Instructor: Professor Judith Gerson  
Email: gerson@rci.rutgers.edu  
Office: Davison Hall, Room 139, Douglass Campus  
Office hours: Tuesday, 4 – 5 p.m. and by appointment

Overview:

This seminar takes up the epistemological challenge of how sociologists might most wisely study catastrophe and disaster given their variability and complexity. At the heart of this project is an intellectual tension between the extraordinary, unprecedented, and un-patterned, which commonly characterize catastrophes and disasters, and a commitment in many of the social sciences to analyze everyday structures, processes and contexts, aiming to generalize and theorize empirical findings. Acknowledging that some instances of change and disruption common to catastrophes are also seemingly increasingly routinized (e.g., diaspora/resettlement), the seminar aims to develop a conceptually rigorous and empirically informed set of research tools for how best to study catastrophe.

One key approach to studying catastrophe relies on the literature on collective or social memory—how groups of people remember the past in the present for some future purpose(s). Whether the unit of analysis is global, national, or collective, people recall the past as members of various groups and those recollections are shaped by social and cultural formations. Collective memory touches upon the content of recollection—what is remembered, forgotten and avoided as well as the documentation and evidence of memory—archives, memorials, and commemoration. As this area of inquiry has its beginnings before the study of catastrophe and disaster emerges as a distinct field, we begin our readings with some of these earlier texts.

In substantive terms, the seminar is organized along multiple themes and foci, which inform each other. We consider questions of conceptualization of disaster, catastrophe; trauma and its aftermath; victim, perpetrator and witness; and collective and social memory as well as commemoration. We investigate questions of evidence and archives, and how to assess what counts and what is missing. We also grapple with the relationship between human rights abuses and what kinds of evidence matters, focusing on ideas of truth, reconciliation and justice. Lastly questions of commemoration and memorialization inform our study how catastrophe is recalled locally, nationally and transnationally.

The seminar aims to provide the analytic tools for you to pursue your own well-defined research interests within these parameters. We have 11 weeks of common readings, and two weeks of workshopping people’s research projects. In practice what this means is for eight of the 11 weeks of assigned readings, everyone will submit a 2 – 3 page reading memo (double-spaced) online by Monday noon that stresses the ideas that are
most exciting and productive, and identifies the questions, problems, gaps, and sources of confusion in the texts. Every week one person will co-facilitate class discussion. On November 8th everyone will give preliminary presentations on their papers in progress, having posted a 2 – 3 page overview on November 7th by 9 a.m. We will workshop final papers in-progress on December 6th. All term papers are due on December 16th by 5 p.m. The quality of your weekly reading memos, contributions to seminar discussions, and your final paper each carry equal weight in determining your final grade. I reserve the right to rebalance this three-part grading schema in your favor. Except under the most unusual of circumstances, late papers will not be accepted and incomplete grades will not be given. Final grades will be calculated based on the work completed during the regularly scheduled term.

Expressed in somewhat different terms, the learning goals for this seminar are: 1) Conceptualize key ideas including catastrophe, disaster, trauma, collective memory, social memory and forgetting, witness, survivor and perpetrator. 2) Understand the epistemological tensions presented by studies of catastrophe and disaster on the one hand, and more ordinary, routine, and predictable events on the other. 3) Identify the major intellectual trends in memory studies, and recognize the field’s relative strengths and weaknesses. 4) Assess the merits of the literature on trauma and consider how it has shaped our knowledge of catastrophe, and vice versa. 5) Critically review the “work” victim, perpetrator, witness, and bystander do in various texts. 6) Critically assess the role of empirical evidence including questions of how reliability and validity inform our knowledge of catastrophe and disaster. 7) Identify how ideas of social justice and reconciliation shape the scholarship on catastrophe, and conversely how ideas of catastrophe define knowledge about social justice and reconciliation.

This seminar strives to create and sustain an environment that supports and affirms diversity in all its configurations, including but not limited to race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, age, social class, language, (dis)ability, region/country of origin, and political orientation. Moreover, we recognize the importance of varied, sometimes conflicting theoretical and methodological perspectives, and aim to foster an atmosphere of constructive intellectual exchange. We have zero tolerance for violations of these principles, and have instituted clear and respectful procedures to respond to any and all grievances.

All work for this course must adhere to the specific practices and ethos of the University’s policy on academic integrity, which should be read at http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/. Full compliance with the academic integrity policy is mandatory.

Readings:

The books listed below are available for purchase at the Barnes and Noble Bookstore in New Brunswick. All other articles and chapters are posted on the seminar’s Sakai website.


**Weekly Schedule:**

September 6  Seminar Overview and Syllabus Review

September 13  Collective Memory, Social Memory: Foundations and Themes


September 20  Memory and the Nation State


October 11, continued


October 11, continued


October 18

Disaster Research—Natural and/or Social


October 25  Trauma, Victimhood Rethought

Fassin, Didier and Richard Rechtman. 2009. *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood.*

November 1  Evidence, Silence and Erasure


November 8  Preliminary Presentations of Final Projects
Post a 2-3 page overview by November 7th, 9 a.m.

November 15  Objects, Museums, Commemoration


November 15, continued


November 22  N.B. No class meeting (Thursday class day at Rutgers University)

November 29  Care and Humanitarianism


December 6  Workshop Final Papers
Guidelines forthcoming

December 13  Transitional Justice


December 15  Final Papers Due