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## disasters

*Hilary Silver*

Disasters are sudden, unexpected, localized, rare, and acute events that disrupt the environment and social structure, and inflict substantial harm on individuals, groups, and property. They differ from accidents in the greater scale of their individual and collective impacts. Roughly speaking, such catastrophes entail over a hundred deaths in a short period of time.

The sociological study of disasters dates to the late 1940s, when governments sought to comprehend the damage of World War II and started planning for potential nuclear holocaust. First at the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) and later at the Disaster Research Center at Ohio State, sociologists drew upon experience from natural disasters. Over time, disaster scholars borrowed from other subfields in the discipline.

The number of disasters has increased, especially since 1990. Ulrich Beck argues that, unlike modern industrial society based upon the distribution of goods, contemporary risk society is founded upon the distribution of dangers. Science and industry are creating more and deadlier risks with impacts less limited in time and space. These physical risks are situated in social systems that aim to control them. However, many technically risky activities require society to depend upon and trust inaccessible, unaccountable, and unintelligible organizations and institutions. Scientific realism should be tempered with the viewpoints of ordinary citizens who may be affected by oversights in rational systems. This means modernization must become “reflexive.” These observations hold for most disasters, regardless of cause. For some purposes, however, sociologists classify disasters by type, often distinguishing between natural and technological disasters. Increasingly,

political disasters have become a third category of study.

Natural disasters are often viewed as “acts of God.” Yet numerous studies of the social impacts of floods, earthquakes, tornadoes, hurricanes, wildfires, eruptions, famines, plagues, and pandemics demonstrate the importance of social structure and cultural context in determining the incidence and outcomes of these events. For example, Mike Davis’s *Ecology of Fear* (1998) argues that profit-driven, sprawling urban development in Southern California without regard to its fragile ecosystem causes any one natural disaster in the area to set off others. John Barry’s *Rising Tide* (1997) similarly finds that engineering ineptitude and greed of planters and bankers helped cause the great Mississippi flood of 1927. Similarly, Eric Klinenberg’s “social autopsy” of the 1995 Chicago *Heat Wave* (2003) demonstrates the contributions of selective government preparations, privatized service delivery, and biased coverage of the local media to the death of over 700 people.

Technological disasters are often attributed to human error or worse. Thus, some say, they produce more enduring and debilitating impacts – anger, fear, uncertainty, stress, and distrust – than natural ones. Sociologists have studied explosions, dam breaks, blackouts, oil and toxic spills, fires, genetic mishaps, mad cow disease, Y2K and computer viruses, and accidents at nuclear power plants, chemical plants, and NASA. Such studies refute the usual risk management response based upon “high-reliability theory” which maintains that decentralized authority and built-in redundancy enhance reliability and safety.

Vaughan’s study of organizational deviance in *The Challenger Launch Decision* (1996) identifies risk-taking, ignored warnings, and deception trickling down from the top to the bottom of the space agency. In uncertain environments such as agency competition for scarce federal funds, formal organizations like NASA develop technical cultures and bureaucratic and political accountability systems that tolerate mistakes, misconduct, and risk-taking for the sake of ultimate goals. Social constructions of reality unnecessarily produce disastrous accidents.

However, Charles Perrow, in *Normal Accidents* (1999), says social constructionist

explanations miss the power structure that devises such risky complex systems in the first place. “Normal accidents” are inevitable in complex (vs. linear) interaction systems with tightly coupled, interdependent components. In such systems, failures multiply and spread in unexpected ways, making rational planning impossible and high-reliability approaches even more damaging. Yet such catastrophes, Perrow points out, are rare because they have no one cause. Disasters require a “negative synergy” of combined conditions, from lack of warning to concentrated population.

Webb (2002) notes that sociologists currently know far less about political disasters – riots, revolutions, and terrorism – than about natural and technological ones. Man-made disasters are not accidental, but deliberate. Terrorist disasters are designed to inflict as much death and damage as possible on symbolic victims. The sheer arbitrariness of their targets diffuses fear among entire populations, thereby magnifying the disastrous effects. After the World Trade Center catastrophe, the study of urban disasters became a growth industry. Savitch (2001) identifies three factors – social breakdown; resource mobilization; and global target-proneness (including international media centrality) – that are responsible for which cities around the world are more vulnerable to terrorist disasters. Nancy Foner’s collection *Wounded City* (2005) shows there was also variation in the impact of 9/11 among New York City communities. Vale and Campanella (2005) analyze the recovery of a wide range of cities throughout the world. They identify a dozen “axioms of resilience,” including narratives to interpret and remember the disaster and the importance of surviving property.

Whether natural or man-made, disasters have many similar social consequences. The majority of property losses in urban disasters are due to housing damage. Disaster victims disproportionately consist of the aged, the isolated, and the destitute. African Americans and renters are also over-represented.

Disasters tend to have a life cycle, says Drabek (1986), progressing through the stages of preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation. Most scholarly attention has focused on the second. There are widespread myths that, in an emergency, the population will panic and loot, and first-responders will abandon their

posts, requiring a paramilitary, command-and-control structure to impose order. In fact, during the immediate crisis, studies find that people become more cohesive and converge upon the disaster site, offering help. This “therapeutic community” reaction is more typical in the wake of disaster than conflict, or what Freudenberg (1997) calls “corrosive community.” Established, expanding, and emergent organizations, Dynes (1970) argues, together provide flexible and diverse responses.

Once disasters recede into the past, the political incentives to prepare for future contingencies diminish. Mitigation usually entails tradeoffs between profit and safety, security and civil liberties. Private insurers may withdraw from communities hit by natural catastrophes, forcing the federal government to become the insurer of last resort. Policy continues to be disaster driven, offering short-term compensation rather than long-term prevention strategies.

During the recovery stage, there is an opportunity for social change, but it may not be seized. In some cases, community corrosion ensues, prolonged by endless litigation, uncertainty about long-term health, organizational competition, and “recreancy” (perceived governmental failure). As Kai Erikson’s *Everything in Its Path* (1978), a classic study of the Buffalo Creek flood, concludes, the survivors of disasters suffer from both individual and collective trauma. Disasters disrupt the social bonds, networks of relations, and common patterns of life that would otherwise support people. Thus, sociologists are now studying disaster memorials and the social construction of collective memory. Commemorations cement social bonds after a common tragedy.

SEE ALSO: Dangerousness; Ecological Problems; Organizational Deviance; Organizational Failure; Organizational Learning; Risk, Risk Society, Risk Behavior, and Social Problems; Social Structure of Victims

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## disciplinary society

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Talk about the disciplinary society is frequently linked to the idea of a society of total surveillance and adjustment. However, in his seemingly most popular and at the same time highly complex book *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1977) describes the disciplinary society not as a social reality but as a *program* of disciplining individuals. Thus it was the “dream” of the old authoritarian police to establish a society organized along military lines, functioning like the cogs of a machine. This aspiration did indeed have historical configurations: in the “social disciplining” (Gerhard Oestreich) of an administrative and regulatory organization of society, already being instituted in early modern times, aimed at producing obedient individuals; and in an unprecedented process of rationalization of power, provoking Weber to speak of the “iron cage” of bureaucratic rulership in modern societies. Foucault’s intention, however, is not to point out historical continuities and general principles shaping society, like “capitalism,” “modernity,” or “rationalization.” Rather, the disciplinary society is the effect of micro mechanisms of power and has itself to be distinguished from a type of power that donated the name: *discipline* does not refer to an institution, but designates a technology of power. It is unacquainted with a ruling center as it unfolds beyond the state. It is a mechanism of power localized amid society: the “productivity of the norm” (Macherey 1991), operating in occidental

societies since the seventeenth century. It thus differs from the juridical sovereign power of the *ancien régime* legitimized by the implementation and enforcement of law.

The topic of *Discipline and Punish* is the self-conception of modern societies, referring to ideals like humanity, civilization, and progress. Foucault exemplifies his critique of this self-conception, focusing on the transition to a new practice of confinement. The “birth of the prison” marks the new self-conception of the modern constitutional state dissociating itself from cruel practices such as the exhibition of sovereign power through the spectacle of public punishment. However, modern societies cannot count as better societies, as they are not free from power and repression. They operate with different mechanisms of power. This is the central argument in *Discipline and Punish*. The repeatedly evoked process of humanization turns out to be a shift to a new regime of power, a new economy of power, making the prison appear not only as a practice of confinement, punishment, and treatment, but particularly as a more effective and economically useful practice compared to corporeal punishment.

Two kinds of shift are significant for the transition to the disciplinary society, which Foucault exemplifies in his focus on the figure of the delinquent: the mechanisms of power shift from the body to the “soul” and from law to the norm. The practice of the prison is in no way unphysical, as confinement also is a physically noticeable restriction of freedom. Yet, while the offender in the *ancien régime* is punished conspicuously, in order to restore the king’s law, his power, disciplinary power is interested in the individual. Thus, rather than the body of the offender, the “soul” of the delinquent; rather than the real, the possible act; rather than the behavior, the character of the person takes center stage. With the emergence of the prison the delinquent has been born as an individual to know. Psychologists and psychiatrists, and later on social workers, are concerned with the motives and the biography of this person in order to reform his or her personality. The delinquent becomes a category describable in generalized terms, and that allows for subsuming the discrete offender like a species. The prison makes possible the establishment of criminology as a science – and as a practice of surveillance and control.