

EDITED VOLUME SERIES

Günter Bischof (ed.)

Regional Economic Development Compared: EU-Europe and the American South

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**Regional Economic Development Compared:
EU-Europe and the American South**

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Table of Contents

Günter Bischof	
Preface	7
 Ronald Hall	
The Development of Regional Policy in the Process of European Integration: An Overview	13
 James C. Cobb	
The American South: Regional Development Strategies in Global Context	35
 Cynthia L. Rogers, Stephen Ellis, Grant Hayden	
Economic Development: Traps and Accountability	49
 Elisabeth Springler	
Theories of Regional Development and Implications for Housing Market	65
 Martin Heintel	
Urban and Regional Development in the Case of New Orleans ... And a Tentative Public Policy Comparison between the USA and EU	81

Martin Heintel

Urban and Regional Development in the Case of New Orleans ... And a Tentative Public Policy Comparison between the USA and the EU

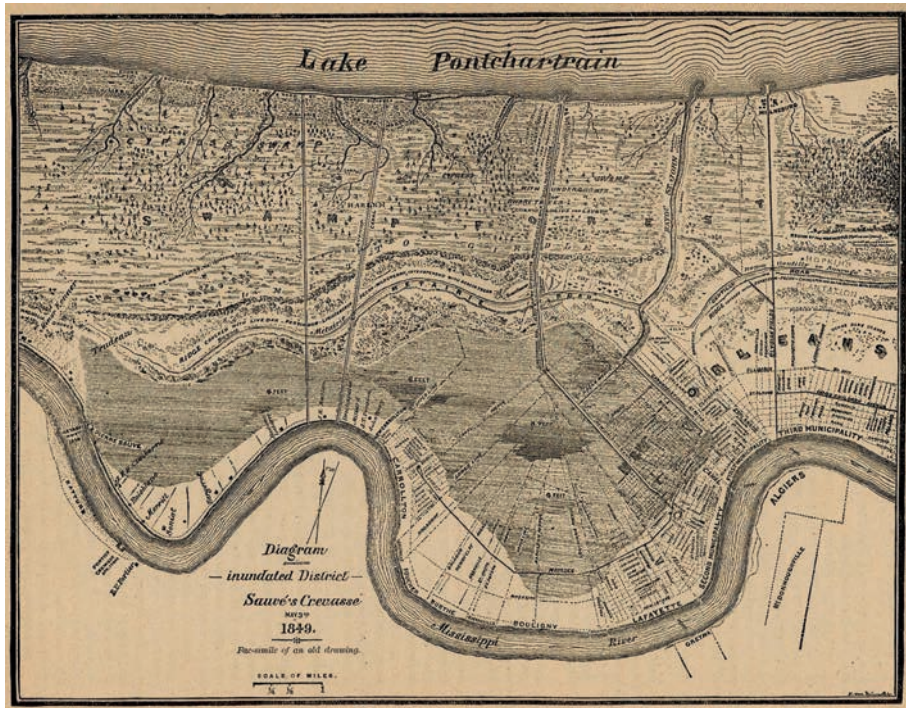
How much government is needed to provide for public goods, infrastructure and daily needs? This is an issue that is not only a concern for European nations and municipalities, but a battleground of partisan and state interests particularly in the U.S. or, as the example of New Orleans shows, a matter of controversy even within a city.

Is urban planning an issue of responsible public policy – national and regional – or simply a matter of temporary public interest due to the post-Katrina crisis situation? What is the significance of “precautionary policies” for New Orleans? What role did urban planning have until 2005, prior to Hurricane Katrina, how does the situation present itself today and how will it in the future? Where are the parallels and differences between U.S.-American and EU-European developments in respect to urban and regional development, to reconstruction and civic and social responsibility?

Planning Once ...

Looking back at the time before Katrina, one can, without much analysis, speak of a planning failure in the case of New Orleans; also, many problems were homemade. It was not always that way, as the original settlement history of New Orleans shows. New Orleans was founded on the Mississippi river banks (see ill. 1). The French Quarter and the Garden District were not affected by the flood, as they are situated above sea level.

Illustration 1: New Orleans settlement area in 1849



Source: <http://www.lib.utexas.edu> (08.12.2007)

Due to the massive expansion of the city area and as a result of wetland drainage becoming technically feasible, New Orleans today is situated, for the most part, below sea level; also, the city is still sinking. New Orleans has to permanently rely on technological know-how, maintenance of levee and pump systems, and hence is highly resource-dependent.

Anthropogenic influences such as the dredging of rivers for the largest U.S. port, the building of canals for the oil industry in the coastal marches, dams in the upper reaches of the Mississippi, and additional drainage canals have to be factored in here; at the same time, they also contributed to the erosion of natural protection systems such as marshlands or barrier islands. Environmental phenomena such as sea-level rise due to global warming and a higher probability of hurricanes forming in the gulf have been causes of continuing uncertainty until today. All of this is sufficiently known; simulations and

warnings to this effect had been published for years by Louisiana State University (LSU) and the University of New Orleans (UNO). Independent of these large-area human-made changes in the Mississippi delta, it was clear that the city's levee system was utterly inadequate for a category 5 hurricane. Nevertheless, not much happened in terms of precautionary measures before 2005.

Back then already, simulations showed that, if no preservation measures were taken for the coastal wetlands in the future, the Mississippi delta would have disappeared by 2009 and New Orleans would become a city by the seaside. Given the massive urban sprawl the city had seen, an effective flood protection system was nothing short of a necessity of survival; an insight that, in retrospect, was imposed, more than by anything else, by hurricane Katrina.

On a global scale, New Orleans is certainly not the only city in danger of submersion; however, it should be possible here to put the necessary measures in place – maybe setting an example for other coastal wetland areas and seaside cities. What is needed here is public planning and implementation of long worked-out bundles of measures; also conceivable would be public-private partnerships, e.g. in cooperation with the oil industry. In this respect, quite a few things have in fact happened in the past nine years.

Already in the 1980s, there had been different plans to save New Orleans from going under. Reaching an agreement on the matter was difficult; and eventually it was Katrina which gave cause for massive investment programs. Numerous federal and state agencies were responsible and had authority with regard to planning and taking specific actions in wetland areas. In late 1998, a plan for the restoration of the Louisiana coastal area (“Coast 2050”) had already been presented, based on a cooperative participatory process which involved the Governor's Office, the Louisiana Department of Natural Resources, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the federal Environmental Protection Agency, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as well as all 20 coastal parish governments. However, the plan was not binding on any of the parties involved. It was considered as too expensive and a mere vision of the participant scientists.¹

What is more interesting about this example is the question of the competence, responsibility, and priorities of national, regional and local policies – not least in comparison with European countries. For nobody, not even in the USA, would seriously believe

1 Mark Fischetti, “Wenn New Orleans versinkt,” in *Spektrum der Wissenschaft*, Dossier 2: *Die Erde im Treibhaus* (2005): 75–82.

that the population should be responsible on their own for a system of levees with a total length of more than 500 kilometers as well as for its improvement and maintenance. The fundamental question of the fundability of a sound levee system that would withstand category 5 storms did not really pose itself for the world's only remaining "superpower" engaged in waging and financing several wars at one. In fact, "Make levees not war" had become a resounding slogan of the post-Katrina time.

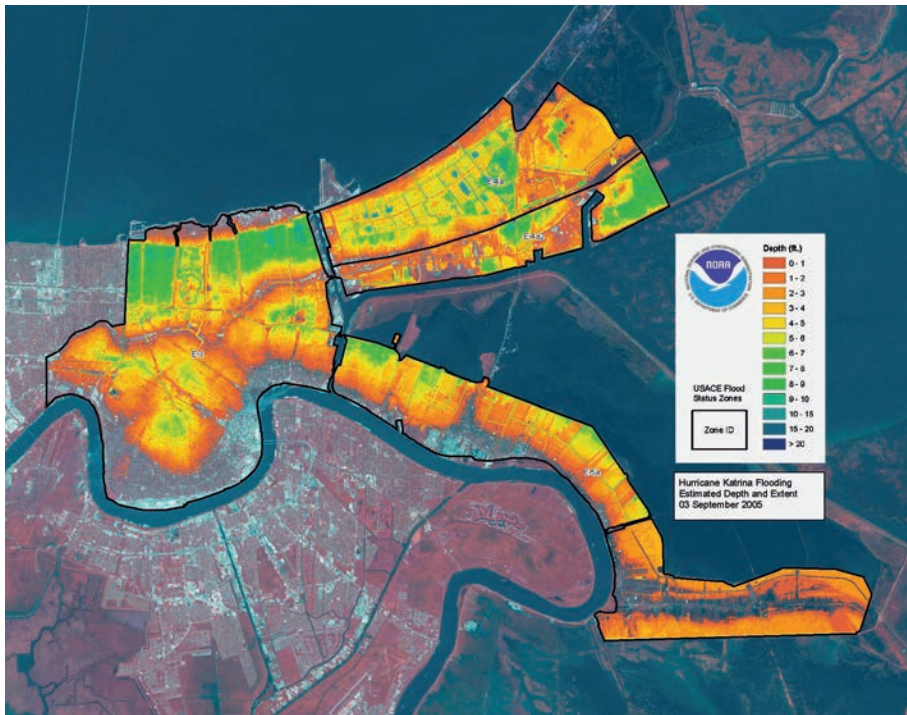
The city's own funds were insufficient for the purpose; regional tax revenues had been too low even prior to Katrina and, after it, only reached a far-below-average 82 percent of the "pre-storm level". Municipal budget shortfalls had affected the streets in the urban area, which had already been in bad repair before Katrina, as well as urban road construction on the whole. Nevertheless, the question of national priorities and political decisions with regard to planning and reconstruction measures has remained crucial until the present day.

A Reminder: Katrina, the Big Storm of 2005

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina brought on the disaster that marked a historic divide for the city of New Orleans: between the time before and after. At that time, Katrina was the sixth-strongest hurricane ever measured. After failures of several levees and floodwalls, waters from the city's system of outfall canals flooded almost 80 percent of the city area (see ill. 2), which in part was three meters below sea level. According to statistics, this catastrophic natural disaster killed about 1,800 people.² Numerous public facilities such as schools, hospitals, or the Dillard University, remained closed for a long time after the event, in some parts of the city, they still are today. Not only was it the most devastating natural disaster to date, but also the one whose immediate consequences entailed the highest costs. Donations of money and relief goods were coming in from all over the world, from Kuwait to Bangladesh. Tens of thousands left the city in the wake of the disaster, many of them have not yet returned to their neighborhoods.

² See http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hurrikan_Katrina (last accessed January 21, 2014)

Illustration 2: Flood levels in New Orleans on September 3, 2005



Source: <http://www.noaa.gov> (last accessed May 13, 2014)

Urban planning deficits in New Orleans emerged not only in respect to the vital question of wetlands and levee systems; in fact, it was omnipresent over a long period of time. Sometimes it seems like a tug-of-war between different special-interest lobbies or like an endeavor, in which each and every step in planning and implementation took an enormous effort.

A Few Urban-planning Examples in Retrospect

Infrastructure which had long been in disrepair in many areas suffered further damage from Katrina, as far as public transportation, design of public spaces, but also basic needs like electricity supply and medical infrastructure were concerned.

Public transportation still is not an issue to win elections in the USA, unlike gas prices. In many American cities, public bus systems were set up, historically, with the main purpose of connecting black neighborhoods to white residential districts. This is no longer up to today's requirements of economic and social interaction in the urban fabric. However, bus systems, like passengers, have only changed insignificantly. Katrina further crippled an urban public transportation system that had in no way met present-day standards in the first place. Frequency, fixed intervals, schedule punctuality and comfort were somewhat unfamiliar concepts for the Regional Transit Authority. Also, a number of lines – including, for example, the famous “St. Charles Streetcar” – had been closed down after Katrina.

Moreover, different public transportation companies operate in different parishes (counties), so that often two tickets have to be bought even within city limits, and to make things worse, bus schedules are not synchronized, which – with the usual two buses per line per hour per direction – leads to very long traveling times. A ride from downtown New Orleans to the airport takes more than two hours on public transportation, while in easy traffic it is only a 20-minute drive. There is no high-frequency public transportation service between the state capital of Baton Rouge and New Orleans, although after Katrina even more people have to undertake 80-mile commute (one way) on a daily basis and are stuck in traffic every morning and evening.

Electricity supply is, or was, deficient as well in many areas. One would have assumed that in the country with the highest energy consumption per capita electricity supply works fine and without trouble. But here, too, there is a permanent debate about duties and responsibilities going on between public utilities and private customers. Is supply management and planning a public or a private responsibility? The slogan of the generator commercial on regional TV, “Life goes on when power goes out,” therefore seems not too far-fetched. Also, water-pipes bursts all over New Orleans contributed to the precarious supply situation.

One year after the disaster, a large number of window panes was still missing in the Louisiana State Hospital building downtown, halfway between the Superdome and the Hyatt Hotel, numerous hospital units had not been reopened yet, and the programs for medical students were in jeopardy. Some hospitals have remained closed down until today, doctors, nurses, and therapists have, as it were, vanished from the city with the advent of disaster. There has since been an acute shortage of medical care. The New Orleans Charity Hospital, socially the place to turn to for the uninsured, closed its gates after

Katrina. This is a development that clearly illustrates the “care gap.” While there is talk of a “hospital building boom” in suburban areas throughout the United States, nothing like this can be observed in the sometimes poorer inner-city neighborhoods. Infrastructure is quick to follow to those urban outskirts with high recreational value where the more well-off pensioners settle.

Reconstruction

Many of the companies that took part in the rebuilding of the city were rumored to have close affiliations with the President and the Republican Party. What would be considered a flagrant distortion of competition, downright corruption, or at least a veritable public scandal in the European Union (campaign financing rewarded by public commissions) is an integral part of the American business, politics and economic policy. This certainly admits of the conclusion that public contracts are not always awarded “with a plan” and a long-term perspective, all the more so since planning in politics rarely looks beyond the current legislative period. This does not make much of a fundamental difference between the political logics of the European Union and the USA, but becomes a matter of public interest if selective affiliations come into play. After all, planning, infrastructure, and contract awarding largely depend on economic activities. Not without reason, the unemployment rate in Louisiana reached a historic low and at that time was the lowest throughout the USA after Katrina (July 2006: 2.6 %).

The rebuilding of the city was not an immediate national priority although then-president George W. Bush had personally promised that “we will do what it takes, we will stay as long as it takes, to help citizens rebuild their communities and their lives.” But under a Republican presidency Louisiana in general and the democratic bastion of New Orleans in particular were facing tough times. Also, the reconstruction of far-flung areas of New Orleans was a battleground of rivaling factions. Consensus remained out of reach for quite some time. “Black interests”, “white interests”, real-estate speculators, and politicians of every complexion all were involved in the debate. More than 150,000 houses kept rotting away for two years, entire urban districts (“Lower Ninth Ward”) appeared like vast derelict areas, in part without water and electricity, for a long time.

The reconstruction of New Orleans was overshadowed by fierce political turf battles. In early November 2006, the announced presentation of “Neighborhood Recovery

Plans” by Mayor Nagin and City Council president Thomas to the “Louisiana Recovery Authority Board” (LRA) which controlled more than \$10 million of federal relief funds, was cancelled. The background of this was a sharp public controversy about two different urban planning processes, the “New Orleans Neighborhood Rebuilding Plan” (“Lambert Plan”) developed on behalf of the City Council and the “Unified New Orleans Plan” (UNOP) that was administrated by the “Greater New Orleans Foundation”.³

Both planning processes mentioned had been based on a combination of professional planning and citizen participation. However, both were also marred by a “collision of confusion” (ibid. 3). With financial resources being insufficient in the first place, parallel planning activities of such a scale made little sense. On the contrary, important decisions and infrastructure measures were even further delayed.

The main criticism of the “Lambert Plan” was that only the 49 inundated neighborhoods were incorporated in the planning process. The plan was therefore criticized for being a “patchwork,” to which the UNOP was supposed to pose an alternative in that it – a city-wide planning process with participation from numerous planning teams from all over the U.S. – also integrated the 24 non-flooded neighborhoods.

In the background of these rivaling planning activities, however, was a central question raised by neighborhood activists, namely, that of the political responsibility for public planning. Should a non-profit foundation be responsible for the reconstruction of the city, or rather the elected and politically legitimated city government and legislature? In those EU member states that advocate a system of social market economy the answer to this question is simpler. State responsibility and relief is taken for granted here – and readily accepted.

Unlike in Europe, precautionary public policy for the broad masses plays a subordinate role, and often is openly rejected in the USA. Perhaps the best known example of this is the heated and intricate discussion about a public health insurance system. Even national disaster relief is highly controversial throughout the USA – in the European Union, a special emergency budget is held in order to be able to adequately respond to a situation. So how about planning, or the attitude toward planning as a public service or precautionary public policy? Can planning actually work where society as a whole tends to reject, rather than advocate, state or communal responsibility for individuals? Or to

3 S. Lewis/S. Writer, “City Planning: Administration Clashes Lead to Delay,” in: *Driftwood; The Community Newspaper of the University of New Orleans*, vol. 50, issue 10 (2006): 3–12 (here 3).

put it differently, can it be that the case of New Orleans is about the individual fates of a number of people losing their livelihood basis?

The example of New Orleans shows that apparently little public trust is placed in public planning – and such distrust seems substantiable by the case examples mentioned. It is not without reason that planned economy and market economy were antagonistic global socio-economic models for a long time. There was a widespread impression that Katrina only cast light on what had already been dysfunctional before – namely, planning.

“Pre-disaster planning seems to have been as poor in this specific case as post-disaster management,” Manfred Prisching drily states in summary of the situation.⁴ It is little wonder therefore that in the post-Katrina midterm elections there were independent candidates running for Congress on the sole slogan of being in support of the improvement of the levee system and the reconstruction of New Orleans.

The public and private interest in the reconstruction of the city was also informed by other external factors. Would businesses forced out by the flood find their way back into the city, securing future regional tax revenues, and would most of the evacuees return to New Orleans?

The Rebirth of New Orleans

It has been almost a decade now since August 29, 2005, and Hurricane Katrina is history. Traces of its course of devastation are still visible in many places today. But, in 2014, what first hits the eye is not the lingering effects of this natural disaster, but rather the many things that have since happened, been rebuilt, renewed or invested in. This process—obstacle-ridden, painful and with many temporary setbacks as it was – perhaps also is easier to communicate from an “outside” perspective than with an “inside” view of things.

4 Manfred Prisching, *Good Bye New Orleans: Der Hurrikan Katrina und die amerikanische Gesellschaft* (Graz: Leykam, 2006), 41. Manfred Prisching, a sociologist from the University of Graz, had started out on a sabbatical at the University of New Orleans, when Katrina struck. He lived through the storm in the Hyatt Hotel next to the Superdome and was a first hand observer of the chaos in New Orleans after the storm. His book on New Orleans after Katrina was one of the very first books to be published on Katrina; it was part participant observation, part sociological disaster analysis.

Michael Hecht, president of the Greater New Orleans Economic Development Group, brought the matter to the point in October 2013 at a workshop on “Regional Economic Development in Europe and the United States” held at the University of New Orleans, when he said that “it is hard not to benefit from 150 billion in investments over the course of the reconstruction.” It has taken a while, though, for the money to get to where it is now.

Although those parts of the city particularly affected by the flood still have less population than they had in pre-Katrina times and although far from everything has been repaired or restored, the city is growing again, mainly at the periphery but also in some inner city areas. These are new population groups who made a very conscious decision to return, or newly move, here to live and work in New Orleans. They are younger, often with a better education, among them many artists and alternative people who inform part of the city’s atmosphere.

All of a sudden, there is bicycle traffic in town – something rather untypical for a U.S. city – and there are new-built bike paths, the City Park in part is a re-cultivated wilderness, there are kayaks on the city’s canals. The palm trees have been straightened up, the Street Cars are back on track, and the public buses are new and have air-conditioning. The French Market has been re-opened, a hip grocery-shopping arcade offering Cajun food like fresh oysters, crawfish, and alligator sticks. There are queues of people waiting to get into clubs and restaurants, the “French Quarter Voodoo Tours” are well booked. This kind of urban life was missing from the city in the years immediately after Katrina.

Little by little, many foundations, civic organizations and initiatives as well as donation-funded projects are gaining visibility in the cityscape. Even if they frequently appear small in scale and scope, they are symbols of the reconstruction, of public and international interest, and urban development. Numerous examples can be named in this context: established 2007, Brad Pitt’s Make it Right Foundation⁵ or the Musicians’ Village Park⁶ are two typical model projects in neighborhoods particularly impacted by the flood such as the Lower and Upper Ninth Ward, which today attract study visits from all over the world.

After breaches of several floodwalls along the Industrial Canal, the Lower Ninth Ward – one of the poorer New Orleans neighborhoods with a predominantly African

5 See <http://makeitright.org> (last accessed January 23, 2014)

6 See <http://www.nolamusiciansvillage.org> (last accessed January 23, 2014)

American population – was widely laid in ruins (see photo 1). Political circles in the city repeatedly speculated about a complete demolition of the quarter. The reconstruction took time to get under way for several reasons; to date, only about half the razed properties were redeveloped, or destroyed buildings rebuilt or repaired.

Photo 1: One year after Katrina in the Lower Ninth Ward



© Photo Heintel (August 29, 2006)

The Make it Right Foundation alone is currently building 150 houses in the most destroyed area of the Lower Ninth Ward (see photo 2). The architecture and overall design of these houses appear strikingly vernacular and typical of the region, and what is more, they are conceived for ecological sustainability in respect to energy use and climatic adaptation. Pushing solar energy was intended to help build New Orleans into an important solar industry location in the U.S. and secure green jobs in Louisiana.

Photo 2: Houses built by the Make it Right Foundation in the Lower Ninth Ward



© Foto Heintel (October 22, 2013)

The Musicians' Village in the Upper Ninth Ward is a newly built neighborhood that was erected around a music center as a facility for local musicians to teach and perform. With the help of "Habitat for Humanity International," a neighborhood was created to make returning home easier for musicians who had fled the city after Katrina and thus to bring back the music to the city. Today, music is heard again at every corner and in many reopened bars and clubs.

Also, non-profit organizations have established themselves that in most cases directly relate to the affected neighborhoods to support this fresh start. Common Ground Relief⁷ is such an institution that supervises a broad range of urban development projects, including infrastructure measures, the restoration of wetlands, the establishing of com-

7 Vgl.: <http://www.commongroundrelief.org> (last accessed Jan. 23, 2014)

munity gardens, educational projects and legal counselling services. The focus here is on community work and the support of volunteer labor under aspects of social, ecological, and economic sustainability, with the target clientele mainly being returnees to New Orleans and the neighboring parishes.

Discontent with public services, common to many Americans, even deepened in view of the disaster relief measures provided by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and in the context of public planning measures after Katrina. Help for self-help therefore was of great significance and also was a reaffirmation of the regional identity of those who had consciously stayed, or of the returnees. In a way, the people of New Orleans were like the famous Baron Munchhausen who pulled himself out of a swamp by his own pigtail.

From an urban planning perspective, this period of upheaval and redevelopment also provided an opportunity for the social intermixing of residential areas. American cities are usually characterized not only by functional specialization, but also by greater social segregation than is customary, for example, in Europe. Incentives to go in a different direction often are regarded with skepticism and classified as socialism in the USA; nevertheless, there is a number of recognized projects, implemented in most cases with the help of charismatic politicians and foundation funds. A 'window of opportunity' also opened for an improvement of previously deficient general infrastructure like water and electricity supply systems or public roads.

Gentrification – the upgrading of partly run-down neighborhoods by new higher-income residents moving in – goes hand in hand with this development, as do increasing sales of condominiums or traditional 'shotgun houses' for temporary living as in the neighborhoods of Tremé, Bywater, or Faubourg Marigny.

Before and after Katrina, life in New Orleans was like a parade. If there is not one on the march in the streets, another one is being prepared. Aside from numerous festivals, occasions such as Halloween are celebrated for weeks. This positive attitude does not only become apparent when it comes to partying, but also in other fields. Tourism is booming, the conventions the city used to host, often with thousands of participants, are back, and cruise liners leave regularly from the port of New Orleans for the Gulf of Mexico again – it is not seldom that the city is booked out completely, with average hotel room prices often coming up to \$ 300 and above.

In addition, high energy prices and environmental standards in the EU have led to

an investment boom of European companies in the south of the U.S. This has sparked heated debates inside the EU; economically, it was a blessing for the poorer states of the American south. International comparison shows that investments in the New Orleans area are now rather favorable – in this view, New Orleans has actually benefited from the Katrina aftermath.

For example, one current investment is in a major hospital complex, which should more than outweigh the previously rather deplorable infrastructure in the public health sector. New technologies also are in the focus of numerous investors. In collaboration with top universities like Tulane, investment is made in the city as a research location.

Intermittent storm-caused natural disasters and, above all, the oil spill caused by the 2010 explosion of the offshore Deepwater Horizon oil rig slowed down the recovery of the city only temporarily. Nevertheless, New Orleans remains to be a city in danger that depends on the reinforced levee system and its pumps which also have been massively invested in. Equally in jeopardy are the Mississippi Delta marshes. Without them as a natural barrier, there is no protection against open-water inundation. The artificial cut-off canal from the Mississippi River to the Gulf of Mexico – the Mississippi River – Gulf Outlet Canal, MRGO or “Mr. Go” – was closed to maritime shipping for ecological reasons. Preservation and restoration of the coastal region and its ecosystem has increasingly moved to the center of public interest.

While global warming is still being negated in large parts of the U.S., the issue is existential and a matter of sheer survival for New Orleans. Again, making a virtue of necessity appears to be the order of the day here. Still in 2007, the new-built levee systems of New Orleans were secured by the National Guard for fear of terrorist attacks.

Photo: 3: The National Guard patrolling the Industrial Canal 2007



© Photo Heintel (2007)

Irrespective of the many positive developments that are visible in the city there can be no glossing over the fact that there still are great intra-urban disparities, social and other; also, the crime rate is high, and from a European perspective, disconcertingly so. And it is not least for these reasons that a fair and socially balanced approach in the reconstruction and urban development is of special, also integrative, significance.

Summary: The Actors Involved – A Comparison between the U.S. and the EU

Any transcontinental comparison of natural disasters and reconstruction measures is difficult. Social preconditions, involvements, frames of reference, and politically legitimized responsibilities as well political systems as a whole are too diverse, even within the European Union.

From a planning and social science perspective, even a tentative comparison raises a number of questions that would be worth exploring further in an in-depth analysis. The thematic areas and issues summarized here might provide a basis for future comparative studies between the USA and the EU and should be understood as suggestions for an expansion of a discourse that has only started in this field; they do not claim to be complete or systematic and should be taken as an impulse.

Broadly speaking, civil-society action takes different orientations in the new EU Member States, the former EU-15 and the USA. While within the EU – also and particularly in Austria, for example – all relevant politicians get involved early on and are in the front line of public compassion and support, it took president Bush several days to make himself a picture of the situation from a helicopter. At the same time, financed from donations or governmental emergency budgets, public emergency response is prompt in the EU.

On the other hand, civic engagement in New Orleans set an example. Also, individuals were very confident about the chances for recovery. The attitude of “relying on someone else for help” made itself felt far less in the USA than it would have in the EU.

Photo 4: “Please Stop ‘Helping’ Me”



© http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Katrina_Go_Away_sign.jpg (last accessed Jan. 23, 2014)

Participatory planning played an important role in the reconstruction of New Orleans. What on the one hand looked like integration, civic involvement and self-empowerment was on the other the result of an utter failure of responsible authorities, administrative bodies, and elected politicians. “If you don’t help yourself no one else will” may sound like a sententious truism but actually puts the situation in the immediate aftermath of Katrina in a nutshell (see ill. 4).

Complex participatory procedures in urban or regional development are rather untypical in the EU. Reconstruction in the wake of natural disasters, however, tends to be treated as a national concern, in which civic participation is appreciated, but participatory procedures usually do not have a decisive say.

Also, the role of foundations or private-public partnerships is given different weight in this context in the USA than in the EU. Donations from NPOs have an important role in Europe as well, but relief and reconstruction measures are mostly seen as a responsibility of the public sector.

The points mentioned here with respect to planning, responsibilities, and issues concerning reconstruction would be well worth exploring in depth in a specialized research project. What would in particular be called for is a detailed comparative study of the influences of politics and society on planning-relevant issues pertaining to the role of public goods, infrastructure, public services and the respective responsibilities and potentials of both public office and civic engagement.

List of Authors

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