

New Orleans and poverty: a damning admission from the New York Times

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14 September 2005

The newspaper that proclaims as its motto “All the news that’s fit to print” was forced to make a damning admission on Sunday. In answer to a reader’s query, the public editor of the *New York Times* was compelled to acknowledge that over the past decade the newspaper had done little to inform its readers about the desperate poverty and social inequality prevailing in New Orleans. Both were exposed conspicuously and tragically in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

It is impossible to deny the obvious: the horrific impact of the disaster in terms of human life and suffering was the product not primarily of a natural disaster, but rather of a social catastrophe that has been deepening in America for decades. A vast portion of the population has been driven into desperate poverty, and, in New Orleans, tens of thousands were left without the means to heed an evacuation order. They were abandoned to fend for themselves against the storm, and then left without aid for days as the weakest among them died in the city’s streets.

“Poverty so pervasive that it hampered evacuation would seem to have been worthy of the *Times*’s attention before it emerged as a pivotal challenge two weeks ago,” wrote the editor, Byron Calame, adding that coverage of issues surrounding the city’s levee system would also have been merited.

“Yet a look back over the past 10 years of *Times* coverage of New Orleans in its news columns raises serious questions about how well the paper helped readers recognize and understand these two major problems that have compounded the devastation and tragedy of the storm,” he continued.

The editor went on to acknowledge that, while New Orleans had the greatest proportion of its inhabitants living in poverty of any American city outside of Detroit, the *Times*’s coverage of the city consisted for

the most part of “stylishly written articles about the city’s charm, cuisine and colorful characters.”

Adopting a *mea culpa* tone, Mr. Calame declared that “given the dimensions of poverty in New Orleans...the *Times* coverage of these problems over the past decade falls far short of what its readers have a right to expect of a national newspaper.”

While all of this is no doubt true, the *Times* public editor makes no response to the reader’s question that prompted his column to begin with: “Why didn’t the economic-social-racial conditions in New Orleans get some attention in the paper?”

Why didn’t they? Why were these conditions—the product of a slow-motion economic and social hurricane that has ravaged the lives of millions throughout the country—of such little interest to the supposed newspaper of record of America’s erstwhile liberal establishment?

The *Times* public editor fails to answer because to do so honestly and seriously would be far more damning than merely confessing to the newspaper’s sins of omission. The *Times*’s inattention to the poverty and social inequality laid bare by the Katrina disaster has deep social and political roots.

It is not merely a matter of spending more time writing about Mardi Gras and *etouffee* than on social conditions in New Orleans. The picture is no better when it comes to the city where the *Times* is based.

The conditions of life for the 50 percent of New Yorkers who live on an annual household income of \$41,000 a year or less—not to mention the 20 percent who somehow survive below the poverty line of barely \$19,000 for a family of four—get little more coverage than the impoverished population of New Orleans.

Even a cursory examination of the newspaper makes clear to and for whom it speaks. Monday’s “Fashion

and Style” section, for example, carries an article that reads: “There are probably more scientific ways to measure the bulge at the upper end of the economy, but the season’s hot Prada coat is one way to tell how much disposable income is floating around.... That the price of the coat is around \$5,500 has apparently done little to deter sales. Since the first fall shipments, even the Prada stores have had trouble keeping the coats in stock.”

The same issue of the newspaper in which the public editor’s admission appeared ran pages of ads for Manhattan apartments with an average selling price above \$3 million.

Such regular items in the paper are indicative of the staggering enrichment of the social layer in New York City that forms the core constituency of the *Times*. In a piece based on census data, the newspaper itself reported earlier this month: “The top fifth of earners in Manhattan now makes 52 times what the lowest fifth makes—\$365,826 compared with \$7,047.... Put another way, for every dollar made by households in the top fifth of Manhattan earners, households in the bottom fifth made about 2 cents.”

While a few neighborhoods in Manhattan boast the greatest concentration of multimillionaires and billionaires in the world, the sprawling outer boroughs of Brooklyn and the Bronx are counted among the 10 poorest counties in the country. There is no reason to believe that a disaster approaching the scale of Katrina would reveal any less social decay and polarization in New York City than it did in New Orleans.

This juxtaposition of immense wealth and poverty is no geographical accident. New York’s financial elite and a broader periphery in the upper middle classes have accumulated vast fortunes off the stock market’s speculative boom. The boom itself rests fundamentally upon the steady decline in the real wages of working people and the systematic razing of all that is left of social reform measures dating back to the New Deal and even earlier.

This enrichment of those who constitute Manhattan’s top 20 percent has been accompanied by a protracted drift to the right by the liberal establishment with which the *Times* has traditionally been identified.

It is more than a century since Jacob Riis, who then worked for the *Times*, employed his considerable abilities as a photojournalist to expose the wretched

conditions to which millions were condemned in America’s tenements. These exposures and his famous book *How the Other Half Lives* helped inspire a reform movement that sought the elimination of slums, the strict enforcement of housing codes and the erection of livable housing for working people.

While the images of death, suffering and humiliation that have come out of New Orleans have shocked and angered millions, there is no indication—and even less reason to believe—that this event will spark a similar turn to social reformism on the part of America’s ruling establishment.

That is the essential significance of the *Times*’s failure to even attempt an explanation as to why it neglected over the course of a decade to examine the social conditions that have given rise to this massive tragedy. Its reporting reflected the vast gulf separating the upper-class audience to whom the paper principally speaks from the masses of working people and poor who have borne the full brunt of the disaster unleashed by Katrina.

The *Times*, like the Democratic Party and other institutions previously associated with American liberalism, defends the interests of the financial oligarchy that rules America and is organically hostile to anything that could fuel the growth of political and social struggle against the existing order.



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