

**Feminist and Ecological Economics: Applying a Social Provisioning  
Approach to the Case of New Orleans, Post-Katrina**

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International Affairs Working Paper 2006-04  
March 2006

Presented to Spring 2006 New School Graduate Program in International Affairs Seminar  
Series  
March 1, 2006

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper introduces the feminist economics methodology of social provisioning, and discusses its potential contributions to an ecological economic analysis. After describing the five core starting points of social provisioning, the paper analyzes the public policies which contributed to the Hurricane Katrina disaster in New Orleans, and the particular issues facing low income women. The social provisioning approach is then used to develop criteria for a just and equitable reconstruction plan.

# **Feminist and Ecological Economics: Applying a Social Provisioning Approach to the Case of New Orleans, Post-Katrina**

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## **Introduction: Feminist political economics and social provisioning**

Feminist political economists have been active in the analysis and critique of economic theory and policy since the beginning of the second wave of feminism in the late 1960's. By the 1990's, the UN conferences in Rio and Beijing increased the international dialogue, and made it clear that the feminist critique of economic and environmental policy went beyond a focus on policies, to a fundamental interrogation of the theory and methodology of mainstream neoclassical economics. The International Associate for Feminist Economics, since its formation in 1992, has held annual meetings which provide a forum for the presentation of new theoretical and empirical research from feminist economists and those in related fields, with membership from nearly 50 different countries. Given the hegemony of neoclassical economics—particularly within the United States—strengthened in the triumphalism of the Reagan years, many IAFFE members in the beginning years were schooled exclusively in the mainstream model, although political economists, institutionalists, and other feminist economists were an active presence from the start. Early efforts were often focused on critiquing aspects of the neoclassical theory, and on the “social construction of economics as a discipline” (Beneria 2003: 42). Increasingly in recent years, the growing scholarship and on-going dialogue among feminist economists has begun implicitly to coalesce around some methodological principles—emphatically not an orthodoxy, but common starting points—which I have labeled a “social provisioning” approach (Power 2004)). In brief, I have identified five core methodological starting points common to much of the work in feminist economics (Power 2004: 4-5):

1. Nonwaged caring and domestic labor should be incorporated into the analysis from the beginning.
2. Human well-being should be a central criterion for economic success.
3. Human agency is important. Processes as well as outcomes need to be investigated in evaluating well-being.
4. “[E]thical judgments are a valid, inescapable, and in fact desirable part of an economic analysis” (Power 2004: 5).
5. Divisions as well as commonalities must be incorporated into the analysis, by class, race-ethnicity, and gender, as well as other culturally-determined factors.

As I have argued (Power 2004: 7), starting economic analysis with a social provisioning approach

illuminates the ways a society organizes itself to produce and reproduce material life. This organization is a set of social activities, rather than individual choices, and its outcome is social production and reproduction...Social provisioning is a classical, not a neoclassical, concept, a descriptive category rather than a motivation. At any historical moment within a given economic system, a specific aspect of provisioning can be carried out in a myriad ways. The dynamics of economic relations (themselves embedded within power relations) interact with societal institutions and social divisions (by, for example, class, race, and gender) to construct specific outcomes.

The social provisioning approach provides a number of points of intersection with ecological economics, as well as some contributions which could enhance the ecological analysis. Like ecological economists, feminist economists view their analytic terrain as a set of complex interconnected systems. They seek to portray the complexity of economic and social formations, rather than develop abstract models that prioritize simplicity; and the outcomes of their analyses are often indeterminate (“messy”, to use my favorite technical term). Both feminist and ecological economists consider it crucial to include unpaid “services”—whether human caring or natural ecological—in their analyses. Both

prioritize well-being and valuing, not discounting, the future. Both recognize the importance of ethical judgments.

But feminist economics can make some contributions to ecological economics as well, first of all through an emphasis on a recognition of power and difference. Conflicts of interest—both material conflicts and conflicts arising from cultural understandings—by gender, class, race-ethnicity, caste, etc. crucially affect ecological outcomes (Agarwal 1994). Further, and related, feminist economists' close attention to the human processes of getting a living illuminates the complex cultural and historical specificity of political economic and ecological processes. Crucially, the social provisioning approach, by emphasizing process as well as outcomes, can lead to a more ecologically and humanly fruitful definition of efficiency as the least wasteful means of achieving outcomes society has openly and democratically chosen to value. The “commons” can, in this sense be viewed as common interests, but with clear and careful respect for difference as well.

What would such a feminist-ecological-political-economics look like in practice? In what follows, I will take the case of the reconstruction of post-Katrina New Orleans as an example.

### **Natural Disasters, Vulnerabilities, and Difference**

In a paper included in the Social Science Research Council's series on Understanding Katrina, Neil Smith states that “It is generally accepted among environmental geographers that there is no such thing as a natural disaster” (Smith 2005:1). But writing in the same series, Alex de Waal cautions against a tendency in modern capitalist societies toward short time horizons and the denial of the inevitability of extreme natural events (de Wall 2005:1-2). Social scientists focusing on the failures of human social, political, and economic institutions, he argues, shouldn't ignore the role of nature: “in an event such as this the natural and social abut one another, and much as the storm lays bare social structures and processes, it is also a chance occurrence of a natural

extreme” (de Waal 2005:7). It is partly because of the unpredictable nature of extreme natural events that societies persist in putting people in harm’s way. In the case of New Orleans, both human agency and human indifference to risk played a role.

As became glaringly obvious in the aftermath of Katrina, vulnerability in the face of a natural event tends to be “highly differentiated” (Smith 2005:1) by class and race-ethnicity (although exceptions certainly occur, as in highly scenic but geographically-risky locales). Vulnerability, in the words of anthropologist Anthony Oliver-Smith, “links general political economic conditions to very particular environmental forces to understand how basic conditions such as poverty or racism produce susceptibilities to very specific environmental hazards” (Oliver-Smith 2005:2). Less frequently recognized is the particular vulnerability of women in the face of disaster. New Orleans is no exception in this regard. To understand vulnerability, further, it is necessary to move beyond the immediate effects of the hurricane, to an examination of historical decisions which contributed to the disaster, as well as medium term, and possibly long term implications. Factors of income, race-ethnicity, and gender affect vulnerability at all levels, from the ability to select a relatively safe environment, to the ability to maintain that level of safety, evacuate if necessary, and recover in the aftermath.

In the case of New Orleans, decades of governmental policy at all levels served to put low income African Americans—and particularly low income women and children—in harm’s way. This was done through policies creating concentrated and highly segregated pockets of poverty in low-lying areas, and policies which increased the likelihood of flooding through destruction of the flood plain and through soil subsidence.

### **Segregation of people, exploitation of nature: the creation of vulnerability in New Orleans**

The Brookings Institutions’s Metropolitan Policy Program has documented the systematic way that federal and local public policy beginning in the 1960's and 1970's

began to create “extreme segregation by race and income” (Brookings 2005:5) in New Orleans. According to the research summarized in the Brookings report, while New Orleans has historically had a large African American population, until the 1970's the city was fairly integrated by race. Similarly, while pockets of concentrated poverty existed before 1970, the number of Census tracts with extreme poverty (defined as 40% of the population or higher) increased from 28 in 1970 to 47 in 2000, while the percent of the overall population under the poverty line increased only slightly, from 26% to 28% (Brookings 2005:6). By 2000, 84% of the city’s poor were African American, and the average African American in New Orleans lived in a neighborhood that was 82% black (Brookings 2005:6). White flight to the suburbs was facilitated by “land reclamation, de-watering, and expanded flood control” (Brookings 2005:9), while well-paying manufacturing jobs in the city were replaced by low-paid service and retail occupations. Brookings notes that four of the five largest areas of job growth paid less than the national average for non-farm earnings, \$43,061, with accommodations jobs averaging only \$19,131 in annual pay (Brookings 2005: 11).

As occurred in numerous other cities, federal housing policy acted to encourage white middle class flight from the city, while destroying viable, mixed income inner city neighborhoods to create highly concentrated and highly segregated public housing projects isolated from job growth and political influence. These projects, further, were concentrated in the lower lying areas of the city (Brookings 2005: 21). As the Brookings report notes, the state and local governments participated in these decisions. But, according to Brookings, “Without federal funding, oversight, and planning, these projects would never have taken place” (Brookings 2005: 20). By 1985, an estimated 50,000 people, or 9% of the population of New Orleans, lived in public housing (Brookings 2005: 22)

Federal flood control subsidies also contributed to the segregation of poor African Americans in New Orleans, first in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by enabling the draining of

swamps near Lake Ponchartrain through the building and maintenance of the levees, creating poor predominately black neighborhoods. In recent decades the government engineered levees and subsidized road construction in marshlands north, west, and east of the city, enabling the construction of sprawling suburban developments which facilitated both white flight and job diffusion away from the inner city (Brookings 2005: 25). In addition, elimination of flooding led to a loss of sediment to replenish the marshes, while draining the land for development exacerbated soil subsidence (along with the effects of oil and gas pumping), leaving much of New Orleans below sea level (Black 2006: 41).

Although the Brookings report doesn't dwell upon it, the Institute for Women's Policy Research points out that low income women were particularly hard hit by Hurricane Katrina, in New Orleans and in the Gulf Coast Region as well. More than half of families with children in New Orleans were female-headed in 2004 (Gault et. al. 2005: 2), and 25.9% of women lived below the federal poverty line, compared with 20.0% of men. Elaine Enarson, writing in the SSRC series, notes that women are generally more vulnerable to disaster, because they have the fewest resources to begin with, and because they tend not to be the focus of reconstruction efforts:

Most public housing residents, residents of mobile homes, renters, and those lacking insurance are women—often women heading households on their own income alone—but re-housing them is not a priority in our owner-focused and single-family home rebuilding plans. The poorest of the poor before Katrina, socially marginalized women of color will be the last to escape the confines of FEMA tent cities and other encampments. The finely balanced networks of support poor women develop to survive in our economy, piecing together cash from odd jobs, boyfriends, government, family and kin, were ripped apart by this storm. Low wage women employed at the lowest rungs of the tourist industry and as beauticians, child care workers, home health aides, servers and temporary office workers will not be helped back on their feet by economic recovery plans geared to major employers in the formal sector. (Enarson 2005:2-3)

Further, because women take disproportionate responsibility for child care and unwaged domestic labor, as well as community volunteer work, their ability to find jobs



is dependent upon crucial services. Enarson states, “Without functioning households, and the social infrastructure of transit systems, schools, stores, health clinics and child care, women’s return to employment is delayed. Women supporting households singlehandedly are, of course, most at risk.” (Enarson 2005: 3). Both Enarson and IWPR emphasize the importance of involving women in the planning for the reconstruction of New Orleans, both in the immediate aftermath and in the long term.

### **Social Provisioning and New Orleans Reconstruction**

The social provisioning framework can draw our attention to some important criteria for a just and egalitarian reconstruction plan.

1. Attention must be paid to the needs of communities, in terms of caring and domestic labor, as well as paid labor. Communities must be seen as groups of interdependent and interconnected human actors, rather than aggregates of isolated individuals. IWPR emphasizes that “The reconstruction effort must focus not just on constructing houses, but on rebuilding communities” (Gault et.al. 2005: 11). In this regard, the planning process must recognize what became clear in the agonizing aftermath of Katrina, as displaced people searched for their family members: people, and especially poor people, often live within a web of kinship connections which extend beyond the living unit. Treating female-headed families, for example, as isolated units that can be moved, housed, and provided for separate from an expanded network of proximate kin may be a catastrophic error.
2. Human well-being must be at the center of the reconstruction effort. This means, as IWPR argues, ensuring basic needs for food, housing, and medical care, without time limits, complicating red tape, or ill-timed budget cuts (Gault et.al. 2005:11). Beyond the immediate term, it means confronting the causes of embedded poverty; and working to raise wages and create economic opportunities in the poorest neighborhoods (Gault et.al. 2005: 12; Brookings 2005: 2).

3. Human agency is important. The people displaced from low-lying New Orleans neighborhoods must be involved in the decisions about what should happen next. Particular effort will be needed to involve women in the process. Women, IWPR notes, “often constitute the backbone of communities...Their perspectives will provide critical insights that might otherwise go unrecognized—such as making sure, for example, that child care locations are convenient to public transportation” (Gault et.al. 2005: 12).

Enarson (2005: 3) details what would be needed:

Will women’s voices be heard in the independent commission likely to be appointed to review the national response to Hurricane Katrina? Will community recovery meetings be held at times convenient to those with children and in places safe for women? Will specialists about family life, women’s issues, the gender concern of boys and men in crisis, poverty, race and gender, and women’s environmental knowledge and activism be consulted?.

Note that what is being called for here is not the devolvement onto the individual for all responsibility for her or his future. Economist Edward Glaeser has suggested that it would be preferable to divide the federal relief money up and distribute it as checks to the individuals affected (Pettus 2006:15). But confronting racism and sexism, fighting poverty, reconstructing community, and, fundamentally, deciding on the future of New Orleans’ low-lying neighborhoods requires a collective effort. It must be noted in this regard that the longer the process of reconstruction is delayed, the less likely it is that poor displaced New Orleans residents will be able to have a voice in the process or, indeed, return at all. The community organizing group ACORN has argued that many houses in low income neighborhoods are not, in fact, irreparably damaged if repairs begin soon. Delay, in effect, condemns the houses—and ACORN has accused FEMA of allocating roofing tarps (which at least stop further damage) disproportionately to higher income neighborhoods (Anonymous report on New Orleans 2005: 1; see also Smith 2005: 4).

In a disturbing development, the New Orleans Housing Authority, with support from the City Council President, is establishing a screening process to regulate which low income families are accepted into the reopening public housing projects. The preference would be for people with a work history, work training, or a “willingness to work” (Varney 2006). Because the city’s public housing may represent “New Orleans’ single largest source of housing” (Varney 2006), this policy puts the Housing Authority in the position of deciding who among the poorest city residence—particularly low income mothers and children—will be allowed to return to New Orleans, clearly violating the principle of widespread participation in the process of deciding the city’s future.

4. Ethical judgments must be made. In this case, reconstruction can be an opportunity to rectify many of the social, economic, and environmental deprivations of the past. The Brookings report prioritizes three goals for New Orleans: “Mak(ing) the region a paragon of high-quality, sustainable development”; “Transform(ing) neighborhoods of poverty into neighborhoods of choice”; and “Mov(ing) the economy from the low-road to the high-road”, adding that the report “proceeds out of a conviction that New Orleans *must* be rebuilt, although emphatically *not* the way it was on the eve of Hurricane Katrina’s landfall” (emphasis in original) (Brookings 2005: 2). In IWPR’s view “The issue before the nation is one not only of immediate disaster relief, but of mounting an aggressive fight against longstanding poverty, homelessness, and lack of employment in our cities, towns, and neighborhoods” (Gault et.al. 2005: 12). To these I would add that the New Orleans reconstruction must involve a reconstruction of wetlands, curtailment of sprawl, and a recognition that nature cannot be endlessly controlled and exploited for short term economic gain.

5. It is clear that the problems stemming from Katrina can only be understood through a prism of race, class, and gender. Solutions must be similarly conscious, and in this regard, the plight of renters may need particular attention.

A final note: one pressing question from both an economic and an environmental point of view is whether some parts of New Orleans can, or should, in fact be rebuilt at all. Low-lying areas made worse by decades of subsidence may be difficult to protect, particularly if severe hurricanes become more numerous. And it could be argued that poor African Americans were, in effect, stranded in these desperately poor parts of the city while job opportunities moved elsewhere. This is part of Glaeser's thinking when he urges that the federal money be allocated to displaced inhabitants who can then choose to move where the jobs are. He presents this as a strategy of "helping poor people rather than poor places" (Glaeser, quoted in Pettus 2006: 16), but this ignores the institutional basis of inequality and poverty. The forced migration of New Orleans' poor population through a policy of public neglect would be an unjust outcome. It is clear that not all displaced people will return to New Orleans; but the long term decisions about its future need to be carefully considered, in an extended conversation involving all stakeholders.

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