

Media

The logic of racism in the age of US imperialism

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October 6, 2005—Reports of a reign of civilian terror—general and massive looting, rapes, and other sado-masochistic fantasies—in Katrina's New Orleans turn out to have been false. So says the New Orleans Times-Picayune on 26 September: "the vast majority of reported atrocities committed by evacuees have turned out to be false, or at least unsupported by any evidence, according to key military, law enforcement, medical and civilian officials in positions to know."

The "natives" did not go berserk, after all.

I wonder, however, what the media will do to erase the lurid racist images of sex and violence they have implanted in television viewers' minds. Absolutely nothing is my guess. When the sympathy of ordinary Americans threatened to become seditious outrage at the government's criminal irresponsibility, the plan to demonize the victims went into effect, tapping into long-established myths of black people as rapists and murderers.

Is the media racist? I would guess not at the vulgar, knee-jerk level of pathological racism, but "racialist," yes—processing reality through the unscientific prism of "race." "Racialism" is to racism what "paternalism" is to sexism: it views the Other as either a victim needing protection or a menace requiring suppression. The racialist paradigm does not permit regarding the Other as equal. Pity or fear are the emotional byproducts of racialist thinking, and both went into effect in New Orleans, but the fear mode won out. It concocted fantasies of murderous anarchy, which stifled the immediate impulse of pity.

Yes, the rule of law during this time of Bush's catastrophic capitalism is in decline (illegal and unconstitutional war against Iraq, Guantanamo detention of "stateless" people, torture by proxy via renditions, suspension of domestic civil rights by USA PATRIOT Act, stacking courts with neo-fascist liberticides, corruption in high places, etc.), but the symptoms of this decline are not to be found among unruly citizens in New Orleans but among a greedy business class, misgoverning through an authoritarian-styled management as though the state were just another corporation, strictly responsible to investors who funded the selection of the CEO of the nation.

Bush rules but does not govern. That's what it means to have government off our backs in right-wing parlance: the government administers our treasury, but it does not do so for our happiness or our safety. It's government off the corporations' backs.

Rule through administrative management for the benefit of the few is in the ascendancy, while the rule of law is in decline. This was evidenced by the Katrina disaster. Confronted with proof of the absence of order in emergency situations—relief, rescue, prevention—the managers in this managerial administration simply winked at the hegemonic organs (the media, the pundits, the right-wing demagogues on "talk" blather waves—in short, the industrial priests of mass deception) and local and state officials to manufacture a phantasmagoric theatre of cruelty in which largely black citizens were portrayed as reverting to the law of the jungle from whence they once supposedly hailed.

Obediently, the media sicced the Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde paradigm on the compassionate viewers, anguished by images of old people in wheelchairs overcome by thirst and fatigue. They sicced the images of the primitive beast—the looter, the rapist, the sadistic child-murderer—to erase from viewers' minds the image of the pitiful sign, "Help Us Please," held up by people, standing in water on top of cars. They sicced the fear of primitivism, of potency in the wrong pants, of rituals of blood not sanctioned by Rumsfeld, Pentagon, Congress, and the rest of the vultures of war.

They had New Orleans "go native."

And then the government militarized the devastated Gulf Coast, re-establishing "freedom and democracy" at the point of a gun. Blackwater mercenaries shooting US citizens in their own land! Sound familiar? And, of course, there will be "reconstruction" for no-bid contracts for government cronies. Sound even more familiar? What goes around, comes around. Logic of empire.

And Condoleezza Rice says racism is not the issue! No, but it sure is a manipulative ploy to scare the populace back into ancestral fears of the different, the darker, the Other.

The scapegoat.

When states embark on criminal projects, such as the conquest of the world, scapegoats are essential to scaring people into consenting to mass slaughter abroad. Hitler had the Jews, the Slavs, the gypsies, the homosexuals, the "Asiatics," and anyone else around whom he could weave myths of conspiracy intending to subvert his blond Christian nation's messianic mission for rescuing the world from the debilitating influences of impure races and "criminal" groups. We had the Indians, the blacks, the Filipinos, the Germans, the Japanese, the Communists (the list is long and opportunistic), and now the Muslims.

To embrace the paradoxical administration of the absence of order and increase in legal regulation (more terror, less freedom), the populace must be made to fear an enemy—to learn to live with hatred of Him, seeking the state's protection against Him in exchange for the surrender of freedoms to enslave Him. In an empire, no one is free, not even the emperor, who must walk naked among the people in order to convince them he's clothed. The important thing is to be able to define oneself in opposition to Him—the generic enemy du jour. The logic of empire is unforgiving: you're either with us or you are with the "terrorists." And to be someone other than Him and to be rid of Him, you have to erase your freedom—you have to allow your retina to be scanned so His arm may be tattooed with a number. That's the logic of conquest. "The conquest of the earth," wrote novelist Joseph Conrad, at the beginning of the decline of the British Empire in 1900, "is not a pretty thing when you look at it up close" ("Heart of Darkness").

No it's not. At its center lie propaganda thoughts that come to regard human beings as masses of disposable utilities or irksome encumbrances. But, to dispose of them when cumbersome, you first have to be made to dehumanize them—to turn them into "objects," because you cannot be reasonably expected to kill someone who looks and feels just like you—human. You have to ascribe to the non-human object in your crosshairs the ills that your rulers foisted on society, with your silence or complicity, authorizing the destabilization of order and security, the looting of public wealth, and the severing of the ties that bind you in solidarity to one another and to the world. You are given a designated enemy, and then you blame Him for the consequences of the crimes you have been deceived into committing.

In America, the traditional domestic enemy is and has been since time immemorial (which in US terms amounts to under 400 years) the black man. A few days ago, William Bennett, former US Secretary of Education and author of the best-selling right-wing screed "The Book of Virtues," commenting on the decline of crime as a possible result of abortion on his radio program, said that, reprehensible as abortion might be, he could not help but observe this: "I do know that it's true that if you wanted to reduce crime, you could, if that were your sole purpose, you could abort every black baby in this country, and your crime rate would go down."

Nothing prevents something logical from being immoral, and Bennett's logic is that—immoral. It is also deceptive logic. He alludes, I assume, to the fact that one in every 20 black men is imprisoned as opposed to one in every 180 white men. Among blacks in prison, 57 percent are imprisoned for drug offenses as opposed to 23 percent of whites. White drug users outnumber blacks by a five to one margin, yet 30 percent of black Americans will eventually serve time in prison compared to 5 percent of whites. Draconian drug laws that disproportionately criminalize the black sector of the population? A distinct possibility, especially since the "war on drugs" is helping to jail people but not to rid society of drugs.

And, of course, the prison-industrial complex is lucrative, securing some \$50 billion per year in federal and state funds to keep two million people in jail, one million waiting for trial, and three million monitored through the parole system. An inmate costs us, taxpayers, \$37,000 per year. If we spent that much on a poor child's education per year, we might get more productive youngsters and fewer drug users, but then we would win the "war on drugs" and lose the profitable prison business.

Bennett's remarks border on the virulent or pathological kind of racism: he flirts with the idea of aborting black fetuses by ascribing to them the feature of genetic criminality. The White House rightly denounced his repulsive playfulness, but it did not do so categorically. They called Bennett's remarks "inappropriate." So when are remarks like these "appropriate?"

Could anyone imagine what would have happened to a radio host in Bush's America if he/she had made a similar remark on the abortion of potential neocon fetuses? Arguably, global crime would decline! The Bush administration—and Laura Bush in particular—found charges of racism, made in the wake of Bush's laissez-faire attitude toward poor blacks in New Orleans, "disgusting," and I'm prepared to say that Bush is not a racist, but he sure enables policies that are.

It is the covering up of racism itself that is inappropriate. Katrina caused the natural disaster in New Orleans, but it did not cause the levees not to be fortified for the protection of low-lying, poor, mostly black neighborhoods, the evacuation of the indigent and car-less not to be organized, the medical and security relief of the most vulnerable poor not to be planned, the global warming data that promised increased frequency of category-5-force hurricanes not to be heeded. That disaster was man-made, and the responsibility for that disaster is called Citizen Bush.

Instead of focusing on this disaster, the media focused on "looters," thereby shifting the blame.

It is a wonder that government-embedded media in New Orleans, just as surely as it is militarily embedded in Iraq, didn't report a string of heads on pikes, lining some New Orleans white boulevard, but, then, no one can accuse the media of being literate. Thrill-seekers they may be, but not because they read Conrad's "Heart of Darkness." If they had, they might have actually articulated the thought lurking behind their indiscriminate scavenging in the sewers of the penny-dreadful imagination. If they had been literate, they might have put Conrad's criminal, imperialist character's final, mad judgment of Africans in print: "Exterminate all the brutes." But, then, if they were literate, they would quit their jobs—or commit suicide for the wrong they have done to democracy, to humanity, to their profession.

They will say that they merely repeated the stories they were told, which is, after all, what they do on a regular basis: transcribe to newsprint the obscenities the White House invents—enemy WMD that do not exist, global warming that can be ignored, a worldwide torture system that is ascribed to a "few bad apples," you name it and they uncritically "report" it. Analyze? Not their job! Perfectly objective folks; stories choose them—not the other way around. Passive stenographers to power, it is not their fault if they live in a journalism culture that rewards the professional integrity of plague rats. Doesn't Rush Limbaugh make \$32 million a year?

I'm glad I didn't watch national television during that paroxysm of "hurricane Katrina reporting," which in a jiffy morphed into "Katrina: looter-and-rapist reporting." But my students did. And I wonder if some of those who will end up in Iraq will exchange pictures of dead Iraqis for a chance to watch naked ladies on a Florida porno website.

After all, they watched the media exchange Katrina's tragedy for shock entertainment; they heard officials proclaim that the suffering was intensified by a rampage of looters rather than admitting the failure of government to organize society; they heard that dark-skinned people are incapable of saving themselves and that they prey on one another.

Why wouldn't the logic of racism at home be exported abroad?

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