Notes:

People think of Katrina as strange and unique. This is NOT a unique situation. Freudenberg is interested in what happens when people strike nature, not when nature strikes people.

Basic background:

1. Theories of environment and pollution. The more production we have the more pollution we have. There is a direct relationship. “Enduring conflict” vs. Environmental Protection.

New research shows disproportionality and that the majority of economic pollution comes from between 5 and 20% of economic activity. The whole economy isn’t a problem; there are specific portions that cause harm.

2. High ground next to rivers: When there is a flood, while land/water looks flat, right next to rivers is the high spot in sediment, and land gets lower farther away. Natural levees right next to the river are built (a sliver by the river).

3. How hurricanes work: energy sucked out of warm water. Because of earth rotation water spins and slows down when reaching land. Damage comes from water and the “storm surge”, not wind. Because the Northern Hemisphere spins counterclockwise the “right hook” of a hurricane is most dangerous. The storm is essentially a very high tide.

Katrina.

1. Nature: Katrina was a major event. Started as a tropical depression. The next day named Katrina as a storm. Became hurricane on day three. It caused a billion dollars in damage in Southern Florida. By the next day it kept energy and crossed into Gulf of Mexico. By the next day it was one of the biggest hurricanes to enter the Gulf of Mexico (wind speeds had doubled in a day in a half, partially because the Gulf water was warm b/c of global warming). By the next day the hurricane shifted just to the East of New Orleans and the “right hook” hit Mississippi. By then Katrina was no longer just natural. It became a human event.

2. Katrina becomes a human event. It was a natural disaster just East, but it was an unnatural disaster in New Orleans. People screwed up. Physical and Organizational defenses failed. The levees and canals failed. Emergency responses failed even worse. “The problem was that the government was supposed to give us an organized emergency response and they didn’t give us any of those things.” The critical first three to four days the federal government did nothing. This is the worst response Freudenberg has seen in the 30 years he’s been monitoring this.

Regular people responded though. People brought flat bottom boats to New Orleans four days before the Feds responded. Ordinary citizens came in to help people.

At the convention center/superdome people were walking across bridges to safety and were shot at and ordered to go back. These people figured that they could use water trucks to sneak out of the city before the buses came. People in the city were figuring out how to help themselves as well. Tulane Hospital chartered helicopter, evacuated sick people; they used parking garages and transported people in pickup trucks. When they ran out of gasoline they looted gas to evacuate people. They then donated the helicopters to charity hospitals.

The US National Weather Service released a realistic message about what will happen. People said they got out b/c of the weather service reports.

The Coast Guard moved helicopters in immediately and evacuated hundreds to thousands of people. The Coast Guard thinks “rescue first, ask for permission later.”
FEMA? Homeland Security? Where were they? It was an embarrassment. It was a “national disgrace.” People while waiting for help. When people finally showed up they showed up as a military force to stop looters, not help. “Looters” were taking food, water, medicine. The National Guard was met “by despair, not violence.”

From the coroners reports in the city all the mass media stories about gang activity, rape, and murder were wrong. It didn’t happen. Ordinary people are the REAL first responders.

The other reason that they didn’t find the looters is that they were looking in the wrong place.

3. Humans + Nature = the real looting. Earlier actions (by few) created much of the damage to environment and humans.

Clue 1: Katrina not the first big hurricane to hit Katrina. Hurricane Betsy and Camille should have been equally or damaging. Camille in 1969 was even stronger than Katrina. Betsy 1965 had a right hook that hit the city. Wind speeds downtown were worse than in Katrina. They built floodwalls and levees in response to Betsy. Katrina still killed 20x as many people though.

Clue 2: Three failed canals. The three that failed are open to the bay, so the river is 20 feet higher than the lake. The official story is that all three of these canals should fail in a similar way. But the failed differently. The water didn’t get within eight feet of the top of two levees, and went right over one of the levees.

Clue 3: New Orleans isn’t a Coastal city. It’s inland. It’s on a delta. It’s 100 miles in from the Gulf and protected by wetlands. You could sail through small gaps in the wetlands and sail up behind the city. Cypress swamps surrounded the old city. As the city expanded these cypress swamps stayed because they were so low-land. But the “Industrial Canal” was finished in 1923. Started lobbying for a new tidewater (sea level) canal. Claim: Big increase in commerce, federal funds, etc. to build a ditch through the wetlands. Wildlife managers said this is a big mistake but people said there was nothing to fear. The wetlands were drained out, cypress trees destroyed and people moved into below sea level land. The MR. GO (hurricane highway) was built to help with world trade. They started lobbying in 1923 and started building in 1963. We spent 200 million in initial excavation and another 20 million to dredge. We spent 1.5 million per round trip to dredge. This was the real looting.

What did MRGO do well? It wasn’t a good outlet for shipping, but it was an inlet for salt which killed the Cyprus trees. It also built up soft soil down the Mississippi river.

Rule of thumb: 2.7 miles of wetlands – 1’ of storm surge. They die from salt water though. 1 mile of Cyprus trees will lower storm by an inch. Salt turned Cyprus trees in ghost swamps. Plants die, soil slumps, they redredge, and the cycle continues. One canal destroyed 100 square miles of swampland (1/5th of total).

The industrial canal was the canal that failed.

Disaster let us gain insights into power, status and class. While Katrina hit the rich as well as the poor, it hit them in different ways. The rich were able to get out.

The terminology of disaster might be wrong. “Disaster” means unlucky and without human control (bad star). A better term might be “tragedy” which is caused by the “hubris of a great person.”

Modern version is:
1. Hubris of the few strikes nature
2. Nature strikes humans
3. Major suffering by innocents and bystanders. People blame govt for not building stronger levees but don’t blame developers who build in flood plains. In 1993 FEMA moved three people after Mississippi homes. FEMA bought/razed 12,000 more homes. Changed land to parks. Developers came in and added twice as many new homes as had been removed as well as strip malls and 2.2 billion dollars and new investments.

After a flood, the homeowners and business say developers sold a place that’s going to flood. Developers said that’s city halls fault. City hall says that’s FEMA’s responsibility and FEMA says that they can’t be held responsible for damage (or sue congress). Homeowners don’t have anybody they can sue. Developers are protected by legal rights and can’t be sued even though they’re the ones creating all these projects.

CA has second highest population living below sea level. San Francisco, Sacramento, Stockton, etc. Gov. fired his flood control panel a couple days after Katrina. In the CA delta after Katrina we’re putting hundreds of thousands of new homes in harm’s way.

This isn’t even a case of the rich vs. the poor. It’s a small sliver of people who get subsidies out of the political system. We reward politically connected elites with profits while they’re putting people in harm’s way. Small number profits and everybody else pays for it.