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Common Good

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Practical Wisdom and Institutional Transformation in an Urban Disaster

Michael A. Cowan

Two Social Disasters

As I complete the editor's introduction to these articles on institutional disruption and transformation in New Orleans triggered by Hurricane Katrina, Corona splashes her colors over maps of the earth. The hurricane pales in comparison with the pandemic, but one contrast between the two occurs to this participant/observer in both.

Prior to Katrina most institutions necessary to proper city functioning—including city administration, police department, and courts—were broken or stretched to the breaking point. As you will see in these articles, following the storm, business and civil society leaders, cooperating with government officials when possible, challenging them as necessary, led dramatic changes in city ethics institutions, community/police relations, property tax assessment, and so on. Such changes could only have been envisioned and executed locally. And so, they were. The base of power for post-Katrina change was local.

By contrast, it is inconceivable that the primary impetus for responding successfully to the coronavirus could come from local communities. They are perfectly suited to lead charity, education, and support, but societal recovery from COVID-19 depends on effective, efficient, and functionally integrated macro-systems of food, housing, banking, education, health care, public safety, unemployment, transportation, and small business support. Macro-system functioning also requires aggressively targeting corruption. Terms like “price gouging,” “bid rigging,” “malfeasance,” “payroll fraud,” and “insider dealing” begin to surface as the trillions of public dollars required to pay for these very expensive programs are released. A stolen and a wasted public dollar have in common that neither achieves its intended public benefit. The base of power for responding to the corona pandemic is at the top.

A Social Network Emerges from Disaster

I want to introduce the authors of this unconventional volume in an unconventional way.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle contrasts two ways of knowing, the university scholar's (*theoria*) and the public actor's (*phronesis*). *Phronesis* means prudence or practical wisdom. It arises in the world and guides action there. It is continually modified in the complex, relentless action/reaction process that is the social world.

Actors with practical wisdom include effective leaders, coaches, mediators, physicians, administrators, elected officials, principals, pastors, parents, police officers, volunteers, CEOs, teachers, and physicians. The practically wise gain their wisdom by acting in the day-to-day world and learning from the reactions to their actions. Experience teaches wise actors what works and what doesn't in the interplay of action in the world.

Robert Hariman identifies three dimensions of practical wisdom: inclusiveness, foresight, and decisiveness.¹ Practically wise actors know how to act in situations involving differences of perspectives and priorities. Practical wisdom requires *inclusiveness*. Practical wisdom allows actors to make educated guesses about the likely consequences of their actions in an unpredictable future. Practical wisdom requires *foresight*. Skilled actors must learn to make judgment calls

without a formula. Practical wisdom includes the virtue of *decisiveness*. In and through their social engagements, public actors develop the virtues of inclusiveness, foresight, and decisiveness.

In the years following Hurricane Katrina's near-death blow to New Orleans in August 2005, the authors of this issue and their organizations lived and took a key part in the transformation of a disordered city. One founded a neighborhood organization that signaled hope to the recovery effort. Another directed the rebuilding of the city's dysfunctional administration. Another brought indigent defense into the twentieth century. Another led the process of unwinding the infamous waste and corruption in the operations of the city's airport. Another was a key leader of the business community's unprecedented engagement in the rebuilding of the city. Another founded an organization of women who played a visible role in demanding restructuring of the failed governance of levee boards and assessors. In theirs and the other stories in this issue, the inclusiveness, foresight, and decisiveness of reflective actors appear.

Something unique lies in the backdrop to these articles that would not be visible without editorial highlighting. Authors led the change process on their issues, and one or more of the authors leading on other issues were typically active partners with them on it. They were not working separately but as partners in a fluid, collaborative action network in an environment with no end of possibilities for change. They made their political and financial capital available to each other at critical moments. These relationships, among people who for the most part had not known each other before the storm, were forged in public action in a moment of devastation. The articles here represent not simply the words of individual actors and scholars but a social network giving voice to its common experience. My abiding respect for the wise partners whose words await you arose in the crucible into which we were thrown together in the darkest moment of our city's three hundred years.

When I have spoken publicly about changes in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, one question invariably comes from the audience: "Would the changes you described have occurred without a hurricane?" My answer must be no. But there is a fuller answer: "Nature can create temporary vacuums but cannot fill them." The campaigns, legislative actions, and public meetings recounted here might not have happened. But they did.

Note

¹ Robert Hariman, "Prudence in the Twenty-First Century," in *Prudence*, ed. Hariman (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2003), 298.