

Disasters, Culture, and Society
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This course is about some key ideas and case materials on disaster 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 won't 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. Note about "recommended readings": you do not have to read these to be prepared for class. I put them on the syllabus in case you want to know more about a topic. I have copies of most or all of these readings, so if you want them just ask.

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. We only meet once a week so if you miss a class it is like missing an entire week of a "normal class." You can miss one class 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).

To facilitate and direct discussion, one or two people will assume responsibility for leading discussion for a particular day. This isn't a heavy requirement, though it is an important one: 1)

to write a page of questions or issues that you think should be covered to adequately treat a topic, 2) this page of questions should be posted in the “Discussions” section of Sakai no later than the night before class (that is, Wednesday nights), and 3) try to keep the seminar on track. We'll arrange this on the first day of class.

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 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 Wednesday night, or the night before the class – before 9 o'clock. We all need time to read them. Plan ahead. Don't send me stuff Thursday morning, or Wednesday at 2 in the morning. That's not enough time! The memos are part of your “participation” grade and I will deduct points if they're late. These should be posted in the “Discussions” 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 May 3. 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.
- May 3: paper due.

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. 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. More details will be provided 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?

Materials to buy

Lee Clarke, *Worst Cases*, University of Chicago Press, 2006. ISBN: 0226108597

Kai Erikson, 1995, *A New Species of Trouble: Explorations in Disaster, Trauma, and Community*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton.

Harvard Business School, Interactive CD: *Columbia's Final Mission*. Multimedia case 9-305-032
<http://www.hbs.edu/it/courseware/teaching/columbia.html>

1. January 19 The Nature of the Course

- a. Introductions of each other, and my introduction to thinking about disaster.
- b. Group creation.
- c. Assignment: before next class watch a “disaster movie.” Be prepared to discuss the movie next class period. Your weekly 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.

This will be the first part of your “memo;” the second part of your first memo will be reactions to readings. Basically, I want you to use the ideas in the readings to analyze the movie you watched.

2. January 26 What we fear, why, and what difference that makes. Disaster myths.

- a. Barry Glassner, *Why Americans Fear the Wrong Things*, in *Culture of Fear*.

b. Jerry Mitchell, Deborah Thomas, Arleen Hill, Susan Cutter, Catastrophe in Reel Life versus Real Life, *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters*, November 2000, 18(3):383-402.

c. Watch the video of me:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2R2yhWstuG0>

d. 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>

e. Lee Clarke, *The Myth of Panic*, *Contexts*, Fall 2002.

f. Jesse Walker, *The swine flu panic that wasn't*, *reasononline*.

<http://reason.com/news/show/133525.html>

g. Lee Clarke & Caron Chess, *Elites and Panic*, *Social Forces*, 2008, 87(2):993-1014.

h. Rebecca Solnit, Chapter 1, *A millennial good fellowship: the San Francisco earthquake*, in *A Paradise Built in Hell*, NY: Viking, 2009.

i. Disaster myths: I'll also talk about these

1. Convergence
2. Following the leader
3. Panic
4. Crying wolf
5. Warnings are unproductive
 - (a) messages must be simple
 - (b) speak with one voice

i. Project progress.

Recommended

Steve Hilgartner, *The social construction of risk objects: or, how to pry open networks of risk*. Pp. 39-53. In *Organizations, Uncertainties, and Risk*. Edited by James F. Short, Jr. and Lee Clarke, Boulder: Westview Press, 1992.

James Kendra, *The reconstitution of risk objects*, *Journal of Risk Research*, 2007, 10(1):29-48.

3. February 2 Dis-Community and Disaster

a. Kai Erikson, *A New Species of Trouble: The Human Experience of Modern Disasters*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 1995. ISBN: 0393313190, paperback.

- b. Checkup on project progress.

4. February 9 Terrorism and 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?

Also, for the first part of the class we'll be joined by Professor Angus Gillespie. He's a professor in Rutgers' American Studies department and wrote a book called *Twin Towers*, which get a lot of attention after 9.11.

- a. Tom Junod, *The Falling Man*, New York Times.
- b. Executive summary, 9/11 Report.
 - i. http://www.9-11commission.gov/report/911Report_Exec.pdf
- c. John Mueller, *Overblown: How Politicians and the Terrorism Industry Inflate National Security Threats, and Why We Believe Them*, NY: Free Press, 2006, Chapter 2, *Overreacting to terrorism*.
- d. Selections from *Terrorism and Disaster: New Threats, New Ideas*, Elsevier Press, 2003, Lee Clarke, editor.
 - i. Lee Clarke, Introduction: 9.11 as disaster: on worst cases, terrorism, and catastrophe.
 - ii. Brent Marshall, Steven Picou, Duane Gill, Chapter 6, *Terrorism as disaster: selected commonalities and long-term recovery for 9/11 survivors*.
 - iii. Kathleen Tierney, Chapter 4, *Disaster beliefs and institutional interests: recycling disaster myths in the aftermath of 9-11*
 - iv. Tierney, Kathleen and Christine Bevc. 2007. *Disaster as War: Militarism and the Social Construction of Disaster in New Orleans*. In D. Brunnsma and S. Picou (eds.) *The Sociology of Katrina: Perspectives on a Modern Catastrophe*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- e. Checkup on project progress.

5. February 16 Virginia Tech: Problems of Security and Risk Communication

- a. Special treat today. RU Police Officer Richard McGilvery will 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.
- b. Read from Virginia Tech Review Panel Review:
 - i. Summary of Key Findings

- ii. University setting and security
- iii. Timeline of events
- iv. Mass murder at Norris Hall
- v. Aftermath
- vi. Guidelines for choosing messaging system
- vii. Fatal school shootings in the US

<http://www.governor.virginia.gov/tempcontent/techpanelreport.cfm>

c. <http://www.vt.edu/remember/> -- run through the section entitled "other content." Hit every link there. I want you to spend a lot of time on this website. How would you characterize what's going on here? Who is communicating what to whom? What does the structure and content of this website tell us about how tragedy is dealt with in our society, commemorated, and framed? Imagine if someone you loved was one of the victims. Would this change how you think and feel about the website? Why, or why not?

d. checkup on progress

6. February 23 The biggest hazard of all: Climate Change.

a. <http://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/assessment-report/ar4/wg1/ar4-wg1-faqs.pdf>

b. <http://cmi.princeton.edu/wedges/>

c. Gregg Easterbook, Hot prospects, Atlantic April 2007

<http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200704/global-warming>

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

e. Matthew L. Wald, Getting Power to the People, Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, 63(5):26-43.

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

7. March 1 Vulnerabilities of Place and Social Organization

a. Paul Mohai and Robin Saha, Reassessing racial and socioeconomic disparities in environmental justice research, Demography, 2006, 43(2):383-399.

b. Alice Fothergill. 1998. "The Neglect of Gender in Disaster Work: An Overview of the Literature." Pp. 11-25 in The Gendered Terrain of Disaster: Through Women's Eyes. Westport: Praeger.

c. Alice Fothergill, Enrique G.M. Maestas, and JoAnne DeRouen Darlington, Disasters, Race, Ethnicity and Disasters in the United States, 1999, 23(2):156-173

d. John McPhee, *The Control of Nature*, Chapter 1, Atchafalaya.

http://www.newyorker.com/archive/1987/02/23/1987_02_23_039_TNY_CARDS_000347146?currentPage=all

The McPhee reading is also on Sakai.

60 Minutes segment on hydraulic fracturing.

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

<http://www.gaslandthemovie.com/whats-fracking>

60 Minutes segment on 2005 Texas City BP explosion. This is a short movie I'll show.

f. Charles Perrow, *The Next Catastrophe: Reducing our Vulnerabilities to Natural, Industrial, and Terrorist Disasters*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007, Chapter 1 (pp. 1-13), Chapter 7.

Recommended

g. Charles Perrow, *Normal Accidents: Living with High Risk Technology*, Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 1999. Chapter 3 & Postscript on Y2K

h. Scott D. Sagan, *The Limits of Safety*, Chapter 4, Redundancy and Reliability: The 1968 Thule bomber Accident, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.

i. Editors (1994). Systems, organizations and the limits of safety: a symposium. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management* 2(4): 205 - 240. The selections begin with "JCCM"

8. March 8 How to freak out with intelligence, grace, and wit

a. I'll show a few film clips that I have.

b. Lee Clarke, *Worst Cases: Terror and Catastrophe in the Popular Imagination*, University of Chicago Press, 2006.

Well, here you have *The Truth*. Ha ha. Most reviewers and readers like the book, but some don't. Try to figure out who those people, and organizations, might be, and why they might adopt the positions they do. Imagine that you are the Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security. You read the book and ask Prof. Clarke to come give a presentation in Washington. What kind of advice should Clarke give?

c. Checkup on project progress.

9. March 22 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?

- a. Spike Lee, *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Parts*. I will bring in selections from the movie.
- b. Read the interview with Spike Lee:
<http://www.hbo.com/docs/programs/whentheleveesbroke/interview.html>
- c. William F. Freudenburg, et al., Chapter 8, *Critical for economic survival?*, 135-145
- d. Eric Klinenberg, *Heat Wave*, Chapter 1, *Dying Alone*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.
- e. Fothergill, Alice and Lori Peek. 2006. *Surviving Catastrophe: A Study of Children in Hurricane Katrina*, pages 97-130 in *Learning From Catastrophe: Quick Response Research in the Wake of Katrina*. Boulder: Natural Hazards Center.
- f. Ann Fabian, *Seeing Katrina's Dead*. Chapter 5 in ...?
- g. AC Thompson, *Katrina's Hidden Race War*, *The Nation*, December 17, 2008
<http://www.thenation.com/doc/20090105/thompson/single>
- h. AC Thompson, *Body of Evidence*, *The Nation*, December 19, 2008
<http://www.propublica.org/article/body-of-evidence>
- i. AC Thompson, *Jury Convicts Three, Acquits Two in Post-Katrina Police Shooting*, *The Nation*, December 10, 2010
<http://www.thenation.com/article/157029/jury-convicts-three-acquits-two-post-katrina-police-shooting>
- j. Checkup on project progress.
- k. Setup for Columbia exercise.

Recommended

Douglas Brinkley, *The Great Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans, and the Mississippi Gulf Coast*, William Morrow, 2006.

10. March 29 Managing and Working in Complex Systems

Most students are too young to remember the Challenger disaster, though of course you "know" about it. There are massive continuities between the NASA that caused that disaster and the NASA that caused the Columbia tragedy. Here we have hands-on "experience" with making fateful decisions.

Note: no memo for today

a. HBS Interactive CD: Columbia's Final Mission. Multimedia case 9-305-032

i. <http://www.hbs.edu/it/courseware/teaching/columbia.html>

b. Spoof on innovation in NASA

i. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_424YskAfew

I'm leaving that link there. It's now a "private" video. Somebody at NASA must have gotten peeved. You can find "innovation at NASA" to see what the vid is about. Here's a riff on it:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mnUEDA6drB8>

11. April 5 Disaster, capitalism, Iraq.

Special treat today. Professor Michael Schwartz, who is a sociologist at Stony Brook University, will visit and we'll discuss Iraq as a disaster. I mean this both literally, in the sense that ecological disasters have been happening in Iraq, and metaphorically, in the sense of considering the question of whether the entire adventure has been a disaster. If so, in what ways?

a. Here's Stephen Colbert interviewing Naomi Klein:

<http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/186550/october-02-2008/naomi-klein>

b. Water shortage threatens two million people in southern Iraq, Guardian, 26 August 2009.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/aug/26/water-shortage-threat-iraq>

c. Naomi Klein, Disaster capitalists reap profits, The Nation, July 1, 2008

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

d. Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York, Metropolitan Books, 2007)

i. Chapter 16, "Erasing Iraq," pp. 325-340

ii. Chapter 17, "Ideological Blowback," pp. 341-359

iii. Chapter 18, "Full Circle," pp. 360-382

e. Michael Schwartz, *War Without End: The Iraq Debacle in Context* (Chicago, Haymarket, 2008)

i. Chapter 9, "Creating Slum Cities," pp. 127-137

ii. Chapter 10, "Saga of the Al-Fatah Pipeline," pp. 141-148.

iii. Chapter 11, "The Degradation of the Iraqi Infrastructure," pp. 149-159

iv. Chapter 12, "The Downward Spiral," pp. 160-175

v. Chapter 13, "The Tidal Wave of Misery," pp. 176-191

vi. Chapter 18 "The Battle of Baghdad," pp. 251-269.

12. April 12 Disaster Conspiracies and Culture **THIS CLASS STILL A WORK IN PROGRESS**

- a. DC-10 landing on LA freeway. This is a little video I'll show.
 - b. James Ridgeway, *The Five Unanswered Questions About 9/11*, NY: Seven Stories Press, 2005, ISBN: 1583227121, paperback.
 - c. Steven E. Jones, *Why Indeed Did the WTC Buildings Collapse? Here's the link.*
<http://www.rinf.com/news/nov05/World-Trade-Center.html>
 - d. Malcolm Gladwell, *Connecting the Dots*, New Yorker, March 10, 2003.
 - e. *The Journal of Debunking 9/11*. Here's the link. <http://www.jod911.com/>
 - f. Segments of conspiracy theory films that I have.
 - g. Final preps for presentations
13. April 19 Student presentations
- a. We'll probably also be finishing up other materials.
14. April 26 Student presentations
- a. Boo hoos.