

BOOK REVIEWS

A Paradise Built in Hell – The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster by Rebecca Solnit, New York: Viking.

Allen H. Barton
Visiting Scholar
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Chapel Hill NC 27599

Email: allenbarton@mindspring.com

A Paradise Built in Hell doesn't contain any news for disaster researchers. That rational, pro-social behavior is the predominant response of ordinary people in the face of extraordinary destruction, that mutual help from family, neighbors, and fellow community members is the major source of rescue and relief in the first few hours of sudden disaster, and that this experience generates an intense and rewarding sense of community, have been reported since disaster research began, and were summed up in the idea of the "post-disaster Utopia" presented by Charles Fritz (1961) in his classic paper.

But for the general public, the mass media, and government officials, this news can't be repeated too often, given the persistence of myths of panic, stupor, helplessness, and predation, with their implication that command and control by professionals and officials is the key to disaster response. The author provides vivid portrayals of public pro-social response in both historical disasters and those that she has studied in the field. She also provides telling examples of official nonfeasance and malfeasance arising from ignorance, stereotypes, and vested interests.

Cases she deals with at length are the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire, the Halifax munitions ship explosion of 1917, the Mexico City earthquake of 1985, the terrorist destruction of the World Trade Center in 2001. The greatest length is devoted to the New Orleans hurricane and flood of 2005, where she interviewed ordinary participants in rescue and relief and the victims of monstrous official and mass media blunders. She also offers illuminating discussions of how social philosophers (like William James and Dorothy Day) and disaster researchers and theorists (like Fritz and Quarantelli) have tried to extract broader lessons from observations of disaster behavior.

However, she has an ambitious agenda beyond telling us how to improve disaster response. She would like us to draw lessons from that response to transform society as a whole. She continually contrasts the altruistic, active, improvisational behavior of ordinary people in disaster with the "disaster of daily life" in American society—the selfishness, competitiveness, coldness, isolation, and deadening routine she finds there. She sees disaster as revealing the human potential for making "daily life" more Utopian:

The joy in disaster comes, when it comes, from that purposefulness, the immersion in service and survival, and from an affection that is not private and personal but civic: the love of strangers for each other, of a citizen for his or her city, of belonging to a greater whole, of doing work that matters. These loves remain largely dormant and unacknowledged in contemporary post-industrial society: this is the way in which everyday life is a disaster.

Unfortunately she does not seriously discuss how daily life in an advanced technological society can be transformed to awaken these human potentials. Her non-disaster examples are the 19th century Utopian farms, the Rainbow Coalition's brief escapes into communal life in the wilderness, the 1960's Freedom Summer of college students challenging Southern segregation, and Dorothy Day's religiously inspired creation of "houses of hospitality" for the poor and homeless. These examples aren't much help in telling us how to improve post-industrial society as a whole, rather than finding temporary escapes from it or limited social-service projects within it.

Why does disaster bring forth such highly motivated altruistic behavior? All the research shows that disasters suddenly bring ordinary people face to face with people in great need of rescue, first aid, food, shelter, and comforting. These needs are intensely motivating for most people, and most people are capable of useful actions in response. But the intensity, suddenness, and temporary nature of the situation make it unrepresentative of what most people experience in most of their lives. Reforming a whole society, to give ordinary people more satisfying roles and relationships in ordinary times, is a much more complicated enterprise. Bringing intense altruism, opportunity for creativity, freedom to innovate, work satisfaction and group solidarity into the workplace, the schools, and the off-job social activities of the community—making daily life more Utopian—requires more than simply unleashing people's desire for mutual helpfulness and mutual affection. It requires building better institutions to give opportunity and social support for such actions and feelings. This can be the long-term goal of social inventors, social activists, and social researchers and experimenters, but it cannot happen overnight or by simple exhortation. We have to learn how to redesign institutions, and mobilize people to support such reforms, against powerful interests. The kind of motivations that Rebecca Solnit finds in the disaster situation will be needed to do this, but they cannot simply revolutionize society by themselves.

Long-run, comprehensive change in everybody's way of living is a slow process requiring much social learning from experience, including disaster experience, and also the experience of past and present social movements. A more plausible form of social change would be to find ways to mobilize the public to respond actively and altruistically to situations of large-scale deprivation that are chronic in society in "normal" times. While some kinds of mass deprivation create an "altruistic community," others are simply ignored, hidden, regarded as incurable, or ideologically justified as due to the moral inferiority of the victims. (For a set of propositions on the sociological variables producing such different responses, see Barton, 1969, Ch. 5, "The Altruistic Community.") What can we learn from past social movements and popular activism?

From abolitionism, the farmer's movements of late 19th century America and Scandinavia, from the depression-era outburst of industrial unionization in the U.S., from the successes and failures of social-democratic movements in other countries, and the civil rights movement in America?

Besides celebrating the helpfulness and ingenuity of the public in disasters, the author is outspoken in condemning official practices which make the situation of the victims worse. In New Orleans, victims were rounded up and contained in miserable holding centers and prevented from crossing the bridge into the white suburbs. Voluntary organizations were refused access to provide victims with help; police were diverted from rescuing people to protecting property from presumed anti-social elements; and the mass media spread unsubstantiated and largely false rumors of murder, rape, and mayhem—seriously hampering the disaster response. She describes this as “elite panic.” She is forthright in saying “the people” are helpful but “the elites” are unhelpful or positively injurious to disaster-stricken communities because they fear the public getting out of their control. Certainly she has well-documented examples of such elite behavior, which match the Disaster Research Center's field work findings on the New Orleans case (Quarantelli, 2008).

But her emphasis on spontaneous, self-organized help in disaster, and her general antipathy to the responses of governmental agencies, ignores the limits of localized, spontaneous mutual aid in big and intense disasters. Individuals with boats rescued lots of people from rooftops in New Orleans, but there weren't nearly enough individually owned (or individually commandeered) boats, so thousands were left for days unrescued. (One of the few effective official organizations was the Coast Guard with its rescue helicopters, but they were just too few.) In earthquakes, local people desperately work by hand to rescue people from ruined buildings, but it takes heavy equipment to deal with many such situations. (Here private construction companies and their workers have played a vital role as well-equipped and highly skilled volunteers.) In Hiroshima, victims of the atomic explosion tried to help one another, but there were just too many victims and too high a proportion were incapacitated to help everyone who needed aid. The author underplays the need for rapid, well-organized response by government agencies and professional emergency services.

Of course, however well planned official responses may be, however well equipped they are to deal with normal emergencies, it is the nature of major disasters to completely overload their personnel and equipment. This is why “coordination of organizational and mass behavior” (Barton, 1969, Ch. 4) is an absolute necessity. Toward the end of her book (pp. 310-311), the author expresses her pleasant surprise that the San Francisco Fire Department has a program to train volunteers to take care of their neighborhoods in disaster, and trains its professionals to work with volunteer response groups. Professionals are not normally trained to do this but, when they are, they make their own work and the “mass assault” of the local population much more effective. Working together, self-organized volunteer groups and emergency services can bring advice and equipment to amateur rescuers, label buildings that have been searched, direct volunteers and scarce equipment to where they are most needed, organize the mass exodus of victims to government or voluntarily organized aid centers.

One book can only hold so much. An issue not explored in this book is that of the limits of empathic identification with victims of physical or social disasters. Public response to mass deprivation is geographically channeled—strongest in the local community, then in the region or state, then in the national society, and weakest for victims on the other side of the world. In a “globalized society,” who is responsible for whom?

The author does deal sharply with the channeling of help by ethnicity and class. Social ideologies may define deprived people as “deserving” or “undeserving,” helping them as a social duty or as a threat to maintaining norms of individual responsibility. Belief systems may define some people as superior, others as less capable, some as worthless, and still others as positively dangerous. The latter belief can give rise not to helping behavior but to murder (as reported in this book carried out by white vigilantes against blacks in New Orleans) or to genocide (pick your own example.) A theory of human behavior in disaster will necessarily use variables that, at the other extreme, create human-made hells. Disaster research and holocaust research can learn from each other. And the public and its government officials can learn a lot from this book. It could also be great reading for students in the social sciences and humanities, church-sponsored study groups, or organizations of social activists, to set off discussions of basic social and moral problems. It also reminds professional disaster researchers to look beyond technical and formal organizational problems.

References

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