

Communities at Risk: Collective Responses to Technological Hazards

Stephen R. Couch and J. Stephen Kroll-Smith, eds.
New York: Peter Lang, 1991. 320 pp. \$50.95 (cloth)

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This collection of essays deals with modern, technological disasters from a sociological perspective. The case studies discussed include internationally well-known accidents such as Three Mile Island, Chernobyl and Bhopal, but also several of more local, predominantly New England, interest. These include toxic waste leachates in a residential area (Love Canal), industrial water pollution, an oil spill, a PCB fire in an office building, radon contamination and the threat of a watershed "development" plan. Ten of the 12 chapters are grouped into four parts according to the kinds of responses focussed on, respectively, "social psychological," "local organizational," "cultural" and "political economy."

The "social psychological" contributions present statistical material on different varieties of psychological response to disasters. The "local organizational" section addresses questions concerning the success or failure of local protest groups. The "cultural" part illuminates the role of therapeutic "disaster subcultures," the symbiosis between media and activists and the likelihood of "environmental stigma." The chapters on "political economy," finally, deal with the transformation of political structures and with the control of information as a source of power.

Kai Erikson's interpretive, initial chapter, "A New Species of Trouble," and a final chapter by the editors summarize some general conclusions which can be drawn on the repercussions of human-made disasters. Erikson emphasizes the essential differences between technological and natural hazards. It is ironic that the former are in part generated by our struggle to protect ourselves from the latter and that they generally have proven even more difficult to deal with. Technological disasters provoke anger and blame rather than resignation. Moreover, as they often involve toxic poisons, they "pollute, befoul, taint, rather than just create wreckage," eliciting an "uncanny fear" in us (p. 15) and, perhaps, a lower sense of self-esteem. Toxic emergencies are not temporally bounded, nor can they generally be apprehended by the use of our senses. They strip our "emotional insulation" against risk, dissolving our trust in expertise and our confidence in logic and reason. Technological disasters offer us a "distilled, concentrated look" at the chronic perils spread out everywhere in modern society.

The editors suggest that a "latent" theme in all the chapters is "the idea that technological degradation of the biosphere sets in motion organizational activities and psychological processes that frequently result in personal, social and cultural change" (pp. 293-294). Natural disasters generally do more damage to the human-made environment than to the natural one, whereas human-made disasters tend to do the opposite. Moreover, the human-made environment can almost always be refashioned, whereas contaminated groundwater, soil and air are "much more difficult (if not impossible) to restore" (p. 297). In the absence of an adaptive "disaster subculture" such as may exist for natural catastrophes, responses to technological accidents require more interpretive work, have to be more innovative and are more likely to result in long-term change. People will differ in their responses not only in terms of whether or not they choose to become politically active, but also in their definitions of a crisis

and of adequate courses of action. Social conflicts, Couch and Kroll-Smith suggest, will increasingly focus not so much on wages and other traditional benefits as on the right to clean environments.

Although it addresses an extremely important topic and does make several good points, the volume lacks theoretical depth. One would have wished to find, among the sociological statistics and empirical conclusions, more interpretive essays like Erikson's. To an anthropologist it is a pity that more actual use was not found for Douglas and Wildavsky's (1982) cultural constructivist perspective, mentioned only in passing. Sociologists may be similarly puzzled by the seemingly total ignorance of the work of Ulrich Beck on "risk society," the six-year delay in English translation (1992) notwithstanding, and even more so by the omission of Anthony Giddens' work on risk as an aspect of modernity. The sociological discourse on the concept of "risk" (and "trust") would have provided a more profound framework for these case studies.

The book would also have benefited from a unitary macro-perspective on the forces responsible for what the editors call the "technological degradation of the biosphere." The essays are highly heterogeneous in terms of *positioning*. In some contributions there is an eerie distance to the anxiety of informants and the impression is that the knowledge produced is of less use to the environmental movement than to the corporations and governments it challenges. Activists are viewed as more or less successful "issue entrepreneurs" (Clarke, p. 108). In other studies, there is an unmistakable and commendable sense of commitment to the victims of disaster. Omohundro, for instance, reveals that he is "not a disinterested party," but an environmentalist. This hard-to-reconcile spectrum of approaches can be illustrated by the difference between, on the one hand, finding it "unfortunate" that victims of Three Mile Island tended to "externalize blame" (Davidson and Baum) and, on the other, criticizing the "organizational myths" of Union Carbide (Shrivastava) or celebrating the political success of organizations like POWER (Wolensky). The lack of overall positioning raises fundamental epistemological questions which the editors might at least have mentioned.

References Cited

Beck, Ulrich

1992 Risk Society. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Douglas, Mary, and Aaron Wildavsky

1982 Risk and Culture. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Pilgrimage in Latin America

N. Ross Crumrine and Alan Morinis, eds.

Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1991. xvi + 432 pp. \$45.00 (cloth)

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This well-produced volume provides 15 case studies of Latin American pilgrimage, along with two useful introductory chapters and a conclusion. For the most part, the tone of the book is highly ethnographic and its main appeal will probably be to Latin American specialists. While several authors (e.g., Nolan, Sallnow, Poole) do touch on some of the larger theoretical and comparative issues in the anthropological study of