New Orleans—An Autopsy

Ben C. Toledano

Reports of the death of New Orleans as a major American city have not been greatly exaggerated; they have only been greatly delayed. Although the funeral was not conducted until Katrina struck, the death took place several decades ago.

Since the disastrous storm, there has been much lamenting over the lost joys of the city's cuisine, music, and architecture, and ringing proclamations of the need to "save" and "rebuild" New Orleans. For at least the prior 50 years, however, these undeniable charms and graces had masked problems of major proportions, unexposed until over half of the city's residents were forced by the hurricane to leave town.

The fact is that the majority of New Orleans's citizens were poor, black, uneducated, unemployed or underemployed, and living in near slum conditions. Today, the city is a very, very different place. Along with everything else Katrina did, it eliminated some of the sub-marginal public and private housing, reduced unemployment, lessened (somewhat) the sale of illegal drugs, lowered the number of illegitimate births among teenage girls, and drastically cut the number of victims of the public-school system. New Orleans will henceforth be closer to the mythmakers' idealized notion of it: smaller, whiter, and more dedicated than ever to its main sources of commerce: tourism, the port, and conventions.

Yet no comfort can be taken from what a forced mass exodus has done. The city, or what remains of it, continues to suffer from what it is, from what it was, and from how it arrived at this catastrophic end. Since history is ignored only at one's peril, it might be of interest to consider what caused the death of old New Orleans before Katrina struck: a story of destruction not from without but from within.

Ultimately, no doubt, the problem that became New Orleans grew out of the social system set up by the Creoles, the early French and Spanish families who in the late 18th century established in this unlikely locale a vestige of European class hierarchy.* Among their core beliefs, one element was *noblesse oblige*—a certain sense of responsibility toward even those among their fellow human beings who were black, and slaves. But another was that aristocrats were born, not made. Aptitude and achievement made no difference; the top rung belonged to those to the manner born.

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* In *The Creoles of Louisiana* (1884), George Washington Cable pointed out that the term "Creole," which applied at first only to French settlers, "came early to include any native of French or Spanish descent by either parent, whose non-alliance with the slave race entitled him to social rank." Later on, Cable adds, "the term was adopted by—not conceded to—the natives of mixed blood, and is still so used among themselves."

The Civil War put a crimp into the New Orleans style of living as an aristocratic European oasis within the otherwise upstart experiment known as American democracy. Control of the city passed to federal troops, who occupied it from April 1862 until April 1877. But after the inauguration of Rutherford B. Hayes as President, the old ruling class returned to power once again, both socially and commercially. Blacks, though free, returned to their "place"; even without the foul element of legal ownership, they remained dependent on whites.

A complicating factor now was the carpetbaggers. While under military occupation, New Orleans had exercised a particular appeal to outside opportunists from the North, mostly Republicans, no less, who journeyed south toward the end of the war and thereafter to fatten (as Lincoln said of a different class of Civil War profiteers) on the city's misfortunes. Surely they were impressed by a system in which there was no necessary relationship between effort and reward.

Carpetbaggers, by their very nature, knew a good thing when they saw it. Perhaps their quintessential act was securing a charter in 1868 from the Reconstruction legislature, itself made up almost entirely of carpetbaggers, for the Louisiana State Lottery Company. The lottery, which appears to have been the brain child of Charles T. Howard, made so much money for its promoters that in 1890 the company offered to pay the state $1,250,000 annually to renew its charter for 25 years. (The offer was declined.)

After 1877, the carpetbaggers mounted an effort to court social acceptability. The process took a while: as long as the Creoles and other prominent pre-Civil War families could hold the fort, the newcomers, mainly descendants of people from the British Isles (i.e., Americans), would have to wait. But having witnessed the 1862 "defense" of New Orleans—the city's resistance to occupation was comically brief—they knew the wait would not be very long.

It lasted no more than 40 years. For the most part, the return of the aristocrats to power amounted to but a brief flexing of tired, inelastic muscles. They could not adjust to the new way of doing business introduced by the carpetbaggers, and once they lost what was left of their recovered money, they also lost their influence. Though no armistice was signed, the old guard in New Orleans finally fell at about the same time as hostilities ceased in World War I. And it was just as well; there was no place left in America for a quasi-agrarian, Old World aristocratic order that had for too long controlled a city without being part of a nation. "Gentlemen" had been replaced by producers—just as, in time, producers would be replaced by manipulators and influence-peddlers.

For the victors in New Orleans, the question became one of organization. How would the *nouveaux riches* and the newly powerful structure their social system? Would they simply expropriate the traditional outfit and tailor it to their needs, or would they start anew? They were far too clever for the latter. The trappings of respectability were theirs for the taking, and there was no obvious need to earn what could be seized. But they did see a benefit in reserving some positions of influence for the deposed aristocrats themselves, for the sake not only of continuity but of legitimacy. Whether in a law firm, a brokerage house, or a club, the economic value of social credentials continued to be axiomatic.

To anyone unfamiliar with institutions like Mardi Gras and Carnival, it is extremely difficult to explain how such practices actually work. Most outsiders still view them as a series of festive events, and as such, indeed, they may have begun. But before long they became a means of distinguishing those who were socially acceptable in New Orleans from those who were not.

To put it differently: by the terms Mardi Gras and Carnival, I do not mean the celebrations of the week or two preceding Ash Wednesday, but rather the four men's luncheon clubs and seven or so private organizations that annually sponsored balls or parades or both. Systematically excluded from membership in these institutions were Jews, Italians, Latin Americans, Asians, women, and, of course, blacks.* Almost all newcomers to the city were also excluded. The social organizations also tightly controlled business, professional, and civic activities.

While the system lasted—roughly through the 1970's, though the attitudes linger on—an individual's ability to become successful by local standards depended largely upon the simple factor of inclusion in or exclusion from these organizations, and not upon such things as talent, energy, accomplishment, or integrity. Personal merit was not a consideration. Nor—in contrast to the old Creole insistence on *noblesse oblige*—did belonging any

* Prior to World War I, but not thereafter, a number of Jews of Sephardi or German origin were in fact granted membership in the Boston Club, New Orleans's most selective and exclusive. Among them was Judah P. Benjamin, secretary of state of the Confederacy.

longer confer a special sense of civic responsibility upon persons within the cherished inner sanctums.

The grossly debilitating nature of the system cannot be exaggerated, although its truly fatal effects did not rise to the surface until after World War II. Without vision, without competent leadership, above all without an ethic of upward mobility by virtue of merit, New Orleans could not prepare itself to enter that period of great national growth and prosperity. In fact, it actively chose not to. Given the demands of exclusivity, only a few were permitted to participate, to profit, and, sadly enough, to plunder. Bankers lent money to two groups, those who did not need it and those who were fellow club members; in most instances the two were one. Lawyers were engaged by virtue not of their talents but of their associations; so it went in the fields of insurance and financial services, and so it went across the board, in a daisy chain of "class."

A friend of mine, a specialist in adolescent psychiatry, observed the effects of all this on children at both ends of the social ladder. According to his report, those whose parents were "out" tended to view their prospects in life as practically nil; to succeed as individuals, they would have to leave New Orleans. Those whose parents were "in" suffered in other ways: deeply troubled by the lack of any need to accomplish anything, they felt weakened, deprived of nerve and force. Though membership in the "in" group provided a sense of identity, a self-esteem derived mainly from devaluing those outside, it also imposed a stifling conformity that crippled the development of the in-group itself.

Thus did the new elites in New Orleans, masquerading as the old, come to trade the vitality, energy, and productivity characteristic of a dynamic merchant class for safety and security—ostensibly, the same safety and security ensured by the social credentials of the group over whom they had triumphed. But real social credentials are like those loans from a New Orleans bank; you can only have them if you don't need them. As potentially productive businessmen surrendered their natural advantages in exchange for royal status, they undermined and ultimately destroyed their own effectiveness. The "reestablishment," in short, killed the horses it rode in on.

How, one might ask, did the Jewish community in particular get along in such a system? In some ways well, in others poorly. By dint of intellect, talent, and work ethic, the Jews of New Orleans were more than able to satisfy their material needs. Doing so, however, often meant joining forces with their designated social superiors in ways that compromised their self-respect. Virtually every successful law firm, for instance, had at least one named Jewish partner, usually the second name in the firm. Though the Jewish lawyers brought in many of the best clients and did a large part of the serious work, they were not allowed to dine with their partners at the men's luncheon clubs.

In this connection, a wonderful story, possibly apocryphal, concerns the press mogul S.I. ("Si") Newhouse, who among his many newspapers owned the New Orleans *Times Picayune*, the city's leading daily. Allegedly, Newhouse appeared one day, just before noon, in the office of the paper's publisher, Ashton Phelps, Sr. "Si," said Phelps, "I was just leaving for lunch at the Boston Club and wish I could invite you to join me, but the club doesn't admit Jews." "That's perfectly all right, Ashton," replied Newhouse, "just be back by 1:00." Whether the tale is true or not, Newhouse had the right attitude.

Sadly, New Orleans Jews paid a price for their patience and tolerance. Many of their children, either unwilling to wait or realizing there was nothing worth waiting for, left town. Three of my good friends at grammar school in the late 1930's and early 1940's were Benji (Benjamin M.) Rosen, Shorty (Francis) Fraenkel, and Carmel Cohen. Rosen became a founding developer of Lotus Development Corporation and chairman of the board of Compaq Computer. Fraenkel became president of Shearson Loeb and served on the boards of other major corporations. Cohen is a renowned surgeon and gynecological oncologist.

Today all three live in New York. Each of them would probably deny that his leaving New Orleans had anything to do with the discriminatory social system, but the fact remains that they had to go somewhere else to do what they were capable of doing. The same applies, in a later generation, to such ex-New Orleanians as the journalist Nicholas Lemann and the writer Walter Isaacson.

In 1970, the city had 10,000 Jewish residents; today there are probably fewer than half that number. In May 1989, a handful of the handful held its annual fund-raising dinner for its favorite charity, which provides in-patient care for people with respiratory disorders. At the black-tie event, the 1989 Humanitarian Award was presented to a Gentile who belonged to as many clubs and organizations that still excluded Jews from membership as did any person in the state of Louisiana. All four previous honorees, including Edwin Edwards, former governor of Louisiana, were Gentiles as well.

No doubt, when my wiser friends left New Orleans, I should have gone, too. But I lacked the energy, or sense, or whatever, and deep down I may have thought I could make some meaningful contribution by staying. I was wrong. Maybe everyone's time for making a difference had passed.

Although I had the opportunity to be part of the system, and *was* a part of it for much too long, I gradually chose to move outside. I can't say it was easy to say no; very few could and did. But neither did my essentially negative decision provide me with a sense of purpose or accomplishment. The really hard thing was to find something worthwhile and productive to say *yes* to.

In 1970, I ran for mayor of New Orleans. One of the most volatile campaign issues was the city's then-proposed "Public Accommodations Ordinance." Its purpose was to include private drinking establishments—bars, in other words—within the scope of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, even though Congress had specifically exempted them. The principal argument in favor of passage was that Super Bowls and other major national events would not come to New Orleans unless the bars were integrated. To the bill's proponents, this was mainly a question of good business; for the same reason or for others, the measure also had the support of the city's social bigwigs and "good government" forces.

As it happened, however, every bar that catered to tourists and other visitors had already opened its doors to everyone. Hence, the only businesses that would be affected by the bill were the neighborhood bars, both black and white, which, for generations, had functioned as working-class social clubs, the places ordinary New Orleanians frequented to play cards, to drink, to watch television, to be with friends.

I agreed with Congress. I did not believe bars were a proper setting for forced integration and social experimentation; there were far more significant areas for such efforts. I worked myself up over what I perceived as hypocrisy, and one day, toward the end of the campaign, in a speech to the Sertoma Club, I declared that if social clubs were indeed a proper setting for such action, it was the responsibility of community leaders to lead the way and set an example. In the presence of reporters from the city's two newspapers and three television stations, I called upon several of the more prominent citizens supporting the ordinance to resign from any club or organization to which they belonged that excluded others from membership because of race, religion, or nationality.

It was a big moment in my life—or so I thought. As soon as I finished speaking, Herbert Garon, a lawyer prominent in Jewish and civic affairs, came up to me, very visibly moved, and said: "I didn't think I'd live long enough to hear anyone say publicly the things you've said today." Otherwise, though, the general response in the room was mixed, with shock seeming to prevail over approval. And that was the end of it. No one reported the story. It was as if it never happened.

The experience confirmed what I had believed for some time: control of the news in New Orleans was another critical factor contributing to the city's problems. The media, and particularly the newspapers, were in the hands of the same people who had charge of social and business activities, the same people who either would not or could not provide leadership.

If I had won the mayoral election, would it have made any important difference regarding the destiny of New Orleans? All things fairly considered, I think not. Moon Landrieu, the man who beat me, mounted a serious effort to keep the ship afloat, and many of his intentions were good. But too much was beyond his control. It would have been the same for me. We both cared about our city, but that was nowhere near enough to save it. The excesses, the exclusivity, the rejection of any sort of system based on ability, the greed, the indifference, the rewarded laziness, the well-mannered nastiness, the gently disguised pettiness—these were the pallbearers who brought New Orleans to the cemetery.

In any case—and here we come to the denouement of the story—many of Mayor Landrieu's good intentions did not turn out well. Though he was firmly committed to racial justice and equal opportunity, he could not seriously influence the actions of the black politicians who now felt *their* time had come. And they seized their opportunities with a vengeance. In all probability, Landrieu thought or at least hoped that once he placed black powerbrokers in charge of the distribution of federal funds—readily available at the time—they would allocate at least some of these monies to much-needed services for poor blacks. He was wrong.

In fact, very little effort was made by the new black power elites to conceal their goals or their motivation. As one of them told me: "It's our turn now, baby. You guys have been at the trough since the beginning. Move over, all the way over. Whatever's left belongs to us."

Ever since 1978, when Moon Landrieu completed his second term of office, New Orleans has had

black mayors. Eight years of Ernest "Dutch" Morial; eight years of Sidney Barthelemy; eight years of Dutch's son, Marc Morial; and five years of Ray Nagin, who was elected to a second term in 2006, the year after Katrina. Over the same three decades, most of the significant public officials have also been black. Many of them and their cronies have grown rich through various city contracts for all kinds of services, some "legal," others questionable at best. How have poor blacks fared in such areas as public education, employment opportunities, and housing? No better. In fact, worse.

According to census figures as of 2000, 35 percent of blacks in New Orleans were poor; the national figure was then 25 percent. It has been reported that, pre-Katrina, 45 percent of black families in New Orleans with children under the age of eighteen were headed by unmarried mothers; 96 percent of births to black teenagers were to unmarried girls; and 58 percent of black high-school students dropped out before they graduated. Better known is the fact that the city boasted the highest homicide rate in the United States; in the majority of cases, both the perpetrators and the victims were black.

Control of the New Orleans public-school system was taken over by Congressman William Jefferson (of cash-in-the-refrigerator fame), his family and friends. They made the Visigoths look like pikers. One year, the auditors, unable to account for where all the money had gone, refused to sign their own audit report. By 2006, so bad had the condition of public education become that the state of Louisiana took over control of the New Orleans system. When management by Louisiana becomes the preferred alternative, things can hardly get worse.

In early December 2005, three months after Katrina, Mayor Nagin, in comments directed at the mostly black evacuees, said: "I want you all to come back, and we can work this out." When it was suggested to Cynthia Hedge-Morrell, a city councilwoman, that New Orleans might better be reduced to a smaller scale, her response was: "You are underestimating the intelligence of the people of New Orleans. They know what they are doing."

So the mayor says "we can work this out," whatever "this" is, and the councilwoman says the people of New Orleans know what they are doing. These comments need to be considered in light of the fact that most of the living conditions in New Orleans before the hurricane were—unlivable. Today the question is, come back to *what*? Harsh though it may sound, what these politicians are saying is: come back and make our city 70-percent black again so we can continue to elect blacks to almost every public office.

How can we account for the fact that the black leaders of New Orleans have so callously ignored the needs of their poor, uneducated, under- and unemployed brothers and sisters? To a certain extent, fault rests with the black class structure, itself modeled in significant measure on the white. For many years, the socialites within the black community have donned their full-dress suits and evening gowns to pay tribute to their debutante daughters, relatives, and friends. In almost all respects, the events are the same as those held by white society. And so are the social attitudes, particularly with regard to the black poor (who also tend to be of darker skin pigmentation).

There is much resistance to discussing why this should be so, but can anyone seriously believe that wealthy and influential descendants of slaves avoid helping poor and destitute descendants of slaves because of the legacy of slavery? The real reasons are assuredly complex, but the consequences have been plain to see—the combined handiwork of the benign neglect of whites, the harsh indifference of prosperous blacks, and a thirty-year succession of black officialdom.

When cities die, there is no formal cremation or burial, no bang, hardly even a whimper. Buses keep running and garbage gets collected—sometimes. People go on eating, drinking, sleeping, relieving themselves, cursing, murdering, even loving. But they do so as individuals who are no longer a part of a larger family, a community with legitimate cultural, economic, and human traditions. Such was the death of New Orleans as, over the years, tourists continued to eat, drink, and merrily clap their hands to the music. Beneath the mask of those activities, reality struggled vainly for recognition.

The question of whether New Orleans was doomed to die as a major American city continues to be debated after the fact. Those who think the end was inescapable argue that the original reasons for the city's location and prosperity had ceased to exist. As the nation's transportation network changed, the port of New Orleans, the southernmost habitable spot on America's greatest river, lost much of its life's blood. Without the port, New Orleans, built in a swamp, could only degenerate into a theme park for conventioneers.

Not so, say others. Every city has to be somewhere; look at where Dallas and Houston are. At

the end of World War II, they argue, there was still time to turn things around if the Whitney National Bank, then the largest in the South, had become an active force in the city; if New Orleans had become an air hub; if "The Gateway to the Americas" had become a fact rather than a slogan; if new businesses had been vigorously sought for the area; if the oil and gas industry had been welcomed and accommodated. If, if, if.

Still others blame the death of New Orleans on the vicissitudes of the oil and gas industry itself, or resort to the contention that New Orleans's problems—poverty, ignorance, joblessness, corruption, sloth—were to be regarded as facts of life, and never anyone's actual fault. For if nothing was anyone's fault, there could be no accountability. Sure enough, there wasn't.

I am not so naive as to believe that there will not always be forms of class structure. For the foreseeable future there will be rich people, poor people, and, one hopes, those in between. But the genius of the United States has always been its openness, its flexibility, its invitation to mobility based upon merit. In New Orleans, these qualities were notable for their absence long before the city's demise.

In an October 1971 article, Charles Y.W. Chai, then teaching political science at Tulane, analyzed the city's most serious problems and the response to them by those in positions of power and authority. He found an inadequate tax base due to unfair, corrupt assessment practices; a gross inability to attract new industry; and, most importantly, a social system that stifled new leadership and was hostile to able newcomers. Concluding that the city was headed in a "disastrous direction," Chai forecast "both political and economic stagnation."

In 1975, James R. Bobo, then a professor of economics at the University of New Orleans, published a research study entitled *The New Orleans Economy: Pro Bono Publico?* His ironic subtitle was taken from the motto of Rex, the Carnival organization that parades on Mardi Gras "for the public good." Bobo's study predicted that New Orleans would die unless steps were taken at once to counteract its diseased conditions. These included a disproportionately large number of impoverished, uneducated, and unemployed people; the relative absence of a dynamic, business-oriented middle-class; the persistence of a narrowly based social and economic oligarchy.

Bobo's recommendations were not followed in 1975 when they were offered, and were not followed thereafter. The large, uneducated, unemployed lower class increased. The small, business-oriented, middle class all but disappeared. The narrowly based, controlling social and economic oligarchy alone remained unchanged. Bobo left town. So did Chai.

Was the system in New Orleans really different from that in other American cities? I believe the answer is yes. There are power structures and establishments elsewhere, but membership in them is based significantly on a rough standard of merit, measured in part by financial success. However distasteful that last criterion may be to some, almost everyone is eligible to get in, and such eligibility is not foreordained from birth or by bloodline, real or imaginary.

We should assume that most people at the top of New Orleans's deeply discriminatory social system were not naturally mean or contemptuous toward those who, for reasons of race, religion, nationality, or economic circumstances, were excluded from full social participation. But a system that is itself evil or vile (depending upon the arrangement of those four letters) affects those in control in many detrimental ways, giving vent to the most objectionable characteristics of its individual members. Higher aspirations, a sense of duty, the propensity for outrage become dulled, ultimately disappearing from consciousness.

Many poor people who were forced by Katrina to move to other cities now really know what it means to miss—as in to escape or to avoid—New Orleans. It means the availability of good schools, of decent housing with clean living conditions, of good job opportunities, of safe streets, and of some minimum quotient of competent, honest, and hard-working public officials. Of course, they may have to go without exotic cuisine and all that jazz, but that is surely a fair price to pay for living far away from what has long passed for *pro bono publico* in the Crescent City.