MARKETS OF SORROW, LABORS OF FAITH

NEW ORLEANS IN THE WAKE OF KATRINA

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FIGURES 1–8 appear courtesy of Taslim van Hattum.
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This book is dedicated to
the people of New Orleans,
Gay Becker & John Norby.

CONTENTS

ONE

IT'S NOT ABOUT KATRINA

Why should [we] continue to carry the full burden of this recovery on [our] backs? . . . We are in a dead standstill, as there is no money for building materials. We were devastated both physically and emotionally. Our mental health is in crisis. The depression has shifted from the storm to the hopelessness and stress of the Road Home. Yes, it is that bad. . . . A little girl came to volunteer with her mom from Boston. She was nine years old. And she asked her mother on the third day of working in [our community], "Mom, when are we going back to America?" You know . . . that really . . . [*crying*]. Sorry. I said I wasn't going to do this. But it's overwhelming. . . . [*taking a deep breath*]. . . . So I think I'm here to ask you all. . . . We are Americans. We are homeowners and we pay taxes and we are citizens. My question to you is: when can we rejoin the country?—CAROLINE REEVES, community organizer, testimony for the U.S. Senate, May 2007

This book is not about Hurricane Katrina. It is about Americans who have managed to survive a second-order disaster that was precipitated by the success of profit-driven solutions to a crisis of need at the turn of the twenty-first century. It is about the disaster of stalled and prolonged recovery, not the disaster that preceded it. It is about the price that is paid in human terms for the success of processes set in motion long before Hurricane Katrina, about the effects of privatizing our most public social services, and about the failure of these services to respond to Americans in need because they are tied to market forces guided by profit. It is also about the other face of privatization: the grass-roots, community, and faith-based responses that rose up in the wake of these failures and the new economy that

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Figure 1. The destruction was widespread and pervasive (2006).

has emerged in the wake of such responses. This economy is based on the circulation of an affective surplus—the emotional responsiveness and ethical inducement to action generated by a recognition of ongoing need among Americans—and the unpaid labor force it mobilizes. Finally, this book is about the infringements of market logic that impinge on even the charity sector in ways that promise, once again, profits gained from the spoils of a disaster and its victims. New Orleanians are in a good position to tell us this story, and perhaps none are better qualified to do so than the Bradlieus.

The Bradlieus

In August 2005, Henry and Gladys Bradlieu lived comfortably in retirement in one of the oldest properties in the Gentilly neighborhood of New Orleans.[1] Henry had served in Vietnam, had been shot several times, and was a three-time Purple Heart recipient. He then became a civil servant for the U.S. Postal Service; after he retired he spent his free time golfing at the public course. Gladys had worked different clerical and assistant jobs her whole life and had last been a data entry clerk at City Hall. They owned their two-bedroom home on a corner lot in what was, in 2005, a densely packed mixed-race neighborhood. They were a success story of middle-class comfort that surpassed many of their relatives who lived across town in Mid-City and the Upper Ninth Ward. The Bradlieus had no idea how quickly everything they had lived and saved for in order to retire in modest comfort could be taken away from them.

On August 27, 2005, the Bradlieus evacuated to Texas and watched the storm on television; they didn't know yet that their home would survive the hurricane but would be swallowed up by the floods resulting from the collapse of the levee system thereafter. Their home filled with ten feet of water, and it sat like that for three weeks. When they finally came back to the city a few months later, Gladys recalled it was so quiet. "No birds, no trees, no color. Nothing. Just gray, everywhere gray." Furniture was covered in layers of lifeless mud. Silverware that had floated off of kitchen counters was strewn about in layers of smelly, gooey sludge. Family photographs were blackened and moldy. Clothing, linens, books, and shoes were indistinguishable from the walls, which had wallpaper peeling away in sheets from the stained brown-gray sheetrock beneath. Worst of all, Gladys said, were the trees. Most of the trees had been uprooted, and the rest were covered in brownish-gray mud. They were as lifeless as the neighborhood around them.

Like a lot of returning residents, Henry and Gladys didn't really know where to begin. They had received a check for $2,400 and a trailer from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). The church folks in Texas who helped the Bradlieus while they were displaced sent them home with some $500 taken up in collection from parishioners, a few items of clothing, some dishware, glasses, and linens. In December 2005, they moved into their three-hundred-square-foot trailer parked lengthwise on what was once their front lawn. As African Americans who had lived through the years prior to the passage of the Civil Rights Act, they were used to pulling themselves up by their own bootstraps, or at least with nothing if not the Lord's help. Henry said, "We'll rebuild."

Five years later, in January 2011, at the age of seventy, Henry Bradlieu died, having spent most of the last three years of his life in his cramped bed at one end of a FEMA trailer, paralyzed by a stroke that he suffered in 2008 on the day he learned that he would be denied, for the second time, federal assistance for rebuilding from the Louisiana Recovery Authority's Road Home Program. Gladys recalled her husband's anger on that day in 2008. "He was beside himself," she said. His two-and-a-half-year struggle to prove to Road Home that he owned his home, including getting an affidavit from the previous owner, months and months of lost paperwork, repeat visits to agency offices, being treated like a criminal, and the sheer discomfort of living in his little FEMA trailer, was too much. Gladys had tried to reason with people at the office of the Road Home Program, providing the paperwork and the bond-for-deed sale records showing that they owned their home. Bond-for-deed sales were common among those who had been denied opportunities for mortgages through conventional banks. Despite the fact that Gladys had retrieved documentation from City Hall that showed such transactions were legal and conferred ownership, she was unable to convince them. She was resigned, but "Henry was different," she said.

> He wanted to cuss them out. One time we had one meeting and we went all the way to [Governor] Blanco's office and he cussed them out and they had to get people to escort him out of there. . . . He was so mad. . . . They were trying to say that we hadn't flooded in our

home. Can you imagine? Henry said, "I fought for my country. Look what my country did for me? They kicked me in the head."

By 2008, Henry and Gladys's savings were gone. Their pensions were not enough to afford even the building materials for repairing their home. He was out of time, out of money, out of patience. In the same year that Henry was denied his request for a mere $50,000 to rebuild, the executives at ICF International who ran the Road Home Program under a no-bid federal subcontract awarded themselves $2 million in bonuses and posted record earnings for their stockholders. When Henry got the letter that denied him funds for a second time, he couldn't believe it. That afternoon, he told Gladys he was going in to take a nap; within minutes of lying down in his tiny trailer bed, he suffered a massive stroke that left him nearly totally paralyzed.

Gladys took care of Henry after that. She fed him, cleaned him, tended his bed sores, got his medications, and, in her spare time, tried to figure out what to do with her gutted, empty home that sat some fifteen feet from her trailer door. Even the tasks of keeping the weeds down and the rats out were challenges. When the Bradlieus finally moved back into their rebuilt home two years later in July 2010, it was only because a neighborhood volunteer group had championed their cause. It took two years, eight hundred volunteers, and a steady stream of donations from ordinary people—people who, upon hearing Henry's story, would say things like "Screw the government! We'll rebuild it ourselves!"

The wait was too long for Henry. Only six months after moving in, he died. Gladys said she believed Henry had waited to die until she was settled back in their home. "You know," she said, "it wasn't Hurricane Katrina that killed him. It was the recovery that killed him." Remembering the day of his stroke, she said, "Look what they did for him. "Look what they did *to* him."

Delayed Recovery and Market-Driven Governance

There are specific reasons it took so long for people to recover in New Orleans. These reasons are largely tied to forces that were far beyond the control of any returning resident or any local official. They were mobilized in and through political and economic arrangements that allowed them.

These arrangements turned disaster recovery into a for-profit endeavor that enabled private companies to obtain government relief funds while offering little accountability to the people for whom these funds were intended. They allowed banks to offer loans that drove up debt among victims while generating interest-based returns for lenders. They allowed insurance companies to evade culpability when they refused to pay for damages but extract further insurance payments from people whose homes could no longer be inhabited. Finally, they ensured that real recovery would be left up to local volunteers, churches, and nonprofit charities. Recovery that should have taken a few years was turned into what locals called a "funeral that would not end." For people like Henry Bradlieu, the funeral became all too real. Henry Bradlieu's experience was not exceptional; it was exemplary.

The testimonies and analyses of New Orleanians' experiences of trying to rebuild and recover offer a glimpse of the inevitable outcome of what is often called *neoliberal capitalism*. In New Orleans, we can see in bold relief the contours of our political and social predicament created by neoliberal policies of governing, or what Margaret Somers has more descriptively called *market-driven governance*.[2] Emerging out of a half-century commitment to neoliberal policies that favor and advance market-based solutions for our most pressing economic and social problems, we see now a steady transformation of public-sector institutions into market-based consortia wherein fiscal, for-profit transactions become the means by which access to federal resources, even for things like disaster relief, is determined. George Soros has called attention to the dangers of this trend—a form of *market fundamentalism*[3]—in which popular support prevails for ending "big government" alongside policies that allow the free market to determine how we allocate our national resources in order to solve not only our fiscal problems but also our social problems. What New Orleanians' stories offer is a glimpse into how the trend toward letting the *for-profit market* serve as the engine that drives public-sector work is both much more complex and more pervasive than we have seen in the past, and also how it fails.[4]

Despite calls for ending big government, New Orleans offers evidence of an ongoing dependence upon big government to fund the work of things like disaster recovery in ways that help markets and companies but hurt people. To be sure, market-driven governance has in no way ended government involvement in socioeconomic affairs. Market-driven governance simply offers new ways to bring the market and its rationalities of profit into governance. Somers notes that these trends have been successful at converting popular legislative agendas, which historically favored and protected an ethos of "shared fate, equal risk, and social justice" into a situation in which exclusions on the benefits of citizenship are determined by contractual opportunities governed by the market.[5] Market-driven governance is what happens, she writes, when "disproportionate market power disrupts the carefully constructed balance [of power among state, market, and citizens, adjudicated in the public sphere], as risks and costs of managing human frailties under capitalism once shouldered by government and corporations get displaced onto individual workers and vulnerable families."[6]

The conscription of the profit sector to do the work that the public needs has in no way resulted in more efficient or effective recovery for those trying to return and rebuild after a disaster. New Orleans offers an example of how this happens. The costs of shouldering responsibility for recovery were shifted to families and individuals, while profits were generated for corporations that were given responsibility for managing what many people still think of as civil and social welfare needs. Companies that were hired to help New Orleanians rebuild developed high-profile IPO offerings and upward trends in stock values, while homeowners were forced to go into debt, arbitration, and lawsuits to recover funds they were promised. The delayed recovery produced a second-order disaster that had its own logic and rationales that were nearly as deadly as those that produced the floods in the first place.

The disaster of market-driven governance emerges today as an entrenched set of institutional arrangements in which government continues to play a key role in protecting the interests of market-oriented businesses that, in turn, are increasingly authorized to make money not only on key government activities like defense contracting and infrastructure but also on key commitments to social welfare, including assistance for disaster and recovery aid—that is, on the business of social suffering. These arrangements define the contours and also the predicament of our current political economy; accounts from New Orleans in the five-year aftermath of Katrina offer us insights about the uneven success of such policies when it comes to the social contract, demonstrating how well this arrangement is working for some and how poorly it works for others. In the chapters herein, we will see how market-oriented policies deployed to effect and augment recovery instead enabled and encouraged private-sector investment in public-sector problems in ways that prioritized corporate financial rewards and fiscal growth over other measures of success that have, at different historical moments in the United States, held sway because they were protected by a strong public sector.

The Inefficiencies of Profit

When government funds allocated for relief are funneled through private for-profit companies on their way to being distributed to victims of disaster, something happens to the money. The interference of competing demands of the market can impede operations, pulling resources in other directions than downward to the recipients who are in need. What we will see herein is an example of a *privately organized, publicly funded bureaucratic failure*. The market, which many believe provides an impartial engine for sustainable infrastructure and social welfare, actually got in the way of hoped-for outcomes. The assumption that government bureaucracy was to blame for the disaster of delayed recovery was voiced, but it concealed a more pivotal truth: such delays were actually a result of *the inefficiencies of profit*.

Commitment to neoliberal arrangements on the part of policymakers, planners, and citizens alike in the United States has been growing for more than fifty years even though it has never been universally supported. Today, the market penetrates more and more domains of the public sector, where one finds large-scale commitment to the idea that profit motivation will create an equitable and efficient trickling down of resources to those in need who deserve it.[7] This trickledown is believed to occur in two ways: first by the growth of businesses that find ways to solve problems of need while also making profits and, second, by the recognition on the part of large profit owners that charity will work better than public-sector institutions to take care of those in need. Both of these processes are seen in post-Katrina New Orleans.

Businesses organized to help with relief arose at the intersection between government and citizen and seized opportunities to show that the private sector could succeed where government would fail. Subcontracted to the government to carry out redistribution activities, these businesses were nevertheless allowed to work with little regulatory oversight. In the end, they were able to profit from human tragedy, turning sorrows into opportunities for capital investment in what Naomi Klein calls a form of *disaster* *capitalism*.[8] In New Orleans, one can trace this dynamic in the actions of private-sector businesses like Halliburton, the Shaw Group, and Blackwater, who were called in for rescue-and-relief operations, all the way to the recovery subcontractors like ICF International and the banks who obtained Small Business Administration loan support and insurance companies who denied payments to their clients.

Even more surprising, and frightening, is how the trail of profit making can also be followed all the way to the nonprofit sector, with creeping market penetration into the charities and faith-based groups that stepped up in response to the failure of the for-profit sector. Organizations like HandsOn and Points of Light Institute have emerged as part of a new national-level corporate assemblage that makes use of federal funds in new ways, bringing charity into the mix of market-oriented opportunities to take care of a needy public. As this assemblage grows, so, too, does the degree to which our economy turns *need* and the affective responses it generates into a new source of profit. Questions about how best to provide for people in need (and which of these people qualify for help) after a disaster are vividly brought to the forefront as the recovery industry becomes a new sector for market opportunism and growth.

Transforming Need into Profit

Understanding the trend toward increasing privatization of public-sector resources, including social welfare services like those that emerge after a disaster, requires understanding a new set of commitments, as Somers notes—commitments to the subtle replacement of an ethics of public care with an ethics of private profit. Although the idea of subcontracting government work to the private sector is not new, what is new today is the particular way that for-profit businesses have come to be involved in public-sector activities in largely unregulated ways and in ways that put our most important safety-net infrastructures at risk.[9] Institutions that are designed to provide public care (from welfare services to education) have become places where profit making not only is deemed ethically tolerable as a mainstream political proposition but also is desired as a measure of success, and often the only measure of success. Naomi Klein notes that, under these arrangements, revolving doors between government agencies and private-sector businesses have enabled large for-profit corporations not only to deploy but also to design public-sector programs, including federal programs to stimulate long-term recovery and the provision of rebuilding resources to post-disaster communities. Such arrangements have allowed for a blurring of investment potential with humanitarian need while also creating a slippery slope for those who would use public resources for private gain at the expense of those who are left to fend for themselves.

Foucault noted that "the problem of neoliberalism was not to cut out or contrive a free space of the market within an already given political society . . . the problem of neoliberalism is rather how the overall exercise of political power can be modeled on the principles of the market economy."[10] An exploration of recovery after Katrina offers a good lens through which to view the long-term success of neoliberal approaches to problems of governance and the subtle ways in which they are changing things—that is, an exploration of what neoliberalism *is* today as a form of market-driven governance. If, for example, neoliberal policies have always discouraged dependency on the part of the poor and needy on government "handouts" not only as failures of public policy but also as failures of personhood and citizenship, then new regimes of marketized governance both reinforce and reverse this logic. They enable the needy to become a site for the production of capital, generating profits for companies that spring into existence after a disaster.

Who is authorized to care for those in need, who determines how much money a company should be able to make doing so, and what outcome indices are used to determine whether or not the company has done the job well are all forms of political power in which notions of fiscal enterprise should be measured against the persistence of need. But what we see today is that market-driven governance turns the persistence of need into an engine of disaster capitalism. Measures of fiscal success are inversely tied to the job of eradicating need in part because need is itself a source for further subcontracting opportunities, as we will see.

The Affect Economy

New Orleans in the wake of Katrina shows how a new set of market transactions has grown around the role of the poor and needy as both products and producers in an economy that relies on specific kinds of suffering to generate new and quite large profits. Creating an *affect economy*, the problems of need after a catastrophe circulate as emotional calls for the witness of suffering and also as urgent ethical demands to intervene and help. In the wake of recurring disasters, whether caused by the disparities of a healthy economy, the ravages of a declining economy, or the decimation induced by so-called natural disasters and failed recovery, the sectors of our society and economy that answer the call to help are on the rise. The job of taking care of the needy, whose numbers grow in the wake of tragedies, is now offered up as a new set of opportunities for profits, tethering market indices of success to the humanitarian work of private for-profit companies and nonprofit charities alike. New transactional opportunities emerge in the space of suffering, even changing the role of charities in the process.

Moving beyond those who would argue that the task of the social scientist is to provide witness to suffering after a tragedy, or that witnessing affect alone might disrupt the structural conditions that produce it,[11] my hope is that the stories herein will help us to reconsider how the acts of witnessing and the affective surplus produced by disasters like Katrina have become themselves part of an economy in which affect circulates as a source of market opportunity for profit. This is more than a situation in which companies use people's emotions to capitalize on them, as has been well documented in the service-sector industries.[12] The affect economy we live within today makes use of affective responses to suffering in ways that fuel structural relations of inequality, providing armies of free labor to do the work of recovery while simultaneously producing opportunities for new corporate capitalization on disasters.

The growth of private for-profit industries within the world of relief and recovery has had a significant effect on the way that nonprofits and charities do their work. It is particularly clear, for example, that nongovernmental and charity institutions, especially those that are faith-based, have been called upon to provide support where for-profit federal subcontractors have left gaps in the recovery landscape (or where the unregulated free market economy has itself produced the catastrophe). While it is clear that the churches have been largely successful in this work, it is also clear that the machinery of our current political economy not only depends on but also hopes to conscript this sector for new kinds of profit making. Tying together the affective surplus of suffering with an outpouring of charity-based volunteering motivated by affective responsiveness, churches and charities offer ideal sites for new investments of profit capital.

New companies that blend public-sector work with for-profit private business have today emerged as a growth industry in postdisaster locations in the United States, and these firms continually seek new ways to grow by exploiting the resources of unpaid or low-paid volunteers who are called to action by the affective surplus that arises in a disaster's wake. This predicament extends far beyond disaster relief, as witnessed in the growing ranks of underpaid AmeriCorps, HealthCorps and Teach for America workers. As small charities and churches play a larger and larger role in filling in where other recovery processes fail, larger for-profit corporations that are capable of inserting themselves into the mix of recovery assistance increasingly become monopoly intermediaries between nonprofit, faith-based, charity safety-net resources and the people who need help.

The for-profit corporation has become a preferred model for assembling together charity, government support, and people in need into what is sometimes called a *virtuous circle*, in which it is assumed that the work of providing charity can also be profitable. The assumption is that profits can be made on suffering produced by need even while trying to attend to its elimination. The business of charity has become a big business opportunity for those able to generate fiscal surplus out of the affective surplus aroused by human suffering. The idea of using churches and faith-based labor to do this work is built into neoliberal prescriptions that see the private charity sector as more efficient than government-run safety-net programs. Using labor that is largely free because it is motivated by faith and moral conscience enables this structural arrangement to suture infrastructures of profit making to the problem of need. In this arrangement, the safety net becomes a kind of affective choice, rather than a civil right protected by regulations that are enforced by strong public sector policies and juridical protections. Helping others in need is seen as a moral virtue, while making profits on this work is seen as equally virtuous. In an insidious turn, however, this system reproduces need by paying low or no wages for the work volunteers contribute under the banner of moral certainty. The arrangements of an affect economy insert the engines of affect into the machinery of corporate survival. In the meantime, private-sector solutions enable companies to funnel fiscal rewards upward toward executive and marketing portfolios as a systematic necessity of company operations and survival rather than downward to those doing the work or those in need. This arrangement involving volunteer labor alongside corporate profits is justified by the affective sense of purpose, sometimes tied to notions of Christian charity, that such work arouses.

Thus, even though charity's role in helping out where the government and the free market are not able to take care of everyone is not new, we are witnessing the flourishing of this arrangement today. Wealth owners are asked to help take care of needy Americans without passing through the systems of taxation and redistribution of the public sector. The involvement of wealth philanthropy in charity caregiving (Andrew Carnegie is a good example) is not new, but the support for this has grown in ways that have given rise to the notion that, even here, there are profits to be made, turning charity itself into not a residual but a primary site for investment capital. Venture philanthropy and philanthrocapitalism offer striking examples of this trend, and both have been important in nonprofit charity work that has helped New Orleans to recover. In the affect economy, the compulsion to help those in need and the regeneration of need itself in and through such things as prolonged recovery failure (and reliance on low or unpaid volunteer labor) now dance in tandem with one another because of the market's penetration. This arrangement not only spawns new profit opportunities but also changes how humanitarian work gets done.

Accounting for the actual work that gets done to help people recover and rebuild while also trying to track the upward flow of profits that are now available through this work are not just tasks that charities must undertake: they are also the goals of this book. Today, as nonprofit, charity, and church organizations are brought into relationships with corporations who hope to profit on the circulation of ongoing need and the affect it arouses, it is important to track how and when these arrangements work, as well as when and why they fail.

Federal Relief and the Free Market

Federal support for emergency relief, like support for those in need more generally, has a long history in the United States. It did not emerge in the Roosevelt years as a novel form of Keynesian government welfare against laissez-faire regimes. Debates at the federal level over the effectiveness and legitimacy of providing federal funding to support disaster relief and other safety-net programs (as opposed to leaving this job to private-sector charities) are historically persistent within the United States and are fraught with further debates over moral blame, Christian virtue, racial inequality, and concerns about the legitimacy of Congress versus the courts in deciding policy and federal action.[13] Any history of the welfare state must include accounting for the role of nearly a century of federal disaster relief in paving the way for Roosevelt's New Deal. Indeed, in the century prior to Roosevelt—a century labeled as one in which "laissez-faire" capitalism reigned—federal assistance programs were plentiful. Michele Dauber notes that these programs provided the rationale for their augmentation during the Great Depression.

The historical and contemporary persistence of federal support for disaster relief is neither contested nor doubted here. A sympathetic state has always been a necessary counterpart to the free market. What is surprising, however, is how debates over federal disaster relief are not muted by larger concerns over the most efficient and effective ways to distribute such relief. That is, the state has not retreated, and it has not been minimized under neoliberalism, but neoliberalism has now provided a new and robust rationale for involving big business in the operations of the sympathetic state and few people are studying the outcomes of these shifts.

The story of post-Katrina New Orleans is thus not a story of the decline of the welfare state or the rise of crony capitalism. It is a story about how the two have become intertwined in new ways: crony capitalism now makes money *on* the welfare state.[14] As legislative policies call on the free market to provide solutions to problems of poverty, dispossession, and postdisaster blight, the government creates opportunities for new kinds of market-driven networks that are designed to do many different things. Rebuilding basic infrastructures such as roads, electrical grids, and sewage systems as well as reconstructing schools, public housing, and neighborhoods are jobs that require federal and state support. When support is given, what matters is how it is routed and the relative weight placed on public- versus private-sector priorities in deciding how and where to spend it. Post-Katrina New Orleans illustrates that public-sector interests became blurred with private-sector opportunities. As a result, there were few to no real mechanisms in place to ensure that resources were used fairly. There were virtually no effective regulations placed on companies to ensure that profits were not sought at the expense of people in need. In fact, it appears that showing corporate profits counted for more than ensuring public recovery. Measures of fiscal reward and corporate growth were used to account for progress in ways that displaced other measures of success such as seeing many people returning to rebuilt homes or gauging residents' access to reconstruction funds without an increase in their personal debt.

Henry Giroux, in his book *Stormy Weather*, noted that "market fundamentalism prevails when the values of the market and the ruthless workings of finance capital become the template for organizing the rest of society."[15] We saw this before, during, and after the disaster of Hurricane Katrina, when the conditions that caused the disaster could be traced to cronyism between private companies and the Army Corps of Engineers. It was seen when rescue-and-relief operations were handed over to private-sector firms that made money through Homeland Security operations that were putatively hired to provide humanitarian relief.[16] It was visible in the recovery processes that were deployed and came into being in the five-year aftermath, as we will see.

Returning New Orleans residents were asked to participate in the circuits of capital that flowed from the government through corporations and, finally, to them in ways that were belabored and inefficient because such capital was used to show corporate profitability *alongside* recovery success. This process entailed not an erasure of government but an active converting of government effort into a process of "allowing" the market to do the job of reasoning for us or, as Foucault noted, in the passage above, when "the overall exercise of political power can be modeled on the principles of the market economy."[17] Post-Katrina New Orleans in this sense offers an exemplary case of market-driven governance, even if the situation there was in some sense historically and culturally unique.[18] The consequences of these arrangements, more than of any natural disaster, figure visibly in the stories of the people of New Orleans, many of whom, more than five years after the actual hurricane and the weathering of a second crisis precipitated by the BP Gulf oil spill, were still searching for ways to rebuild and recover.

Disaster Stories

In some ways, the story of what happened between the initial hurricane and the five-year mark as I began to write this book, when New Orleanians who did come back were in some cases still digging out of gutted homes, trying to avoid debilitating debt, and fighting deep depression, is a story that is familiar to other American communities that suffered catastrophes and never recovered. Eric Klinenberg's account of the devastating 1995 Chicago heat wave; Kai Erikson's study of the Buffalo Creek Flood in West Virginia; Anthony Wallace's study of a coal-mining disaster in St. Clair, Pennsylvania; and a host of other sources on Hurricane Katrina's effects have all offered insights about how tragedies should be conceptualized in terms of the social vulnerability they reveal and the ramifications of existing inequalities that explain not only patterns of morbidity and mortality but also adjustment, recovery, and well-being or the lack thereof in a tragedy's immediate aftermath.[19] Following Klinenberg's example, what we need is a way to read disasters in terms that provide a social autopsy of what went wrong before but also in the long-term aftermath.[20] Comparative cases show how, as Anthony Oliver-Smith notes, disasters are events that reveal the existing crises of social vulnerability.

Comparative analyses of disasters have noted that it is in part the sustained rhetoric of disasters as "natural" phenomena that enables their political causes and consequences to be overlooked. In *Catastrophe in the Making*, William Freudenberg and his coauthors make it clear that Hurricane Katrina's devastation was not an unpredictable accident. The floods and displacements that followed could easily have been predicted given the existing structures of inequality and dispossession and the growth industries that governed the fragile relationship between wetlands, canals, levees, and human populations in this Louisiana landscape. The disaster of Hurricane Katrina didn't "happen" accidentally; it was produced by the industries that shaped the Gulf region in and around New Orleans in the fifty years prior to the hurricane, about which we will hear more. Similarly, treating disasters as "natural events" can conceal the ways in which they reinforce and conceal political arrangements that enable violations of human and civil rights and a furthering of political agendas in the name of humanitarian aid.[21] This, too, could be seen in New Orleans as federal proclamations of a state of emergency enabled private-sector paramilitary groups like Blackwater to do the work of humanitarian relief.[22] The racial and class contours of Hurricane Katrina's impact made it possible for the relief to exacerbate preexisting inequalities along these lines.[23] The storm's impacts on poor and middle-class African American families were much harsher than for middle- or upper-class Euro-American families, often entailing infringements of both civil and human rights.[24]

Nandini Gunewardena and Mark Schuller, as well as Naomi Klein, note