics of postwar south was civil rights—not ideological debates about the true meaning of federalism. For Dixiecrats in Louisiana, the benefits of the welfare state were always intended to be selective. The system was simple, federal dollars designed to promote the interests of white Louisianians were good while any attempts by that same government to upset racial hierarchies or hinder development were bad.

The history of Katrina is a story of environmental racism. Horowitz demonstrates this point while examining the aftermath of Hurricane Betsy in 1965. African Americans who lived in New Orleans’ Lower Ninth Ward understood the hurricane and the subsequent flooding as more evidence of the ever-present structural racism that defined Louisiana environmental politics. The destruction caused by Betsy was no accident, not in the eyes of the African American community. They knew that “they lived in greater peril because of decisions made beyond their control” (p. 57). Dixiecrats soon celebrated government intervention again—this time in the form of direct aid to homeowners, loans through the Small Business Administration, and mortgage relief. But the benefits were not shared by all. “For African Americans in New Orleans’ Lower Ninth Ward, the high tide of American liberalism arrived in the form of a flood” (p. 68). African Americans struggled to receive any financial relief that was often distributed through the same local, racist systems. Many African Americans found themselves in greater economic peril. Still stuck paying mortgages on homes washed away in the flood, Black residents found that the SBA loans only created another form of debt.

The ideological commitment to economic growth born of the New Deal political order continued for decades. New projects such as the Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet or the Lake Pontchartrain and Vicinity Hurricane Protection Project epitomized the idea that government spending for the sake of economic growth was unquestionably good. Even the creation of the National Flood Insurance Program in 1968, a program meant to dissuade development in flood-prone areas, warped into a pro-growth economic policy. Rather than dissuade new-home construction, the program encouraged it by placing the

Federal government as a primary stakeholder in the underwriting of insurance companies' policies. New Orleans suburban communities boomed. Structural racism remained a hallmark of 20th-century Louisiana, though in more subtle ways. "While the policies and practices that supported the growth of the white suburban middle class sometimes reached African Americans...they could easily preclude African Americans from enjoying the benefits of development" (p. 79). Racist zoning practices enabled white Louisianans to settle in the newer developments of lower-lying St. Bernard Parish, while African Americans remained in the older, more-elevated, Lower Ninth Ward.

The first section of the book tracks a familiar format for environmental histories of urban development. Equal parts political, economic, and environmental history, the section effectively weaves various methodological elements together into a cohesive narrative. In clear and effective prose Horowitz dispels any myth that the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina in 2005 was a matter of chance or unforeseeable circumstances. In fact, the evidence of impending catastrophe is almost jarringly obvious. By combing through government records, political papers, and tracking the geographic development of New Orleans, Horowitz outlines a clear path to the "disaster" of Katrina. "The New Orleans that flooded was the metropolis financed by the Federal Housing Administration and the GI Bill; it was the city fueled by oil and gas and built for cars and commuting; it was the city of single-family homes. It was not primarily poor New Orleans or rich New Orleans, nor was it white New Orleans or Black New Orleans, that flooded during Katrina. It was twentieth-century New Orleans" (p. 119). The geography of modern New Orleans would be the largest determining factor to understand who sat under water when the flooding arrived.

Broadcasters settled into familiar racist tropes. News stories glorified white resilience while shaming Black suffering. While Americans tuned into the racialized coverage of post-Katrina New Orleans, the Federal government found itself completely unable to address the systemic issues that caused this flooding. Any notion that the distribution of suffering might be equitable washed away once policymakers arrived in flooded New Orleans. Conservative ideologues in and around the Bush administration could only imagine a market-approach solution to the question of New Orleans. Through the use of congressional appropriations, the Federal government provided a meager sum of money to all many of the states affected by Hurricane Katrina. That money shrank again. The conservatives' commitment to private enterprise created a system in which contractors amassed massive profits contracting and subcontracting various work through multiple companies. The few funds that remained passed through the Louisiana Road Home project which offered direct assistance to homeowners—not renters—who remained in New Orleans. The policy, like so many that predated Katrina, tended to favor white

homeowners whose properties were already valued higher due to enduring racist structures. Louisiana legislators continued their assault on Black communities of the city. They gutted public housing programs in order to build a new, gentrified New Orleans. Healthcare access for Black residents was virtually non-existent. Louisiana legislators went further, identifying the recovery process as an opportunity to replace public education, and public educators, with charter schools. In doing so, established African American teachers were replaced with white, younger, and cheaper educators. Horowitz clearly demonstrates that recovery in New Orleans only exacerbated structural racism in New Orleans. Katrina, in this sense, sped up a long process of exclusionary policymaking, further enforcing racial biases that had been a defining feature of twentieth-century Louisiana.

Environmental historians cannot help but read Horowitz's *Katrina* without thinking of Ari Kelman's *A River and Its City* (2003). Though there are obvious overlaps given the shared geographic focus, both books offer distinct views on the historical actors and the key developments of 20th-century Louisiana. First published two years before Hurricane Katrina, Kelman's core text focuses on the interwoven relationship between the historic residents of New Orleans and the Mississippi River. Kelman's story is one of place-making, where changing residents find and make new meanings of a singularly important river throughout the long history of an iconic city. Kelman places far more historical emphasis on the development of levees—physical evidence of New Orleanians attempts to shape the river in their image. Horowitz, on the other hand, downplays the central role of the Mississippi River. In fact, environmental agents almost seem secondary in *Katrina*. The Mississippi River is present but not all that central to the story. Climate change is mentioned, but hardly explored. Rather, Horowitz chooses to center political decisions, economic desires, and urban development as central elements of the story. This is not because he does not recognize environmental forces as agents of historical change. However, by tempering the influence these environmental agents Horowitz stresses the importance of the human actors who designed the conditions necessary to turn Katrina into a "disaster."

Neither author is necessarily at historiographic odds with the other. In fact, in some ways *Katrina* is a natural and necessary addition to the history of New Orleans. Kelman seemed to argue as much in the 2006 edition of *A River and Its City*. In his updated prologue, he began to notice the failings that Horowitz would later flesh out in great detail. "The federal disaster relief had been a debacle," he wrote of the Bush administration (p. xi) Kelman also wondered about the future of New Orleans. "Whose neighborhoods will be rebuilt? Whose will not? Although it's too soon to know right now, the answers, I expect, will tell us a great deal about which members of the city's displaced population will be defined as part of the public, that body of people who

wield political power” (p. xvii) By tracking the long history of that moment, Horowitz demonstrates that the answers to those questions had roots in the early 20th century. The same populations that were victims of structural racism throughout 20th-century Louisiana were the same populations left-behind, ignored, and demonized during its recovery.

So, what are disasters? Despite what media outlets and many politicians may argue, they are not an act of God. Disasters are foreseeable. They are designed. Disasters are products of particular values, particular policies, and particular biases. Disasters will continue to occur, though they will not all be floods. Sometimes they are fires. Other times they are earthquakes—drought too. Historians of these significant events will benefit from reading Horowitz’s *Katrina*. Encouraging scholars to examine the long history of these defining moments, Horowitz’s work reminds researchers to explore the political ideologies, social bias, and economic motivations of those members of society that designed each disaster.

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