

**Agency and Power in Modern Disasters:
A Rejoinder to Hewitt**

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Hewitt's vigorous response to our exploration of the nature of disasters deserves a far more detailed analysis than I have the space to include here. Therefore I will largely restrict my remarks to commenting on his central accusations, including some reflections on the wider issues of agency, power and the role of the state, that he raises. These observations reflect my particular interest in disasters that take place in technologically advanced societies.

Hewitt reminds us of the continuing dominance of what he calls the "agent-specific approach," sometimes called the "behaviorist" or "hazards" paradigm, in conceptualizing disasters; in other words that the behavior of physical systems defines the problem. Having recognized that we all reject this approach, he goes on to suggest that we all, to some extent, substitute the behavior of other (abstract social) systems, into this role. "However" says Hewitt, "a generalized and abstract paradigm of vulnerability is as unsatisfactory as the hazards paradigm." According to him, the outcome of adopting this approach is a rather academic, austere view of disasters, combined with a tame managerial approach to disaster response that reflects the view of the "establishment," or the state.

How is it that others (and Hewitt himself, for that matter) have escaped this fate? Presumably it has something to do with the grounding of theory in practical experience of disaster zones, preferably in developing countries, since "most of the innovative studies and ideas are from work in poorer nations." I have neither the space nor the inclination to discuss this proposition at length. However, I am a little concerned about Hewitt's use of the idea of "witness," which has a certain ritualistic quality to it. Grounding theory in empirical fact is one thing, the provision of a favored status for the "testimony" of victims as a condition of authenticity is quite another.

Turning now to questions concerning agency and power in technologically advanced societies, Hewitt wonders whether I see the existential dimension of "modern disaster" as arising from "impersonal, inevitable"

processes or from the actions of the powerful. I feel that Hewitt misses the point I was trying to make by returning, yet again, to his theme of the disadvantaged, "hidden" victims and the "ideology and actions of the more influential persons and institutions."

Three points need to be made. First, in my paper and in subsequent work (e.g., Horlick-Jones 1995a), I have tried to understand what structural processes in late modern societies lead to certain events, call them "disasters" having a distinctive social, cultural and political impact. This has led me to focus on a number of distinct but interlocking themes; the construction of identity in these societies (see Craib 1994); the progressing freeing of agency from structure by reflexive process (Beck et al. 1994); Pidgeon's social framing of risk perception; and the impact of global economic restructuring on societal structures (Lash and Urry 1994); and, sociotechnical systems. I certainly have no wish to deny the role of power in these societies.

Second, the disasters with which I was primarily concerned, technological failures of some shape or form, often affect the well off and powerful. This is certainly not to say that the poor and disadvantaged are not disproportionately exposed to risks in late modern societies. Indeed, I would argue that within the developed countries exist "risk ghettos" in which the disadvantaged are exposed to a host of "unglamorous," often chronic, risks.

Third, whether "modern disasters" can be avoided is certainly not as clear-cut as Hewitt suggests. The bombing of Hiroshima was a fundamentally different process from the mechanisms of failure in complex sociotechnical systems interacting with their socioeconomic environments in, arguably, unpredictable ways. Indeed, Hewitt seems to contradict himself by recognizing that "there are so many risks over which people exposed have no control. But safety experts responsible are not, and in many cases, perhaps, cannot be adequately equipped to "do the job."

Finally, I turn to disaster response, and the question of whose interests should be served by state agencies. This is a very familiar theme, and once again an opportunity for some to express outrage against the behavior of powerful institutions. I would simply add that, in my view, the social and management sciences have crucial roles in improving civil protection measures by placing the human dimension at the center of planning and preparation (see Horlick-Jones 1995b).

References

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