

Definitions and Disasters: What Hurricane Katrina Revealed About Women's Rights

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Abstract

The decisions made in the 1930s following the passage of women's suffrage reflected definitions of equality that had been accepted by both women's rights activists and labor progressives. These decisions constructed rights to government support in old age, unemployment, illness, or support of dependents by tying them to employment rather than citizenship. This construction both reflected the gender assumptions in a social model of a "family wage" for a male breadwinner with dependent wife and children and worked to exclude African-Americans. As a consequence, any sense of "dependency" or government support has been demonized by equating it with an unwillingness to work. As the American economy has transformed into an information and service economy these views have been further reinforced, since many of the service jobs are in sectors that are traditionally constructed as "women's work."

The impact of these policies can be seen in the federal response to Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. There the economy was largely service and tourist oriented, the city overwhelmingly African-American, and the income levels considerably below the national average, and often below the poverty line, even for those working full-time. The interactions of assumptions about gender, race, dependency and the conscious under funding of government are evident in the federal response and reflect conditions that continue to hinder the development of women's rights in the United States.

Introduction

The devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina and the flooding in New Orleans rank as the greatest natural disaster in American history and is now an all too familiar part of the public record. What is perhaps less well known is the degree to which the situation in New Orleans reflected both the changes as the American economy has moved from manufacturing to a service and information base over the past century, and American cultural assumptions about the social compact, personal responsibility, and the lines between public and private concerns. These assumptions are reflected in how American social programs developed. What can seem at first an esoteric debate among public policy specialists and historians has an impact on the formation of the political debate among U. S. citizens.

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In the 1990s, historical scholarship began tackling two issues. One was the development of the policies which formed the basis of what has come to be known in American politics as "the welfare state." The other issue was how the analysis of public policy had been consciously

or unconsciously shaped by gendered constructions and metaphors. These issues of scholarship were driven by the political climate of the late 20th century as scholars sought to either explain away or protect government involvement in citizen's lives in the wake of the "Reagan Revolution". Scholars also were increasingly interested in comparative perspectives on the role of the state. After the destruction of the Berlin Wall in 1989, differences between the United States and European nations such as Britain and West Germany seemed to demand an explanation. Works such as Diane Sainsbury's *Gender, Equality and Welfare States*, Koven and Michel's *Mothers of a New World* and Theda Skocpol's *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers* explored these differences.¹

In the same time period another trend developed in historical and cultural scholarship. Emerging from the mix of the establishment of women's history as an area of study in the wake of the reemergence of the Women's Movement in the 1970s, and the postmodern attention to the importance of language in structuring consciousness, gender itself became a category of analysis, most notably in works by Joan Kelly and Joan Scott.²

These concerns merged into consideration of gender as a category in the construction of state responsibilities for welfare. The analysis was brought together in 2001 in Alice Kessler-Harris's *In Pursuit of Equity: Women, Men, and the Quest for Economic Citizenship in 20th Century America* where she draws earlier work into a synthesis on welfare, gender, and government policies on economic citizenship and explicated how these constructs function in contemporary America.

¹ Diane Sainsbury, *Gender, Equality, and Welfare States*, (Cambridge: Cambridge U Press, 1991), Seth Koven and Sonya Michel, eds, *Mothers of a New World* (NY: Routledge, 1991), and Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard U Press, 1993).

² Joan Kelly, *Women, History and Theory: The Essays of Joan Kelly*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), and Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *The American Historical Review* 91 (1986): 1053-1075.

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By reflecting on Progressive era policy discussions we can see what Kessler-Harris calls “the power of gendered worldviews...to construct the circumstances of history by shaping the parameters within which people see.”³ In the same way that the choices made during Hurricane Katrina reflect debates over the structure of American society, the debates over the origin and meaning of the “welfare state” and the relationship of the government to the citizenry also form an unexamined basis of decisions that were made in New Orleans.

The social welfare decisions made in the 1930s, which reflected definitions of equality that had been accepted by both women’s rights activists and labor progressives, constructed rights to government support in old age, unemployment, illness, or support for dependents by tying them to employment rather than citizenship, thus creating categories of dependent and non-dependent citizenship. This construction both reflected a social model of a “family wage” given to a male breadwinner with dependent wife and children, and had tremendous effects on American social attitudes. Workers with non-dependent benefits were de facto constructed as white males. As Kessler-Harris notes:

“... when the federal government began, in the 1930s, to legislate an array of social benefits and tax incentives designed to ensure economic security for the American family, it attached its most valuable benefits not to families but to wage work. Tying benefits like old age pensions and unemployment insurance to jobs affirmed the status of recipients as independent and upstanding citizens and delineated the secondary positions of those without good jobs or any at all. ... when the federal government linked wage work to tangible, publicly provided rewards, employment emerged as a boundary line demarcating different kinds of citizenship.”⁴

³ Alice Kessler-Harris, *In Pursuit of Equity: Women, Men, and the Quest for Economic Citizenship in 20th-Century America*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 6

⁴ Kessler-Harris, 4

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The distinction was supported by most Americans because it reflected a cultural belief in independence and voluntarism. As Kessler-Harris notes, “At the heart of voluntarism lay a uniquely American version of manhood. Closely tied to American ideals of self-sufficiency and upward mobility, it was rooted in the notion that those who gave up control over their own fate gave up a precious source of liberty and would become lesser citizens. In this respect, the stance of American workers differed from forms of social democracy supported by European labor that encouraged alliances between labor and social insurance advocates.”⁵ Barbara Armstrong, one of the original drafters of the Social Security program noted: “If we hadn’t made those insured people contributors, i.e., pay regularly toward their insurance so that they would think of it as theirs, they would have no protection against the politicians who periodically would wish to reduce their benefits or even eliminate them.”⁶

These decisions worked to both disadvantage women and to exclude African-Americans. The immediate impact of the construction of economic citizenship as a limitation was not as immediately apparent for women, since in the 1930s most of US society consisted of a male breadwinner and a woman caring for home and family. With the commitment of the US labor movement to a “family wage” for white male workers, most women were assumed to be cared for within families, since “. . . wage work for women appeared as a privilege for the well-off and an obligation for the destitute. For the latter, it marked an invidious status; it was engaged in by the unmarried, single mother, and those whose spouses had failed them. . . . This expectation continued to shape the labor market well into the 1960s...”⁷ From its inception, these policies had the greatest impact on African-American’s through their systematic exclusion from the programs being developed. The Unemployment Insurance Act of 1932 failed to address the

⁵ Kessler-Harris, 68.

⁶ Kessler-Harris, 126.

⁷ Kessler-Harris, 34.

reality that as early as 1920 “More than a third of married African-American women worked for wages, double the proportion of white women, and two thirds of them worked in service jobs of one sort or another”⁸ which were excluded from coverage. These exclusions were later reinforced in the 1938 Fair Labor Standards act which “covered only 14% of working women, compared to 39% of adult working men. African-American women, more than a third of whom still worked as domestic servants in 1935, and African-American men, who constituted 80% of agricultural workers, almost completely lacked its protections.”⁹

The same sorts of issues replayed in the fight to create the Social Security legislation in 1935. In understanding the impact of the of racialized gender assumptions on the social imaginary behind this legislation and its effects down to the present day it is crucial to remember that in the minds of the reformers “This was...labor legislation rather than poor relief.”¹⁰ As originally conceived, the real legislative purpose behind the Social Security program was to help economic recovery and spread jobs by providing support to allow less-efficient older workers to leave the labor force, thereby stimulating hiring of younger unemployed workers and advancing economic recovery. As such, it focused almost entirely on the industrial workforce and “Consciously or not, policy makers imagined a program available to most white wage-earning men that would omit ‘as a matter of course’ most African Americans, by virtue of their position in the labor market, and most women, whose positions appeared derivative of their marital partners.”¹¹ It should not, therefore come as a surprise that “...more than three fifths of fully employed African American were denied coverage. Sixty percent of the excluded workers were female—in a labor force whose membership was more than 70 percent male. Probably as

⁸ Kessler-Harris, 27.

⁹ Kessler-Harris, 106.

¹⁰ Kessler-Harris, 129.

¹¹ Kessler-Harris, 120.

many as 85 percent of wage earning black women were deprived of participation and benefits.”¹² Unlike farm interests who worked to exclude agricultural laborers “No large interest group lobbied to keep domestic workers out of the old age insurance provisions of the new law. Race alone united them.”¹³ Not until 1954 were hotel, laundry and agricultural workers, as well as the self-employed and government employees included in “what had by the mid-1950s become America’s most revered welfare program,”¹⁴ approaching Armstrong’s original vision of a program that would cover everyone in old age.

The implications of these decisions were written deeply into both American social policy and into American consciousness creating a social reality in which “‘We are,’ in the worlds of political scientist Judith Shklar, ‘citizens only if we earn.’”¹⁵ These racialized gender images have multiply disadvantaged women and people of color, usually the poorest paid workers, and included not only economic deficits but also depriving them of the dignity inscribed in a contributory program and instead relegating them to “a demeaning ‘free benefit while others received a due return on their investment.’”¹⁶

As Wendy Gamber argues, “Kessler-Harris’s signal contribution is to show not merely, as have several scholars, that social policies were gendered. But by granting economic citizenship to white male breadwinners, such policies implicitly and sometimes explicitly rendered others less than ‘persons’ under the law.”¹⁷ Consequently, any sense of “dependency” or government support has been demonized by equating it with an unwillingness to work. Nicholas Winter has noted the continuing political effects of this association whereby “the

¹² Kessler-Harris, 131.

¹³ Kessler-Harris, 146.

¹⁴ Kessler-Harris, 156, 162.

¹⁵ Kessler-Harris, 12.

¹⁶ Kessler-Harris, 143.

¹⁷ Wendy Gamber. Review of *In Pursuit of Equity: Women, Men, and the Quest for Economic Citizenship in 20th-Century America* by Alice Kessler-Harris *Journal of American History*, 89 (September 2002): 599-600.

framing of Social Security in political discourse has associated it symbolically with race. The linkages are subtle and symbolic, and they serve to associate Social Security with *whiteness* in a mirror image of the association of welfare with blackness.”¹⁸

What became Lyndon Johnson’s “War on Poverty” in the 1960s was built on the base of the 1935 law establishing Aid to Dependent Children, which later became AFDC—Aid to Families with Dependent Children. It was based on the assumption that good women stayed home with their children when widowed (single motherhood was never seen as a social category), and that the nation should make that possible by socially replacing the breadwinning male who had died. In the late 1960s the Moynihan Report moved the issue of single motherhood to the center of the cultural radar screen with its emphasis on “the problem of the Negro family” and analysis of “black matriarchy” at precisely the same time more educated and affluent married women (usually white) were moving into clerical jobs in the labor force in large numbers and asking pointed questions about why they were socially confined to jobs which underutilized their education and talents. This convergence of structural forces further disadvantaged poor women, particularly if they valued childrearing over low wage jobs.

In the debate as the American economy has transformed into an information and service economy these views have been further reinforced, and disproportionately disadvantaged poor women. “... For those who viewed themselves primarily as mothers, serving their families was doing good work, worthy of support, yet a larger public perceived them as deriving benefits of citizenship without having earned them. If mothering young children no longer provided

¹⁸Nicholas J. G. Winter, “Beyond Welfare: Framing and the Racialization of White Opinion on Social Security,” *American Journal of Political Science* 50 (2006):400.

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sufficient justification for middle-class women to stay at home, why should it be a necessary cause for the public to support poor women?”¹⁹

This debate over welfare became increasingly heated from the 1960s to the 1990s, finally resulting in replacing AFDC with TANF “Temporary Assistance for Needy Families” in the euphemistically named 1996 “Personal Responsibility Act,” a bipartisan act which President Clinton signed following his veto of an earlier bill with fewer child welfare provisions. Throughout the debate welfare recipients were socially coded as single African-American women,²⁰ even though three-quarters of recipients were white. This bill reflected two seemingly contradictory values: it firmly established the absolute demand that mothers participate in the paid labor force AND it promoted marriage by ending the entitlement to welfare benefits to unmarried or divorced mothers. As Sharon Hays put it in *Flat Broke with Children*: “How, then, are we to interpret the message of welfare reform? Are marriage and family commitment the central concern? Or is the importance of individual self-sufficiency so great that the care of children can take a back seat to mother’s paid work? Are we reasserting the portrait of a nurturing mom and a breadwinning husband, or are we pressing for a world full of breadwinners?”²¹ The 1996 welfare reform act signaled a willingness to allow the poor to serve as test cases in the national debate over values, casting them as disposable people. It is a reflection of one of our greatest national weaknesses to believe that only those like me count as fully human. It is in clear contrast to one of the better parts of American culture, a belief that no one is expendable, everyone is worthwhile, and there are no disposable human beings. This belief is neither “left” nor “right” on the political spectrum; it is expressed socially both in an

¹⁹ Kessler-Harris, 272.

²⁰ Sharon Hays, *Flat Broke with Children: Women in the Age of Welfare Reform* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 23.

²¹ Hays, 18.

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insistence that we protect the children and elderly, and in the Marine injunction to leave no comrade behind—alive or dead. It is an essential element of democracy—each vote counts because each person counts.

It is also tied to the ideal of independence in American definitions of “manhood.” But such individualism has traditionally been tempered by a communal sense that some things made more sense NOT to do individually. Barn raisings, wagon trains, and mutual help and burial associations all worked on the principle that giving time, money or effort to the group produced greater personal return than individual accumulation or effort could. Ignoring this necessary interaction of individual and communal “allows politicians and others on both sides of the debate to simultaneously condemn the ‘dependence’ of poor women and children on the state and celebrate their dependence on miserly employers or men.”²² It also ignores the crucial fact that “the low-wage work typically available to welfare recipients offers neither financial independence nor the independence associated with the higher ideals of American citizenship.”²³

Most of these low-wage jobs are the modern-day equivalent of the domestic, food-service, and agricultural jobs left uncovered in the 1930s social legislation. They have simply been moved to a larger, less “private” workspace, often through employment with major multinational corporations such as McDonalds. Though the U. S. federal minimum wage is only \$5.15 per hour, currently a single provider earning less than \$9/hour for full-time work will place the family below the federal poverty line. 30 million workers—1 in 4 Americans—hold such jobs, which almost always also lack the health care, vacation pay, sick leave or pension benefits which have been tied to economic citizenship through work in the United States. Most of these

²² Hayes, 30-31.

²³ Hayes, 34-35.

individuals have a high school education, though a sizeable number do not, and they work taking care of the more middle class often in downtown or suburban areas distant from where they live.

Who are the beneficiaries of these policies? McDonalds is currently the largest single employer in the United States; a temporary help agency is second. Welfare to work requirements are imposed even in rural areas, such as Greene County Alabama, where official unemployment is over 15%. As Hays notes: “Work requirements and time limits throw millions of desperate women into the labor market and put them in a position where they must accept low wages, the most menial work, the poorest hours, with no benefits, and little flexibility. Thus, low-wage employers gain not only the benefit of this large pool of ‘eager’ new workers, they arguably also gain greater control over their existing workers—who must now fear that if they don’t accept their current working conditions, they can be replaced by former welfare recipients.”²⁴

These structural economic effects can be seen with exceptional clarity in New Orleans, where the travel and tourism industry formed a very large and often driving part of the economy, with jobs in the service sector overwhelmingly occupied by African-Americans and other women. According to Biz.com²⁵ “While New Orleans lost 1.9 percent of its nonfarm payroll jobs between December 1999 and the end of 2003, both Houston and Atlanta grew nonfarm jobs by 1.9 percent.” Grumman Ship Systems is also anticipating large further cuts, even before the hurricanes. Only 62.8% of the population 16 and over was in the labor force. As a post-Katrina report by the Urban League notes “...nearly 13 percent of workers in the city of New Orleans were employed in the relatively low-wage food and accommodations industry, compared with only 9 percent of all workers nationally. Total service jobs represented 26 percent of all jobs and

²⁴ Hays, 22.

²⁵ < <http://bizneworleans.com/70+M50c204deb0d.html> > (3/11/06)

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paid an average of only \$8.30 per hour.²⁶ Another 2.3% were employed in arts, entertainment, and recreation.²⁷ In 2004 the New Orleans per capita income was only \$19,711,²⁸ leaving 23.2% of all New Orleans residents living below the poverty level, including 38.1% of children under 18.²⁹ These were also the New Orleansians who were least able to evacuate without assistance. “More than one in three black households in New Orleans (35 percent)—and nearly three in five *poor* black households (59 percent)—lacked a vehicle.³⁰ While the damage and death in Katrina disproportionately affected senior citizens, over 65 were only 19.3% of those living in poverty.³¹

When the statistics for New Orleans are compared by race, the key indicators of entrenched poverty become even more overwhelmingly racialized. Almost 68% of the population of New Orleans is Black or African American, and 31.3% of black families are below poverty level.³² Though 28% of the population in New Orleans is white, only 4.7% of white families are below poverty level.³³

It thus emerges that who became the victims of Hurricane Katrina was not coincidental.

As the Congressional Research Service noted: “one-fifth of those displaced by the storm were

²⁶Harry Holzer and Robert L. Lerman “Employment Issues and Challenges in Post-Katrina New Orleans.” The Urban Institute. , February 10, 2006. < <http://www.urban.org/url.cfm?ID=900921>> (3/11/06)

²⁷U. S. Census Bureau. “Fact Finder.” 2006 <http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/QTable?_bm=y&-geo_id=16000US2255000&-qr_name=DEC_2000_SF3_U_DP3&-ds_name=DEC_2000_SF3_U&-lang=en&-sse=on> (3/11/06)

²⁸U. S. Census Bureau. “2004 American Community Survey: New Orleans.” 2006 <http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/ACSSAFFacts?_event=&geo_id=16000US2255000&_geoContext=01000US%7C04000US22%7C16000US2255000&_street=&_county=new+Orleans&_cityTown=new+Orleans&_state=04000US22&_zip=&_lang=en&_sse=on&ActiveGeoDiv=&_useEV=&pctxt=fph&pgsl=160&_submenuId=factsheet_1&_ds_name=DEC_2000_SAFF&_ci_nbr=null&_qr_name=null&_reg=&_keyword=&_industry=> (3/11/06)

²⁹U. S. Census Bureau. “New Orleans City, Louisiana: Selected Economic Characteristics 2004.” 2006 <http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/ADPTable?_bm=y&-geo_id=16000US2255000&-qr_name=ACS_2004_EST_G00_DP3&-ds_name=ACS_2004_EST_G00_-&-lang=en&-sse=on> (3/11/06)

³⁰Arloc Sherman and Isaac Shapiro, “Essential Facts About the Victims of Hurricane Katrina,” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, September 19, 2005,< <http://www.cbpp.org/9-19-05pov.htm> > (5/27/06)

³¹U. S. Census Bureau. “Fact Finder.” (3/11/06)

³²“2004 American Community Survey: New Orleans.” 2006 (3/11/06)

³³Brookings Institute: Key Factors of Entrenched Poverty

<http://www.brookings.edu/metro/20050920_povertynumbers.pdf > (3/11/06)

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likely to have been poor, and 30% had incomes that were below 1 ½ times the poverty line. African Americans are estimated to have accounted for approximately 44% of the storm victims. An estimated 88,000 elderly persons (age 65 and older), many with strong community ties, may have been displaced, along with 183,000 children, many of whom were just starting the school year when the storm struck.”³⁴ Those most likely to suffer from severe wind damage and/or flooding in Louisiana fell predominantly into the following groups: the aged, children, the disabled, and their care-givers. In a larger sense, these working aged adult caregivers became enmeshed in what Megan Glancy refers to as “derivative dependency.”³⁵ By caring for “dependents,” they indirectly also become dependents themselves.

This group of the secondarily dependent is particularly vulnerable to the effects of social definitions of acceptable and unacceptable dependency. The numbers are also significant. While estimates vary, Hayes found that at least 15% of the women welfare recipients in her study either themselves had, or were full-time caregivers for someone with, physical disabilities.³⁶ This total is much lower than a General Accounting Office Study, which found that 44% of welfare mothers reported a physical or mental health disability, at a time when the national disability rate was only 16%.³⁷

These figures help explain the almost continuous images of the elderly, disabled, children and their caregivers that emerged from New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. The predominantly African American elders were also members of precisely the same group of

³⁴ Thomas Gabe, Gene Falk, Maggie McCarty, and Virginal W. Mason, “Hurricane Katrina: Social-Demographic Characteristics of Impacted Areas.” Congressional Research Service for Congress, November 4, 2005 RL33141. <<http://www.gnocdc.org/reports/crsrept.pdf>> (5/27/06)

³⁵ Elizabeth Megan Glancy, “The Social Construction of Women as a Lower Socio-Economic Class,” Paper presented at Oxford Round Table, March 20, 2006.

³⁶ Hayes, 166.

³⁷ Hayes, 165.

people not included under Social Security legislation until 1957. They had already been socially relegated to invisibility or deemed disposable in America's larger social vision.

Not only unemployment and old age insurance through social security and pensions, but also health care coverage have been tied to employment status not citizenship. Economic changes since the 1970s have made this decision increasingly problematic for growing numbers of Americans, and the effects are likely to continue to spread. For the middle and working class Americans who form most of our population, long-term employment for one employer is largely over. With the increasing job volatility even the "respectably employed" are increasingly likely to be left without benefits at some point. As the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities noted, from 2001 to 2004 a "statistically significant" additional 4.6 million Americans were without health insurance.³⁸ Linking benefits to employment rather than citizenship no longer serves even middle-class interests, and the costs of broken levies and destroyed infrastructure far outweigh individual tax savings.

Conclusion

What are the larger public policy implications of these findings? They reflect not only the impact of race, but also the impact of gender, and that they reflect both social attitudes and the original racialized, genderized imagination of the American welfare system. These issues are reflected not only in the original 1930's social legislation that established what evolved into the American welfare system, but also in the attempts to change that system in 1996 in the "Personal Responsibility Act." In both of these cases, what seems at first to be fairly esoteric public policy arguments or debates among historians instead reflect fundamental social choices with

³⁸ "Economic Recovery Failed to Benefit Much of the Population in 2004," Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, August 30, 2005. Accessed at < <http://www.cbpp.org/8-30-05pov.htm> > (5/27/06)

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tremendous structural impacts on the lives of citizens. Only a reaffirmation that everyone matters, that there are no expendable people, and that the individual must be balanced with the communal will cease to hinder the progress of women's rights by systematically disadvantaging a large group of women, and perpetuating these same inequities into future generations. This cost must be borne not only by individual taxpayers, but by corporate ones as well. The social cost the current human under funding is much too high, and it should not take the scene in the New Orleans Superdome or Convention Center to make it visible to us. They are also issues which must be addressed in the rebuilding efforts.

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