

*The Political and Cultural Economy of Recovery:
Social Learning in a Post-disaster
Environment*

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Society is “smarter” than the individuals within it.

How do societies achieve a level of complexity, coordination, and social intelligence that far surpasses the capacity of individual human intelligence?

F. A. Hayek’s path breaking work took us a long way toward an answer to this question by investigating the cognitive role of market prices in complex social learning processes.

But how does social learning unfold in non-priced environments?

Grounding this theoretical discussion in the context of post-Katrina New Orleans.

It is in the wake of catastrophic destruction—when societies have to rebuild from the ground up—that the process of social learning can be most richly investigated.

What gives communities the ability to rebound and rebuild in the wake of disaster?

If we understand how social learning unfolds in a post-disaster environment, we are in a better position to understand social learning more generally.

Crisis & Response in the Wake of Hurricane Katrina

The Mercatus Center, George Mason University



Three “legs” of community resilience

- Institutional/Political Rules
- Market Processes
- Civil Society

Qualitative field studies

- Mary Queen of Vietnam community in Village de l'Est
- Upper/Lower Ninth Wards & Desire Community
- Gentilly
- Central City
- New Orleans East
- St. Bernard Parish
- Broadmoor
- Houston
- Second round interviews

To date: 385 subjects



The principal theme to emerge in the work so far has been the role played by cultural tools.



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Community Resilience in New Orleans East: Deploying the Cultural Toolkit within a Vietnamese-American Community

- Coordinating capacity of the MQVN church as tool



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- Historical narratives as tool

David Vu: We are used to being evacuated. Some of us [are] originally from North Vietnam. My parents evacuate to the South Vietnam. Then, when we were in the South Vietnam, we evacuate from one area to the other area because of [the fighting]. And then in 1975 we left everything behind and came to the United States. So to us, [it's] a whole game sometimes. To me Katrina, it's just an inconvenience.

Community Resilience in New Orleans East: Deploying the Cultural Toolkit within a Vietnamese-American Community

- Coordinating capacity of the MQVN church as tool
- Historical narratives as tool
- Appropriation of the “model minority” myth as tool

“Model minority” myth as cultural tool

72% of interview subjects made reference to the MMM by describing themselves and/or the Vietnamese community as particularly self-reliant, hard working, prone to saving, and/or family-oriented.

Of those who mentioned one or more of these qualities, 80% volunteered (without being asked directly) that these cultural characteristics assisted in the swift return of the community.

“There’s No Place Like New Orleans”: Sense of Place and Community Recovery in the Ninth Ward

- Pronounced sense of place attachment, identity, and dependence in Ninth Ward communities

Irene Walker: Well, we had our parties and things that was going on. We had barbeques out in the yard.

Interviewer: How often did people do barbeques?

Irene Walker: Oh, every weekend... You could find a barbeque going on every weekend, every weekend.

Jordan Walker: And then like this time of the year, we were trying more like boiled crawfish... crab. People would go crabbing, ... come back home, boil crawfish and crab, sit down, have a little social.

Interviewer: And socials, how big do socials get?

Jordan Walker: Everybody on the block... If we didn't have everybody on the block around with us eating crabs and stuff, we called friends from [St. Bernard] Parish, called [our] children and tell them, "We got some crab and crawfish, come on!" We have a good time... Every weekend... Somebody always had something going on... [Indicating different houses] They [might] have a christening, they [might] have a party going on for [someone], they [might] have a barbeque going. They always have something going on and it was always enjoyable on the weekend. You can relax on a weekend. You really could. Everybody's tired of working. You worked all week, so it's time to enjoy yourself.

“There’s No Place Like New Orleans”: Sense of Place and Community Recovery in the Ninth Ward

- Pronounced sense of place attachment, identity, and dependence in Ninth Ward communities
- Sense of place made more pronounced by evacuation experience

Ed Williams: That's just a part of who we are, part of our culture. We sit down, we barbeque, we have our crawfish. I went out there today and washed the pot out, we barbequed last week. It's just something we do. We get off from work early, go spend \$30, \$40, \$50, \$60 buy a sack of crawfish, cook them, and sit outside and eat. Like I said, that's just New Orleans. That's what we couldn't do when we went to Houston, Texas or wherever. You know? It feels good, don't get me wrong. I love what they've done, but at the same token, it's not home. We not used to [living in apartments]. With the help of people we got our apartment. But see, we couldn't even sit outside. It was the rules—you don't sit outside. [I would say...] "This is my apartment here. This is my front door. I can't come outside?" If me and my wife want to sit in our lawn chairs, and sit here and drink us a beer or something, and watch the kids play in the street. It's just something they don't do. And I couldn't get adjusted to that.

“There’s No Place Like New Orleans”: Sense of Place and Community Recovery in the Ninth Ward


- Pronounced sense of place attachment, identity, and dependence in Ninth Ward communities
- Sense of place made more pronounced by evacuation experience
- To be an effective resource for community rebound, sense of place must be complemented by anchoring institutions (e.g., schools & hospitals).

Houston field study, city preferences		
Total number of respondents	103	
Respondents who preferred Houston over New Orleans	48	47%
Respondents who preferred New Orleans over Houston	55	53%

Most common reason for preferring New Orleans over Houston	
New Orleans is home	69%
Prefer New Orleans' unique culture	49%
Overall quality of life better in New Orleans	35%
Family/Friendship networks in New Orleans	27%
Better transportation in New Orleans	24%
People are friendlier in New Orleans	18%

Most significant factor inhibiting return to New Orleans	
1. Lack of quality schools in New Orleans	27%
2. Just isn't the same New Orleans	22%
3. Path dependence issues (locked into a lease, employment contract, etc.)	20%
4. Cost of living (including cost of housing)	11%
5. Health issues	7%
6. Other	7%
Not clear what the inhibiting factor is preventing return	6%

Deploying Collective Narratives in St. Bernard Parish



**Share identity
as a working
class
community**

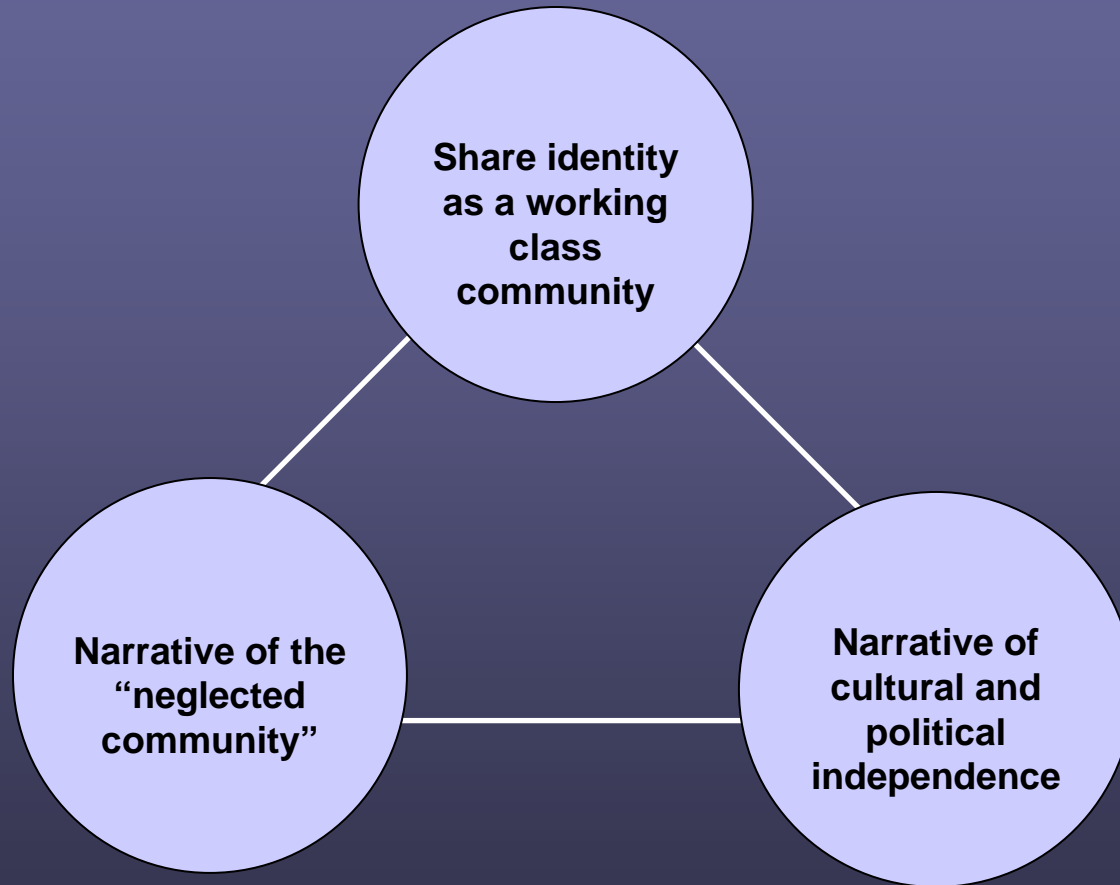
Michael Fontana†: We in the Parish, we are a self-sufficient type of community. We all work. We're almost 100 percent employed people of Saint Bernard Parish. And because of the nature of the people that live in St. Bernard Parish – we're a blue collar community – we're not afraid of work. We know what work is. And so it was devastating to our mind, to see what happened to all of our properties, but we realized that, "Look, we got where we were, and we're the only ones that are gonna restore where we were."

Deploying Collective Narratives in St. Bernard Parish



Alana Fournier†: [After the storm] you didn't hear much about St. Bernard. Like my brother said, "Are you sure there's a place called St. Bernard Parish?" And it always amazed us that there wasn't one house that wasn't flooded [in St. Bernard], but you never hear that. You here Ninth Ward, Ninth Ward, Ninth Ward. I think that makes a lot of people upset.

Deploying Collective Narratives in St. Bernard Parish



[I]t became more than clear that we were on our own. Our government had failed us. Promises of portable classroom buildings within 90 days, secured through a “mission assignment” to the Army Corps of Engineers, were broken. No housing for our teachers could be quickly secured by FEMA, and cleaning the muck, debris, and marsh remnants from our buildings was a task that would be ours. So we forged ahead without help from the state or federal governments, locating our own portable classrooms and housing trailers, sealing deals with a handshake in parking lots of uninhabitable buildings, securing our own national disaster clean-up team, and relying on our own people... We had no patience for excuses, for bureaucracy, or for any obstacles that would delay our reopening.

—Doris Voitier, excerpted from her speech accepting the John F. Kennedy Profile in Courage Award

The lesson that's emerging...

Social learning in non-priced environments has a great deal to do with the cultural tools. In fact, the social learning that takes place within markets depends crucially on the social learning that takes place outside the market.