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EXPLORING THE POPULAR CULTURE OF
DISASTER

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Exploring the Popular Culture of Disaster
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Exploring the Popular Culture of Disaster

During your weekend explorations around the beautiful city of Chicago, I am sure most of you saw the *art cows* currently displayed on street corner sidewalks. These metal structures have, for this summer, become part of the downtown landscape and have been caught forever on many a tourist's camera. On Friday, a group of us came across one *art cow* of particular interest to our discussion this evening. Outside a fire station not too far from the historic water tower, one cow had painted on it representations of the Great Chicago Fire.

This *disaster cow* is just one example of many representations of disasters that we encounter daily. The movie *Dante's Peak*, reality TV programs showing footage taken by tornado chasers, Y2K coffee mugs and comic strips, and the presently popular Allstate Insurance commercials tell us as a public what disasters are like. There are also, however, less mass forms of cultural products that convey social meaning and contribute to popular definitions of disaster situations that emerge in a community impacted by a disaster event—such as disaster t-shirts, calendars, and graffiti.

The question posed to the panel today was to reconcile what exactly the popular culture of disaster is, why we should study it, and how best we as sociologists interested in disasters can contribute to the area of study.

We, as disaster sociologists, are clearly not the first to debate how we are to construct a definition of popular culture and to struggle in our efforts to determine what products fall under its rubric. Popular culture theorists have defined the area in several opposing ways:

- 1) Culture that is mass produced
- 2) Culture stemming from the people, or bottom-up
- 3) Post-industrial, urban, American culture
- 4) Commercial culture
- 5) Products generally thought of on the lower end of the high-low binary
- 6) And finally, there are those that see all forms of post-industrial culture as popular.

Taking into account the discussions leading up to this panel, scholars seem to be suggesting a desire to study products that fall under several of these definitions. I will argue that it may be more useful for our purposes to concentrate on the *cultural studies of disasters*, and include in this area investigations of mass culture, emergent culture, folk culture by the populous including products of the everyday, and even treat elite cultural representations of emergency events in our research. Even though we might not be able to use a uniform theoretical framework to discuss these multiple manifestations of disaster culture, including all forms in our mandate allows us to also examine how their dynamic characteristics; that is, how, why, and to what effect do these material products move to and from one cultural form to another. For instance, how emergent products like t-shirts and folk stories become mass produced and consumed; and how canonical literature or religious representations such as the Biblical story of Noah and the flood can influence advertising and product marketing.

Certainly, the meanings conveyed by these social products are fundamental to our knowledge about disasters. Cultural texts, no matter their material form, tell us about the roles of government officials, who is vulnerable in disasters, they tell us about gender, race, age, and so on and particularly any changes in these representations over time. Cultural products are

important clues for us as researchers as to what different groups are experiencing throughout the disaster cycle and what issues the public defines as important. Most people learn about disasters and disaster behavior through mass or folk cultural products. The disaster movie genre, for example, provides its audience with directions about what actions are commendable in a crisis situation. Although a strong argument can be made that an audience recognizes the difference between appropriate social action in a movie versus appropriate behavior in real life, these representations are sometimes the only experience people have with disaster. The meanings these representations convey will therefore influence how we interpret real events around us. Clearly, it is important for us as sociologists to examine the influences these representation have on the public and how they compare to representations of what research tells us about disasters and social action. Furthermore, researchers could study how these products are in dialogue with each other—that is, inter-textual—and chart the similarities and differences between the various mediums of representation. For example, many of the current disaster movies tell us that the government hides information out of fear of panic and disruption of routine activities, and that a lone researcher or lay person will be the one to discover the potential hazard. They make clear statements about race and gender relations. Disaster folk songs, on the other hand, often present victims as brave heroes, include a verse about the grief of surviving loved ones, pay less attention to blaming individuals and organizations for the incident, and concentrate on people coming together in a time of need. Consider the movie *Dante's Peak*, in which the grandmother dies but the dog defies great odds and survives, or *Deep Impact*, in which anyone over a certain age is forbidden from the underground shelter. These movies are making fundamental statements about our value of the elderly and which segments of the population are dispensable.

Emergent products can also provide an alternative voice to the government or mass media

perspective of the disaster. Disaster graffiti and t-shirts may express frustration with the recovery process at the same time organizations are commending their recovery efforts.

Cultural studies is, of course, an interdisciplinary endeavor. I do think, however, that we as sociologists and disaster researchers have something unique to contribute to a dialogue on the cultural studies of disasters. The study of collective behavior has much to offer an examination of some emergent cultural products that appear after a disaster event. T-shirts and bumper stickers that read "I survived the flood of the century" or "I sweated out the 1999 heat wave" are often fads that disappear several months after the event. Collective behavior, social solidarity, narrative analysis, and presentation of self are several frameworks useful in analyzing disaster graffiti. We can study how symbolic interaction through cultural texts shapes meaning for those involved in a disaster and how the formulaic structure of disaster genres reflect social structure.

Moreover, cultural studies of disasters offers us other avenues for cross-cultural, comparative research. When I was home in Manitoba last winter, a new Canadian disaster movie was released. Although I have yet to see it, most of the reviews juxtaposed the movie with its American counterparts. These reviewers stated that instead of the Bruce-Willis-like heroes and the rioters often portrayed in US movies, the movie's characters were quintessentially Canadian—polite and apologetic until the end.

It is useful to consider Walter Benjamin's (1985) work of mechanical reproduction. Benjamin states (p. 223) that contemporary masses desire to "bring things close spatially and humanly" and attempt to "overcome the uniqueness of everyday reality by accepting its reproduction." That is, in the disaster context, we reproduce representation of disasters in formulaic ways to understand them better without having to live through them or challenging our pre-conceived understandings of them. If this is true, is the general public more likely to prepare

for and respond to disasters in ways similar to popular representations they see or ways consistent with what emergency organizations instruct them to? On the other hand, are products that emerge from a disaster more accurate than what emergency organizations, with their own political and organizational biases, convey?

Again the cultural study of disasters is ripe for research and I look forward to a more concentrated effort by sociologists to contribute to this fruitful area.

References

Benjamin, Walter (1985). *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Schocken Books: New York, pages 271-251.