

(Un)Natural Disasters: Race, Poverty and Relief

Panelists:

- ❖ **Lee (Chip) Clarke**
(Sociology, Rutgers-NB)
- ❖ **Ben Lintner**
(Environmental Science,
Rutgers-NB)
- ❖ **Karen O'Neill (Human
Ecology, Rutgers-NB)**
- ❖ **Richard Schroeder**
(Geography, Rutgers-
NB)

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What pre-existing conditions make communities more or less resilient in the face of earthquakes, hurricanes, and other environmental disasters? Recent earthquakes in Haiti and Chile were cause for faculty from various departments and schools at Rutgers University to discuss the intersections of race, poverty, vulnerability, and relief in the face of so-called natural disasters. Scholars explored how racial and economic disparities and historical, structural and environmental factors contribute to creating the "un-natural" aspects of disasters, and discussed ways that communities organize themselves to respond to environmental threats, risks and devastation. This event was part of Rutgers "Week of Action," sponsored by the NJPIRG, to benefit victims of the earthquake in Haiti.

QUESTIONING THE NATURAL-NESS OF DISASTERS

Panelists problematized the notion of disasters as natural phenomena, drawing from their research in geography, sociology, and climatology. According to political sociologist Karen O'Neill (Human Ecology), "Disaster is a human defined term." Scholars have used terms like "hazards," "extreme geophysical events," and "risk" to describe events that are popularly understood as disasters. Professor Lee Clarke (Sociology) followed up with a telling example: "A landslide is not considered a disaster until it falls in an area where people are present." A disaster implies that the event is out of the ordinary, when in fact there are continuities between disaster times and non-disaster times. Yet who defines the disaster and how can shape the way people, communities and states understand and respond to it.

Similarly, panelists discussed critiques of contemporary usages of the concept of "natural" to explain phenomena in the environment, climate, and landscape and their impact on human life. From the Homestead Act in the U.S. midwest to cattle grazing practices in the Sahel region in northern Africa, we see that human action is, in part, responsible for precipitating hazards. For example, in the

19th century, the U.S. government developed western settlement policies during a period of above normal rainfall, which led to problems for farmers after more normal conditions returned.

How do disasters get naturalized? When considering the recent earthquake in Haiti, Professor Rick Schroeder (Geography) cautioned against "quick" explanations for disasters such as poverty, culture, and religion. Popular responses and media coverage often blamed Haitians "progress resistant culture" and "voodoo ideology" for the circumstances created by the earthquake. Such problematic assertions imply that Haiti's culture itself was the disaster.

Schroeder suggested that "analysts must look to political economy and history to know

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--Rick Schroeder

why people were made vulnerable in the first place." Some of these factors include retribution for Haiti asserting itself as the first black independent nation, U.S. occupation in the early-mid 1990s, large-scale agricultural projects that devastated the countryside, uneven patterns of import/export, and internationally circulating racist depictions of Haitians as a



(l to r): CRE Acting Director Lisa L. Miller with panelists Rick Schroeder, Karen O'Neill, Lee (Chip) Clarke, and Ben Lintner

poor, black underclass. “The people of Haiti were standing on shaky ground long before the earthquake,” Schroeder added.

HOW DO SCIENCE, STATES, AND COMMUNITIES PREPARE FOR AND RESPOND TO DISASTERS?

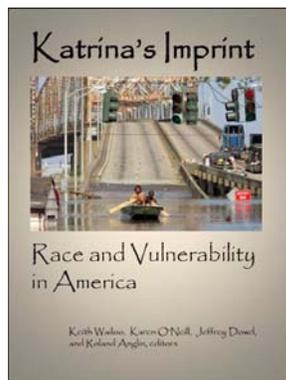
This notion of “natural disasters” also trickles into policy decisions and lawmaking. According to climatologist and professor Ben Lintner (Environmental Sciences), policymakers want scientists to predict disasters and major environmental changes so they can decide how to determine risk, build or repair infrastructure, and allocate funding. “The one thing we can predict is the unpredictability of climate,” Lintner noted. As a consequence, policymakers are often frustrated that climatologists cannot easily translate climate system behavior into models that fill policymakers’ economic- and policy-driven expectations.

Panelists highlighted how people and communities are differentially exposed to hazards. While some communities are better equipped to deal with disasters, research discussed by the panelists reveals that local, state and federal policies (of development, farming, etc.) can set up situations of greater or lesser vulnerability for certain people and communities. On the one hand, regions of the world that may be similar in terms of climatic susceptibility to droughts (e.g., tropical South America and the Sahel) may experience very different outcomes in terms of human impacts when droughts occur: drought-related mortality is much higher in Africa than in South America. Thus we see wealth, policy, water usage and infrastructure matter. On the other hand, Professor

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Clarke provided an example of state policies that effectively respond to disaster. Local authorities in Florida use an effective system of registering elderly and disabled persons so that during times of crisis they can be evacuated first when storm warnings are released.



Katrina's Imprint: Race and Vulnerability in America, Keith Wiloo, Karen O'Neill, Jeffrey Dowd and Roland Anglin, eds. (forthcoming July 2010)

What should be the role of states and local governments in responding to disasters? In the aftermath of earthquakes in Haiti and Chile, news commentators and locals questioned the legitimacy of each state for their responses to the disasters. Chilean citizens urged the president to deploy the military to help them secure their homes and businesses as well as to restore order in the chaos created by little resources like clean water and food. Some Haitians interviewed in news media expressed a desire for the United States government and military to establish order where they felt Haitian authority was too weak to respond effectively.

Professor O'Neill discussed these examples to show how ironically in times of disaster people look to the state and military to supply order, rescue services, and rebuilding initiatives even in light of onerous histories of militarization and occupation, as in the cases of Chile and Haiti.

Professor Clarke suggested that scholars and communities look to “instances of everyday leadership, or leadership from below” in times of crisis, and that rescue resources be allocated at this level. Communities often look to formal leadership to provide rescue services, but women and community organizations are untapped resources as first responders. After Hurricane Katrina, a group of local men set out to search and rescue storm survivors, but were abruptly turned away by troops waiting for official rescuers to arrive. However, such services are less effective in the immediate aftermath of disasters because they arrive too late to rescue the elderly, the sick, and others who only marginally manage to survive disasters.

CONCLUSION

Scholars from human geography to sociology to climatology and beyond have copious knowledge concerning the social, structural, historical and environmental conditions within which disasters are produced and managed. This panel revealed axes of interaction between social organization, racial stratification, human capacity, and natural events. Although policymakers and scholars often clash on how to most efficiently mobilize scientific knowledge and research results in the preparation for and response to disasters, it is clear from the examples of Hurricane Katrina, earthquakes in Chile and Haiti, and drought in the African Sahel and New Jersey that “being organized for a disaster is important,” as Professor Clarke asserted.

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- Facilitating research and enriching education on matters of race and ethnicity in contemporary life in America, in New Jersey, and the world
- Promoting collaborations and fostering cross-disciplinary seminars and discussions on topics from immigration and work, to ethnic politics and racial classification, from preservation of cultural identity to its transformation, and including questions of poverty, discrimination, advancement, integration, and privilege
- Identifying critical areas for future research and supporting race and ethnicity research and policy development.

