FEEDBACK FROM THE FIELD

DISASTERS AS SOCIAL PROBLEMS?: A DISSenting VIEW

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The nature of natural disasters and how best to conceptualize them are issues that have received renewed interest recently (e.g., Quarantelli 1987; Kreps 1989; May 1989). One proposal calls for treating disasters as social problems. Drabek's (1989) paper on disasters as nonroutine social problems is the most explicit statement of this idea. I do not think that disaster phenomena have features commonly associated with social problems, and therefore I do not believe that such a theoretical reorientation would be beneficial to the field of disaster research. I will try to indicate in this brief piece some of the reasoning behind this conclusion.

PROBLEMS WITH THE FUNCTIONALIST THEORY OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS

The papers that I have read and the discussions that I have listened to about treating natural disasters as social problems—nonroutine or otherwise—seem to rest on an assumption that there is a single theory of social problems. I have not heard anyone discuss this issue with anything in mind other than what specialists in the field of social problems (e.g., Spector and Kitsuse 1977) would call a functionalist theory. The outstanding feature of this theory is its emphasis on the objective conditions of the social system. Social problems are things gone wrong with the system or things that threaten to make the system go wrong. Presumably, natural disasters would be treated as one class of things that can go wrong with social systems and natural hazards as things that threaten to go wrong.
One problem with the functionalist theory of social problems, of course, is that it begs the question of who decides when things have gone “wrong” and by what criteria (Spector and Kitsuse 1977, pp. 23-30). Quarantelli (1989, p. 23) alludes to this problem when he argues that treating disasters as social problems won’t work since disasters have “functional” as well as “dysfunctional” consequences. The work of Scanlon (1988) on “winners” and “losers” comes to mind here as does the work of neo-Marxist disaster theorists (e.g., Clausen et al. 1978) who point out that disasters affect the differing social classes differently.

The problem with a functionalist approach to natural disasters as social problems is that it will provide no empirical referents to determine when or whether disasters are problems or even what kind of problem they may be. There is another theoretical tradition in the study of social problems, however, that provides a considerably better vantage point for addressing the disasters-as-problems issue. This alternative perspective is currently referred to as the constructionist view of social problems (Schneider 1985). Its most concise explication is by Spector and Kitsuse (1973, 1977), but it also has roots in collective behavior such as in the work of Blumer (1971) and Mauss (1975).

**PROBLEMS ARE CONSTRUCTED**

Oversimplified, the basic tenet of constructionist theory is that social problems exist when groups press claims identifying “putative conditions” that are intolerable and propose solutions for their abolishment. The career of a social problem varies as a function of the resources of claims-pressing groups (including how claims are pursued, resisted, or ignored) and as a consequence of the constraints imposed by the arenas in which claims are pressed (Hilgartner and Bok 1988). Mauss (1975) explicitly links the career of social problems to the activities of social movements, although this theoretical connection is somewhat controversial (Mauss 1989).

**DISASTERS ARE NOT OBJECTS OF CLAIMS-PRESSING ACTIVITY**

The problem with treating natural disasters as social problems is that disasters lack the organizational base associated with claims pressing in social problems. Disasters are often instantaneous, at least from a technical and logistical perspective. The time-lag between the occurrence of a disaster and the recognition of consequences is much shorter than the time-lag between the rise of a social movement and the development of a collective consciousness. Disasters are not part of the “natural” fabric of society, and their consequences cannot be a matter of collective decision-making. They are not objects of claims pressing in the way social problems are.

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minous, disasters therefore are not social problems. Let me illustrate this point by distinguishing among several types of phenomena that often co-exist in the aftermath of dramatic events such as major earthquakes or airliner crashes. These frequently-confused phenomena have distinctive forms of social organization associated with them.

At one extreme there are events that are bounded in time and space. An earthquake is one obvious example; so too is a temporary evacuation due to the discovery of toxic chemicals. The spatial and temporal dimensions of events, central to discussions of taxonomy (Kreps 1989; May 1989), are less relevant to the question of the theoretical adequacy of social problems theory than is the matter of the collective “ownership” of events (Gusfield 1981, pp. 10-13). Earthquakes and toxic evacuations as events are owned primarily by emergency planners and emergency responders including news organizations. (Mass media audiences following reconstructed accounts of events through news reports might be thought of as another type of owner, but an audience at best is a mass rather than an organized collectivity capable of sustained activity over time.)

The term **risk** denotes a wider range of social activity and social organization. For example, radon gas as a hazard associated with the internal environment of homes is part of the agenda of risk professionals (Dietz and Rycroft 1988), risk entrepreneurs, social movement entrepreneurs, and professional movement organizations (McCarthy and Zald 1973, p. 20). Ownership in this instance is not of a situated event having a beginning, a middle, and an ending but of ongoing conditions that exist at several locations. Hence the organizational base of phenomena thought of as risks is more extensive (though largely confined to experts and insiders), and activity associated with them is continual rather than discrete as in the case of events.

Events (as symptomatic of underlying putative conditions) and risks can develop into public issues, but neither is inherently or objectively controversial. Successful promotion by owners or, more intriguingly, unsuccessful disownership (Gusfield 1981, p. 14), is necessary for creating a public divided over and discussing an issue. Current attention to levels of radon gas in homes is an example of public ownership. This type of discourse is different from the everyday discussions of the risks of radon in the narrower arenas of professionals and experts.
Broader of all in terms of organizational base are social problems. In addition to being objects of attention by all previous forms of collectivities (professional associations, the news media, publics, etc.), social problems in addition are owned by mass membership-based social movements. For example, the environment as a social problem encompasses activities (letter-writing, rallies, nature walks, demonstrations) by numerous movement organizations; public discussion of several rather than a single controversial public issue (radon gas, recyclable materials, toxic waste disposal, acid rain); the efforts of experts and social movement entrepreneurs linked to numerous types of risk; and the occurrence of a multitude of local events (such as an evacuation) providing “raw material” to sustain claims-pressing activity.

A functionalist theory of social problems demands that researchers decide a priori whether natural disasters constitute social problems. A constructionist theory of social problems, on the other hand, points to where one can find the empirical evidence with which this question may be answered. The answer does not lie in the results of public opinion polls or in data from surveys of elites and community influencers. Rather, the answer lies in the forms of the collectivities owning the putative condition. Phenomena usually studied from the perspective of social problems theory have distinctive features, most importantly their association with membership-based social movements.

Using the social constructionist theory of social problems as a measuring device, natural disasters cannot be considered social problems (cf. Short 1989, p. 405). One does not see spokespersons for a “natural disaster movement” competing with representatives from the environmental movement, the Pro-Choice and Pro-Life Movements, the Gay Rights Movement, and so forth for space in public arenas such as the general audience media (Ganson and Modigliani 1989). The issue of natural disasters and what to do about them is not a topic of public discussion that remains on the public policy agenda year after year. The political “clout” of disaster planners and emergency responders is highly limited.

In short, social problems have to do with power. They are not merely the dysfunctions of social systems, however these may be judged. Until natural disasters comprise part of the agenda of a social movement with sufficient political resources to influence public discourse and to attract the attention of elites (Rossi et al. 1982; Mittler 1989), a social problems approach to natural hazards and disasters is unwarranted.

REFERENCES

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