PKSOI Book Review

Review of A Paradise Built in Hell
by Rebecca Solinit

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Introduction

Media reports of disaster emphasize tragedy but what of triumph? A Paradise Built in Hell shows that altruism during and after disaster is not the exception but the rule. The messages in this book, that neighbors are in general very good to one another, that humans crave this connectedness, and that the first and most effective support in crises is provided informally and locally, are messages with implications for disaster preparedness and response and potentially for complex crises as well.

Rebecca Solnit examines in depth a number of case studies, including the San Francisco earthquake and fire of 1906, the Halifax explosion of 1917, the 1985 Mexico City earthquake, New York's 9/11, and New Orleans' Hurricane Katrina in 2005. She argues that disasters are shared traumas that connect individuals otherwise alienated by the capitalist marketplace. Despite social conditioning to act selfishly, many willingly share whatever they have to help others in need. She posits a positive benefit of crisis: "in returning their sufferers to public and collective life, [disasters] undo some of this privatization, which is a slower, subtler disaster all of its own" (p. 9).

Review

The author, like researchers before her, noticed that people who experience such adversity commonly light up in the telling of their stories, "the startling, sharp joy I found in accounts of disaster survivors" (p. 7). Her personal

experience inspired this book. She and friends loved the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake that affected them in San Francisco, "Or loved not the earthquake but the way communities had responded to it…For weeks after the big earthquake of 1989, friendship and love counted for a lot, long-term plans and old anxieties for very little." (pp. 4-5). Researchers, Aaron Antonovsky most prominent among them, have observed positive or salutogenic outcomes associated with such challenging experiences. Salutogenesis, explains psychologist Peter Suedfeld, is "the deeply meaningful, if badly named, ability not only to survive extremely bad experiences but through them to achieve greater strength, understanding, and purpose." [1]Solnit argues that while disasters are unwelcome, the social change they produce can be beneficial. This is because our everyday lives have become disconnected from the things we most crave – "purposefulness, immediacy, and agency" (p. 7). Referring to Charles Fritz, one of the first to study human behavior in disaster and one of the key scholars on the repetitive bombing of London in World War II known as *The Blitz*, she summarizes, "everyday life is a disaster of sorts, one from which actual disaster liberates us."(107) Through disaster survival, we discover that "social ties and meaningful work are deeply desired, readily improvised and intensely rewarding." (p. 7) In sum, the title of the book *A Paradise Built in Hell* refers to the liberation and belonging released in the otherwise terrible circumstances of disaster: "in the suspension of the usual order and the failure of most systems, we are free to live and act another way." (p. 7)

This joy, altruism and mutual aid are largely ignored in media accounts and Hollywood fictionalization.[2] An exception that comes to mind is John Boorman's semi-autobiographical film *Hope and Glory*, in which a nine year old boy in World War II London rejoiced in the war's upset of restrictions. More commonly, disaster films depict people acting like selfish beasts, such as Thomas Hobbes imagined in *The Leviathan* - a "war of all against all." Such depictions begin with the assumption that selfish behavior is a function of human nature, Solnit notes, not "the social systems in which they operate." (p. 125). Media accounts of actual disasters often take on the air of fiction. Solnit describes sensationalist media reports, commentary and false rumors that spread in the wake of Hurricane Katrina as "slander against an entire population" of New Orleans (p.242); retractions have been scarcely noticed.

Such myths about human behavior are widely held and perpetuate "elite panic" – a fear-driven over-reaction based on the assumption that people will behave like criminals. Solnit quotes scholars Caron Chess and Lee Clarke: "what elites panic about is the possibility that we will panic."(p. 129). The term *looting* is particularly pernicious. The maxim "looters will be shot" does not discriminate between opportunistic stealing and emergency requisitioning and makes looting a capital crime. Any police, military or vigilante might serve as judge, jury and executioner (p. 37). Elites who fear looting call upon police and armed forces who then see the people as the enemy, as when *Army Times* published the headline, "Troops Begin Combat Operations in New Orleans." Indeed, Brigadier General Gary Jones of the Louisiana National Guard's Joint Task Force was quoted as saying: "This place is going to look like Little Somalia…This will be a combat operation to get this city under control."[3]

As Solnit documents, the state response to the crisis in New Orleans was more concerned with control than rescue. The state not only failed miserably to rescue the people, it aggravated the crises. The governor and mayor shifted resources from search and rescue to focus instead on looting; the Federal Emergency Management Agency was "aggressively turning away relief supplies and rescuers" (p. 240). Authorities treated disaster survivors "like we was all fugitives….We ended up in this concentration-like camp with barbed-wire fences and snipers, like we did something wrong" (p. 234).

As disaster researchers know, the empirical evidence is that ordinary people tend to respond to disasters with astonishing altruism. Panic and exploitative behavior are rare.[4] In a process Fritz labeled convergence in 1957, "Movement toward the disaster area usually is both quantitatively and qualitatively more significant than flight or evacuation from the scene of destruction" (p. 195). In New York after 9/11, for example, one volunteer organizer described his experience, "We were all going without sleep and all crazed…I realized *this is a little heaven*. Everyone is walking around hollowed out by grief, they need to do this, you don't think beyond it." (p. 206).

In her optimistic view of the power of civil society, Solnit directly confronts a more one-sided view from the left put forward by Naomi Klein in the 2007 book *The Shock Doctrine*, that disaster creates opportunity for exploitation by elites. Instead, the newly empowered community sometimes translates this

energy into a press for political reform. In Mexico City, the community has cared for itself, created new heroes and won reforms to the state. San Francisco and New Orleans made some long-term social gains, despite profit-seeking elite exploitation in the early recovery era. Solnit notes that the fallout from Hurricane Katrina was a devastating loss of mandate for the Bush Administration. Although the book basks in the connectivity of community this is not a conservative nostalgia. Nor does the author argue for a state-based solution. The state is often late in arriving and makes a mess of things when it does so. Military response is often inept or worse, as in San Francisco in 1906, in which the military mismanaged explosions to create firebreaks and exacerbated the fires. The state often tramples upon spontaneous initiatives that are the center of gravity for transformation and widely applauded in a growing disaster studies literature as “emergent behavior”. Disaster sociologist Tricia Wachtendorf notes that officials often reject volunteer efforts labeled “rebel food” or “renegade supplies.” (quoted on p. 207).

The book’s moral argument is humanist, and arguably a case for natural rights that are “pre-conventional, morally prior to any social institution or contractual arrangement…grounded in the natures of the creatures that possess them.”[5] The most significant criticism of natural rights of course is their reliance upon metaphysical ideas, such as John Locke’s “divine will,” that fared poorly in the Enlightenment. For this reason, the author’s biblical and other religious references are particularly interesting. The Hell that Solnit describes is an alienation from the social contract that can be and sometimes is made new. Positive experiences in community come about when people put aside current social convention and create an Eden in which each is again the keeper of one’s brother and sister.

Those interviewed in this book frequently refer to the voluntary nature of the associations that bring great reward. In crises, voluntary associations focus on survival. In complex crises, voluntary associations address natural disaster layered upon human conflict. Solnit’s case study approach to social resilience in disaster offers a useful model for investigation of peace building in turbulent times.

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1 Suedfeld, P. (1998). "Homo invictus: The indomitable species." Canadian

Psychology 38: 164-173. Antonovsky's best- known work on this subject is Antonovsky, A. (1987). Unraveling the mystery of health : how people manage stress and stay well. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.

2 Fischer, H. I. (1998). Response to Disaster: Fact Versus Fiction and Its Perpetuation. Lanham, MD, University Press of America.

3 Chenelly, J. R. (2005). Troops Begin Combat Operations in New Orleans. Army Times.

4 Quarantelli, E. L. (1986). Research findings on organizational behavior in disasters and their applicability in developing countries. Preliminary Paper #107, Disaster Research Center, University of Delaware, Newark, DE., Drabek, T., E. and D. McEntire, A. (2003). "Emergent phenomena and the sociology of disaster: Lessons, trends and opportunities from the research literature." Disaster Prevention and Management **12**(2): 97.

5 Gray, J. (1986). Liberalism. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.

Authors Biography

Karen Guttieri is a faculty member of the Global Public Policy Academic Group at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California. Her scholarship on military operations in civilian environments analyzes dynamics of transitions, strategic implications of them, and normative issues such as standards for civilian care. Current research seeks to engage in fresh ways the now standard debates around globalization and national security issues. Dr. Guttieri edits the Complex Operations Case Study Series. She has published on civil affairs, evaluative metrics, international law, cognitive psychology, and military learning. She co-edited *Interim Governments* - a book on transitional regimes. A native of California, Dr. Guttieri earned her doctorate in Political Science at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada. She joined the Naval Postgraduate School in 2001 after conducting post-doctoral research at Stanford's Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC).