

Commentaries on "Taxonomy and Disaster"

Taxonomies of Disaster and Macrosocial Theory

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I would like to introduce the subject of taxonomy in disaster situations by asking you to suppose that a chemical had been released across the United States to which tens, perhaps hundreds of millions, of people would be exposed and that would kill hundreds of thousands of people a year. What would you call this? What response would you expect to it? I call the chemical tobacco. Suppose that a famine is causing hundreds of people to die every day in a city. Is that a disaster? What response would you expect to this? The city is Calcutta. Now imagine a country with seven million working people who have no regular jobs. That is where we are now, the United States. Imagine a town and surrounding region in which the largest part of the population are slaves. That is the town of Williamsburg 130 to 200 years ago. Barely mentioned in all the information on Williamsburg culture is the fact that it celebrates a slave society and its products.

Gary Kreps has defined disasters as events in which societies or their larger subunits incur physical damages and losses and/or disruption of their routine functioning. You should note that this includes nonphysical impacts because it uses "and/or," and disruption of routine functioning would presumably include sudden economic breakdowns, sudden social breakdowns, riots, strikes, massive loss of jobs in a locality, and so on.

Note however, that by referring to disruption of routine functions it excludes routine mass deprivations, for example mass malnutrition and

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