Disaster resilience towards which direction(s)?
Deconstructing hegemonic development discourse in post-Katrina New Orleans

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Extended Abstract

This paper mobilizes the theories of discourse and social innovation in order to unpack the theoretical nexus between hegemonic discourses, housing, social justice, and human agency against the background of a long-term post-disaster recovery period. This will help the author revisit and clarify the notion of resilience to make it more pertinent to the sociopolitical realities on the ground. More specifically, the paper critically inquires the influence of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic development discourses in sketching the recovery trajectory of New Orleans after the Hurricane Katrina struck the city in 2005. These discourses are articulated and defended by social agents of various socio-spatial scales (federal, state, city, neighborhood) as well as socio-political entities (governmental bodies, think tanks, foundations, grassroots organizations, for-profit and non-for-profit developers) who inform their narrative on different values, philosophical underpinnings and/or perceptions of needs. The time dimension in the articulation of the various discourses is crucial for the purposes of the analysis. As we witnessed in the case of New Orleans, the alternative housing sector has developed a stronger counter-hegemonic discourse - and vision of how the city should be rebuilt – later on in the recovery process. During the first years of the reconstruction, the counter housing movements were faster to react to urgent needs of housing than to become involved in a counter hegemonic discursive game. Over the years, the development of a counter hegemony has proved to be a living option, and the alternative housing movement has built up both counter hegemonic discourse and practice, which might not necessarily lead to a counter hegemony but to a transformation of the existent hegemony.

Zooming in into this complex interaction between discursive and material practices in the housing sector brings to the surface a highly dynamic reconstruction process in which, hegemony, path dependencies, unsatisfied housing needs, human agency and political mobilization shape and reshape 'pre-determined' urban visions of an 'ideal' post-crisis resilient city. In turn, this contesting process of discursive and material struggles brings to
the surface various types of 'resilience cells' (newly produced and reproduced) who deal with 'recovery' and 'resilience' in radically different ways, and who fight – both discursively and actively – for their right to social reproduction through their participation in the housing reconstruction experiment.

The resilience cells in the housing system landscape could be categorized as follows: on the one hand, we witness the powerful pro-growth urban coalitions, consisting of powerful local actors and institutions (i.e. developers, realtors, bankers, utility companies) working together to generate and extract exchange values through ongoing land-use intensification (including hazard-prone areas, usually on the coast) (Bull-Kumanga et al., 2003). These agents define housing problems by material standards and housing values are determined by the material quantity of related products, such as profit or equity (Turner, 1980). Houses are, hence, treated as commodities subdivided into lots and constructions, ready to become the object of a profitable transaction in the free market (Pais and Elliot, 2008). On the other hand, we observe the generally less powerful, pro-equity coalition, individual homeowners and their associations, neighborhood associations and civic groups who advocate primarily for use values and who are interested in preserving and improving the local quality of life (Pais and Eliott, 2008). These are also the groups who advocate in favor of a qualitatively richer housing market or a more just distribution of economic resources (Davoudi et al., 2012). In between these two groups we observe a variety of organizations who are engaged in co-materializing initiatives, placing emphasis on housing production as a collective activity, and not as an end product. Either connected to ideological inspirations or triggered by traditional housing market exclusion due to financial insolvency, these groups undertake responsibility for their own social reproduction and housing reconstruction. Their mode of organization usually manifests itself in disaster affected homeless people's cooperatives, community land trusts, and grassroots rebuilding initiatives collectively erecting houses in 'solidarity' style (Biel, 2012; Satterthwaite, 2011).
What we contend is that these three broadly-grouped-housing agents have their own transformation capacities. Their differentiation – across and among them – lies in the ways by which they understand and materialize transformation, and the answers they give to questions like: For whom are we rebuilding? How do we provide for the needs of all the people who were displaced by a natural disaster? Who should rebuild? What civic principles and moral values are on the table that frame and push reconstruction processes forward? (Gutmann, 2006)

This heterogeneity of 'resilience cells' and the interaction between hegemonic and counterhegemonic discursive and material practices of the 'resilience cells' will consequently lead the discussion towards the investigation of the ‘new’, changing role of the state (as the arena of class struggle, a platform that is potential ally for all but in reality often dominated by the logic of capital) in negotiating and formulating relevant disaster-recovery governance models that hold a potential to design programs and funding mechanisms that correspond to, as well as accommodate, the redundancy in housing reconstruction actions – which could also be seen as strategic planning tools to incubate resilience.

In order to better theoretically understand the potential role of discourse in the urban process, with a focus on the housing system, and shed a conceptual light in the connection between discursive and material practices, the theoretical orientation of this paper is founded mainly on a building dialogue between cultural theorists (Jessop and Sum 2001, 2006), theorists of social innovation (Moulaert, 2007, 2013) and theorists of urban political ecology (Swyngedouw, 2009).

On the one hand, discursive practices will be better explained through the work of cultural theorists who are interested in how practices of framing, narration and articulation express relations of power linked to conflicts over material and cultural resources (i.e. housing) and hence serve to reproduce ideology (i.e. hegemonic visions of the 'ideal' post-disaster city).
The hegemonic view of urban development depicts a 'new' urban economy which primarily engages itself with large-scale physical infrastructure and enters in competition with other cities in the well-favored sectors of the global markets (i.e. new technologies, advanced business and communication services etc.) (Moulaert 2002; Brenner et al., 2005 in Moulaert et al., 2007) and holds hands with a neo-liberal New Urban Policy agenda, promoting and justifying market-led development (Broomhill 2001; Moulaert et al., 2003; Swyngedouw et al., 2004 in Moulaert et al., 2007). Capitalist social relations result in the production of use-values that operate in and through specific social relations of control, ownership and appropriation and in the context of the mobilisation of both land and labor produce commodities (i.e. housing) with an eye towards the realization of the embodied exchange value (Cook and Swyngedouw, 2012). This portrait of the new urban city tends to be recycled to the post-disaster city. The hegemonic discourse remains powerful by promising growth that is good for everyone on the basis that it brings new jobs, taxes and stature to the area and reconstitutes citizens’ pride and the collective psyche (Pais and Elliot, 2008). In this way, the post-disaster landscape provides the opportunity for capitalistic modes of housing production to renew themselves by entering new cycles of wealth accumulation (Biel, 2011).

On the other hand, material practices will be further understood through the mobilization of the social innovation and urban political ecology literatures. These analyze the post-disaster socio-spatial actions of community-based groups against 'imposed' meanings of 'rebuilding' and 'recovery' by getting involved in the direct address of urgent material (housing) needs. This opposition of social groups reveals that hegemonic discourses might be appealing at the grand level (i.e. at the global and national scale, where powerful actors can construct select and/or diffuse values, imaginaries and symbols) but prove to be less pertinent if they bypass or ignore human development needs experienced in concrete living circumstances. This means that there is a gap between discourse and practice which becomes more evident when it is examined in spatial terms. The closer we get to 'real communities' in regions, cities and neighborhoods, the more sensitive to path dependency and context specificity
discursive and/or material change appear, and complexity becomes more intense (Moulaert et al., 2007; Moulaert et al. 2010).

These concepts and theoretical insights are then applied in the case of post-Katrina New Orleans with a historical retrospect in order to analyze how resilience cells have been built in and interacted with each other over the recovery years in this urban context. This will provide us with an analytically significant long-term chronological platform on which we can test how recovery and redevelopment is variously imagined and re-imagined, shaped and reshaped in terms of narratives, policy orientations, values and actions.

The research involved a six-month field work in the USA (March-September 2014). During this period, a variety of research papers and policy documents were collected and analyzed and a series of semi-structured interviews with key reconstruction actors in New Orleans and Washington DC was conducted. Some of the interviewed actors were: governmental bodies, influential think tanks, housing developers, activists, urban specialists and architecture firms. The aim of this qualitative research was to identify the plethora of narratives mobilized by different reconstruction agents from the Katrina disaster in 2005 onwards (what meaning they attach to disaster rehabilitation) and critically examine their influential capacity in housing actions (in policies and programs).

What has been distilled from this research is that a hegemonic neoliberal development discourse pre-existing the storm was influential in the immediate aftermath of the Katrina disaster in guiding the reconstruction trajectories. Less than two weeks after the Katrina hurricane struck the Gulf Coast, the conservative movement in the United States, a politically influential group with capacity to 'frame' issues and problems in ways that facilitate their ideological objectives (i.e. the Manhattan Institute, the American Enterprise Institute, the Heritage Foundation) (Lakoff 2002 in Peck, 2006) was quick to put emphasis on the responsibility of the storm's disproportionately poor African American victims for their predicament, founding their argumentation on the fact that the looting that took place
after the storm was a symptom of a pathological culture of governmental corruption and welfare dependency (Gotham and Greenberg, 2014). The Heritage Foundation was ready to even propose a series of 'principled' solutions to reconstruction. They encouraged, inter alia, a) accountability, flexibility and creativity by supporting the utilization of tax credits and voucher programs in order to encourage private-sector innovation and sensitivity to individual needs and preferences; b) the reduction or elimination of red tape with the aim to speed up private-sector investment and initiative in the rebuilding of facilities and the restoration of business; and c) private entrepreneurial activity and vision as the main engine to rebuild vis-a-vis the bureaucratic government (Meese et al., 2005, p.1 in Peck 2007). According to Peck (2006), the influence of the conservative movement has been reflected on the package of the neoconservative/neoliberal ideas that dominated the post-Katrina policy debate. In December 2005, the US Congress passed the Gulf Opportunity Zone Act 2005 (GO Zone Act) in order to provide tax incentives and other financial incentives, deductions and exemptions for business in Louisiana affected by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita to spur the rebuilding and renovation of the Gulf Coast Region. Under the GO Zone Act, the state of Louisiana was responsible for allocating $14.0 billion in tax-exempt private activity bonds between 2006 and 2011 (Olshansky and Johnson 2010, BondGraham 2011). Inter alia, the Act provided special allocation of Low Income Housing Tax Credits (LIHTC) to raise private capital to rebuild rental housing (Seidman, 2013).

In October 2015, the Louisiana Recovery Administration (LRA) was created by the Louisiana State government as a business-oriented agency to oversee the reconstruction effort, bypassing the authority of local elected officials. The LRA with the aid of federal-level waivers was able to eliminate income targets, public benefit requirements and public oversight from guiding recovery policies. This enabled a) the transfer of community development block grant (CDBG) funds to private developers and b) the use of tax-exempt private activity bonds through the Go Zone to promote and finance private reinvestment (Gotham, 2013). According to Gotham and Greenberg (2014), the introduction of waivers created lucrative opportunities for the company that administered the 'Road Home' program
and its subcontractors to further their profiteering interests with little public oversight.

On the local level, what was further observed during the first months after the disaster was that many people, particularly outsiders but also powerful local actors and politicians, wanted the city to abandon the areas at lower elevations, and radically restructure its urban form and demographics (Olshansky and Johnson, 2010), putting emphasis on the need to prioritize immediate rebuilding of those areas that went through minimal damage, and evaluate the feasibility for reinvestment of those areas that suffered more extensive damage. The demolition of four public housing projects after the storm was another bone of contention. Despite the fact that most public housing buildings did not suffer significant damages from the storm (Arena 2012), the storm provided a momentous opportunity and a significant amount of funds for the city's growth coalition to accelerate and expand their longstanding plans for transforming real estate use values in predominantly low-income African-American neighborhoods into exchange values for private developers (BondGraham, 2011). In the other infamous words coming this time from a Republican Congressman from Baton Rouge, Katrina was a godsend: ‘We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn’t do it, but God did.’ (Katz, 2008).

In the immediate aftermath of Katrina, the counter-hegemonic movements were very heterogeneous and more focused on addressing the urgent housing needs. Their housing actions (and less their discursive practices) have proved to be influential in changing predestined recovery trajectories. The proposed new urbanism ideas and the demolition of the projects spurred an unprecedented explosion of civic activism (Gotham and Greenberg, 2014). This activism took many forms: protests, advocacy, formation of neighborhood associations, development of neighborhood plans, development of alliances and strategic partnerships, alternative modes of housing production (i.e. collective rebuilding in solidarity style). As early as December 2005 the idea that all neighborhoods might need to prove their 'viability' activated concerned citizens and community organizations in the most flooded neighborhoods to hold meetings and launch their own independent planning
processes (Broadmoor, Village de l'Est). In addition, groups began to form in areas which lacked established organizations prior to Katrina because they anticipated the threat of forced redevelopment and permanent displacement (Lower Mid-city). Other neighborhoods made strategic alliances with academic institutions to develop plans and conduct studies for their neighborhoods (Ninth Ward, Broadmoor). Finally, some communities (the Vietnamese community in New Orleans East) started to use their own savings to buy building materials and neighbors offered labor to one another (Olshansky and Johnson, 2010, Seidman 2013).

This heterogeneous grassroots movement that was spurred after the storm while present and involved in the various rebuilding struggles was simultaneously very diversified both in the theories and terminology they employed to justify their positions and in the type of actions mobilized. According to Gotham (2012), for the part of the NGOs, the ones coming from a Left background turned into Marxian class theory, while others employed a mixture of human rights, identity politics, pragmatism, and 'there is no alternative' discourse and ideology. In contrast, activists who operated outside the nonprofit complex and who were mainly involved in the opposition against demolitions came from various ideological and organizational tendencies and framing (Christian pacifist, Maoist, Luxemburgist, Anarchist, human rights) (Gotham, 2012).

In the long run, all the resilience cells have proved to be skillful enough to adapt themselves to the new conditions. The pro-growth resilience cells reproduced themselves with the election of the new mayor in 2010, when New Orleans has been rebranded as a center for film production, bio-sciences, software and digital technology, and sustainable industries; all part of a campaign to direct public resources into new economic development areas (Gotham, 2012). This new urban imaginary of New Orleans that grew over the last few years has contributed to a considerable change in its demographics, which in turn has generated the new issue of gentrification in the city and the urgent need for more affordable housing to avoid internal displacement.
The grassroots movement(s) that emerged post-Katrina in response to an inequitable recovery and housing provision has also been transformed into a movement of skilled NGOs that builds and/or advocate for affordable housing. An important legacy left from Katrina in terms of housing-movement maturation is the discovery of the power to work in partnerships. A typical example of a strategic alliance is the Greater New Orleans Housing Alliance (GNOHA). The most recent and ambitious initiative of GNOHA is the HousingNOLA plan; a broad-based initiative that is currently producing a community-led plan to meet the housing needs of all New Orleans for the next 10 years which will serve as a road map for maximizing the effectiveness of scarce government resources, increasing non-traditional resources, and assisting private sector investors in making strategic choice.

In the long run, a counter-hegemonic discourse is slowly built on the local level that can potentially initiate structural changes in the grand hegemonic discourse. However, what largely determined the piecemeal, spontaneous and fragmented rebuilding profile of New Orleans was not the imposition of a grand alternative discourse but a continuous interaction between discursive practices on the national and city level and material practices on the local level. This constant action/practice-discourse interaction over the recovery years, shows the building up of new movements/organizations (new resilience cells). In the genesis of this counter-hegemonic movement, the criticism of the dominant discourse plays a role. As the counter discourse has built up stepwise, it is not a monumental clash in a big arena between two discourses. Its a much more iterative, sometimes decentralized, sometimes city-wide confrontation that dynamically alters the social relations of power among the resilience cells who fight over the rights to experiment with their ideas of how the city shall be rebuilt for the best interest of all. These dynamics have also reproduced the role of the state which is increasingly forced to build alliances with very diverse types of resilience cells.

**Key words:** Resilience, discursive practice, material practice, hegemony, recovery, housing, human agency, resilience cells, New Orleans
References


