

9-2012

## Book Review: The Neoliberal Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, Late Capitalism, and the Remaking of New Orleans

J. Mark Souther

Cleveland State University, [m.souther@csuohio.edu](mailto:m.souther@csuohio.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/clhist\\_facpub](https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/clhist_facpub)



Part of the [Public History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

**How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!**

---

### Original Citation

Cedric Johnson, ed., *The Neoliberal Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, Late Capitalism, and the Remaking of New Orleans* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), *Journal of American History* 99, no. 2 (Sept. 2012): 682–683.

### Repository Citation

Souther, J. Mark, "Book Review: The Neoliberal Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, Late Capitalism, and the Remaking of New Orleans" (2012). *History Faculty Publications*. 124.  
[https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/clhist\\_facpub/124](https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/clhist_facpub/124)

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the History Department at EngagedScholarship@CSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of EngagedScholarship@CSU. For more information, please contact [library.es@csuohio.edu](mailto:library.es@csuohio.edu).

*The Neoliberal Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, Late Capitalism, and the Remaking of New Orleans.* Ed. by Cedric Johnson. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011. 416 pp. Cloth, \$75.00. Paper, \$25.00.)

Even before the floodwaters abated in New Orleans in late 2005, commentators began to question characterizations of Hurricane Katrina's devastation as a natural disaster. Many scholars have explored the ways the historic flood was also a human-made catastrophe, focusing variously on inadequate government planning for evacuating and sheltering residents, long-term policy decisions that left the Crescent City's levees vulnerable, and the social geography of inequality that placed some at greater risk than others. Cedric Johnson's edited volume, *The Neoliberal Deluge*, comprising twelve essays mostly by sociologists, political scientists, and communication scholars, makes a sustained case that the disaster of Katrina is rooted in something more pervasive and fundamental: global neoliberal restructuring.

Johnson and his contributors understand neoliberalism as an anti-Keynesian ideology in which a state divests itself of social spending in favor of privatized, market-driven solutions. The authors claim that this paradigm, which emerged full-blown in the United States during the Ronald Reagan presidency, is more critical to understanding modern American society than is neoconservatism because the latter often presupposes that socially conservative and fiscally libertarian agendas drove

political change. Thus, while *The Neoliberal Deluge* is a new interpretation of the 2005 disaster, it is chiefly a case study of how neoliberal society creates and manages crises.

The essays focus on preparation, evacuation, sheltering, rescue, relief, cleanup, and reconstruction. They detail how neoliberal stakeholders such as hoteliers, home builders, and private security and reconstruction contractors were beneficiaries of so-called disaster capitalism and how celebrity philanthropists (notably Brad Pitt) and grassroots volunteers served as unwitting handmaidens of the neoliberal agenda by playing into the argument that private responses were most appropriate. The book contends that the federal government conceptualized crises as lying largely outside the realm of legitimate political control and managed the image of crisis through control of mainstream media. It also examines the responsibility of neoliberalism for troubling developments in public housing and education, neighborhood reconstruction, and comprehensive urban planning. Finally, the volume questions the extent to which progressive responses to neoliberalism could take root after Katrina, particularly in light of the brief window of time when news media stepped outside the normal constraints of disaster reportage.

Johnson's collection will interest historians of Hurricane Katrina with its close problematizing of post-storm responses, ranging from a philanthropic live-work compound for relocated storm survivors to the nation's most extensive charter school experiment. Some of the responses receive their first serious treatment in this volume. *The Neoliberal Deluge* is not without shortcomings, however, at least for an audience of historians. True to its title, it tends to force all aspects of post-Katrina responses into the mold of neoliberalism, which ignores the fact that nongovernmental actions were always part of the equation, even when New Deal liberalism was at high tide. Readers may detect an overreliance on textual analysis that assigns too much value to semantics, as well as a devaluation of long-term historical patterns. Recent historians of the new conservatism, moreover, may view this collection as one-dimensional when placed alongside a growing historiography that explores the

highly contingent nature of modern conservative power in the United States. Although the volume presents neoliberalism as an ineluctable, almost seismic force in recent history, historians may well counter that a range of social, cultural, economic, and political factors have constrained any wholesale shift to market-driven politics. Nonetheless, *The Neoliberal Deluge* is an original and important addition to the growing body of scholarly work on the human-made disaster that accompanied the natural disaster of Katrina.

J. Mark Souther  
*Cleveland State University*  
*Cleveland, Ohio*