

Disaster, Culture, and Society

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Lee Clarke, SAS - Sociology

MTH 12:00-01:20P

Lucy Stone Hall Room A215

Livingston Campus

Fukushima is a bell-weather event for modern society. Climate change threatens our futures. And Katrina was a bell-weather event for American society. Along with 9/11 it threw into bold relief just how vulnerable we can be. Such events are intellectual opportunities, chances to look into how society works, and fails to work. There will be more big disasters, and the consequences from them will continue to be severe. The main reasons for these trends has to do with how society is organized.

We usually think disasters are special but they are prosaic, part of rather than discontinuous with “normal” reality. In normal reality we must make sense of things. We excel at that, applying familiar categories to organize events, motives, and histories. Generically, disasters are not different from other events that need ordering. It is easy to imagine all kinds of non-disastrous things or times that must be confronted with, “How shall I make sense of this?” Big disasters just do that in a big way.

This seminar will mainly be case-based, which means that I’ll organize the materials around particular events. Examples are accidents (Bhopal, Titanic, Challenger, Columbia) “natural” disasters (Katrina, the threat from near earth objects) and epidemics (1918 flu). The focus will be on the interplay between culture, social institutions, and calamity. We will use video and internet resources throughout.

I will also construct exercises for students to participate in. An example might be giving groups of students a potential disaster scenario and then making them “advisors” to the President: what will you do? What do you recommend? What will be the consequences if you follow one path rather than another? We will run these exercises at key points in the semester, as knowledge about disaster accumulates.

I will ask students to write one-page “reaction memos” to readings. I will provide examples of what these should look like, but basically they are critical reflections on what you’ve read. Students will email these memos to everyone in the class and we will use them to drive the seminar on any particular day. Students will very actively participate in the seminar, as we weave into and out of key ideas concerning culture and disaster.

LEE CLARKE is a Professor in the Department of Sociology. His areas of expertise include leadership, culture, disaster, and organizational and technological failures. Clarke has won two awards for his teaching and enjoys interacting with motivated and interested students. He has written or edited 6 books and over 50 articles. He has written about the Y2K problem, risk communication, panic, civil defense, evacuation, community response to disaster, organizational failure, and near earth objects. His most recent book is *Worst Cases: Terror and Catastrophe in the Popular Imagination* was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. In August 2005 he was honored with the Fred Buttel Distinguished Scholarship Award by the Environment and Technology section of the American Sociological Association. Visit www.leeclarke.com for more information.