CSBS 310 Strange—Fall 2014

Critical Social Analysis # 2: Hurricane Disaster. Due on **Tuesday, November 18.**

Please note the questions come in **two** sets: first FIVE, and then another NINE, further below.

Statement(s) to criticize:

"No One to Blame but Themselves"

by Ludlow Cooper

Much of the death, sickness, and uprooting caused by Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and Mississippi can be laid at the door of the people of that region's failure to heed warnings. Later, when the call to evacuate came, many people simply decided not to respond. Instead, they chose to stay at home and wait out the storm, rather than leave town or seek safety in the Superdome, the place made available to them by authorities. The damage done to homes, people, and their future lives, like the hurricane itself, was an act of God, or if you will, Nature. The US government and its priorities should not be held responsible. Neither should the large corporations and contractors who came to re-establish order and rebuild. Instead, the weight of responsibility should fall on the people on the ground who made their own free choices, as each person must do, choosing to ignore warnings and mandatory evacuation orders, or choosing to make their way to high ground, shelters, or relief in neighboring towns.

After individuals made their choices, voluntary, non-governmental agencies and well established corporate businesses stood ready to fill in to aid evacuation, emergency relief, and keeping order among an agitated citizenry. They will be of help in the long term resettlement or relocation of people, and in the eventual rebuilding of the damaged city.

On the other hand, taking food and other goods without permission from damaged or flooded stores and businesses is a crime for which individuals are responsible, and cannot be excused by emergency circumstances. Human nature under high stress can lead people to be unruly, hysterical, and even vicious. The official forces of order need to control hysterical people in the aftermath of disasters. Under the laws of a republic such as ours, individual lawbreakers are treated equally, whether white, black, or brown, rich or poor.

This storm came down on everyone in its path, regardless of their race, ethnicity, or social class. Since we live in a democracy, everyone had an equal chance to leave in time—or not. In accord with the American Dream, everyone affected by the hurricane will have their equal opportunity in America to restore their lives not only to what they were before, but to achieve more than they had thought possible.

Surprisingly, disasters such as this in the long run can clear the ground of old habits and outworn traditions, paving the way for the unhindered play of free market forces. Free markets have a way of resolving the problems of our lives, when we participate fully in them. On a newly leveled playing field like New Orleans, people can sell their talents and abilities in the market to achieve new heights of prosperity. By letting people find their own way, by not removing people's incentives, nor adding to the deficit, and also by not interfering with natural (market) processes, the local and federal governments can set the stage for success and opportunity. At an early point, government should get out of the way and allow the free market to do its work. This is what democracy, and freedom, is all about.

Questions Part I. Please note the following questions **refer to the statements above, by Cooper,** ***except*** *where otherwise noted as in Q.s 1. and 2.* The four Pacifica (Democracy Now!) radio excerpts are meant to give you a basis for a critique of Cooper's statements. Show in your

responses that **you have given a thorough reading to each of these interview-excerpts,** and to **the definitions of the critical terms that follow, below**. Read the questions carefully, and label your numbered answers with a), b) etc. When the answers get long, *use paragraphs* for your separate points.

1. What impressions, statements, and general "tone" in Cooper's piece are challenged or contradicted by the New Orleans resident in "Seven Betrayals..", "Race and Looting at..", "New Orleans Hit by Another Hurricane of Racism, Greed, and Corruption, and "A paradise built in Hell"?

2. a) What (and whose) is the *point of view* taken, would you theorize, in Cooper's analysis? b) What are the *points of view* in the four interviews from Democracy Now? Does p.o.v. matter? c) Is there a Eurocentric p.o.v. here? Whose? In conventional history, whose p.o.v. usually dominates, and whose gets lost? [Remember, if members of a group who consider themselves to be European-descended (white) excludes, ignores, or treats with contempt, ignorance, or disregard an "other" group who they regard as not European-descended—this, too, even in the same country, may be seem as one of the manifestations of Eurocentrism.] d) Explain just how and why Eurocentric p.o.v.s might change how things are seen, at home and abroad.

3. a) See the definition of ideology, below. What widespread, unconsciously held views of the world, (known as *ideologies,* whenever they concern public policy) does Cooper appeal to here, to persuade and convince the reader? (Ideologies are often idealized or wished for states of affairs expressed as if they were already existing realties. To achieve this effect, they often use reified terms.) Please identify what you think might be ideologies, or ideological, in Cooper's statement. b) What forms of possible "false consciousness" do you detect? c) Do you think his way of seeing things is widespread? d) A more advanced question: Who benefits from promoting such ideologies, or misleading consciousness, and what sort of realities do they conceal?

4. a) What does Cooper seem to be trying to explain (theorize)? b) How much of the explanation or analysis in these statements can you find to be reductionist (*emphasizing individuals and the individual* parts *of the situation?* [See my previous paper, and the definition below] Is there anything more *holistic*, emphasizing some level of social context, in Cooper's remarks? c) How about the remarks of people interviewed? Show you know how to use or apply the definition of these terms (holistic, and reductionist) in your answer. [Don't confuse these terms *with "specific" and "general," they're not the same thing* as reductionist and holistic. See discussion below and the previous assignment-paper.] d) How can one tell whether an explanation is tending to be reductionistic or tending toward a measure of holism?

5. a) What does it meant to **reify** a term or concept? b) Give several big conceptual terms used by Cooper that seem to be ***reified***? How so? c) Is his analysis *historical*, in the sense discussed as #3 "Rule of Thumbs" and in another version, below? How so, or, how not? What *possible* historical comparisons are missing? (Don't forget to do the next questions under **part II,** below.)

The following are terms useful for answering the questions in part I and part II. We have already discussed these concepts, **except for Ideology**, to a fare thee well. But here are yet other

versions, to shore up what you know.) This assignment gives you another chance to show you have understood the terms we have belabored so far.

Reductionism is a term for *explanations (theories, arguments)* that place too much emphasis on the individual parts of something bigger, whether that something be a person, group, society, or international (world) system. Reductionistic explanations explain wholes by their parts. For example, when the behavior of a person (which is one kind of whole) or of a group or community (which are also wholes), is explained by her, or its, smallest parts, say by genes, or, yes, by people's *individual choices*, this explanation may be said to be **reductionistic.** And yet we hear such explanations all the time, don't we?

Likewise, if the behavior of a person, or a group, a social structure (like a class, or ethnic group), or a population *is explained* by the thoughts or actions of an *individual or individuals*, or, once again, by his/her personal choices, the theory, argument, or opinion is tending toward **reductionism**. The same is true when a group's actions (a family's, for example) are explained by the character of the individuals in that family, or when a society, or culture, is explained by the smaller groups within it, and so forth. Again this is done all the time by a lot of people, including experts. In fact, especially **experts**. That is one of the things wrong with expertise in these times. It is not so much that such explanations are dead wrong, but rather that they ignore our social being. What is missing are the larger, encircling wholes of which the thing you are trying to explain is only a part. "**Holism,**" on the other hand, is a term meant to express the opposite, or the corrective of reductionism. It means looking at some part of the larger whole in which the thing you are trying to understand is embedded, or contained. You might be trying to explain, for example, the failure of many to get out of New Orleans, or the failure of government agencies to act to restore housing to many, or to come to their aid in a timely way. What might be the larger wholes, affecting these things? This is the holistic question. Another name for "larger whole" is **social context**. For example, what were some of the social situations (social contexts) that might have kept people from fleeing the high waters?

To understand what is meant by "larger wholes," remember that genes, for example, are surrounded by (always changing) proteins and cells, cells are part of tissues and organs, organs are part of a whole person, persons are part of groups, groups are part of institutions, institutions are part of nations, which are part of the world (international or global) system. Each of these things are affected by being part of "something larger." At each level, the "something larger" up the scale (family, group, community, ethnic group, economic or class system, depending,) can also be described as the smaller part's social context. **Social context** is what social (human) scientists are best positioned to study. If *we* don't study social context, **if we don't go beyond reductionism** (e.g., "the individual should have made better choices to avoid losing her house") who will? If we don't look at larger wholes, meaning social contexts (such as bureaucracies, markets, wealth and poverty, gender, ethnic and class structures, etc.) ***nobody else will.*** (If still in doubt, see pages 47-48, In Rigney.)

A second, more vague **definition of reductionism** says that reductionism is the attempt to explain a complex phenomenon by a single, simple thing. But of course, *all* explanations simplify somewhat, *or they wouldn't be explanations*. So this is a matter of judgment—yours—based on what I've just been talking about, and the readings referred to. These are meant as helps, but rigid *formulas* are for technocrats, not critical social thinkers.

Ideology (-ies) Ideology is a word for widespread, **dominant ideas** that tend to make people *accept things just as they are* (the "status quo.") Accepting things just as they are in social life

prevents consideration of any deep changes, especially those that might threaten the wealthy and powerful. So such ideologies tend to be promoted by the dominant (rich and powerful) classes, and the dominant ("mainstream") media.

Think of "The American Dream," and the notion it usually includes that anyone can climb the social ladder as far as they wish, if only they put up the effort. This is a view we Americans can hardly help clinging to, in spite of a lot of evidence and research that shows the contrary. But doesn't this belief, at the same time, *make us much less concerned* with inequality, social injustice, and the need for change? Because, "if anybody can make it if they try," then not "making it" is nobody's fault but the person's own. (Does this sound like reductionism, and blaming the victim?) Misfortune is a person's own fault, not the fault of the system they are locked into, or the limited menu of choices they have been handed. Besides, *you* might just be the one who "makes it." So why change anything fundamental, or worry about what happens to anyone else? Such are the common effects of the **ideologies** advanced by the mainstream (of journalism and politics) today. Such arguments can be criticized because they depend on automatically accepted **ideology**, in this case, one version of the American dream. An argument can be criticized because it embodies an ideology that props up, and does not challenge, the established, and possibly unjust social order. Of course this view of ideology contains many assumptions about the world we live in that it is up to you to decide. Is oppression (injustice) built into our social system, and can it ever be changed in some meaningful measure by our actions?

Ideologies are the shared ideas and common sense assumptions that trap us in "**false consciousness**" (as discussed in class and the handout from Lemert) about what the causes of suffering—ours and other people's—might really be.

Reify (verb), or **Reification** (noun)

Reification is a term for those words—words heavy with meaning—that can be used to mislead us. Here are two ways reified words or concepts can be used to lead us astray.

a) Certain influential key words or phrases (concepts) lead us to believe that something is <u>all one thing, its different inds and qualities are all alike</u>, and it is nailed down for good—never changing. This is a reification when in fact the thing referred to is a good number of quite *different* things, with different qualities, and subject to change, like all things constructed by humans. These different, changing things need to be taken apart and analyzed, and have their history traced. But **reifying** blocks any analysis, blocks thought, ignores history, and encourages the knee-jerk reactions beloved by those who need to keep us quiet and apathetic.

To demonstrate, let us take "crime." One powerful little word, but it refers to many dramatically different things: property crime, violent crime(s) (both of which contain types that are different), public disorders (including, sometimes, constitutionally protected political protest), drug related offences, white collar crime, corporate crime, crimes without victims, crimes against the environment, crimes committed by governments or their agencies, and juvenile crime. And these are just for starters. Furthermore, much of *what is defined as criminal changes* historically, over time.

Normally we think of crime, and are often urged by politicians and the media to think of crime, as a simple, single, stereotyped thing committed by people who are all bad (as seen on TV!) This is the **reification** of the idea of crime. Could it be more common? In another example, your little book on poverty tries to break poverty down into its many different and

changing varieties, aspects, and subtleties: poverty is not what we think it is. What other key words and phrases that we hear all the time stop *thinking and discussion* dead in their tracks?

b) Reification (also) refers to treating, or speaking of something (some concept) as if it were an unchangeable product of nature, just "the way things are"—when in fact the concept in question is better understood as a process that has been socially constructed. "Crime," "race," "democracy," "intelligence," free markets, so-called human nature itself are not eternal, unchanging essences. They are better understood as taken for granted but historically changing processes fashioned by people acting together, as all social things are. Reifications like these, and many more, are often used to support *false consciousness* and **ideologies** that help mislead us about how the world really works.
Further examples include: free trade (free in what sense, for whom, and to do what?), national security, the "middle class," masculinity, femininity, war, and natural disasters.
Natural disasters *are* of course part of nature, by definition, but infrastructures (levees) that could have lessened their effects, preparations, planning, mobilizations, attempts to repair the damage disasters cause, and long term after-effects on people, are all the result of our social, political and economic arrangements, not nature. We can change such things when we have the will.

Historical vs. **Ahistorical** ("ahistorical" means non-historical, disregarding of history.)
This has to do with bringing history to bear on whatever problem is being dealt with, whether it be drug use, a disease epidemic, patterns of crime, a war, stagnant wages, the militarization of the police, or the results of a natural disaster—etc. To ignore the history of such things, or to do history badly, sets one up for the criticism of being "ahistorical." But **how does one use history effectively?** Here are a few suggestions and examples:

a) **Trace the origins**: In the case of Katrina, this might mean following the steps in time that led up to, for example, the condition of the levees, poor or black people living furthest below sea level, the lack of preparation for evacuation, etc. In a different example, say, the rise of a dictator, one might trace the social conditions that led to the felt need for a popular leader, the tactics he found necessary to achieve his power, and the views of those who supported and opposed him.

In the case of what has been happening in Afghanistan, how poorly it is understood, without discussion of that country's past history. In the 19th century it was divided and manipulated to serve as a buffer zone between rival (colonial) powers, Britain and Russia. More recently (1979), Russia invaded Afghanistan to prop up an unstable regime and to protect its borders. The Russians were reacting to the US trained and supported Muslim fundamentalists whom the US had armed and encouraged in order to destabilize the Afghan government, and so to provoke the Soviets into their own Vietnam-like quagmire. This struggle between the Russians and Muslim fundamentalist armies raged in Afghanistan throughout the 1980's. Later, some of the US organized, trained, and funded jihadists would become the Taliban and Al Qaeda. Now, of course, the US defines these very same former clients as their nightmare foes in a supposed worldwide "war on terror. (The CIA calls this sort of thing 'blowback.')

A little history enlightens the current US re-invasion of Iraq in order to bomb ISIS. Just who ISIS is, is not yet very clear. But after 21 years of invasion, blockade, and bombing of that country, it is predictable that some such group would arise to fill the vacuum created by the chaos we imposed. Since the US fired the entire old (mostly Sunni) army and bureaucracy and replaced them with a Shi'ite government, it is predictable that the ISIS resistance would call up

some Sunni support against a (US installed) government that represses, imprisions, and sometimes tortures them. Even this abbreviated history makes things look very different from what our dominant, and completely *ahistorical*, mainstream journalism encourages us to assume.

(b) **Compare** what you're looking at with similar events or conditions in the past (including the very recent past.) One could compare preparations for, and response to, hurricanes in New Orleans, to those in Florida, or other Caribbean countries like Cuba or Jamaica, and/or to the Tennessee Valley (flood) Project in the 1930s.

c) When trying to understand or explain something, **look at the struggle going on between the less powerful and the more powerful** who are trying to dominate them. In other words, look at history, through the lens of a struggle for social justice. Who gained and who lost in New Orleans?

d) Remember that the most valuable and interesting history—and the one that leads to greater understanding—is about **how things change,** or try to change and fail, and then try again.

Part II: Questions for New Orleans One, Two, Four, and more Years Later

These questions pertain to two articles provided, by Gary Younge and by Adolph Reed, Jr, to the handout on **neoliberalism** by Strange, and to the interview, "New Orleans Hit by another Hurricane of Racism...," the Nation editorial called "Katrina's Untold Story," "a Paradise Built in Hell, and "The Story of the Storm," by Rebecca Solnit.

1. Know thyself. What is your gut reaction to any one of these discussions of Katrina/New Orleans, or to all of them taken together? Which, if any, evidence or arguments presented here provoke in you some heartfelt views or opinions? After a little self-examination, where do you find your reactions and opinion (or lack of them) are coming from? What people and circumstances in your life have influenced your reactions—or lack of them?

2. From the readings by Younge and Reed, and the interview "Another Hurricane..." what is your impression (your "reading," your interpretation) of the conditions in New Orleans one year later? Two and more years later?

3. In the Younge article, "New Orleans Forsaken", *who* has *what* to say (or not say) about race and class? What role does either race or class, or both together, seem to be playing in the situation? How can they work together? Exactly what kind of violence is revealed in "Katrina's Untold Story," and "A Paradise Built in Hell"?

4. a) Tell what you understand to be the meaning of **the general doctrine, or ideology,** of "neoliberalism" from your reading of Reed's article and perhaps even more from the attached handout on the subject by Strange, and class handout/discussion. In other words, what's the general theory? b) Then, ***What are some of neoliberalism's specific policies?*** You may use quotes, but show you have digested it by using mostly your own words.

5. With what evidence and arguments do Reed (in "New Orleans Forsaken") and Strange (in "Notes on the Philosophy and Policies of Neoliberalism") criticize the policies of neoliberalism, and its policies of "deregulation," privatization, and the "free play of market forces?" There is a quite a lot there, so summarize what you think would be **the most devastating criticisms,** if true (assuming "true" means theoretically insightful and based on evidence.)

6. a) How might the doctrine, or set of policies, called neoliberalism fit the definition (supplied above, and by now in another handout) of ideology? b) What specific policies of neoliberal ideology (see Strange attachment) do you think might have played a role in the current financial and crisis and recession (fall '08 to Fall 2013, and counting)? d) *What role may neoliberal doctrine and policies have played in the unfavorable outcomes in New Orleans during and after Katrina?*

7. What was the dominant ("mainstream") media's original way of presenting the disaster? How did it characterize residents of New Orleans? (See Solnit, "the Story of the Storm," and "A Paradise Built in Hell".)

8. What was the response of authorities and "vigilantes"? What was the real, largely concealed, story of violence, and how did it get out?

9. What is "elite panic" (the phrase is on p. 15 of "The story of the Storm," and discussed in 'Paradise Built in..," but what does it mean)? What do studies of disaster show (according to Solnit) about how ordinary people react in a crisis, and what does this suggest about what we call "human nature" (same articles)?

At this point you will have 5+9= 14 questions. Go back and check them to make sure you have said what you meant. Typed.

New Orleans Resident Outlines the Seven Betrayals by Government and Rescue Operations

Monday, September 12th, 2005

http://www.democracynow.org/article.pl?sid=05/09/12/1426233

New Orleans resident Mike Howell discusses how the federal and state government, relief organizations and aid agencies betrayed the people of his city in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina. [includes rush transcript]

- **Mike Howell**, New Orleans resident.

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AMY GOODMAN: Around the corner, with Mike Howell, again, one of the holdouts of the French Quarter, we sat in his garden. He lives on Barracks, appropriately called. He and his wife, Angela, remain there. Mike talked about the seven betrayals.

> **MIKE HOWELL:** What I can say is that they had – they called for mandatory evacuation, but they didn't provide us with transportation out, alright? That's ridiculous. Even the president of Jefferson Parish, who is by no means a screaming liberal – he's a boll weevil Democrat, Aaron Broussard said, you know, "It would be hypocritical for me to order a mandatory evacuation if I don't have the vehicles to get everybody out." So they've always had voluntary evacuation, which is important, legally for the people here. You don't have to live in terror of being thrown out. In New Orleans, the government here said we're going to have a mandatory evacuation, alright? And yet they didn't provide the transportation.
>
> The day before the storm hit, I remember Mayor Nagin got on the radio and asked the churches, who have been useless in the city, in my opinion, with one exception, a Reverend Watson from one of the Pentecostal churches, to organize caravans out of the city. That's ridiculous, alright? First of all, churches are not capable of doing this. They're not capable of organizing mass transit of 150,000 people or 100,000 people without cars. We needed to have a state-organized transit out, like Cuba, alright? Like when they have their storms, they have a whole system in place to truck everybody out here. That's

the same thing we need here. We need – the government here needs to look at Cuba and how they handle the hurricanes, and how they have mass transit out. That's betrayal number one, was this not providing the transportation out. And they knew. We have had bad storms before with Camille in 1965, and Betsy was 1969. They knew. This was 40 years in the making.

On top of this, though, betrayal number two was when they continued to push for the – betrayal number two, excuse me, was when for five days I did not hear, and I didn't run into anybody who heard on the radio, that they were distributing emergency supplies of food, water, or medicine, alright? The French Quarter was dry. We had tree – wind damage, but I work in Jackson Square as a Tarot card reader, okay? And I know -- I always go to Jackson Square, it gives me a feeling of security when I go. But anyways, they could have – from the Monday after Katrina hit, they could have put an emergency – for air drops, send marines in, and it would have been no problem setting up an emergency center for food and water.

They consciously did not do that. I have not gotten a good explanation as to why they didn't do it, and not just – there were many other areas too, there was uptown in Algiers. They had dry areas, too. There has never been an explanation to me as to why there were no emergency food or water. Eventually we started getting it when the army came in. After the army came in, and you'd just run up to the people in the army and they might give you some food or some ice or water, very rarely ice, but food or water, but the police were in no position to give out emergency supplies the first three days because many of the police did not have enough food and water. That's what they were telling me. And I had no doubt that they didn't. So you had even a situation where the police had no food and water. The people didn't know whether they were going to get food and water, and there was no announcement made, no real attempt made to the public to tell us where to get food and water.

The only thing – and this is betrayal number three, of the government here, was they told people after they left, in this period, the first five days after Katrina hit, to go down to the Superdome, and yet they did not have the resources to supply people with food, water, heat, and the Superdome was the last place – well, maybe other than the flood zone, was the last place people should have been going. You know, I have -- know that people went without food, went without water. They were degraded, humiliated. It was unsanitary. I really believe in my heart of hearts they would have been better off if they would have just stayed in the dry areas of -- like the French Quarter or Algiers or wherever they could get to. I think they would have been subject to a lot less abuse. I think maybe some more people would have survived.

But you know, on top of this incredible trauma of losing your home and losing all of your property and maybe losing loved ones, then you go off to this place called the Superdome and you're not allowed to go out, from what I heard, and you are treated like animals. I mean, we were hearing that, as we were holdouts, as we're called here. People, believe me, on the outside were hearing about this and it was horrifying, because we were supposed to be the next ones to go there. They were saying, "You have got to evacuate, you've got to evacuate." So we were just waiting for that knock on the door, and we we're saying, "Where are they going to send us?" Were they going to send to us the Superdome, Convention Center where they are not feeding them food, water, where they're treating them like animals? Hell no, we don't want to go there. And so, I think that that would be betrayal number three, would be that.

And betrayal number four – I mean, I could go on -- that I can remember, betrayal number four was that they – the local government tenaciously and doggedly until maybe the last day or so insisted upon pushing through the mandatory evacuation policies. And at this point you could say, well, we've got – it took them like three or four days to bus people out of the Superdome. So we had a situation where they

were still calling for mandatory evacuation, but they didn't have the way to transport people out, but even if they did, by that point, the people in the dry areas could survive. All we needed was food or water. It would have been a lot less traumatic. So we went through day after day of people telling us, authorities, that "You have to leave. You are going to be forced out." And okay, when that happens, that happens. We'll wait for the knock on the door. But it's like what can you say when you are waiting in your home, you have just survived the greatest natural catastrophe in the history of the country and you're waiting for the police to knock on the door, bang it down with a battering ram. You know, it's just -- it's psychological. So that's betrayal number four was a campaign of psychological warfare against the people who were in New Orleans but outside the Superdome.

And betrayal number five, the – oh God, the Red Cross. I haven't seen hide nor hair of them. I haven't seen hide nor hair of FEMA. I haven't seen hide nor hair of any of these non-profits. I will give the Salvation Army some credits. On September 6, they started delivering some hot dogs and some other stuff, which was –they're the only ones that did it. Hey, I wasn't there for that. Of course, I missed it. But now they have some food that I went and got yesterday. But other than the Salvation Army, they gave me two meals and a couple of sodas, we have gotten nothing. Other than the soldiers. Hey, hey, hey, we have got to like – you see those pictures of people in like the third world, you know, in Brazil or Africa running around after the soldiers, demanding that they throw them something? That's what we did. We do the same thing. So that's where we live.

I think that betrayal number five is that the federal – six – all right, six, is that the government just turned its back. The federal government just turned its back on us. Now, that might be better than what the city government – because the city government didn't, and I don't know which one is worse. The federal government turning its back on us, because being a person who is – do we call ourselves "holdouts" -- you know, we probably prefer to not deal with the government at this point than be brutalized by it. So I mean, obviously, I don't know what the Bush administration is doing. Obviously, they have screwed up totally, big-time. They should have gotten the food and water here. So that's betrayal number six.

Betrayal number seven is they're starting to make decisions about how to revitalize, restructure this country – excuse me, the city, without a public hearing. And I don't think they should do that until they start having public hearings, until we start having people back in New Orleans.

AMY GOODMAN: Mike Howell, speaking in his garden in the French Quarter. He lives on Barracks and refuses to leave.

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New Orleans Resident Discusses Race and Looting at Circle K

Monday, September 12th, 2005

http://www.democracynow.org/article.pl?sid=05/09/12/1426224

New Orleans resident Mike Howell is a "holdout" - one of those refusing to leave his home - in the French Quarter. He discusses the looting of a local grocery store saying, "this could happen in Santa Monica, California, it could happen on Long Island, New York, it could happen in Palm Beach, Florida...if people felt they were going to run out of food and water." [includes rush transcript]

- **Mike Howell**, New Orleans resident.

RUSH TRANSCRIPT

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AMY GOODMAN: We turn now to Mike Howell. He and his wife, Angela, are what are called "holdouts." They are refusing to leave their home in the French Quarter. In a minute, we'll hear Mike lay out what he considers the seven betrayals to the people of New Orleans. But first, we stood outside the Circle K.

> **MIKE HOWELL:** The store I'm standing in front of is Circle K, it's a local mini market like Stop N' Go. And I used to go to this store every morning for coffee, cigarettes, iced tea, whatever I wanted or Angela wanted. And I think the history of this store, as far as looting goes, pretty much reflects the history of looting recently in New Orleans. When I saw people looting this store, and I saw people repeatedly looting it for five days straight, this store was open, maybe not for business, but open for shopping. And people would come in and take out whatever they were going to take out, but what I noticed here is that the vast majority of people looting this store were white and middle class. Okay?
>
> And I saw this one woman take goods out of here, and she definitely lives in a house, a property owner, obviously fairly well to do, about 70, had very much the patrician air about her. And she had been hostile to street entertainers prior to the hurricane. Now this street has a [inaudible] street entertainer, and so she had always been kind of a law and order person, so to speak. But now, I noticed that she was walking outside the store with looted goods, and I walked up to her and just had a little fun, and I said,

"Isn't it illegal to take those products?" And she said, "Well, I earned them, and I'm going to keep them." This was a woman who used to complain about the homeless, the tarot card readers, the street musicians, the young blacks running around. Now, she went back to her $500,000 home with her looted goods. Okay?

On another occasion, a fellow we know, an associate, he's a retired surgeon, he looks just like Alfred Hitchcock, and we saw him coming out of the store. He turned and looked at us. He said, "I never dreamed I would be a looter, but now I'm a looter." So just imagine Alfred Hitchcock looting your local Stop N' Go or Mini Mart. That's what you had. That's pretty much reflected. We have people from the neighborhood, I guess, looked like people from the neighborhood, going in there and looting.

Now, I know, as far as race there was no – from what I observed, in terms of looting, walking down Rampart Street and other areas, you saw whites and blacks looting alongside one another. And I have yet to hear of any incident where there was any racial problems or antagonism. Everybody was busy doing New Orleans shopping. And so, I think what we see here is what could happen in Santa Monica, California, is what could happen on Long Island, New York. It's what could happen in Palm Beach, Florida. It's what could happen along the Gold Coast of Michigan Avenue, if they, people there, felt they were going to run out of food and water.

AMY GOODMAN: Mike Howell, a holdout in the French Quarter of New Orleans.

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August 30, 2007

New Orleans Hit By Another "Hurricane of Racism, Greed and Corruption"–Community Activist Malik Rahim

On the second anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, Democracy Now! broadcasts live from the Lower Ninth Ward in New Orleans. We take a look at the state of New Orleans two years after the storm with two local activists: Malik Rahim, cofounder of the Common Ground Collective and Alice Craft-Kerney of the Lower Ninth Ward Health Clinic. [Includes rush transcript]

Filed under Hurricane Katrina

At 9:38 a.m. local time on Wednesday a moment of silence was held across New Orleans to mark the moment the levees were breached two years ago.

Hurricane Katrina flooded about 80 percent of New Orleans, killed over 1,600 people and displaced another 1.5 million people from the Gulf Coast.

Only two thirds of the region's population has returned home. Few areas in New Orleans were as hard hit by Hurricane Katrina as the Lower Ninth Ward where we are broadcasting from today.

This predominantly African American, working-class neighborhood remains largely in ruins two years later.

In a moment we will be joined with Malik Rahim, cofounder of the Common Ground Collective and Alice Craft-Kerney of the Lower Ninth Ward Health Clinic. But first I want to turn back two years ago to rebroadcast part of Malik's first interview on Democracy Now just days after Katrina hit New Orleans.

- **Malik Rahim interviewed on Democracy Now, 9/5/05**

A week later Malik appeared again on Democracy Now and gave us a tour of the Algiers neighborhood. As our video cameras followed him, Malik showed us how corpses still remained in the street.

- **Malik Rahim interviewed on Democracy Now, 9/12/05**

Malik Rahim joins us again today as we broadcast from the lower ninth ward in New Orleans. He is a longtime community activist in New Orleans and cofounder of the Common Ground Collective. We are also joined by Alice Craft-Kerney of the Lower Ninth Ward Health Clinic.

- **Malik Rahim**, New Orleans community activist and cofounder of the Common Ground Collective.
- **Alice Craft-Kerney**, executive director of the Lower Ninth Ward Health Clinic.

Her home was devastated by the flooding of the Lower Ninth Ward. She is a former nurse with Charity Hospital in New Orleans but lost her job when Charity Hospital closed as a result of Hurricane Katrina.

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- Remembering Hurricane Katrina: Voices from the Storm

AMY GOODMAN: I'm here in the Lower Ninth Ward. Behind me is the Industrial Canal levee that broke two years ago between Lake Pontchartrain and the Mississippi River. At 9:38 a.m. local time on Wednesday, a moment of silence was held across New Orleans to mark the moment the levees were breached two years ago.

Hurricane Katrina flooded about 80% of New Orleans and killed well over 1,600 people, displacing another one-and-a-half million people from the Gulf Coast. Only two-thirds of the region's population has returned home.

Few areas in New Orleans were as hard hit by Hurricane Katrina as the Lower Ninth Ward, where we're broadcasting from today. This predominantly African American working-class neighborhood remains largely in ruins two years later.

In a moment, we'll be joined by Malik Rahim, cofounder of the Common Ground Collective, and Alice Craft-Kerney of the Lower Ninth Ward Health Clinic, but first I want to go back two years ago to rebroadcast a part of Malik's first interview on *Democracy Now!* just days after Katrina hit New Orleans.

> **MALIK RAHIM:** I would have commandeered everything, Greyhound buses, Amtrak trains, school buses, public service buses, and had them all filled with people, getting them out of harm's way. That was the very first thing I would have done. And then, second, I would ask for volunteers, volunteers of people that live in the community, that know the community, that didn't need a map to find out where such-and-such a street exists, and had them to come back in here. I would have had my police force to commandeer every boat that was available, because everybody knew the flooding was going to happen, you know, to make sure that people would have been getting out. I wouldn't have left it on a faith-based community. I would have made sure that everybody would have had a means that wanted to leave or they had the means to leave.

AMY GOODMAN: That was Malik Rahim speaking days after Hurricane Katrina. A week later, Malik was again on *Democracy Now!*, as he was giving us a tour of the Algiers neighborhood. As our video cameras followed him, Malik showed us how corpses still remained in the street.

> **MALIK RAHIM:** Now, his body been here for almost two weeks. Two weeks tomorrow, alright, that this man's body been laying here. And there's no reason for it. Look where we at. I mean, it's not flooded. There's no reason for them to be — left that body right here like this. I mean, that's just totally disrespect. You know? And, I mean, two weeks. Every day, we ask them about coming and pick it up. And they refuse to come and pick it up. And you could see, it's literally decomposing right here, right out in the sun. Every day we sit up and we ask them about it, because, I mean, this is close as you could get to tropical climate in America. And they won't do anything with it.
>
> **AMY GOODMAN:** Malik, do you know who this person is?
>
> **MALIK RAHIM:** No. But regardless of who it is, I wouldn't care if it's Saddam Hussein or bin Laden, nobody deserve to be left here. And the kids pass by here, and they're seeing it. I mean, the elderly, this is what's frightening a lot of people into leaving. We don't know if he's a victim of vigilantes or what. But that's all we know is that his body had been allowed to remain out here for over two weeks.

AMY GOODMAN: Well, Malik Rahim joins us again today, as we broadcast from the Lower Ninth Ward in New Orleans. He's a longtime community activist in New Orleans and cofounder of the Common Ground Collective. We're also joined by Alice Craft-Kerney of the Lower Ninth Ward Health Clinic. And we welcome you both to *Democracy Now!*, though it's odd to welcome you both to your own neighborhood as we come in from New York.

But, Malik, let's begin with you. Set the scene for us. I mean, outside the view of our camera, of our microphones right here, when we were down here two years ago, there were a lot of destroyed houses. Right now it's mainly nature taking over. We don't even see the foundations of the houses.

MALIK RAHIM: No. Most of the houses that wasn't destroyed during Katrina was demolished under our city's Good Neighbors Program. So what you have is — is just a series of empty lots. And it's a testimony of the lack of recovery. This is a testimony of a lack of, truly, support by our federal, state and local government for the upliftment of this community. You find other areas of the Lower Ninth Ward that have a large population of whites, the Holy Cross area, and it's doing well. But over here you only have — I know of only one house that has been totally rebuilt. So maybe about —

AMY GOODMAN: Who determines what gets built, what doesn't?

MALIK RAHIM: Funds. George Washington, Abraham Lincoln. You know, they make the — Hamilton — those are the ones who make the determination. If you don't have the money or if you don't have the strength to rebuild, then you are just in a dismal situation.

AMY GOODMAN: What is this Road Home fund?

MALIK RAHIM: You know what? When you find out, Amy, you ask me. Only thing I could say is it's funding for those who are well connected, you know, because those who don't have the connections, they haven't seen nothing but promises from Road

Home.

AMY GOODMAN: Tell us what happened two years ago here just behind us. There is the levee.

MALIK RAHIM: Well, three blocks — well, the levees broke, I believe it was because of the fact of the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet, which is just about two miles away from here, and when it pushed that storm surge through that canal, it came through and it broke the levee here at Industrial Canal. And a barge came through, and that barge traveled about three-and-a-half blocks, just crushing houses.

You know, this is an area that had the highest death toll in the entire city. Somewhere between 300 to 500 people lost their lives right here. A good friend of mine now, he lost his mother and his granddaughter, you know, the morning of the 29th. So you have many people here that have really suffered that pain.

And there wasn't no trauma counselors here. You know, you had people that, after going through this, after witnessing and experiencing the worst disaster to hit America, they have yet to have any type of counseling, and then they have yet to have any type of support in rebuilding their lives.

So you see the area where the people was hardest hit two years ago by a hurricane, now two years later they are still being the hardest hit by another hurricane, but this hurricane is called racism, greed and corruption.

AMY GOODMAN: Where are the people who had homes here who didn't die?

MALIK RAHIM: They are displaced all over. We have a mailing list of roughly around 700 of the residents in this area, and they're all over America. I mean, they all over America. We have some as far as Seattle, Washington, Miami. We have met some in New York, you know, from this area that's now living in New Jersey, at least in New Jersey. You know, but they are displaced all over America.

AMY GOODMAN: As we talk about recovery efforts, I want to play a clip of what President Bush told the country on September 15, 2005, when he visited New Orleans.

> **PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH:** And tonight, I also offer this pledge of the American people: throughout the area hit by the hurricane, we will do what it takes, we will stay as long as it takes to help citizens rebuild their communities and their lives. And all who question the future of the Crescent City need to know there is no way to imagine America without New Orleans. And this great city will rise again.

AMY GOODMAN: That was President Bush. He was speaking — I believe it was Jackson Square, where there was a candlelight vigil last night. The generators were put on for the first time. He was flooded, bathed in light for that speech. And then the generators were turned off, and they didn't see electricity for a long time. Malik?

MALIK RAHIM: Well, you know, anything that he said about Jackson Square — at Jackson Square, he was speaking to all the residents in that area. You know, and he has helped them. You know, they are recovered. The French Quarter is doing well. The New Orleans Saints is doing well. You know, the Garden District is doing well.

I'm talking about the Ninth Ward. I'm talking about this area, the Lower Ninth Ward. I'm talking about New Orleans East, where he wouldn't even put a blue tarp on the roofs of these houses, where they put blue tarps on — a sea of blue tarps on every other community. Here, nobody received anything. And two years later, nobody is

receiving anything.

AMY GOODMAN: Alice Craft-Kerney, you founded the health clinic that's here in the Lower Ninth Ward. You also lost your home.

ALICE CLARK-KERNEY: Yes, I did.

AMY GOODMAN: Where did you live?

ALICE CLARK-KERNEY: My home was in eastern New Orleans. And I received five-and-a-half feet of water in my home.

AMY GOODMAN: Where were you that day?

ALICE CLARK-KERNEY: Actually, I was here in the Lower Ninth Ward in my brother's home. He has a three-story historic home in the Holy Cross area.

AMY GOODMAN: Is his home OK?

ALICE CLARK-KERNEY: Well, he has decided to rebuild, and he has completed that reconstruction, and he and his wife are living in their home now.

AMY GOODMAN: And your home destroyed?

ALICE CLARK-KERNEY: My home, through the efforts of friends, brothers and sisters who saw my plight, they came down and they started working on my home. And it's about 80% complete, enough for me to move into.

AMY GOODMAN: Were you able to get Road Home funds?

ALICE CLARK-KERNEY: Not as of yet. I'm waiting to see what will happen. But you have to understand, Road Home appeared to be a program that was set up to fail. And many of the folks who did receive the Road Home money, really, that was not their intended target. The folks who were supposed to receive the money were supposed to be people who were flooded. Our state started giving money to people who had wind damage, and that was not the true intention. So those folks received money over folks who were actually flooded. So there's a problem there.

AMY GOODMAN: I saw Cynthia McKinney yesterday, the former congresswoman from Georgia. She was up protesting at Kennebunkport and then drove her way down here to be here for the second anniversary. And I asked her what she thought of President Bush coming here, and she said, "Did he bring money?" She said that's all that counted.

ALICE CLARK-KERNEY: Exactly.

AMY GOODMAN: The clinic, tell us about it

ALICE CLARK-KERNEY: Well, my friend Patricia Berryhill, who's been with me the entire time, she and I decided, once we started the clinic — now, I must tell you that Common Ground Relief — this is a project of Common Ground Relief, the Lower Ninth Ward Health Clinic, because Michelle Shin, who was an organizer down here in the Lower Ninth Ward, along with Leaders Creating Change Through Contribution, were able to come up with a plan for us to assist us to get this clinic up and running. Once we got the idea of a clinic, we needed people to run it who had medical experience, and then they turned to residents, and that was myself and Patricia Berryhill. This clinic was formed because there was a need. There was no primary healthcare here in the Lower Ninth Ward.

AMY GOODMAN: You're a nurse.

ALICE CLARK-KERNEY: Yes, I'm a registered nurse. And my friend Patricia Berryhill is a registered nurse who's Master's-prepared with over thirty-two years experience. And we have dealt with this population before, because we were both working at the Medical Center of Louisiana, Charity Hospital, and she was at the other campus, University.

AMY GOODMAN: Charity is closed.

ALICE CLARK-KERNEY: And Charity is closed.

AMY GOODMAN: Isn't Charity where they had a ceremony yesterday, setting up a mausoleum for a hundred identified remains?

ALICE CLARK-KERNEY: That's correct. But Charity was the safety-net provider for the medically indigent patients in the community, and with that being destroyed, with that infrastructure being destroyed, we knew that many people were going to be caught — the uninsured were going to be caught without any type of medical care. We saw people really just dying on both sides of the street, just because they didn't have access to medical care. And we decided we weren't going to wait. We saw people dying at Convention Center Boulevard, the Superdome, just waiting for the bus, and we decided we weren't going to wait for the healthcare bus. So we determined we were going to open this clinic.

And the clinic was opened by people giving their time, their talent. And what happened was we had folks from all over the country who came to renovate the building, and we had supplies, medical supplies and equipment that was sent down to us, contributions from folks like yourself, as well as some foundations, that got us started. And so, that's how the clinic actually started and opened.

AMY GOODMAN: What do you need now?

ALICE CLARK-KERNEY: Right now we need money for operating funds. We're dealing with a scarcity of healthcare professionals, because, just like my family left the region, many of the healthcare providers left the region.

AMY GOODMAN: Did I see a figure, something like 90% of doctors gone?

ALICE CLARK-KERNEY: I'm not going to say 90%, but there was a large number that actually left, never to come back again. And we're not just talking about doctors, we're talking about nurses, nurse practitioners, physical therapists, pharmacists, anybody in the healthcare field. All of these folks are gone, and many of them are not going to return. So that leaves us here with a few healthcare professionals, and they can basically name their salary. So we're competing against hospitals with wonderful fringe benefit packages, sign-on bonuses. And it's very difficult at this point. So we need funds so that we can actually attract good people to the clinic.

AMY GOODMAN: Malik Rahim, as we wrap up this segment, we're sitting in front of Common Ground Relief, and there are all different signs. One says, "Tourist, shame on you. Drive by without stopping, paying to see my pain. 1,600-plus died here." And another says, "Wish list: men's clothing, food items, cleaning supplies, baby supplies." How do you keep going here?

MALIK RAHIM: Basically off the generosity of grassroots people.

AMY GOODMAN: What about the city?

MALIK RAHIM: Two years later, we have served 170,000 people in direct services, and we have yet to even be visited by any elected official. So we don't receive no federal, state or local support.

AMY GOODMAN: I spoke to Mayor Ray Nagin yesterday. He had dinner with President Bush the night before. I asked him what his demands were, and he said it wasn't a time for demands.

MALIK RAHIM: Well, you know, if your home is rebuilt, if you're living well, if you're full, then maybe it wasn't the time. But if you're hungry, if you're homeless, if you have been traditionally disenfranchised, then the time has always been there, you know.

AMY GOODMAN: You travel not only around the country, around the world now. What is the message that you are spreading?

MALIK RAHIM: Well, the one that I'm spreading most is the fact that we had vigilantes in this city that have killed young African American males, I mean, with complete immunity. One equated killing young males as — equated it with pheasant season, shooting pheasants in South Dakota. And nothing is done. That person whose body that I showed you in Algiers who was killed by vigilantes, his body wasn't identified. He is one of those hundred.

These are the things that we are spreading, the injustice that exists here, that Jefferson Parish refused to open up its border to African Americans, that there's two forms of America: there's America that's for the white and the rich, and then there's another America for the poor, the minorities, the disenfranchised. And that has to change.

So what we're trying to promote now is that we have to come together, that New Orleans is a testing ground for this nation, that if we fail this test on bringing democracy and justice to New Orleans, then this country is doomed.

AMY GOODMAN: I want to thank you both for being with us. Malik Rahim is founder of Common Ground Relief. We're sitting in front of Common Ground Relief and, behind that, the levee that was breached two years ago. Alice Craft-Kerney is executive director of the Lower Ninth Ward Health Clinic, her home also devastated in East New Orleans. I want to thank you both for being with us. We'll be back with People's Hurricane Relief Fund.

Transcript

Rebecca Solnit #1
"A Paradise Built in Hell"

AMY GOODMAN: We continue on this fourth anniversary special, yes, four years after the storm. Anjali?

ANJALI KAMAT: It's widely acknowledged that an estimated 1,400 people in New Orleans died in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. An underreported part of that story is the killings of at least eleven African American men in the days after the storm. They were shot by a group of white vigilantes in the predominantly white New Orleans neighborhood of Algiers Point.

Local police have never conducted an investigation into these deaths, but after an explosive *Nation* magazine cover story by ProPublica reporter A.C. Thompson last December, the FBI initiated a probe into the Algiers Point shootings. Federal agents are now investigating the possible role of the New Orleans Police Department in the deaths of one of the men, Henry Glover, whose burnt remains were discovered in a Mississippi River levee not far from a local police station.

We'll be joined in a few moments by writer Rebecca Solnit, who urged journalist A.C. Thompson to investigate this story. But first I want to turn to excerpts from a video produced by the Nation Institute and Hidden Driver. It's narrated by A.C. Thompson and features interviews with some of the victims of the vigilante violence.

> **A.C. THOMPSON:** At the ferry terminal in Algiers Point, the National Guard established an evacuation zone and began busing flood victims to Houston. On September 1st, 2005, Donnell Herrington left his home and began walking toward the ferry terminal with his cousin, Marcel Alexander, and a friend, Chris Collins. To get to the evacuation zone, the trio had to walk through Algiers Point.
>
> **DONNELL HERRINGTON:** You know, I was talking to my cousin and our friend, and I was telling them that, yeah, we're finally about to get out of here. You know, I was talking. I was talking, because my cousin was on the side of me, on the right side, and I looked down at my arms and everything, and — because, you know, some of the shots hit me in my arm, my chest, my neck, my stomach. And, you know, I just saw blood everywhere.
>
> **MARCEL ALEXANDER:** As I'm trying to pick him up, they shot us again, so I fell. And Donnell's trying to get up, and we all were trying. We're panicking now.
>
> **DONNELL HERRINGTON:** And he was like hollering, like, "You OK? You alright?" And he was, you know — like I said, he was pretty hysterical, man. And when I — you know, when I saw the guy, when I actually recognized the guy with the shotgun, you know, it was like he was reloading or something.
>
> **MARCEL ALEXANDER:** As I'm trying to pick him up, they coming towards us with the gun. It's like probably like — at that time, it's like probably two or three of them.

DONNELL HERRINGTON: And so, now I'm trying to get out of this guy — trying to get away from him, you know?

MARCEL ALEXANDER: Two of them coming my way and one of them coming at Donnell with — [inaudible] Donnell. And I'm running, me and Chris, running, running. They was like, "We're gonna get you! We're gonna get you, nigger!"

DONNELL HERRINGTON: I ran up into the corner. And they had these two guys in a car. They had these two white men in a car, a older white guy and another — you know, a younger white guy. And they had their shirts off. I can remember, you know? And they were like in a small pickup truck.

MARCEL ALEXANDER: We know y'all — what y'all was doing. We saw y'all.

A.C. THOMPSON: Marcel goes on to say the vigilantes thought he was a looter.

DONNELL HERRINGTON: And, you know, I'm asking these guys, I'm like, "Help! You know, help me! You know what I mean?" And the guys was like — I can remember him telling me, "We can't help you, you know? Get out of here." You know what I'm saying? And one of the guys, one of them — I can remember one of them calling me a nigger. You know, "Get out of here, nigger! We can't help you. We're liable to shoot you ourselves." That was the last thing I heard him say.

A.C. THOMPSON: Eventually, Herrington got help. A black neighbor drove him to the hospital, where doctors pulled seven lead pellets out of his neck and repaired a large hole in his jugular vein, saving him from death.

ANJALI KAMAT: We're joined now from Santa Fe, New Mexico by author, historian and activist Rebecca Solnit. Her latest book examines Katrina and other disasters; it's called *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster*. It chronicles both the crimes of the vigilantes and the powerful during Katrina, as well as the numerous instances of altruism, generosity and courage displayed by the vast majority of people who lived through this catastrophe.

Rebecca Solnit, welcome to *Democracy Now!* Why don't you start by talking about how you discovered this story and the process you went through before you got A.C. Thompson to investigate this? You write about how many of the mainstream media journalists you spoke to didn't believe this story.

REBECCA SOLNIT: You know, the thing that still amazes me two-and-a-half years later is that the pieces of this story were all over town. If you wanted to know that this — these crimes had happened, you would know it. It was pretty clear the mainstream media didn't want to know. Nobody was really looking at it. I had talked to volunteers who worked at the Algiers Common Ground clinic. They told me that vigilantes were confessing to them about the murders, about several murders. I talked to Malik Rahim, who I know was on this show right as all this was unfolding. He was talking about as many as eighteen men being murdered in that part of New Orleans Parish. I had seen Donnell Herrington, who you just showed, on Spike Lee's documentary. I'd seen another documentary in which the

vigilantes confessed on camera. I'd seen a lot of other pieces. It was really clear that there was a story here.

And I couldn't find anyone to take it, until I talked to A.C., who is a friend of a lot of friends of mine. We were in the same social circles in San Francisco. And he eventually picked it up, with the support of *The Nation* magazine, as well as ProPublica. And it took him a long time to move forward with that. But he's the one who really brought a lot more of the details to light, tracked down Donnell, talked directly to the perpetrators, and put it together. But, you know, a lot of the basic information was out there, if that's how you were willing to think about Katrina. But that's now how a lot of people were ready to think about it.

AMY GOODMAN: Rebecca, your latest piece, "Four Years On, Katrina Remains Cursed by Rumor, Cliché, Lies and Racism." Talk about Katrina. Talk about New Orleans four years later.

REBECCA SOLNIT: You know, I think one of the important things to keep in mind is that the great majority of people behaved really well, that I was trying to write the counter-story to the story that most people heard in the beginning, which was about large groups of marauding hordes reverting to barbarism and savagery and violence and whatever. And I went to New Orleans to look at what really happened, which was an enormous amount of volunteerism, resourcefulness, altruism, generosity, heroism, on the part of the people who were stranded, on the part of the people who came in as volunteers and rescuers.

And the question for me is, so why did the minority misbehave? And in this case, I'm not talking about the minority the media were willing to target, which was supposed to be sort of the black underclass; the minority who were public officials and the vigilantes. They assumed, falsely, that because the public, in general, was behaving barbarically, they needed barbaric means to repress that public. Vigilante murders are part of a larger picture that includes the sheriff of Gretna and his henchmen turning people back from evacuating the flooded city at gunpoint, incidents of police violence, but also the mayor, the governor, FEMA and a lot of other people treating the city of New Orleans as though it was full of criminals, rather than victims, and essentially turning it into a prison city in which people were stranded and desperate. And the hospital evacuations, for example, could have happened a lot faster. It could have all happened a lot faster, if people had thought about these things differently.

ANJALI KAMAT: Rebecca Solnit, in your book, you talk about several disasters, and you mention how, even in this worst of times, in the midst of disasters and in times like this, the best instincts of people tend to come out. Talk about the sense of community that was built. You know, we're focused on the deaths, on the vigilante shootings, but people also helped each other, ordinary people. How did they come together at this moment?

REBECCA SOLNIT: Yes, in most disasters, people do behave altruistically, resourcefully. They improvise communities. And they often find in that a real sense of joy. You see that in the 1906 earthquake. You saw that in 9/11. You see that in Katrina. And essentially, that the normal roles and boundaries that confine people are removed, and it's absolutely necessary that people connect with each other, that they make strong decisions, that they take care of each other. And that's what they do.

One of the tragedies of New Orleans is that, because of the stereotypes that turn into rumors, that turn into media reports, people believed that ordinary human beings were savages and were behaving barbarically. The truth of the matter is, even inside the Convention Center, even in the worst places, people were taking care of each other. People were improvising all kinds of communities in the school

rooms and other places where they took refuge. And New Orleans, since then, has had hundreds of thousands of volunteers come in to work with the people of New Orleans. And for me, that's the big story. And demographically, it's much, much bigger. You're talking about hundreds of thousands of people. And the minority who behaved terribly matter, but it's important to keep the perspective that this is not how most people behave. This is indeed a minority.

AMY GOODMAN: You put this in a very big context, dealing with disasters, from the 1906 earthquake in San Francisco to the 1917 explosion that tore up Halifax, Nova Scotia, to the 1985 Mexico City earthquake, to Katrina. Talk, in those cases, about the similarities you saw, the individual heroes and heroines and the institutional crimes, the institutional lack of response.

REBECCA SOLNIT: You know, a lot of my work has been based on the field of disaster sociology, which emerged after the World War II, when the US government decided it wanted to know how human beings would behave in the aftermath of an all-out nuclear war. The assumption, as it often is, is that we would become childlike and sheepish and panic and be helpless, or that we'd become sort of venal and savage and barbaric. And the disaster scholars started to look at this and eventually dismantled almost every stereotype we have and found that people are actually, as I've been saying, resourceful, altruistic, brave, innovative and often oddly joyful, because a lot of the alienation and isolation of everyday life is removed. And, you know, you saw that in the 1906 earthquake, which I studied a lot for the centennial a few years ago, that people created these community kitchens, that they were extremely resourceful and helpful. And you see that all through. You see that in Mexico City. You saw that in 9/11.

What you also see is that because the authorities think that we're monsters, they themselves panic and become the monsters in disaster. Some of the sociologists I worked with — Lee Clarke and Caron Chess — call this "elite panic," and that's the panic that matters in disasters, the sense that things are out of control; we have to get them back in control, whether that means shooting civilians suspected of stealing things, whether that means focusing on control and weapons as a response, rather than on help and support or just letting people do what they already are doing magnificently. And so, it really upends not only the sense of what happens in disaster, in these extreme moments, but I think it upends our sense of human nature, who most of us are and who we want to be. There's enormous possibility in disaster to see how much people want to be members of a stronger society, to be better connected, to have meaningful work, how much everyday life prevents that.

AMY GOODMAN: Rebecca, we're going to have to leave it there. Rebecca Solnit, author of *A Paradise Built in Hell*.
