

Reflections on Methodology, Disasters, and Social Learning

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I am honored by the thoughtful observations and arguments put forward in this volume, and though I volley back on some of the points that have been raised, my volleying is done with a deep sense of gratitude for having the ideas presented in *The Cultural and Political Economy of Recovery (CPER)* considered so seriously and by such an impressive group of scholars.

My responses to this collection of papers fall into three categories: reflections on the use of qualitative methods within cultural economy inquiry, reflections on post-disaster recovery, and more generally, reflections on social learning. Below, I take up each of these in turn.

Reflections on Qualitative Methods

One of the distinctive (or odd, depending upon one's perspective) features of *The Cultural and Political Economy of Recovery* is the qualitative methodological approach I deploy; distinctive (or odd), that is, relative to most academic economics literature. The analysis presented in *CPER* is based on in-depth interviews with 300 people who had returned to New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast following Hurricane Katrina, as well as interviews and/or surveys of 103 former New Orleans residents who had evacuated with Katrina but were still living in Houston three years after the storm.

Most of the research team's field studies were neighborhood-based, focusing on residents within a particular community, such as the Mary Queen of Vietnam (MQVN) neighborhood in New Orleans East, the Ninth Ward neighborhoods, Broadmoor, Central City, Gentilly, and St. Bernard Parish. While most of the interviews were with local residents, we also interviewed non-resident business owners and managers, members of the clergy, school teachers and principals, non-profit directors, and other stakeholders in the community.

The interviews were based on a common set of questions and prompts, but the interview structure was such that it allowed an interviewer or interview subject to pursue any particular topic in greater detail as necessary. In general, interviews lasted from one to three hours. Audio files of the interviews were transcribed and the transcripts were later coded for themes and patterns of interest. Reports capturing each occurrence of a theme could then be coded again for more refined pattern identification within and across communities. This approach is widely practiced within sociology (Miles and Huberman 1994, Marcus 1998, Weiss 1994), but is much less common within economics.

Caldwell (2011) recognizes the value of deploying qualitative methods in the study of complex social orders. He emphasizes in particular themes of interest to Austrians, such as the distortion that government planning in its various forms can cause on the ground for people attempting to navigate a context that is rife with policy-related uncertainty. Yet Caldwell (2011: 6) asks whether and how the interpretive frame of the investigator impacts the analysis, i.e., “how do ethnographers deal with the problem that one’s priors always affect the questions one asks and the way that one hears the answers that are given? Are there ‘objective’ ways to compare the different sorts of narratives that may emerge?”

Further, he asks whether and how the identity of the interviewer matters in which narratives the research subject is willing to share. Caldwell (2011: 6) asks, “Who was on the ‘team’ that asked the questions? Were any of them locals? Were they white or black? From the North or the South? Were they seen as ‘social scientists’? All of these sorts of things might affect the answers that a subject might give, how they might be phrased, what things are left in and what left out?”¹ In raising these concerns, I don’t think that Caldwell is guilty of upholding the myth of “pure” science in which the interests and perspectives of the scientific investigator never factor into the investigative process. Rather, Caldwell is simply asking what narratives might be left out of the analysis because the investigator is seeing social phenomena through a particular lens, or, what narratives might subjects never express given the racial and ethnic profile of the interview team?

These are both exceptionally good questions and questions that ethnographers think about carefully. It is important to note first, however, that these questions are just as relevant for quantitative empirical analysis as qualitative empirical analysis. Consider, for example, how the theoretical perspective of the researchers who developed and maintain the *Economic Freedom of the World Report* informs the design of that annual project (Gwartney, Hall, and Lawson 2010). The effort to construct the Economic Freedom Index makes little sense outside of a theoretical perspective that suggests that economic freedom may be related to economic performance and human

progress more generally. The theory tells us that a connection is likely to exist. Empirical work deploying the quantified index gives us a quantitative measure of *how much* economic freedom might matter to any particular outcome of interest and which particular categories of economic freedom matter most. Theoretical perspective *always* shapes scientific inquiry, directing our gaze in some directions but not others. This is not a flaw; it is just the nature of the intellectual enterprise.

Further, the manner in which quantitative data is gathered is just as much an issue of concern (or ought to be) for quantitative researchers as it is for qualitative researchers. Indeed, an interview process may be affected by the identity of the interviewer and interview subject, but it would be a mistake to assume that quantified data did not involve similar dynamics. Consider what difference it makes, for example, when a branch of the federal government gathers data. Might this intimidate some respondents? Might undocumented workers, or family members living with undocumented workers, or simply respondents with Latino surnames be reluctant to respond honestly (or at all) to the US Census survey? And again, in part because of these limitations, no data set (qualitative or quantitative) will present all potentially relevant narratives. Official economic data emanating from lesser-developed countries, for example, primarily capture activity within the formal sector, thus under-representing or neglecting narratives relevant to the informal sector.

All that being said, Caldwell does raise important questions. In addressing them I find McCabe's (2011: 12) remarks on reflexive methodology, which "embraces the interaction between subject and object" and, I would add, the interaction between subject and investigator, particularly helpful. Caldwell (2011) worries that the race of the interviewer might impact what the interview subject is willing to share. Might a Ninth Ward resident, for example, be less willing to share his theories about an intentional government effort to delay the delivery of recovery assistance and the return of municipal services to poor black neighborhoods if the interviewer is a white middleclass academic? Race, gender, class, age, occupational status, and other factors can create cultural distance between subject and investigator that (especially if the interaction is handled poorly) can limit trust and inhibit the flow of response.

But as McCabe (2011) observes and the research team's experience bears out, these interactive effects are not always negative. Sometimes cultural distance can be helpful in eliciting a more fully articulated response (Chamlee-Wright 2011). For example, the fact that I am a white middleclass female academic in her forties living in Wisconsin represents significant social and cultural distance relative to, say, a poor black elderly male who has spent his career in the building trades and his entire life in New Orleans. That social distance *may* mean that he will be less forthcoming or less interested in

speaking with me. However, this social and cultural distance may also mean (and we frequently found this to be the case) that he might take greater care in walking me through the dynamics of racial and class-based politics in New Orleans. If the interaction is handled well, the interview subject is put in the role of expert, with the interviewer playing the role of the deeply interested novice. Had I been an insider, it would have been much easier to establish a good rapport, but he may have then considered it unnecessary to educate me on the dynamics he would have assumed I, as an insider, would have considered obvious.

In our training protocol for new members of the interview team we encourage interviewers to ask follow up questions that might sound naïve. For example, and as Caldwell (2011) anticipates, New Orleans based interview subjects often indicated that the slow response of the government to some neighborhoods was intentional. Rather than assume that we know what lies behind such an observation, the best follow up from the interviewer is to ask, “and why do you think that is?” Such a painfully naïve question may feel awkward to ask. (The Academy tends to discourage rather than encourage this kind of humility.) But such questions often elicit responses that reveal the subject’s mental paradigm, in this case, about the motivations of government actors.

It is telling, I believe, that precisely the narrative that Caldwell worries the interview team would have missed was one that presents itself throughout the interview data collected in the Upper and Lower Ninth Wards and has occupied much of our thinking. In our analysis of expectations of government response in Ninth Ward communities, Storr and I refer to this as the “push out” narrative—the belief that local, state, and federal governments intentionally delayed the provision of recovery assistance and municipal services so as to frustrate poor black residents to the point that they would abandon the recovery effort (Chamlee-Wright and Storr 2010). The interview data reveal that this narrative is widespread across Ninth Ward neighborhoods. Without being asked directly, 89% of subjects considered the government to be intentionally hindering the recovery process in their neighborhood.²

What puzzled us, however, was that despite the fact that most Ninth Ward subjects expressed pessimism about the government’s motivation to assist in the recovery effort, most Ninth Ward returnees we interviewed nonetheless appealed to the government to provide such services in the form of political activism, frequent and time consuming participation in community meetings at which local council members presided, letters to public officials, and appeals to various agencies involved in post-disaster recovery. Why appeal to government offices and agencies, we wondered, if residents believed that the government had no intention of providing effective forms of help?

The interview data presented a potential answer to this puzzle. While most interview subjects were pessimistic about the government's motivation, most expressed the belief that the government had the capacity to provide effective recovery assistance, if only it was motivated to do so. This suggested to us a typology into which citizens might fall. Citizens might be either optimistic or pessimistic about the government's *intent* to provide effective recovery assistance. Further, citizens might be either optimistic or pessimistic about the government's *capacity* to provide recovery assistance. Taken together, these categories yield four possible types, ranging from consistently pessimistic about the government's intent and the government's capacity to help, to a mixed type that attributes malevolent intent to the government but optimism regarding the government's capacity (or vice versa), to a consistently optimistic type attributing benevolent intent and robustness in the government's capacity to provide effective help. [See Chamlee-Wright and Storr (2010) for a description of how we coded each interview subject according to type.]

The majority of interview subjects were consistent with the mixed type in that they were pessimistic about the government's intent but optimistic about the government's capacity to provide effective recovery assistance. While the typology is instructive for a variety of reasons, it was particularly important in helping us untangle the puzzle of why returnees appealed to government agencies and offices they understood to be engaged in the orchestrated "push out." In the months and early years following the storm, community meetings and public protests helped to demonstrate that some members of the community had indeed returned and posed a political challenge to government officials who refused to provide services to a particular neighborhood (on the grounds that no one had returned). Further, such public appeals put pressure on political leaders to clarify the rules of the game under which rebuilding was to be allowed and, where possible, streamline bureaucratic processes that were impeding recovery. The logic at work here was that though the government was not motivated to help, it *could* help if appropriately shamed.

Let me return now to the broader methodological points Caldwell (2011) raises. First, I would challenge the notion that having theoretical priors is a problem to be overcome, as having them is the only avenue toward asking interesting questions. Instead, it seems to me, the critical challenges facing an ethnographer are developing 1) a research design that is intellectually open (i.e., does not build in a preferred conclusion), 2) interview instruments and interview techniques that do not beg responses that stack the deck in favor of the investigator's preferred theory, and 3) a coding protocol that effectively sorts the data, again, in a manner that does not inherently favor a preferred outcome. Addressing fully each of these challenges is too great a task to take

on here and is the subject of a voluminous literature.³ Instead, my response to Caldwell's concerns is to echo the themes raised in McCabe's essay. Interaction effects between the investigator, the social phenomenon under investigation, and the research subject can, if handled appropriately, be the source of genuine discovery.

When we began the Ninth Ward field study, the question of whether there really was an orchestrated effort to push poor black residents from their neighborhood was not on our radar as a question we would be investigating. But the deluge of response indicating that residents themselves believed this to be true led us to take that belief (accurate or not) seriously as potentially determining the rebuilding strategies of residents who had returned. While our interview questions reflected our perspective as academically trained political economists, those priors did not stand in the way of open inquiry. Had we been anything less than intellectually open to learning from what the residents had to tell us, we would have missed the relevance the "push out" narrative had in the strategies residents had adopted in the post disaster recovery process.

Reflections on Disaster

In his essay "Culture, Economics and Recovery from Natural Disasters," Sutter (2011) examines the interactive social dynamics that underlie post-disaster recovery and the policy dilemmas that emerge in the wake of a disaster. Here I will address each of these themes and, with the assistance of Keeling and Carden (2011) and Coyne and Lemke (2011), consider what general lessons can be drawn.

Sutter considers the importance of synchronization—people acting in concert—in the post-disaster period, and whether the type and scale of a disaster makes a difference in terms of the importance synchronization plays. In the context of catastrophic disaster, such as the flooding Hurricane Katrina caused, individual decisions about whether to return or not depended upon whether others within the community—neighbors, local businesses, churches, employers, schools, medical facilities, and so on—were also returning. So long as people attach more value to their original neighborhood than to an alternative location, and they expect most others in the community to return, they will likely return as well. But if they do not expect others to return, they may relocate, even if the alternative location is less desirable in their view. As Sutter (2011) argues, it is in contexts such as this, when there is the potential for multiple equilibria to emerge, that political and/or civic leadership can make a significant difference. This is indeed part of the story I present in Chapter 4 of *CPER* with Father Vien and the Mary Queen of Vietnam Catholic Church helping to tip the balance in favor of an equilibrium of recovery.

But, Sutter (2011) points out, not all disasters are catastrophic disasters. Not all disasters are so devastating that people's decision to return and rebuild hinges upon synchronizing their efforts with others. In fact, Sutter points out, *most* disasters are not of this kind, calling into question the assumption that post-disaster recovery requires a significant and central role for the government. Further, Sutter argues, given the fact that some people's preferences are such that they would *always* return (or *never* return) no matter what they expected others to do, this puts further in doubt the necessity of government action following a disaster.

The logic Sutter (2011) presents is sound, and in general, there is good reason to question the need for and the capacity of the government to successfully plan the recovery effort from the top-down. Yet, I would argue, Sutter's analysis may understate the role that expectations, social coordination, and leadership play in non-catastrophic disasters. As Storr and I argue elsewhere, the value people attach to a community is generally not fixed (Chamlee-Wright and Storr 2009). Particularly following a disaster, catastrophic or not, the value people attach to their community is likely to be in flux (*ibid.*). The provision of public or club goods can play a pivotal role in enhancing the value people place on their community. Consider a post-disaster community in which most of the properties remain intact but a key amenity has been destroyed, for example, a lake community that loses its lake after a dam is destroyed. No lives have been lost and the properties that make up the town and residential community are untouched, but the value people attach to their original community will depend upon their expectations of whether the dam will be rebuilt. Without the lake, businesses dependent upon fishing and tourist traffic might close or relocate, and without the businesses and community life that surrounds them, the resident population may gradually dwindle. Arguably, the wisest move for business owners would be to cease operating as soon as they conclude that the lake will not be restored. On the other hand, if residents and business owners perceive there to be a credible commitment to rebuild the dam and restore the lake, then a full recovery is much more likely.

In making this argument, I am not claiming that government leadership is the only source of such a credible commitment. Such efforts may in fact be driven by private civil society. Consider, for example, the 1878 yellow fever epidemic in Memphis that Keeling and Carden (2011) describe. In terms of the lives lost, it is reasonable to consider this disaster a catastrophic one. But in another sense, it is more the type of non-catastrophic disaster that Sutter (2011) describes. As devastating as the loss of life was to the community, the residential and business properties, and the public infrastructure of Memphis were not compromised. Once the loss of life had been stemmed, one might assume that the principal challenges for community rebound had been

overcome. But as Keeling and Carden (2011) point out, the challenges of post-disaster community recovery had just begun, with many concluding that it was better to burn the physical remains of the city to the ground. Through their involvement in voluntary organizations, private citizens provided key public goods related to municipal management, security, and sanitation. Eventually merchants and business leaders, many of whom were involved in these organizations, pledged their willingness to support a tax levy to construct a new sewer system that promised to further improve public health conditions. The five-fold increase in population and growing prosperity that followed suggests that the provision of key public goods in the wake of disaster, first by private citizens alone and later by local government, dramatically influenced the value people placed on living a life in Memphis.

Notice that the disaster response in Memphis is very much in line with what Coyne and Lemke (2011: 46) regard as a polycentric model of disaster relief. “Polycentric orders are those in which decision-making power is dispersed across multiple organizations able to exercise autonomy within a shared rule of law.” When the board of health ceased functioning in Memphis, the Citizen’s Relief Committee, whose membership cut across the city’s ten wards, began providing public services such as setting up refugee camps and shelters. The Howard Association provided medical care to those who had fallen ill. And the Auxiliary Sanitary Association designed and executed a refuse collection program. Each group had its own autonomous sphere of decision-making authority.

While this case does offer a rich example of the power of private civil society to provide services that are assumed to be the sole province of government in the contemporary discussions of disaster relief, this is not the whole story. As Keeling and Carden (2011) observe, the private civic response served as a training ground for better local governance following the crisis. Military personnel were directed by the Citizen’s Relief Committee to help secure properties. When the provision of public goods, such as the new sewage system, outstripped the capacity of the private civic organization, this effort was assumed by local government. In other words, perhaps the best framing for considering the efficacy of disaster response is not government at one end of the spectrum and private civil society at the other. Rather, as Coyne and Lemke (2011) suggest, perhaps the best way to consider disaster relief is on a spectrum of monocentricity (in which one entity has the power to trump the decision making authority of other individuals and groups) and polycentricity (in which individuals and groups—public or private—have spheres of authority that can intersect with but not trump others). [Also see Ostrom (2005).] Judged through the lens that Coyne and Lemke (2011) offer, the Memphis case was a success because it fell toward the polycentric side of the spectrum. Local

decision makers, whether in their role as private citizens running a voluntary relief organization or as leaders of a newly constituted local government, had access to and made use of relevant local knowledge, and had the flexibility to adapt to larger scale government provision of public goods when necessary.

Sutter (2011) raises another fundamental question related to disaster and that is the question of what constitutes recovery? It could mean, as Keeling and Carden (2011) suggest, the recovery of a particular place such as Memphis following the 1878 yellow fever epidemic or Paris following the 1910 flood. Alternatively, Sutter and others suggest, that recovery must mean that communities (and the individuals that make them up) are less vulnerable to future threats of disaster (Burby 1998, Mileti 1999). Some communities become increasingly vulnerable to disaster over time, such as New Orleans, which has fallen increasingly below sea level since its founding in 1718 as a colonial trade city. Despite the growing threat, path dependence has inhibited net outmigration to safer locales. According to this view, the post-disaster moment presents an opportunity to break away from the path. By prohibiting rebuilding in disaster-prone areas, for example, the population is forced to relocate and will presumably be left in a less vulnerable position. “For all these reasons,” Sutter (2011: 25) argues, “rebuilding in the exact same footprint after a disaster is probably not efficient. The aftermath of a disaster represents an opportunity, perhaps the only opportunity, to make changes to reduce the expected costs of future disasters.” Reasonable delays in allowing rebuilding in New Orleans were justified, in Sutter’s view, because policy makers were considering the efficiency gains of reducing the size of the city’s footprint and not allowing particularly vulnerable communities to rebuild.

Sutter correctly points out that government programs that artificially reduce the costs of living in a disaster-prone area, such as the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP), render people more vulnerable to disaster. Such programs allow developers, residents, and businesses to ignore the true costs of locating in a disaster-prone area, and reduce incentives to develop architectural design and technology that could better withstand these threats. Ordinarily, eliminating such programs or making insurance premiums actuarially sound would be politically infeasible. But as Sutter suggests, the post-disaster moment may be one in which the unintended negative consequences of such policies are more clearly identified and the political tides may turn against them.

That being said, it is unclear whether the post-disaster moment offers an obvious opportunity for policy makers to identify and bring about a more socially efficient outcome if what is under consideration is a prohibition against the rebuilding of residential communities. First, policy makers in a position to make such a choice are unlikely to be disinterested parties in the decision. It is noteworthy that in the early deliberations that followed Hurricane Katrina,

politically connected private developers, who stood to benefit significantly if eminent domain were used to turn damaged residential neighborhoods into commercial redevelopment zones, held key positions on the Bring New Orleans Back Commission. Second, and as Sutter (2011) recognizes, attempts to reengineer the social order tend to get bogged down by multiple sources of veto power, resulting in what Heller (1998) described as a tragedy of the anti-commons. But even if for the sake of argument we assume away these concerns, we are left with the fact that vulnerability to disaster is but one margin individuals on the ground would consider if the decision were left in their hands. If a community is prohibited from rebuilding and individuals are forced to relocate, the benefits of being in a less-disaster-prone environment would be weighed against the costs of losing one's network connections of extended family, neighbors, and civic life, the loss of a sense of place, and so on. A government may possess the power to orchestrate such a change, but we should not fool ourselves into thinking that that power is the same as possessing the knowledge required to orchestrate social efficiency.

Sutter nonetheless is right to raise the thorny issue of flood protection, which in essence serves to subsidize the benefits people attach to living in New Orleans. My work emphasizes the role that private civil society plays in post-disaster rebound and recovery and shines a light on the ways in which poorly designed public policy can stand in the way those efforts. But the arguments presented in *CPER* do not lead to the conclusion that there is no potentially productive role for government to play. The early provision of essential municipal services and public goods helps to tap the widely dispersed capacity for recovery that exists among residents, business owners, and other stakeholders. Whether the bundle of essential services and public goods the government provides includes flood protection or not is, as Sutter (2011) points out, not a question that easily maps on to the government solution vs. private solution spectrum. As Sutter points out, it is not at all clear that had the provision of levee protection been left to the market, that the post-Katrina recovery would have been any more rapid.

Again, I would call upon Coyne and Lemke (2011) as a way to move us forward. Instead of a government solution vs. private solution frame for such debates, a monocentric vs. polycentric frame may be more helpful in sorting out such difficult questions. Positioning the post-disaster moment as one in which a more socially efficient outcome might be engineered is one that begs a monocentric model of recovery with a central authority that trumps the spheres of decision-making authority at lower levels. By understanding post-disaster relief and recovery as a polycentric order, on the other hand, we recognize the importance of maintaining those spheres of decision-making authority, but at the same time, we can recognize a role for government to play in the provision

of public goods that outstrip the capacity of the private sphere. As Sutter (2011) points out, it may be that levee protection is one such case.

Lessons about Social Learning

Several of the essays in this volume raise questions about the nature of the social learning process, particularly in non-priced environments. Aldrich (2011) reminds us that social capital is not a homogeneous resource but instead comes in a variety of forms (Chamlee-Wright 2008). “Bonding” social capital is often shared among tightly knit groups living in close proximity and sharing common socio-economic traits and/or ethno-religious identities. Bonding social capital is helpful in ensuring, for example, mutual assistance between individuals within a network, but it is less helpful when individuals hope to tap resources that lie beyond the group. “Bridging” or “linking” social capital, on the other hand, can be instrumental in tapping resources beyond one’s closest affiliates. Bridging social capital connects members of a group, for example people within one ethno-linguistic group laterally to another ethno-linguistic group. Linking social capital constitutes a vertical connection that connects a person within one network to someone in another network of higher or lower status, for example a small business owner who is able to get a permit approved more easily because he knows someone who works in the city councilman’s office.

Though *CPER* does not deploy this particular language, many of the case studies it presents illustrate how some of the most successful stories of rebound and recovery came from key players leveraging all three forms of social capital Aldrich (2011) describes. Doris Voitier, the St. Bernard Parish school superintendent who so quickly reopened a school in a community that had been devastated by flood waters relied upon her deep connections within the community as a former school teacher (bonding social capital), her solid reputation among the press corps who sympathized with her struggles to fight unnecessary bureaucracy (bridging social capital), and her growing ties to philanthropic circles beyond the community (linking social capital). The stories of the Broadmoor and Mary Queen of Vietnam communities can also be told through this lens, and as Aldrich suggests, the lack of linking social capital in communities such as the Lower Ninth Ward left them at a significant disadvantage when it came to pressuring local government to bring basic municipal services back on line.

The heterogeneity of socially embedded resources underscores the point that navigating this landscape requires an active mind at work—an entrepreneurial alertness to ways in which such resources can be reconfigured to generate greater value. But as Skarbek and Green (2011) and Horwitz (2011)

point out, when it comes to entrepreneurial action in non-priced environments, the challenge is knowing whether, on net, such actions have added value. Without clear profit and loss signals, it is unclear whether the efforts of a local school administrator, parish priest, non-profit director, or community activist have been productive or unproductive. This challenge is more pronounced, I would argue, the further away one is removed from the decision-making environment. In other words, the person leveraging socially embedded resources will be in a better position to determine whether their strategy was a) effective in terms of meeting their defined goals and b) whether the result generated greater value than it consumed. The researcher, on the other hand, is less able to sort productive from unproductive outcomes without profit and loss signals.

As Horwitz (2011: 81) observes,

“In economics, we have a fairly precise understanding of the coordination process and the ways in which prices, profits, and losses serve as knowledge wrapped in an incentive to both inform and motivate market actors to mutually adjust their behavior in ways that enhance social coordination and better serve all of us as consumers. The question is just how well the analogs of these processes work outside of price coordinated environments... [W]hat is the standard of evaluation of... effectiveness [in non-priced environments]? Moreover, how do we know if we've got it wrong?”

Similarly, Skarbek and Green (2011: 73) observe, “When social entrepreneurs utilize embedded resources, there must be some—albeit imperfect—manner in which they judge the success and failure of attempts to initiate coordination that is in a similar sense, ‘correct.’”

In response I would begin by cautioning that though profit and loss signals are vitally important in determining whether a course of action has been productive or unproductive, such a standard may not be as precise as suggested above. Though a course of action may prove profitable, at any moment in time, we do not know if some alternative course would have been even more profitable. And a short run loss might be considered a success if entrepreneurial insight leads to a loss that is half of what it otherwise might have been, and by incurring those losses (rather than closing the operation down) the enterprise is poised to make profits when market conditions improve. This is just a caution, however, and I agree with Skarbek and Green (2011) and Horwitz (2011) that the difference in robustness of feedback in priced and non-priced environments is significant.

Thus, how do we as researchers sort productive from unproductive entrepreneurial ventures within non-priced environments? Skarbek and Green (2011) offer two mechanisms for recognizing whether the actions of social entrepreneurs are productive or not. First, the degree to which social

entrepreneurs secure or fail to secure the voluntary participation of others, could potentially be a sign that, judged by those who commit their own resources to an endeavor, the endeavor is productive. Second, the success or failure of a non-market entrepreneurial endeavor might be judged by how well or poorly it competes with government attempts to offer the same goods or services. I believe that each of these criteria might be useful. That said, and I suspect that Skarbek and Green would agree with me on the next point, such evaluation needs to be made with reference to the particular institutional context in which such endeavors are pursued.

As I have argued elsewhere, social signals such as status and reputation, and membership within social cliques, kinship clusters, and ethnically homogenous groupings can, like prices, serve to extend the cognitive reach of individuals beyond what they can know directly, reduce uncertainty within the decision making environment, and act as stores of useful information (Chamlee-Wright and Myers 2008). But the operative word here is *can*. Whether or not such signals are robust or not depends a great deal upon the social, legal, and political institutional environment. For example, a good reputation only conveys meaning if it emerges in a competitive environment in which one's reputation could be subject to challenge and lost if the person possessing it does not act in ways that are in keeping with a good reputation. (A rigid caste system, in other words, does not generate reputation signals that are robust.) The status that comes from being a member of a particular trading group may transmit a meaningful signal, but only if members within the group police one another's behavior and can effectively sanction those who might spoil the reputational status the group enjoys. Businesses returning to a devastated city following a disaster may be a robust signal that investors see promise for the city's future, but that signal is less credible if their return decision depended on the availability of government subsidies.

Coyne and Lemke's (2011) observations are relevant here as well. Because there are fewer checks on bad information and more limited access to tacit information drawn from the local context in monocentric environments, non-price signals that emerge within them are less likely to convey meaningful information than non-price signals that emerge in polycentric environments. Fortunately, because we are trained to identify institutional barriers that distort market signals, political economists are well-positioned to gauge any particular environment as being one in which the feedback received through non-price signals would be more or less robust. With this approach, we still do not have the benefit of relatively clearer metric like profit and loss, but we do have some way of judging on a relative basis whether a non-priced signal is likely to be more or less robust.

Finally, Skarbek and Green (2011) pose the question of whether socially embedded resources such as habits of association, community-based narratives, and cultural tools might generate unproductive rather than productive outcomes. Indeed the answer is clearly yes. Like any resource, socially embedded resources can be directed to both productive outcomes (e.g., neighbors cleaning up the local park) or unproductive outcomes (e.g., norms that discourage achievement aspirations) and even malevolent outcomes (e.g., community narratives that make a neighborhood inhospitable to ethnic minority groups). But as expressed in Skarbek and Green, the principal concern seems to be whether the social learning process itself can generate an unproductive outcome even as individuals believe they are acting productively. Again, depending largely on the institutional context, I believe that it can.

Consider, for example, how the regime uncertainty related to rebuilding rules in post-Katrina New Orleans and the sudden availability of post-disaster rents shifted the focus of civic life. As Storr and I argue elsewhere, the threats against neighborhood autonomy emanating from the redevelopment planning effort, the opaque process of obtaining recovery assistance, and the slow pace by which municipal services were being restored in some neighborhoods coaxed civic leaders and ordinary citizens into a drawn out and time consuming lobbying process—engagement that likely crowded out direct efforts at mutual assistance and recovery (Chamlee-Wright and Storr forthcoming). Further, the sudden appearance of post-disaster recovery-related rents enticed civic leaders, neighborhood-based organizations, and individual citizens to reorient their social capital investments in ways that were geared more and more toward capturing these rents and less toward providing mutual assistance within the community. By reorienting social capital investments away from mutual assistance within the community and toward capturing rents beyond it, individual citizens, neighborhood-based organizations, and civic leaders developed neighborhood capacity for more effective rent seeking in the future. If communities persist along such a path, they become increasingly in jeopardy of becoming rent dependent. While it is too soon to tell if the communities we profile have become permanently rent dependent, the reorientation of social capital investment that has taken place gives reason for concern.

Concluding Remarks

The essays gathered in this volume are appropriately situated in a journal dedicated to the study of emergent orders. The primary motivation behind *CPER* was to examine the nature and properties of the social order. The post-disaster context offers an ideal opportunity to understand better the forces that foster and inhibit complex social coordination as individuals, associative groups

within civil society, and local, state, and federal governments engage in the recovery process. The essays offered in this volume on methodology are particularly helpful in teasing out the role that qualitative methods can play in examining the complexities that surface when cultural context, expectations, and subjective frames of reference shape and constrain the emergent social order. Further, the essays presented in this volume on disaster research underscore the variety of ways in which order might emerge in the post-disaster context, depending upon the scale and scope of disaster, the range of creative response by local government and members of civil society, and the degree to which spheres of autonomous decision making authority are allowed to operate. Finally, the essays on social learning appropriately caution that while the coordination that emerges within non-priced spheres of civil society possesses some intriguingly similar properties to market coordination, there is no substitute to market discovery based on meaningful prices. At the same time, these essays draw our attention to the importance the institutional context has for the proper flourishing of both priced and non-priced social coordination.

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Notes

¹ The seven lead interviewers involved in the New Orleans-based field studies include three black interviewers, three white interviewers, and one Latino interviewer. The New Orleans East interview teams included a Vietnamese translator drawn from the local community when one was required. With the exception of the Vietnamese translator, none of the members of the interview team were from New Orleans, though several of the interview assistants had lived in New Orleans prior to Katrina.

² Clearly, the relative diversity within our Ninth Ward interview team played a role in establishing a productive rapport with many of the interview subjects, but the “push out” narrative was a recurrent theme in the interviews conducted by white interviewers as well.

³ For example, see Briggs 1983, 1986, Emerson 1987, Glaser and Strauss 1967, Gordon 1969, Hammer and Wildavsky 1989, Merton, Fisk, and Kendall 1990, Merton and Kendall 1946, Miles and Huberman 1984, Mishler 1986, Schwartz and Jacobs 1979, Strauss 1987, and Suchman and Jordan 1990.

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