

Interview of Lance Hill on Hurricane Katrina and Racial and Class Equity Issues

The following is an interview with Lance Hill conducted by Brian Denzer for the “Community Gumbo” program on WTUL-FM radio station at Tulane University in New Orleans. The program aired on January 26, 2008. This transcription has been edited for clarity and footnotes have been added where additional information is needed. The link to the original recorded interview is:

<http://communitygumbo.blogspot.com/2008/01/1262008-community-gumbo.html>

Lance Hill (LH): The closing of Charity Hospital in New Orleans and the resulting lack of health care for the uninsured is the single greatest obstacle to the return of the black community, given that half of them have lost their healthcare insurance since Katrina. It’s amazing, because it’s such a huge story, and the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* won’t talk about it and they never covered any press conferences on the issue for the last two years. They finally covered a recent press conference by advocates for re-opening Charity who had filed a suit to re-open the hospital. It’s an issue unlike the demolition of public housing where you have people in the city who can show up in numbers to protest. People who need a full-service hospital aren’t here; they’ve moved to Baton Rouge or to Hammond or to out-of-state where there are full-service hospitals for the uninsured. And almost by definition, those who are near death and suffering aren’t the kind of people who can pack and disrupt city council meetings.

I’ve talked to national journalists about this and I’ve said “if you tried to close the *only* hospital for the uninsured in south central L.A., you couldn’t get away with it. You couldn’t do it in Chicago; you couldn’t do it in Detroit; you couldn’t do it anywhere else. One of the claims to fame of the Civil Rights Movement in New Orleans is that we never had civil violence, and one could argue it’s precisely because we *didn’t* that policies can be implemented today in which people think there won’t be any consequences in terms of social disruption.

This policy really causes barbarous suffering and pain for people. There was a horrible story in the paper about a woman who showed up in one of these volunteer neighborhood clinics and half her breast was eaten away, metastasized. She was turned away by a private hospital because they’re only obligated to take you in and stabilize you, not to diagnose and treat you. But it’s remarkable, just absolutely remarkable, that no national news organization has done a story on this problem.

Brian Denzer (BD): I hoped to start out more formally with the history of the Civil Rights movement in New Orleans, but we've really just gotten right into it. The core of civil rights is empowering the underprivileged, at its essence, isn't it?

LH: Right. I see the civil rights movement as distinct from a broader movement that's been with us since the Europeans first arrived in North America--a movement for democracy and equality. There're just different forms of it for different people. I think it's one of the mistakes that we make in envisioning the civil Rights Movement in terms of content and themes and purpose as something separate from the longer movement for social justice and equality, is that we lose our ability to understand that the problems change constantly. We solve one problem and ten new problems present themselves. And it creates the illusion that we had a set of problems based on race that were eliminated in 1964 with the Civil Rights Act, and 1965 with the Voting Rights Act, and in truth that legislation addressed only part of the problem.

I think one of the ironies of living in post-Katrina New Orleans is that Katrina struck right about the moment when a national consensus was emerging that race no longer mattered. Someone sent me a review of a book, apparently it's just been published, that argues that race is no longer a determinant factor in political or social, or economic life, and it had nothing to do with Katrina. And I replied to the email and suggested that the title of this author's next book should be *The Myth of Air: I Can't See It so It Doesn't Exist*.

The irony is that this national consensus is based on a definition of racism that is forty years old; that one racial group is biologically, intellectually and/or culturally inferior to another group or that racism is a set of practices that denigrates and degrades people and actually inflicts real psychological and physical harm. That in its most extreme form, that racism can result in lynchings, death, and genocide. But the problem is that we're using this definition, which is about forty years old, and applying it like a template to America today and then saying we don't have racism.

But the fact is that racism itself has changed. In the day to day lives of most Americans, the obstacles to progress for African Americans are certainly not nearly as great as they were at the beginning of the Civil Rights movement. Most African Americans, if they have access to adequate education and resources, can find work and a profession; they can find a decent neighborhood and put their kids in decent schools. The forms of discrimination that exist are subtle and we certainly live in a society where virtually everyone knows that it's politically self-defeating to openly proclaim your prejudices. But what Katrina showed, I think, was that we're far from cured of racism and that in a time of crisis, in which a community is thrown into chaos and people are literally competing for resources for life and survival and trying to keep their families intact, that in the midst of that kind of social and political breakdown and chaos, that deeply embedded racial prejudices reemerged. And they reemerged in very ugly ways.

And it wasn't just the rescue, but in the recovery phase as well. Two and a half years since the recovery, the tendency of one group to advance itself, to pull itself out of the

quagmire of Katrina, at the expense of the other group has really brought out the worst in racial attitudes. All of which culminated in an open “exclusionist movement” to prevent the poor African Americans from coming back to the city. It was an unspoken sentiment among whites in the city from the first day of Katrina: I know that because I didn’t evacuate and I was here--I was a fly on the wall. For the last several months, it’s not uncommon to hear that attitude openly proclaimed.¹

White people have gotten to the point where they think that, even as a political minority in a city, they have the right to prevent people from returning to their homes where they have lived for generations, in some cases, for centuries, and where their forbearers literally built the city; and that by an accident of nature, poor African American’s have lost their citizenship rights. And that white people, by virtue of having more money, a home that’s above sea level, and the good fortune to have gotten back, have a moral and political right to determine who will return to the city. To me, this is evidence of a profound problem of racism.

That this exclusionist attitude is not applied to all African Americans doesn’t mean that it’s not racism. In Nazi Germany, there were favored Jews, there were some Jews who were not necessarily victims. So we’re all old enough and mature enough and adult enough to know that when we use words like “racism” that we’re talking about generalizations. We are using the term to describe a broad phenomenon to which there are exceptions. But for me, I found this very frustrating, that at the national level there’s a sense that we have successfully overcome the problems of these prejudices; yet on a local level in New Orleans, from the very first day of the flood, it was clear that every community in America is susceptible to the same kinds of injustices and violations of democracy and freedom. And if we don’t acknowledge that, we can’t do as we did in the Civil Rights Movement--institutionalize practices and develop laws to protect people. Because now we know that when people are displaced by a natural disaster, there are other people who take advantage of their misfortune, and that it falls along color and class lines.

¹ I have added the adjective “exclusionist” to the word “movement” here and have inserted it elsewhere in the interview since it is the term I normally use to describe post-Katrina white behavior. I define the “exclusionist movement” as the broad social movement of the majority of white people in New Orleans that emerged in the wake of Katrina. The exclusionists were initially united around the common goal of preventing the return of poor African Americans; as time progressed, the goal became to reduce the political influence of the black majority and return the city to white political rule. That meant reducing all the black population, poor and middle class. This accounts for why the Bring New Orleans Back Commission plan to forbid most rebuilding in flooded neighborhoods would have resulted in eliminating 80% of the black population, according to a Brown University study. The exclusionist movement was based on a shared belief that the best way to eliminate poverty was to eliminate poor people. The movement included people with conflicting motives, ranging from humanitarian liberals who thought they were helping the poor by relocating them to wealthier communities, to the old-line social and economic monied elites who historically believed they were entitled to govern over the black majority. Given that the exclusionist ideas did not apply to all African Americans (for example, initially middle class blacks were exempted as were “cultural workers” such as musicians), I think that “exclusionist” is a better descriptive term than “racist,” though the outcomes of exclusionist policies were racially discriminatory and were never intended to apply to poor whites. Racism played a role, though, given that indifference to black suffering, even among self-professed white liberals, was facilitated by deeply imbedded negative evaluations of blacks.

BD: Is this really more of an issue of class than race?

LH: No. I mean, I think the question is really pointless in that both class and race are social constructs, they are terms that sociologists or social scientists developed as definitions to describe phenomenon that have something in common. And they have a certain utility in understanding the world, especially for social scientists. But I think they lose their usefulness in other realms and that in the eyes of most white Americans, that poverty is black. Most people know statistically that's just not the case, that the overwhelming majority of people who fall under poverty guidelines are white. But the perception, which is more important, is that if I start talking about poor people in a bar, or in a coffee shop, among white people, I think that they're thinking "African Americans," and they're not thinking "white senior citizens."

And so, from that perspective, race and class are one and the same. And then I'll reverse it. When I was running food and water to the Morial Convention Center during Katrina, there were approximately 20,000 people who had been abandoned and left without food, water, or medical aid. I don't know what the television or radio coverage looked like, because we didn't have radio or television, but I subsequently learned that most people thought that those 20,000 people were the face of poverty in America, that those were 20,000 poor people. But in that group were doctors, lawyers, and even the parents of my friend Ronald Mason, President of Jackson State University. I could tell by looking at the crowd that actually, compared to the Superdome, there were a lot more intact families, complete families, fathers and mothers and so on. There were people from all walks of life.

But we've come to a point where white people think that if they see an African American in a t-shirt and shorts, they are obviously poor. They think if you are black and at the Convention Center, the only way you could have possibly arrived there was if you were poor. They couldn't accept that it was possible to be black and middle class and still find yourself without the resources and evacuation route that white people had.

I'll give you a perfect example: While thousands of black people were languishing at the Convention Center, there was a full-scale evacuation of predominantly white people from Chalmette in St. Bernard Parish, through the Algiers ferry terminal which is on the "west bank" of New Orleans (across the Mississippi River). They had food, water, buses, transportation, but none of these resources were available to the black people at the Convention Center, and I assume a lot of these white people from Chalmette were relatively low-income as well.

There were decisions being made every day during the rescue and the recovery in which color was the determinant factor. My ability to move about the city for some 31 days, and not get arrested while under martial law, was explicitly due to my color. If Obama had been at the Convention Center the day I had gone down there, he would not have been allowed to leave. The superdome was a jail: once you went in, you couldn't come out.

There were a lot of reasons why people were making these judgments, and it had a lot to do with what happens when people are in crises and they fall back on quick prejudgments and old prejudices, but for me, it really was an irrelevant question. Whether it was class or race, the only way you could possibly make that relevant is to ask, “If those had been 20,000 poor white people, would they have been treated the same?” That would in some way provide the answer to the class question. And the answer to that question can be found in the Chalmette evacuation. You have a concentration of low-income white poverty in Chalmette, but were they treated the same? No, they were treated the exact opposite. They had the resources that they needed; they had the evacuation resources, the medical care, and they even had a separate path out of the city. They went north to North Texas by way of Shreveport rather than to Houston, so they weren’t forced to go to the same staging areas in the New Orleans suburbs and wait for transportation out of the city. The only conclusion that you can draw is that race was the most important factor in how these decisions were being made.

BD: Or is it possible that decisions were made by different people? The experience of people from Chalmette versus here in New Orleans might have been the result of comparative difference in leadership skills in commandeering resources that were required to rescue and help people?

LH: Well we don’t know who actually made these decisions on how you allocate emergency relief resources. For example, there were no ambulances sent into the Convention Center to take out the dying. And when I was down there, there were children screaming with dehydration that needed medical care. People were trying to give me their relatives to take them to hospitals. We really don’t know who made those decisions to keep ambulances out.

But we know that separate evacuations occurred and that the one that commenced first, on September 1st, by way of New Orleans through the Algiers ferry terminal, had access to military vehicles, Coast Guard personnel, as well, state police, national guard, and the Red Cross--which was not delivering food, water and supplies to the Convention Center but was delivering them to the same people in the same conditions in Chalmette and throughout St. Bernard Parish just across the Mississippi river. When white people from Chalmette evacuated from the Parish by way of the Algiers Ferry Terminal—in New Orleans—the buses that came to pick them up were New Orleans school buses. So, who ultimately made those decisions, was that FEMA, was there some kind of military command? We don’t know but we could find out through a congressional investigation. Our problem is that we never had an investigation: we had congressional hearings, but they did not use subpoena powers and then we had a presidential administration that refused full disclosure on how these decisions were made.

End of Part One

LH: I think it's terribly important that we take a close look at what happened. It will reveal that emergency relief resources were not allocated equally, that there was a relief blockade at the Convention Center. There is no question about that; no one denies that there was a blockade, that the Red Cross was prevented from providing food and water to people at the Convention Center in an effort to drive people out of the city. And they've repeated that claim over and over and over at the highest ranks of the Red Cross organization. The Red Cross then refused to provide any relief resources for people who remained in New Orleans, in Orleans Parish, for several weeks, and those were primarily elderly people who had stayed behind with their pets. Those were people that I was helping take care of. And we were told by a dozen different law enforcement agencies that they had been given strict orders not to provide any food and water to people in New Orleans. You cross the parish line to Jefferson parish, you go to St. Bernard parish, you go to any other parish and that wasn't the case. So there was a double standard for Orleans parish.

At some point that needs to be investigated because my sense is that if a similar disaster occurs, be it a terrorist bomb or a natural disaster, to another city with a comparable population of New Orleans, that the same double standard will apply. I don't think that there is any question that the first out will be people with resources and money, the first back in will be people with resources and money; and the people who will be charged with planning the future of the city will be the wealthiest and the most powerful. And the temptation to eliminate the problem of poverty by eliminating poor people will be an extremely strong temptation.

If we don't have a bill of rights for displaced people, and if we don't anticipate those sorts of problems, we will be in trouble. That is what I mean when I say there is a need for a new Civil Rights Movement; that we've now learned that in these kinds of circumstances that our Constitution and our Bill of Rights and our national principles of treating people fairly and equally don't apply: we need some sort of guarantees that go beyond our current laws.

BD: I don't mean to disagree with you because I've seen the photographs of the Coast Guard helping the rescue effort in St. Bernard parish and Chalmette, so I know that to be true, that the relief experience, the rescue experience, was different. Was the demise of the rescue and relief effort in New Orleans the cause of our own problems? I mean, there were no reports, for example, of people shooting at helicopters in St. Bernard parish. There *were*, however, in New Orleans. And I'm not saying that those reports were...

LH: I disagree. That's not the case. There were press reports that St. Bernard was in chaos. There was widespread looting, there was violence, all of the problems that were reported in Orleans parish...

BD: Right, but not by television reporters, and maybe that's...

LH: Well, no, but let's say the argument is that medical services were not provided people at the Convention Center because they (medical personnel) couldn't be assured of

their safety. This is what the Red Cross at one point was told but the National Guard: “Well, we can’t allow you to bring food and water into the Convention Center because we can’t guarantee your safety.” The same conditions that were being reported, widespread looting, violence, breakdown of law and order, were being reported in Chalmette, and yet the Red Cross was distributing food and water in Chalmette. A classic example is that there were ambulances all over the city—when I went out to the I-10 overpass in Metairie to try and get medical treatment myself, there must have been hundreds of ambulances out there. People were in dire need of medical evacuation from the Convention Center. The only conceivable argument that I could think of why they weren’t getting it and yet people were being medivaced from the Chalmette evacuation, is that it was unsafe, yet on Thursday, September 1, the New Orleans police department sent in a tactical unit into the Convention Center to remove two white women, one of whom was the wife of a Jefferson parish deputy—that’s reported in the *New York Times*. Now they literally stepped over dead bodies, children who were dehydrating, people who were sick, in order to remove two perfectly healthy people who they thought were in danger.

During the five days at the Convention Center, there were six New Orleans police officers based at the center during the whole time. You can read an interview on the internet with Sergeant Dumas who was down there who constantly reported to his superiors that it was perfectly safe to bring people in. They made arrests at the Convention Center to the cheers of thousands of people, and in fact, Dumas reports that when young men broke into the Riverwalk Shopping Center, they brought out food baskets for the elderly and for the police as well. There was a doctor who had been at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel who had been aiding the police and who insisted, against police officers’ wishes, on treating people at the Convention Center. He wandered around the Convention Center for days with nothing more than a stethoscope trying to treat people. So, the higher ups had all of the information, the police on the ground told them there was no danger of taking an ambulance in there and taking somebody’s dying grandmother out.

This was a deliberate policy to deprive people of food, water, and medical aid because the fear was that that people would go back into the city. And whether that was plausible, and we look back on it and it sounds almost insane, I didn’t see anyone trying to get out of the Convention Center when I was there. They were trying to get out of the city. But even if it’s plausible--that someone was just going to get supplies and then go back into the city and loot--the question is: Was withholding relief constitutional? In fact, it’s a violation of international law: the Geneva Human Rights agreement makes it illegal to deny relief to refugees of a natural or political disaster. You can’t tell the Red Cross to stay out. Israel got in trouble with that policy in Lebanon. If a relief agency wants to go into a community and take the risk of providing relief to people, that’s their option, and to withhold food and water and medical aid means you’re inflicting real pain, suffering, and death on people, and I don’t think that that’s the role of the United States government. These were innocent citizens, these were people who were not looting, who were not committing crimes. They were perfectly legal citizens.

BD: And law-abiding... You were describing a completely different experience from the grassroots level, in the relationship of people and their experience at the Convention Center. You're portraying a far different experience than what was presented by major national television media organizations in particular. You've described ways in which the experience here in New Orleans could be far different than it has been, especially with respect to bringing people back to New Orleans in a more humane manner. In a *Gambit Weekly* article you pointed out that in South Carolina, the group "South Carolina Cares" was established--a non-profit to help people who were evacuees resettle and take care of their necessities. They were, in fact, put in a resettlement center, which I think you described as being a hotel, and none of that has been happening in New Orleans. There are people—I just drove past the I-10, a section of the I-10 overpass yesterday, and found a group of tents, looked like the same people who were living out in front of City Hall. There hasn't been a policy, an official policy, of helping people, but also, I don't know, that sort of spirit of volunteerism hasn't really appeared in New Orleans, either. Am I wrong about that?

LH: Well, you're right that, certainly there was in the first year after Katrina a lot of emphasis in the national media on the spirit of volunteerism and people helping one another. But the best kept secret, I think, is that a decision was made very early on by the most powerful elements of this community, and shared across the board among white people who remained uptown, that the future of the city hinged on preventing poor people from coming back: the exclusionist movement. It is not unusual that in times of collective trauma and crisis that movements emerge that present themselves as visionary--as rebuilding a new society. They almost always construct a role in which there is one source of the problems that the community had experienced before the crisis; and that one source is often a specific group of people. Then that group of people is transformed from victims, in the case of being displaced from their homes, jobs, and loved ones, to becoming perpetrators. The original victims come to be viewed as obstacles of the realization of the new civic dream.

I actually had someone email me one time because I sent something out about race and disparities and they said "Why can't we have the city of our dreams?" And I responded, "Because one person's dream is another person's nightmare." The fundamental issue is that people have a right to return to their homes. Yet there were open pronouncements in the *Wall Street Journal*² by the movers and shakers of this city that they wanted to change the demographics, which was just shorthand for saying they wanted to make the city whiter and more affluent. If you look at the plans of the two commissions charged with planning the rebuilding of New Orleans, the Bring New Orleans Back Commission and the Louisiana Recovery Authority, both of their initial plans did not allocate a single penny to restore rental properties. Yet 70% of African Americans rented in New Orleans. When you devise a plan to rebuild a community, and nowhere in the plan have you provided for the kind of housing that the majority of people had before, then you can attribute that to just a blind spot, or an oversight but it doesn't make any difference to the victims. The outcome is racially and class discriminatory.

²"Old Line Families Plot Return" Wall Street Journal, September 8, 2005.

We closed the only long-term homeless shelter in New Orleans for single men after Katrina. It was the only shelter that you could go to that was free and you could stay as long as you wanted, as long as you were sober, which I think was a pretty good idea. That shelter was closed at the time when we knew that young, rootless men without jobs and homes would be returning to the city because FEMA was putting them out of the hotels. We closed the only hospital [Charity Hospital] for the uninsured, and in violation of state law, we closed it while FEMA claimed that for \$27 million the hospital could be restored, since the hospital is on the second floor and only the basement flooded. We closed a hospital with the full knowledge that an enormous percentage of the poorest people in New Orleans would not be able to return without a full service hospital.

We took the jobs that historically African Americans had held for many years and turned into prosperous businesses—roofing, bricklaying, plastering, carpentry, and contractors brought in people from outside, and filled those jobs with outsiders, which created a huge obstacle for people coming back who had worked in those trades. Reverse the situation, for example, and imagine if the New Orleans Times-Picayune reporters returned to their desks and found that the publisher had gone to England and replaced the entire news staff with outsiders on temporary work permits who worked for a lot less and could do just as good a job. I think the whole story of New Orleans would be different. The way that the Times-Picayune would be telling it would be very different. And yet, you can go down to the hotels after Katrina and to this day find hotels that are applying to the Immigration service to bring in people from India and China to work as maids in the hotels. At one point, the hotels were claiming that they couldn't find anyone in any of the evacuation centers willing to come back and live in a luxury hotel while they worked.

We have the same situation with the school; the teachers were all fired after Katrina. That's a pretty effective way of decapitating the black middle class. And when the schools reopened, we're told there's not enough space for all the students. That's a pretty strong message that people aren't welcome back, or if they come back, they're going to be facing hardship.

I would say that one of the problems early on--some people refer to this as a "conspiracy"-- was the effort to prevent African Americans and poor people from returning. The proposal to bulldoze the heavily black New Orleans East neighborhood, which, according to the Bring New Orleans Back Commission, the decision would have been made by March 2006—the bulldozing would have been done by that summer of 2006. Gentilly, another major black neighborhood, was supposed to have been destroyed. New Orleans East was to be destroyed; the Ninth Ward was to be destroyed, although the Ninth Ward is actually higher above sea level than predominantly white Lakeview, which was exempted from the demolition plan. And my neighborhood, predominantly black Broadmoor, was to be destroyed. And early on, some people referred to this as a "conspiracy." I think that was a misfortunate use of a term, because a conspiracy suggests that this decision was made by a few people without the knowledge or consent of other people. I think this was beyond a conspiracy; it was an open movement. If you were white, everywhere you went—bars, coffeehouses, clubs, the discussion turned to what would be the vision of this new city and how we should not repopulate the poor

neighborhoods and should not try to bring back everyone who had lived here before. This was not a conspiracy; it was a broad movement. It's a little bit like saying, segregation was a conspiracy. It wasn't a conspiracy; it was a consensus among white people with the power of law behind it.

BD: And with the consent of leadership. I mean, I wanted to bring up our mayor, C. Ray Nagin. He delivered an address on Martin Luther King Day and in his most publicized speech, his so-called Chocolate City speech, he advocated for the right of return of African Americans to the city. On the other hand, is it true that he's really saying one thing and doing another? He's consenting to a general broad movement, as you described, to prevent African Americans, poor African Americans, from returning to the city?

LH: No, I think Ray Nagin was generally despised in the white community after he was elected the second time in 2006 it was essentially a referendum on whether or not the black neighborhoods would be bulldozed. That's what that election was about. Now I don't think Mitch Landrieu was going to bulldoze those neighborhoods, and I happen to know Mitch and like him, and I don't think that was his plan, but I don't fault any African American for not trusting any white politician at that point, because what had been planned in their absence left very few options. And I think the vote for Nagin was a marriage of convenience for many African American voters. The election was about the future of these traditional African American neighborhoods. Would they be turned into "green space" [marshes, drainage ponds, parks]? Because, if they were turned into green space, the likelihood of the black community in any numbers coming back was almost nil.

Since the election, the question has been what has Mayor Nagin done to facilitate the return of African Americans? I don't want to sound as if I'm defending the mayor, there's much that he can be criticized for, but he doesn't control Charity Hospital. I can tell you who controls Charity Hospital, and I can tell you that it's a very well-organized campaign to keep it closed. And whatever the intentions of those people are, that it has had a racially and economically disparate impact on people. The mayor doesn't control the Road Home Program [home rebuilding funds]. He doesn't control the way FEMA allocates money for city infrastructure. He doesn't control the schools. And he certainly doesn't control the contractors in the city who hire roofers and framers and who have the wherewithal to bring people back who were working before.

And so I think, oftentimes, so much is placed on the mayor and on municipal government when the responsibility lies elsewhere. And look, let's be frank: the elected government is not what governs the city. It governs some aspects of the city. Elected government determines who will pick up my garbage. It doesn't govern healthcare; it doesn't govern the cost of mental health care; it doesn't govern the cost of homeowner's insurance; it doesn't govern employment practices. These are all governed by non-governmental agencies, by private corporations, by institutions, and those people are the source of the problem.

BD: I think the thing about Mayor Nagin that concerns me is that he has a platform. He has, even if he doesn't control every aspect of what happens in the city, he has a platform, and when he has something to say, people will listen. And yet, he doesn't appear to be outspoken on issues that we're talking about. He doesn't seem to be very outspoken for more humane treatment and more humane policies. He hasn't raised a banner to save Charity Hospital as far as I know.

LH: I don't know what his position is on medical care for the uninsured, nor do I know what his position is on public housing, and if you're asking do I think that he should take the bully pulpit and advocate for social justice, of course. I think that he should. Do I think that it would make a difference? No, I don't think it would, because I don't think he has credibility with the people who actually control those institutions.

But I would reverse the question. I think a far more important question is why have we gone two and a half years with this open movement to deprive poor people of their fundamental rights? Why have we gone two and a half years opening up the Times Picayune and seeing the obituaries filled with hundreds and hundreds and thousands of elderly people, African American mostly, displaced, dying because of neglect, because of stress? Someone told me they found a homeless quadriplegic under a bush downtown. And two people froze to death right before the big football game and the story was buried in the newspaper. Why is it that we can have children who spend two months sitting on the floor in a school with no chairs, with no tables, with no books, with no paper, and this is a system run by the state, not by the city, and why can these kinds of unconscionable injustices occur and you cannot name a single white business leader in this community who has spoken out against any of those injustices? Not a single white religious leader of a single denomination has stood up and spoken out against those injustices until Bishop Charles Jenkins did recently.

There are thousands of parents who, in the reorganization of the school system, now have their children in elite charter schools, selective admission charter schools. Their children are perfectly warm, they're sitting in chairs, they have a nice lunch, they have teachers, they have all of these amenities of modern life, and yet, as this happened just last year, ten blocks away, children are sitting on the floor with no books. I have a friend who taught at one of the public schools who said they ran out of textbooks six months into the school year, and he spent three months playing basketball with the kids. And for me, the question here is where is the conscience of white New Orleans? Where are those people who understand that silence is confused with consent, and everything we know about the social psychology of harm-doers, of people who commit harm, is they're encouraged by the silence of bystanders.

You can go across the board with social clubs, civic organizations, business organizations, the chamber of commerce, and there is almost absolute uninterrupted silence in the face of injustice. At times it's really been incomprehensible, but I'd have to say that it is predictable in some ways. When people believe that other people are suffering and they don't do anything about it, they often avoid the guilt by fooling themselves into believing either that the victims aren't suffering so much. Eighty percent

of displaced people were unemployed a year ago in Texas; they didn't find the land of milk and honey. Yet all we got from the media were success stories about how displaced people were doing wonderfully. But statistically, that was simply not the case.

The second thing people do to assuage their guilt and prevent them from having to act out of moral obligation is they blame the victim. They think that we live in a just world in which goodness is rewarded and evil is punished; so if these people are without work or without a home, then it's their own fault. It's a kind of elaborate rationalization and this rationalizing has resulted in a great deal of suffering and anguish and real physical pain because it has blinded us to the causes of problems.

It's interesting that we have this eruption of violence in the city since Katrina. So we're now the murder capital of America. And people are throwing up their arms. They just can't explain it. Yet any psychiatrist or psychologist that knows anything about trauma, post-trauma stress disorder, will tell you that people who have gone through severe untreated trauma become more hostile and aggressive. They come to believe that they inhabit an unsafe and uncaring world because they were abandoned themselves, left to their own devices, and they are more likely to engage in preemptive violence. So before Katrina, it was "I'll shoot you if you shoot me." After Katrina, it was "I'm going to shoot you before you shoot me".

And we've had two school superintendents in a row now, Robyn Jarvis and Paul Vallas who both claim that the low test scores and the abysmal school system that we have is largely because the children are traumatized. And yet, we don't have a single program to screen all the children for trauma, let alone referrals and mental health services for them. So I think the violence that we found ourselves wrapped in owed to the fact that from the very beginning we never expected or wanted poor people to come back. So we simply did not plan for that. I think it's a missed opportunity.

I think that we could have had a much better city, and we could have implemented policies and resettled people in ways that would have eliminated neighborhood rivalries. Everyone that came back to this city should've gone through a resettlement process in which mental health care was provided if they needed it. But instead, they were just tossed to the winds. If you were rich and you lived uptown, and your kid gets depressed, you spend \$800 a month on anti-depressants. If you are a 16-year-old in the city and you don't have any money, you self-medicate through drugs. And if you start taking drugs, you're involved in the drug trade where disputes are settled with violence. So I think we've missed the long-term solutions by constantly blinding ourselves to the fact, the reality, that people will come home.

BD: I want to back it up just a little bit. You said in another Gambit Weekly article that hate isn't the problem—it's indifference. You said, "I think indifference to the public education of African American youth is a moral crime. The indifference to suffering is the new form of racism." And I just want to bring this around to the mission of the Southern Institute in particular, and the ways in which the Southern Institute uses the expressions of hatred throughout history as an example of how to combat indifference,

and the ways in which, for example, the Holocaust occurred in large part because of indifference. Could you explain the mission of the Southern Institute and the ways in which you fight indifference?

LH: As a tolerance education center, we focused on the theme that by using case studies of history of the Holocaust and the Civil Rights Movement, that we can teach the causes and consequences of racial and religious prejudice. And what's implied is that we can prevent destructive movements and actions against people based on their race or ethnicity or their economic station in life. The theory behind that is that if people understand how "perfectly civilized" and educated societies such as Germany could result in committing genocide and plunge the world into a war that killed 60 million people, then that kind of tragedy can be prevented.

One of the keys to that is the power of the bystander. We know from both history and from social science experiments that when one group is harming another group, if people who are unrelated to the perpetrator group or people who are bystanders object to the action, that it inhibits that harming behavior. So we always emphasize the moral imperative to speak out and act against the persecution and suffering of other people. That probably explains the many reasons for what I've been saying in this interview; that in the last two and a half years since Katrina I have seen very little of this "speaking out" behavior. What the Southern Institute teaches young people is that to prevent ethnic violence and ethnic conflict and genocide, first and foremost people must act on their own conscience and speak out against the persecution and suffering of other people. And what we know is when they don't do that, that the suffering and the persecution increases. As we devalue people, that it's easier to harm people even more.

And we also know that people then will tend to blame the victim for their own conditions. It's a way of relieving ourselves of our own responsibility and this happens in all kinds of areas. We look at education in New Orleans and there two different narratives about education. One is that the education system was completely mismanaged and destroyed by democracy, because we had a democracy and African Americans constituted the political majority. That narrative says we ended up with a school board that was hopelessly corrupt and dysfunctional, and I think by implication, that the black teachers weren't effective and that the black parents didn't want the children to learn. That's the "white narrative" storyline that then justifies why the schools had to be removed from the democratic process and turned over to the state after Katrina.

In the first year that the state took over the schools, which means white people, we ended up with the worst school system in America. I was talking to a teacher who taught at one school last year; not a single child passed the LEAP exam in fourth grade (promotion exam). There is a white-run charter school association in New Orleans that has six elementary schools and touted the scores of only one of them, which did very well. Yet the other five schools that they managed dropped 60-70 points on the LEAP exam. They had one school in which 93% of the students failed. No one jumped up and said, "Well

this proves that the white elite in this state is incompetent and incapable of administering education and it should be taken from their hands.” No one said “It should be taken from the department of education and from the state legislature and be given to some other entity.”

There is another explanation—another narrative— for what happened in the schools before Katrina. I don’t deny that we had corruption and incompetence, but what’s always struck me was that the schools were being financially strangled. Ninety percent of white people in New Orleans have their children attend private schools. When people don’t avail themselves of the public service, they’re not invested in it and they don’t like to pay for it. And they *don’t* pay for it. In the last 25 years, we passed one bond issue for schools. We passed one pay increase in that bond issue, for teachers. And I say this as the husband of a lifelong teacher in Orleans parish and as a father who sent his children to public schools and not the elite schools, but some of the most challenging schools. The school system was virtually bankrupt before Katrina. And you can add up all of the money stolen and all of the perfidy and it doesn’t come to one-tenth of one percent of what the budget was.

We had a perilously under-funded school system. And so there is another narrative out there that says, “Why did the school system fail? It failed because it was under-funded by people that were not invested in the school system.” I believe that you need a teacher-student ratio of less than about 10 to 1 to teach children who come from poor urban environments. Now, I’m not the only person of that opinion, because every person who sends their child to Isidore Newman School, which is the most selective and the most expensive private school in the city, has a student-teacher ratio of 10 to 1. Well, what does that mean? It means that wealthy white parents know what I know: that you get a very good education if it is personalized, individualized, and offers more resources and extracurricular activities. But we had a public school system that year by year was losing funding for not only teaching resources but teachers as well; we had student-teacher ratios of 38 to 1 in the elementary schools and it’s impossible to teach kids how to read with those limited resources.

We have these contradictory narratives about education because the city is in a state of racial polarization and any time you have ethnic polarization, you have contending versions of history that justify what you’re policies are today. And those two versions of history are almost always opposite one another. One thing that we have to do in order to move forward and reconcile as a city is to begin to construct a shared history in which we know that we have to compromise as to what happened. But if we don’t, for instance, accept what I think is the clear reality, that we dangerously under-funded the schools, perhaps didn’t even have the local resources to do so, that no school reform in the future is going to fix the problems.

Right now we’re funding the schools under the Recovery School District (RSD), [the state agency that took over most of the New Orleans schools] and the new charter schools with the same funding formula as in the past. That’s simply inadequate. We don’t fund other aspects of government this way. If we were going to build a new bridge across the

Causeway, the legislature would not allocate a billion dollars and say “build a bridge with those funds.” They would first go out and ask, “How much does it cost to build a bridge?” And with that figure in mind, they would allocate the funds needed to build the bridge. I actually asked RSD Superintendent Robyn Jarvis this very simple question, which she could not answer: how much will it cost for you to achieve the goals that you have? I would think her goal would be a very obvious one; that twelve years from now we would have a school system in which everyone entering the school system graduates from high school and is literate and, if they have the capacity, has been prepared for college. That’s a pretty simple goal. And I think it would take maybe six weeks to bring in experts who could tell you precisely what resources you would need in terms of teachers, teacher supports, teacher-student ratios, instructional materials, and so on, in order to accomplish that goal. And then that would tell you how you would achieve success. But we are not going about it in that way.

If we accept these old narratives which say we had enough money but people just weren’t using it wisely, then that’s what tax-payers want to hear, but that may not be the truth. And if we accept these old narratives, we’re just setting ourselves up for failure, once again. We’re going to see five years out from now that the charters that don’t have large foundation and corporate backers, the ones that are trying to educate children on only the money the state provides, they will be failing. And we’ll end up with an apartheid school system in which a few schools that have largely middle-class kids, black and white, but middle-class, they will be doing quite well. But the majority of the children will be in schools where they’re not learning.

BD: Given these intractable problems that you’ve been talking about, healthcare, education, things that have been long-standing, but in particular have come into very sharp relief post-Katrina, in which in many cases are driven by, as you say, a broad movement of racism—are you optimistic or pessimistic going forward that New Orleans can tackle these, what seem like fairly insurmountable problems?

LH: Well, I’m optimistic only because the disparities and the injustices over the last two years are beginning to get national attention. I know that one million volunteers have come in the last two years and I’ve seen a big change. They initially came in thinking of themselves as humanitarian relief workers, and humanitarian relief really implies that one is going to help people regardless of their needs or income or resources. Humanitarian relief is almost religiously based in the notion that it does something good for you to help people, rich and poor alike. After Katrina hit, I helped people rich and poor alike; it made no difference, we were just helping people. But as time has gone along, I think people have come back to the city and I they think they’ve had the wool pulled over their eyes; that they have not always been helping the communities that needed help the most. They’ve seen that some neighborhoods have come back and some haven’t. And they’ve asked, “What is preventing these people from coming back?”

That’s when they move toward what they call “social justice” work. In humanitarian relief work, you’re not trying to change people’s ideas or the systems that produce and reproduce inequality or injustice. But in social justice work, you ask a lot of questions

before you come in, and you make sure that the work that you're doing is work that if you didn't do it, it wouldn't get done. And you understand how systems work; that sometimes systems are opaque--it's not clear where the injustices are; there's not a "white" and a "colored" sign. But the outcomes can be just as discriminatory.

And so the optimism that I have comes from seeing a growing social movement nationally among young people of conscience who believe that when the old-line white leadership was quoted in the Wall Street Journal saying that wanted a whiter and more affluent city, they got it. They have that city. And if that's what they set out to do, that's what certainly occurred. And I think that the sort of things that Brad Pitt's doing in the ninth ward, is emblematic that outside the city there's a perception that people who are inside the city and in positions of power are not attending to those problems and aren't really determined to solve them. As an historian, I view this moment very much like Birmingham during the Civil Rights Movement. You come to a point when you have to ask: Do the people in the local community have the moral conscience and the will to correct this injustice? Or is the only solution the awakening of a national conscience and the intervention of a national government?" And usually the answer is both.

The Civil Rights Movement in Birmingham made it clear that you could not rely on the local powers because, for whatever reasons, they're just not going to do it. I think it's really important to understand that New Orleans was saved not by local people, but by people who believed that what happened was a great social injustice and that race was a factor. Congressman, James Clyburn from South Carolina, was the single figure who bailed out the Road Home program [home rebuilding funds]. He came up with the three billion dollars when everyone said there was no money left. Now he's the person who we owe more to nationally than any other political figure. Why did he do that? He's African American. He's in the black caucus. He's also from Charleston, a city in which the black community following Hugo was nearly destroyed. The old black neighborhoods were washed away, and then when rental rates went up, blacks were driven out of that area. They are now on the periphery of the city.

Rep. Clyburn had been a witness to what happens in the wake of a natural disaster. I think it's a very important lesson that we're far better off letting the nation know what our failures are, and our shortcomings are, because we have a congress now that is prepared to help and realizes that we don't have the local resources to accomplish this. And with the new presidential, presidential race we may end up with a president who also shares that belief. There is a sense in this nation, and I've talked to people coming into the city and volunteers, that we have our national priorities askew, that we have misplaced national priorities and New Orleans is uniquely positioned because there's a Congress and there's a nation out there eager to prove that we are a caring and loving and compassionate country. And there's no better place to prove it than in a community in which a natural disaster occurred that was then followed by a human disaster in which the government did not treat its people the way that a great nation should treat its people. And I think Americans have a conscience and they believe that if there's an injustice, it needs to be remedied. And so there's a great benefit for us to make public what the failings are. I think that it only will be through the intervention of the federal government

and the resources that it has, that 20 years from now we'll be a more successful and a better city. So I'm more optimistic now than I was maybe a year ago, but I'm optimistic for reasons quite different than probably most people in the city.

BD: New Orleans is a test case for how we err as a nation, I couldn't agree more, and I hope to carry on this conversation another time. Dr. Lance Hill, director of the Southern Institute, thank you very much for your time.