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When I agreed to participate in this panel on disasters and popular culture, I did so with the anticipation that in the several months I would have to prepare, I would have some bright idea. I recall I did have a bright idea several months ago, but I forgot what it was. It obviously was not that bright. As time moved on, I became quite desperate since I did not think it appropriate to present a paper without an idea in it. Then it occurred to me that I might utilize ideas from books I was reading since authors who write books should have ideas. (Having authored several books, I do know that is a questionable but hopeful assumption) In any case, I did try to exploit others to give me ideas about the possibilities of disaster and popular culture.

The first book I will mention is Hans Blumenberg. Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence, (Cambridge, The MIT Press, 1997) Blumenberg, a German social theorist, has written extensively on myth and I had picked it up several times to read. He has a rather interesting argument. He argues that, in every culture, what escapes reality, life and history is handed over to long term work on images. And that one of the very persistent models is life as a sea voyage. "It encompasses the voyage out and the voyage home, the harbor and the foreign shore, anchorage and sailing the seas, storm and calm, distress at sea and shipwreck, barely surviving and merely looking on." (Introduction, p.1)

Blumenberg argues that, in antiquity, seafaring was seen as a transgression of natural boundaries that was likely to result in punishment. Man was not content with the natural domain but was willing to cross the boundaries of his natural needs. In the modern world, Blumenberg

argues, we are concerned with mastering nature. These ideas and those passions which drove

ships across the seas still can drive those in the modern world toward other treacherous shoals.

He warns that, in the contemporary world, we must be prepared to abandon whatever

patched-up craft that is currently bearing us, in order to leap into the waves and begin again and

again the task of constructing a new vessel. Those new images have to be constructed from the

materials at hand, perhaps even from the debris from earlier shipwrecks. Since Blumenberg uses

shipwreck as a paradigm of a metaphor for existence, there are two implications here. First, how

have disasters, other than shipwrecks, been used as metaphors in different times and cultures?

Second, one should be careful in limiting definitions of popular culture. Conceptual limits on the

definition of popular culture can become latent shipwrecks and restrict our course. At some

point, we may have to reconstruct our notions, using the debris of the past. So let's not make

rigid square boxes of definitions until we know that most of the elements of popular culture are

square.

The second book I have been reading is Francis Fukuyama's The Great Disruption:

Human Nature and the Reconstitution of Social Order. New York, The Free Press, 1999.

Fukuyama's books usually involve an analysis of broad social trends, in this case, the shift from a

society based on industrial production toward a society based on information and knowledge.

More specifically, his books provide ammunition for debates about the nature of civil society and

of civic engagement. Consequently, his analyses often become fodder for political debates about

the nature of the past and the possibilities for the future. There is no need here to engage in such

a debate but only to pick up one idea he often stresses- that there has been some erosion of trust

in significant institutions, such as the government, church, family etc. Actually in the current

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book, he makes the case that the great disruption may be moving in the direction of reconstituting a new social order.

It would seem that the notion of institutional trust or distrust might be a contributing variable to explain disaster graffiti. Are there more expressions of hostility toward government agencies or insurance companies now than 30 years ago? Are there differences in the ratio between instrumental vs. expressive messages in graffiti? Are the messages different between middle class vs. lower class neighborhoods and or ethnic neighborhoods? Does the availability of kin resources decrease institutional trust? Are there regional differences in institutional trust reflected in disaster graffiti? From a mental health view, is disaster graffiti an adaptive response?

In general, many disaster movies cast governmental agencies and helping institutions as bungling and incompetent. Disaster heros are usually individualistic and anti-bureaucratic. Does this vary over time? Is it a constant in different cultures? In any case, if institutional distrust is an important social factor, what does disaster popular culture tell us about its distribution in the population and how it might change over time?

The third book is John Barry, Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1997. This book centers on the massive Mississippi flood of 1927 which inundated perhaps 1,000,000 homes, placed over 300,000 in tent camps and had important political consequences both at the state and national levels. The focus here is much narrower. In part because of its location, much of the cost of the flood was born by the black population. in the area. Indication of some of those costs were reflected in the text of "blues" songs. Songs such as When the Levee Breaks, Tallahacie River Blues, High Water Everyone, Risin' High Water Blues, Terrible Flood Blues, Southern Flood Blues and Red Cross

Blues became a part of the blues tradition, Many of these songs reflecting the Afro American experience with the flood were recorded on "race" records which were produced at the time, so those texts have been preserved.

Since one of the consequences of the flood was the destruction of the old agricultural economy and the loss of jobs for the population of the area, many of the performers and those familiar with the songs became part of the great migration out of the area and into cities, like Chicago, which became a magnet for migration and new economic opportunities. But even in the new surroundings, the migrants retained their images of the effects of the flood and of their distrust of institutions, such as the Army and other governmental agencies as well as the Red Cross. The argument here is that the blues tradition in the U.S. is in large measure based on the experience of southern Afro-Americans in the tragic consequences of the 1927 floods. The text of many of the songs of that period reflect institutional distrust. That distrust was perhaps perpetuated and deepened by the urban migrant experience. To document this episode in American history would require understanding several dimensions of social history but the results would be a rather fascinating chapter in the relationship between disaster and popular culture.

It does occur to me that my recent choice of reading inadvertently has given attentional to manifestations of institutional distrust which might be revealed in post impact popular culture. However, not all victims see themselves as "victims". Some see themselves as lucky, "blessed", thankful but not as victims. It would seem that some images from popular culture emphasize what "victims" should be. Too, these images emphasize what personality types (or occupational types) do well in disaster, pointing to those who emerge as superhuman, heroic and innovative.

Such images are perhaps based less on actual disaster behavior than on normative models of desired behavior.

Finally, it does not occur to me that one of the major difficulties in delineating the relation of disaster to popular culture is the fact that "disaster" is so deeply embedded in traditional Western culture that the emergence of popular culture is difficult to identify- what seems familiar does not evoke surprise. That means that researchers must constantly be alert to the ways in which traditional cultural symbols are reworked and reappear with new faces and different clothing. Our lack of recognition is usually a result of our own lack of curiosity.

(Based on remarks on a panel "Exploring the Popular Culture of Disasters" International Research Committee On Disasters, Chicago, August 8, 1999)