Disaster and Culture

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Class meets: Tues and Thurs 3:55pm-5:15pm
Office hours: Thursday after class and by appointment
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This course is about some key ideas and case materials on disaster, culture, risk, and society. We will read, and discuss, broadly. There is no single field of study regarding disaster. It is an inherently interdisciplinary pursuit.

Several themes transect the readings: notions of vulnerability, what makes social systems break down, how to use disaster as a window into how people think and behave. Contrary to how it may appear at first glance, disasters are phenomena that are about organization and disorganization. Just as you can’t understand divorce without having some conception of marriage, or deviance without normality (and so on), so do you need to think about “routine” life along with disrupted life. These themes will arise as we talk about the material.

This will be a seminar, which means it will be a talk class. I will often, perhaps always, give introductions to the material. But I will rarely if ever lecture for the whole class period. This means that you should expect to participate in class discussions every class period. Being prepared is obviously key, since it isn’t possible to participate intelligently if you don’t know what you’re talking about.

Requirements

- Participation (made up of 2 things: weekly “memos” and talking in class): 30%
- Writing: 30%
- Presentation: 40%
- Extra credit: up to 5%
- Attendance is required at all sessions. You can miss two classes without penalty. Thereafter I will subtract 5% from your grade, at the end of the class, for every day missed (or a big chunk of a class missed).

Memos on Readings:

On days where we have readings—we don’t have that all days—everyone should send everyone else in the class a “memo” about what they’ve read. This should be about a half page to a page of reflections. What grabbed you about what you read? What thoughts did you have that you did not have before? What was interesting? Think about it this way: you go home and tell your parents or friends about some
of the readings (and you can’t just say, “that stuff sucked!”). What will you tell them? This is due on the night before the class – before 9 o’clock. We all need time to read them. Plan ahead. I’m a slow reader so I need a lot of time to read what you’ve written. The memos are part of your “participation” grade and I will deduct points if they’re late. These should be posted in the “Forums” section on Sakai.

Note that all readings except the ones you have to buy are on Sakai.

Paper
I’d like you to write a paper of 10 pages. The paper will be due whenever the final is scheduled for this class (there are no tests). I will subtract 5 points (of the total 30) each day the paper is late. The details of the assignment are in an accompanying document, on the website. We’ll talk about the details in class. I will grade your papers for grammar, clarity, organization, and creativity; in other words, I’ll grade on how well you write as well as how much sense you make. We will spend time in class discussing how to write a good paper, and we’ll spend time in class helping each other pursue a project. Here’s a schedule:

- 3rd week of class: decide on a topic by here. We will talk about this in class (and office hours if that will help). The topic can be event-based (a specific disaster or set of disasters) or theme-based (e.g. social change, gender, etc.).
- 6th week of class: outline to me. Paper or electronic. I’ll comment and return it to you. (I use Word; if you don’t, send the paper as an RTF file).
- 11th week of class: 1st draft to me.

Group Presentations:
It is important that students learn not only to analyze and synthesize knowledge in written form, but also attain the skills necessary to verbally present thoughts and ideas. Therefore, this course will have oral presentations. Students will be divided into small groups of no more than 3 or 4. The groups will have the opportunity to meet during class time to work on their group presentations (though this will not be enough time for a full preparation). This assignment gives students a chance to explore a disaster, or a theme, that interests them. I’ll give more details in class. If I were you, I would tie my paper to the presentation, but this is optional.

Extra credit
Make a detailed disaster plan for your family. Figure out what is the most likely disaster to befall your family and what is the worst case. Make a plan for communication, for protecting life and property. What will you do if one of the scenarios come to pass? What will your family do? What resources do you need to have on hand for the most likely and the worst case? The logic of your plan should be based on the readings for the class.

Sept 6
Introductions, etc.

Sept 8
Disaster as an idea
- It’s Abnormal
• It’s Normal
• Why Is It Important?
  • Lee Clarke, Chapters 1 & 2, Worst Cases
  • Charles Perrow, Chapter 1, The Next Catastrophe

Sept 13
Terrorism & disaster
There are those who say terrorism is nothing to worry about. Others, including me, disagree. In what ways are terrorist events like disasters? In what ways are they different? The Executive Summary of the 9/11 report has some good stuff on prevention. What does it miss?

• Executive summary, 9/11 Report.

Sept 15
What we fear, why, and what difference that makes. Disaster myths.

a. Convergence
b. Following the leader
c. Panic
d. Crying wolf
e. Messages must be simple
  o Barry Glassner, Why Americans Fear the Wrong Things, in Culture of Fear.
  o Take this quiz and as you do, think about what the government agency (FCDA) was trying to accomplish with it:
    http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/bomb/sfeature/panicquiz.html

• Lee Clarke, The Myth of Panic, Contexts, Fall 2002.
• Watch the video of me: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2R2yhWstuG0

NOTE: OVER THE COMING WEEKEND I WANT YOU TO WATCH A “DISASTER” MOVIE. Be prepared to discuss the movie next class period. Your first memo to the class should be about what you observe. Please do NOT watch a documentary—nothing from PBS! Get Armageddon, War of the Worlds, or something like that. As you’re watching, look for images of “human nature,” and assumptions about social organization. Is there panic? If so, what does it look like? Who are the leaders and what are their attributes? Do people form groups on their own? Do they hate each other? Do you see racism or sexism? What happens to pets? What happens to poor people, and do they act differently than rich people? What happens to usual social institutions (marriage, government, community, etc.) as the world falls apart? Note that these are not the only kinds of issues to look for. I suggest them just
to give you examples. In the memo I want your reactions to the readings. Basically, I want you to use
the ideas in the readings to analyze the movie you watched.

Sept 20

• Discussion of movies.
• Jerry Mitchell, Deborah Thomas, Arleen Hill, Susan Cutter, Catastrophe in Reel Life versus Real

Sept 22

The other panic: elite panic

• Rebecca Solnit, Chapter 1, A millennial good fellowship: the San Francisco earthquake, in A

Sept 27

The idea of vulnerability: who is at risk? Who put them there?

• Kenneth Hewitt, The idea of calamity in a technocratic age. Pp. 3-32. In Interpretations of
• John McPhee, The Control of Nature, Chapter 1, Atchafalaya. On Sakai and at:
  http://www.newyorker.com/archive/1987/02/23/1987_02_23_039_TNY_CARDS_00034714
  6?currentPage=all
• 60 Minutes segment on hydraulic fracturing.
• Fracking in Australia
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PELxZ3K2o0c

Click around the following website, to get familiar with some of the issues regarding

Sept 29

More on vulnerabilities

• Paul Mohai and Robin Saha, Reassessing racial and socioeconomic disparities in environmental
• Alice Fothergill. 1998. "The Neglect of Gender in Disaster Work: An Overview of the
  Praeger. – old article, important ideas
• 2013 Gavenus, Katie, Jennifer Tobin-Gurley, and Lori Peek. “Children of the Spills – Phase I:
  Alaska and the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill.” Children, Youth and Environments 23(1): 155-166.
• 2013 Gavenus, Katie, Jennifer Tobin-Gurley, and Lori Peek. “Children of the Spills – Phase II:
  The Gulf Coast and the BP/Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill.” Children, Youth and

Last two readings:

http://disaster.colostate.edu/Data/Sites/1/cdra-research/chilyoutenvi.23.1.0155.pdf
http://disaster.colostate.edu/Data/Sites/1/cdra-research/chilyoutenvi.23.1.0167.pdf
Oct 4
Capitalism, culture, & calamity

- Kevin Rozario, The Culture of Calamity: Disaster & the Making of Modern America. For this you should read:
  * Chapter 2, What comes down must go up: disasters and the making of American capitalism.
  * Chapter 5, The ends of disaster: the culture of calamity in the age of terror.

Oct 6
More on capitalism

- Here’s Stephen Colbert interviewing Naomi Klein:

If something goes wrong with that link go to The Colbert Report and search for Naomi Klein, October 2, 2008

  http://www.thenation.com/article/disaster-capitalists-reap-profits

     ii. Chapter 17, Ideological Blowback,” pp. 341-359
     iii. Chapter 18, “Full Circle,” pp. 360-382

Oct 11
Problems of security and risk communication: The Virginia Tech tragedy, school shootings

Special treat today. An RU Police Officer join part of our discussion. He will talk with us about Virginia Tech and also the effect that the tragedy had on higher education in general. He will also talk about security at Rutgers.

Read from Virginia Tech Review Panel Review:
  i. Summary of Key Findings
  ii. University setting and security
  iii. Timeline of events

Oct 13
More Virginia Tech
  i. Mass murder at Norris Hall
  ii. Aftermath
iii. Guidelines for choosing messaging system
iv. Fatal school shootings in the US

Oct 18
Organizations can kill us, or save us

Oct 20

Oct 25

Oct 27
Disaster Conspiracies and Culture
• Steven E. Jones, Why Indeed Did the WTC Buildings Collapse? Here’s the link. http://wtc7.net/articles/stevenjones_b7_051122.html
  Just breeze through the papers there. What I find interesting is that someone would bother to set up a “journal” devoted to this.
• Segments of conspiracy theory films that I have.

Nov 1

Nov 3

Nov 8
Case-Based Excursus: Death of an American City
At the end of August of 2005 New Orleans was nearly murdered. There are so many issues involved. What are the main causes of what happened? What does the event show about the kinds of vulnerabilities that Perrow talked about? About race, class, and sex in our society? We know that the vast majority of people who did not evacuate stayed put because they didn’t believe the event was going to be so devastating. Why would they believe such a thing, and what do such beliefs imply for building policies
about disaster? If you were in charge of the universe, what would you do to “bring back New Orleans”? What is your personal disaster plan?

- Spike Lee, When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Parts. I will bring in selections from the movie.
- William F. Freudenburg, et al., Chapter 8, Critical for economic survival?, 135-145

Nov 10
More about Katrina

- Ann Fabian, Seeing Katrina’s Dead. Chapter 5 in ...
- AC Thompson, Katrina’s Hidden Race War, The Nation, December 17, 2008

Nov 15
Controlling the uncontrollable

- Dark Winter is a very famous simulation, about the spread of an hypothetical smallpox attack. Look for key decisions that key officials make. Be sure to reflect back on what you learned regarding the myths of disaster, models of social organization, and such. Try to think of how you would behave differently if you were in charge. What would you do and why? http://www.upmchealthsecurity.org/our-work/events/2001_dark-winter/index.html read: “About the Exercise” and “Dark Winter Script”

Nov 17
Power & Environmental Justice


**Nov 22 (Thursday classes)**
The biggest hazard of all: Climate Change.
Al Gore TED talk

http://tinyurl.com/hzgmpxj


Skim through the final report. Or read it carefully if you really want to know what the IPCC is up to.

• http://cmi.princeton.edu/wedges/


• Gregg Easterbrook, Global warming: who loses—and who wins? Atlantic, April 2007

• Lee Clarke, The Nuclear Option, in Routledge Handbook of Society and Climate Change, Edited by Constance Lever-Tracy.


• Charles Perrow, Organizations and Global Warming, in Routledge Handbook of Society and Climate Change, Edited by Constance Lever-Tracy.

**Nov 29**
Belief, the unknown, & magic

• Naomi Oreskes & Erik M.M. Conway, Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco to Global Warming, Bloomsbury Press.
  i. Introduction
  ii. Ch 6, The Denial of Global Warming

• Kari Marie Norgaard, Climate Denial: Emotion, Psychology, Culture and Political Economy, Chapter 27 in Oxford Handbook of Climate Change.

**Dec 1, 6, 8, 13**