



COPING WITH CATASTROPHE

Three years on from the September 11 attack, FRANK FUREDI considers how disasters have moved from 'Acts of God' to 'Acts of Men and Women' and explains how communities coped with catastrophes in the past

The ruins of the First National Bank after the Chicago fire of 1871. The event is held up by Chicagoans as a defining moment in the city's history, an attitude that typifies human response to disaster



Natural events, such as the comet in this English manuscript from 1350, were invested with meaning

AS WE KNOW from the tragedy of 11 September 2001, major catastrophes and disasters serve as historical markers. The phrase 'after this event nothing will ever be the same again' has been repeated after many major disasters. Frederick Francis Cook, the chronicler of the 1871 fire that destroyed a large part of Chicago, wrote that 'in the minds of Chicagoans the city's past is demarcated from the present by the great fire of 1871'. Since biblical times, disasters have been experienced as key defining moments. Biblical events such as Noah's flood were interpreted in a similar fashion.

Disasters make fascinating stories. Though infrequent, they have a formidable impact on the imagination of the generations that follow. Often perceived as Acts of God, a form of divine retribution, disasters are frequently depicted as a type of punishment for human transgression. Russell Dynes, a leading American researcher of the history of disaster perception, has claimed that before modern times, events like earthquakes were interpreted as a 'dramatic means of communication between gods and humans'. Great catastrophes served to underline the transient quality of human existence and the futility of all purely human ends and acted as a stimulus for religious contemplation. Even in today's secular times, disasters are often invested with some hidden meaning.

Throughout the course of history, peoples' explanations of what caused a disaster, what would be its likely impact on their lives and what meaning they should attach to it have gone through important modifications. As Lowell Juilliard Carr argued in a pioneering sociological account of this subject, a disaster is defined by human beings and not by nature. Writing in the 1930s, he noted that 'not every windstorm, earth-tremor, or rush

of water is a catastrophe'. If there are no major injuries, deaths or serious losses, Carr argued, 'there is no disaster'. His definition of disaster as an event associated with the destruction of human life and with economic loss was very much shaped by the modernist imagination of his times.

Michael Kempe, in a recent article in the journal *Environment and History*, argued that in the Middle Ages, 'solar eclipses and comets were seen as catastrophes, because they were interpreted as signs of divine anger against human sins, as were earthquakes and volcanic eruptions'. It was not so much the intensity of human suffering but the powerful signals sent by a major act of physical disruption that shaped the perception of a catastrophe.

From God to nature

According to Enrico Quarantelli, a leading figure in the field of disaster research, historically ideas about disasters have gone through three important phases. Traditionally,

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catastrophes were attributed to the supernatural. They were characterised as Acts of God, 'with the implication that nothing could be done about their occurrence', he argued. The rise of Enlightenment secularism led to an important shift in the way society conceptualised disasters. The development of science as the new source of knowledge altered people's perception: 'They were increasingly seen as Acts of Nature', wrote Quarantelli.

More recently this view has been displaced by the idea that disasters resulted from the Acts of Men and Women. Now the finger of blame invariably points to another human being; governments, big business or careless operatives are held responsible. Floods are less likely to be associated with divine displeasure than with greedy property developers building on flood plains.

The changing historical perception of the meaning of disasters was never straightforward. Medieval ideas about disasters being God's punishment were tested when everyone, even the virtuous, was afflicted. Environmental historian Christian Rohr, who studied people's response to a major earthquake in 1348 in Carinthia, Austria, claimed there was ambiguity in how it was interpreted. He called into question the 'supposed "medieval"

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THE FIRST MODERN DISASTER



A 1755 Czech woodcut of the Lisbon earthquake, which was so severe it caused a reassessment of the concept of disaster

equation of natural disaster and divine punishment'. He thought that many saw the earthquake as not necessarily the wrath of God but as an 'exceptional and unexpected part of everyday life'.

Reactions to the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 were even more variable. Russell Dynes has called this event 'the first modern disaster'; traditional explanations of religious authorities were undermined by the growing influence of scientific thought. Voltaire's powerful polemic, *Candide* was written in part as a response to the earthquake and called into question the idea that it was an Act of God.

Research into disasters

Despite the outbreak of a major philosophical controversy about the meaning of the Lisbon earthquake, serious research into the experience of disasters had to wait until the early 20th century. Until the 1940s most accounts of disasters were descriptive, focusing on their gravity. Eyewitness accounts of high profile disasters that captured the public imagination characterised the literature.

An example is the major outburst of activity after the sinking of the *Titanic*, with numerous speeches, sermons, poems, songs and essays published. For the historian of disasters, reports written by the Red Cross are of great interest. It was the first international organisation involved in disaster relief and sought to use the emerging social sciences to make sense of this experience.

Before the Second World War, the most significant research on the social impact of a disaster was Samuel Henry Prince's study of the explosion in 1917 of a munition ship in Halifax, Nova Scotia. This was a pioneering attempt to explore the effect of a catastrophe – over 2,000 died – on the individual and community. Further serious research had to wait until the 1940s and a project at the University of Chicago. From these studies an interesting picture emerged of how people behave.

At a time when society is concerned about terrorist violence, global warming and a range of potential technological disasters, it is useful to remind ourselves how communities in the past managed to deal with comparable episodes. Interestingly, from the Great Fire of London to Hiroshima, experience shows that communities often possess a remarkable capacity to rebuild their lives.

Prince's study of the Halifax explosion emphasised the solidarity with which the community responded. Post-Second World

The Great Lisbon Earthquake of 1755 had a profound influence on European thought. The earthquake began in the morning of 1 November, not in Lisbon itself, but about 200 kilometres out in the Atlantic Ocean. However, although tremors were felt elsewhere, especially in North Africa, it was the beautiful Portuguese capital, Lisbon, that suffered the most damage. Three distinct jolts over a period of ten minutes reduced hundreds of fine buildings to rubble and the fires that followed raged for five days, destroying many buildings that had survived the earthquake. Some estimates put the casualties from Lisbon alone at 70,000 with 85 per cent of the city's buildings destroyed. Churches, palaces and hundreds of great works of art were amongst the losses, but it was the great human toll that caused writers and philosophers to question the assumption that earthquakes were Acts of God. Kant, Rousseau and Voltaire all wrote on the subject and rejected the 'unscientific' assumption that the disaster reflected God's anger. The issues raised by their debates laid some of the foundations of the Enlightenment.

War researchers also tended to challenge what they described as 'disaster mythology', which includes the assumptions that when disaster strikes, people panic and their communities experience increased anti-social behaviour.

Pulling together in a crisis

Disaster research indicates that the immediate response period to disasters sees an increase in socially responsible behaviour. Enrico Quarantelli observed in 1954 that the 'frequency of panic has been over-exaggerated' and is a 'relatively uncommon phenomenon'.

The bombing of Hamburg in July 1943 is an example. It killed between 30,000 and 45,000 people and left over 900,000 homeless. Yet there was no panic and in a short period of time the city managed to resurrect itself. Within five months it was back to 80 per cent of industrial production.

After the dropping of the atomic bomb, the response of the people of Hiroshima was also astonishingly resilient. Although 75,000

people died out of a population of 245,000, within a few days essential services were restored and after a week economic life was back in full swing.

Studies carried out in London during the Blitz also showed that public morale remained relatively high and that communities showed remarkable resilience in adversity.

Since the 1980s the optimistic version of how humans respond to disasters has been questioned by a new wave of revisionist studies. Kai Erikson's study of the Buffalo Creek disaster in 1976, when 125 people died after a mining dam collapsed, set the stage for more pessimistic assessments of the post-disaster experience. His book provided an account where the prevailing state of human vulnerability overwhelms any sense of community solidarity.

A study of the history of the 1966 Aberfan disaster also illustrates this approach. Aberfan was one of the most devastating tragedies in post-war Britain; 116 children and 28 adults died when a coaltip-slide engulfed a school. Observers were struck by the speed with which the community attempted a return to normality. A year later, Mary Essex, a psychologist from the University of Wales, noted that the surviving children seemed normal and adjusted. Writing in 2000, McLean and Johnes were sceptical, saying 'subsequent research does suggest that long-term effects would be likely at Aberfan'.

The absence of a consensus on the meaning and experience of a disaster represents an open invitation for historians to join the debate. The history of disaster remains a relatively underdeveloped area. Yet at a time when we appear to be concerned about SARS and other viruses, cataclysmic climatic change, environmental and technological disasters, a historical investigation of the experience of the past could provide important insights into what may happen in the future. ■

JOURNEYS

BOOKS

Dreadful Visitations: Confronting Natural Catastrophe in the Age of Enlightenment by Alessa Johns (*Routledge, 1999*); **What Is a Disaster? A Dozen Perspectives on the Question** by Enrico Quarantelli, Editor (*Routledge, 1998*)

JOURNALS

The website for the **International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters** is at www.usc.edu/schools/spdd/ijmed/index.html

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