

## Epilogue

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As indicated in my introduction to this special issue, there had been no consensus about “disaster” as a concept at the roundtable held at the Sorbonne. I had a similar expectation about this special issue. It would have been very surprising to me if much consensus had emerged.

My perception is that most readers would agree that the six authors do differ in some fundamental ways. In their answer to our original question—what is a disaster?—they discuss rather different matters. To be sure the authors do occasionally state they see some similarities in their respective views by alluding to one another, and without doubt there are some surface overlaps in their formulations. Overall, however, given what they explicitly discuss, my general perception is that there are major differences in the way they view disasters.

But the situation is somewhat complicated along one line, if I am not reading too much in what they say. For instance, it strikes me that the none of them would hesitate in characterizing certain social occasions in the same way. Probably all would agree, for example, that the social effects of the 1995 Kobe earthquake was a disaster. In fact, my guess is that all would agree in their characterization of what “traditionally” have been viewed as disasters, most of the so-called natural disaster ones, at least of the sudden kind.

Yet on the other hand, how much agreement, given their statements, would there be in categorizing as “disasters” those situations that in my introduction I called conflict situations, the newer types of collective crises that are emerging, the “industrial crises,” as well as the diffuse kinds of negatively viewed current happenings that are sometime labeled ecological or environmental problems? Perhaps others will see much convergence in the classification that would be made of such social phenomena, but that is not my perception.

Let us take the example of conflict situations. Let us ask disaster researchers as a whole, and not just the authors of the papers in this issue. Would they all agree that the social effect of the Russian military interven-

tion in Chechnya is a “disaster”? What of the social responses to the American air raid on Libya a few years ago? Would all, most, some or none of the following be treated as “disasters” by disaster researchers? Just looking at the current journalistic headlines as this paper is being written, what about the fighting between the Mexican Army and the insurgents in the state of Chiapas, the Ecuador-Peru border clash, the multisided group fighting in Afghanistan, the Islamic militant attacks in Algiers, the ethnic clashes in Sri Lanka, the rampages of gangs in East Timor in Indonesia, the poison gas episode in the Tokyo subway system, and the recent civil strife situations in Rwanda, Bosnia, Somalia and the Gaza strip? Or to use an example of an earlier time: Was what happened in Tiananmen Square in Beijing, China, a “disaster”?

If some of these conflictive situations are excluded from the general category of “disasters,” what criteria are being used? What of the Turkish attack on the Kurds in northern Iraq or conversely the rebellion of the Kurds against the present Iraqi regime? Why is it that I feel the answer in some cases would depend on the political sympathies of those making the classification? Probably because as a student of collective behavior and social movements, I have long noted that some characterizations, even among social scientists, of certain happenings as “riots” or “rebellions,” or as “terrorist attacks” or “liberation movements” have sometime reflected not disciplinary tools and concepts, but extrascientific considerations.

Again taking other current headlines into account, what about the conceptual homes of certain kinds of financial happenings that at least in some past collective behavior categorizations were often called “panics”? Certainly the Barings Bank collapse in England, the Mexican peso crisis, or the Orange County bankruptcy in California, have had major and widespread negative economic, social, psychological, and political effects. Should they be treated as instances of “disasters”? If not, why not?

If they are classed as “disasters” do they not suggest that the nature of disastrous occasions are changing in that some of them, and also “disasters” in computer systems such as have already occurred in Japan and the United States, will necessarily impact more of the better off in social systems, contrary to what most research presently suggests. (However, some past studies have already indicated that, for example, it was the middle socio-economic levels that were more impacted than those in lower status levels in the 1985 Mexico City earthquake as documented in Dynes et al. 1990. Also, clearly some of the recurrent brush fires in recent decades in certain suburban areas of Los Angeles and around the Riviera in France have primarily impacted high status households.) I raise this kind of question,

because if we define or conceptualize disasters in terms of some aspects of the social response, does the social status of those affected matter or not matter in the conceptualization?

Also, we present some of the happenings we do because among other things I have long argued that we should in refining our conceptual tools look at likely future disasters rather than looking back at past disasters. It is after all one of the basic findings about disaster preparedness that researchers have found that unfortunately too many communities take the last disaster that has happened in their area as the prototype around which to plan, instead of projecting for planning purposes the more likely kind of disaster that will occur in the future. Should we also as disaster researchers not project more into the future rather than looking at just the past and the present?

Now in general, refinement of scientific concepts normally is to decrease the inclusive range and to move away from common sense notions. In what direction are we going in the disaster research area? Let me restate again for future writers on the topic, the basic question as I see it. To ask: what is a disaster, does not generate an "obvious" answer for research purposes.

Additionally, it is important to note that the problem is not going to go away. In fact, the conceptual problem will continue to intellectually proliferate. As an example, it may be noted that apart from what I earlier presented to the roundtable, there continues to be a broadening from my perspective of what "disaster" work should be looking at (see, e.g., Erikson 1994; Richardson 1994).

Now it is true that old problems have not been solved, that there is the continuing surfacing of social phenomena that in my view requires taking an intellectual stance, and that the authors in this issue would not seem to be in much agreement about certain kinds of negative happenings. However, my strong feeling is that this exercise has been very worthwhile. Perhaps little consensus emerged about what constitutes a disaster. But equally as important issues have been addressed, such as to what extent disasters must be seen in the larger social context and to what extent ethical and moral considerations must be taken into account. Furthermore, proponents of different conceptions have had to clarify and elaborate their particular views. They have had to discuss to some degree the implicit and/or explicit criticisms or questioning of their perspectives. Some new, at least to me, questions about the problem of defining and conceptualizing "disaster" have come to the fore.

This is intellectual progress. Only out of such kinds of explicit and clashing writings on the problem, and trying to meet criticisms, will the

field move toward a necessary rough consensus on its basic concept. To some readers, the content of this special issue on the topic might seem to have only further complicated the picture of where the field stands. Perhaps, but as Aristotle wrote a long time ago, the emergence of wisdom requires an initial period of confusion.

### References

- Erikson, Kai. 1994. *A New Species of Trouble. Explorations in Disaster, Trauma and Community*. New York: Norton.
- Richardson, Bill. 1994. "Socio-technical Disasters: Profiles and Prevalence." *Disaster Prevention and Management* 3:41-69.