

# Disasters and Social Reproduction

# Disasters and Social Reproduction

Crisis Response Between  
the State and Community

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## 2005: The Unclaimed Corpses

Racism [. . .] is the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.

— Ruth Wilson Gilmore

### THE CORPSE IN THE STREET

On 11 September 2005, two weeks after Hurricane Katrina inundated New Orleans, killing at least 1,836 people<sup>1</sup> and destroying much of the city infrastructure, the news network *Democracy Now* uncovered a scandal that aggravated New Orleanians well beyond the immediate impact of the hurricane: the scandal of dead bodies, rotting in the street. The live broadcast showed an unclaimed corpse, and, standing next to it, Malik Rahim, resident of the neighbourhood of Algiers and founder of the Common Ground network, engaged in the reconstruction of New Orleans. For days, Rahim had been asking city authorities, from the police to the army to the National Guard, to remove an unidentified dead body from the roadside. ‘The kids pass by and they’re seeing it,’ says Rahim:

His body been here for almost two weeks. Two weeks tomorrow [. . .] that this man’s body been lying here. And there’s no reason for it. Look where we at? I mean, it’s not flooded. There’s no reason for them to be—left that body right here like this [. . .] Every day, we ask them about coming and pick it up. And they refuse to come and pick it up. And you could see, it’s literally decomposing right here. Right out in the sun. Every day we sit up and we ask them about it. Because, I mean, this is close as you could get to tropical climate in America. And they won’t do anything with it. (cited in Goodman, 2015: min. 49:02)

With Algiers being one of the most heavily policed areas of New Orleans, each city authority in turn drives by the dead body, as if on command.

When confronted by the show's anchor Amy Goodman and her camera, they admit to knowing about the body but deny any responsibility in removing it from the site. The Algiers corpse was no isolated case. It later emerged that the retrieval of dead bodies started in earnest only on 9 September, a good ten days after Katrina struck New Orleans. With elderly people of colour in the African American neighbourhoods of the Lower Ninth Ward and Lakeview constituting the vast majority of disaster victims, black residents were left to reckon with the wreckage, with the smell of their decomposing neighbours infesting the tropical air.

Those same rotting bodies ignored by city authorities make manifest the systematic omission in scholarly attempts to make sense of events. While critical accounts have focused on how pre-existing social injustices made African American New Orleanians disproportionately vulnerable to hurricane damage (Laska and Morrow, 2006; Tierney, 2006; Brunsma, 2010), on how the federal rescue operations were influenced by racial prejudice (Tierney, Bevc et al., 2006; Russill and Lavin, 2011) or on how the Bush administration used the disaster to advance neoliberal pro-business reforms (Klein, 2007; Adams, 2012; Adams, 2013), a thorough analysis of disaster relief as a question of who clears out the dead remained conspicuously absent. Filling the analytic gap that was left behind when the waters retreated, this book is dedicated to answering that question. It argues that disasters are primarily a problem for social reproduction, understood, following political theorist Nancy Fraser, as 'the capacities available for birthing and raising children, caring for friends and family members, maintaining households and broader communities' (2017:21).

In this view, disaster relief becomes a form of reproductive labour, akin to childcare, elder care or gravedigging, and indeed often involving all three. When seen through the lens of social reproduction, disasters pose the question of who should perform these elemental tasks. This question touches on the fundamental distinction between the state and civil society,<sup>2</sup> thus challenging political life as we know it. This book argues that, far from being an exception, the handling of disaster victims by neighbours and relatives during Hurricane Katrina exemplifies a wider trend. In America today, disaster relief is increasingly shouldered by civil society, in an attempt to make up for the state's reluctance to deliver this essential service.

A thorough theorisation of relief work as a form of reproductive labour is as yet still missing. Little has been written on the structural

transformations of the disaster aid sector, including the changing roles of the state and civil society in the face of disaster. Instead, from the 1755 Lisbon earthquake to Hurricane Katrina, from 9/11 to the 2010 Haitian earthquake, the element of each disaster that researchers most often pick out and focus on is the disruptive, natural event. Between the metaphysical investigations of the Lisbon rubble and today's elaborate contingency planning, a disaster is commonly framed as an exceptional 'moment of interruption and novelty' (Aradau and van Munster, 2011:10) that ruptures an otherwise 'normal' state of affairs.

The New Orleans corpses alert us, however, to a different dimension of disaster. They highlight disasters' *longue durée*, epitomised by the dead body that simply remains, rotting and ignored by the state. They alert us to the structural issues of poverty and racism that create the conditions in which certain communities will not only be lastingly affected by disaster, but also made responsible for managing their own misfortune. The African American disaster victims rotting in the sun represent instances of 'death by class' and 'death by race', rather than the officially certified 'death by flood'. The difference between these views is neatly summed up in the pilot episode of David Simon's HBO series *Tremé*: 'What hit the Mississippi Gulf Coast was a natural disaster, a hurricane pure and simple. The flooding of New Orleans was a man-made catastrophe, a federal fuck-up of epic proportions' (cited in Holm, 2012:15).

This book seeks to illuminate the underlying dynamics of this and other federal 'fuck-ups'. Instead of seeing disaster as a 'natural' contingency, it proposes a fully socialised definition of disaster as a crisis-point, arising from the interaction between capitalism's ecological degradation and the organised neglect of the state. In this view, rather than being the hapless victims of natural calamity, communities suffer the combined effects of capitalism's unsustainable exploitation of nature and the interventionist depravation wrought by the state. In keeping with the ethos of social reproduction theory that 'displays an analytical irreverence to "visible facts" and privileges "process" instead' (Bhattacharya, 2017:2), I argue for an understanding of disaster not as a single moment, but as an unfolding, in which natural crises, do not create, but rather expose ongoing social crises. Nature is thus understood, not as a chaotic antagonist to the social world, but as the product of a complex nature-human relationship. In short, I contend that the origins of 'natural' disasters are never purely natural.

Whilst the critique of an overly literal understanding of the ‘natural’ causes of disaster has gained traction, in the age of anthropogenic climate change, within disaster studies and beyond (Quarantelli, 1978; Hewitt, 1983; Blaikie, Cannon et al., 1994), this scholarship remains plagued by a significant shortcoming. Question as it may the natural origins of disasters, it often relies, in turn, on a simplistic notion of the social, in which a disaster’s impact on a community is seen as a straightforward interface between a calamity and the social fabric, which is itself taken for granted (Solnit, 2009; Patterson, Weil and Patel, 2010; Twigg and Mosel, 2017). By relying on an ahistorical understanding of the social, this critique ignores how state policy, or lack thereof, has historically contoured the social realm. The effort to denaturalise nature, in other words, gives rise to a naturalising of society. By combining natural and social analysis in a thoroughgoing examination of the labour process, social reproduction theory offers us a way out of this dilemma, surpassing simplistic assumptions about the role of nature and society in disasters.

Social reproduction theory builds on Marxist analyses of the irreconcilability of capitalism’s ecologic and economic processes. Rather than positing humanity as distinctly separate from nature, Karl Marx argued for a ‘metabolic relation’ between the social and the natural, in which all human activity springs from nature and must ultimately return to it. The key to humanity’s interaction with nature is Marx’s notion of labour, understood as the process by which humans use nature’s resources to reproduce themselves. For Marx, labour is a transhistorical faculty, encompassing all ‘practical human activity’ (1984:111). In volume one of *Capital*, he writes:

Labour is, first of all, a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature [. . .] He sets in motion the natural forces which belong to his own body, his arms, legs, head and hands, in order to appropriate the materials of nature in a form adapted to his own needs. Through this movement he acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature [. . .] It [the labor process] is the universal condition for the metabolic interaction between man and nature, the everlasting nature-imposed condition of human existence. (1976:283, 290)

While labour itself may be the transhistorical mediation of humanity's relationship to nature, the specific conditions under which humans work the land and adapt it to their particular needs varies a great deal. The peculiarity of capitalist labour is that it uses nature's resources in an unsustainable way, producing what the sociologist John Bellamy Foster (1999) has called a 'metabolic rift' in the exchange between humans and nature.<sup>3</sup>

If in Marx's understanding of the labour process nature appears as dynamic and malleable, so then does society. As humans belabour nature, their interactions with the natural world also create the systems, institutions and structures that make up their social world. For social reproduction theorist Susan Ferguson, 'human labour or work – the practical, conscious interaction between people and the natural world of which they are part – creates the social processes and relations that, in turn, determine the processes and relations of that labour' (2020:16). In other words, from the perspective of social reproduction, there is nothing abstract about society. It does not exist on account of its institutions, its electoral system or its citizen rights. Instead, for this bottom-up approach, the social is constantly made and remade through reproductive acts of labour.

Marx's labour lens is important because it surpasses the facile binary between natural and social causes of calamity, allowing us to see disasters as the outcome of a risk-prone mode of production and reproduction. It widens our understanding of disaster by drawing attention to the systemic way in which our capitalist mode of production – at the same time as it produces our social and economic world – also produces our disasters. While today it has become more popular to think of capitalism as damaging to the environment, this is mostly done in the guise of a circumstantial critique of certain areas of capitalist production – such as fossil fuels or nuclear energy – rather than as a structural critique of the capitalist economy in its entirety.<sup>4</sup> Faithful to Marx's insight that 'men must be in position to live in order to be able to "make history"' (1970:48), this book argues that in the late twentieth century, our 'position to live' was cast into severe crisis, following the reshuffling of social reproductive tasks from the state sector to the market and the community.<sup>5</sup> The following is an attempt to make sense of this crisis through the changes it wrought onto disaster relief.

To date, most critical disaster research has focused on what has come to be known as 'disaster capitalism' (Klein, 2007; Loewenstein, 2017),

i.e. the ways in which the neoliberal state has privatised relief services to advance the business interests of commercial operators. This book is dedicated to the opposite question: How has the withdrawal of the state from emergency relief forced communities to perform disaster aid on a voluntary basis and free of charge? While the commercialisation of social reproductive services under austerity is well understood, the concomitant extension of the voluntary sector to perform those tasks, which both the state and the private sector have abandoned, has not been sufficiently studied. As we will see, many social-reproductive services during disasters resist commercialisation because they do not yield sufficient profits. These services skip the market and pass directly from the state to the community.

Yet when looking at the recent budgetary figures of the United States' Federal Emergency Management Agency FEMA, the withdrawal of the state from disaster relief is glaringly obvious. During the 2012 US presidential election, voters could choose between a 3% cut to the FEMA budget, proposed by the Obama camp and a 40% cut, suggested by the Romney camp (Khim, 2012: para. 4–8). More recently, President Trump redirected \$10 million from FEMA to the US immigration enforcement agency's detention program (Stanley-Becker, 2018: para.1). The trend is clear: as each year records a new spike in disasters (Guha-Sapir, Hoyois et al., 2015:4), budgetary cuts are implemented across the political spectrum. As with other reductions to public spending, the hole left behind by the axing of state budgets has been filled by private investors, seeking to capitalise on insurances and disaster aid, as well as by unpaid members from civil society, who perform formerly state-run services out of goodwill and free of charge.

Coextensive with this federal withdrawal, scientific studies of disaster began to flaunt the emergent and self-organising potential of civil society to become resilient to disasters and survive alone and without the state during emergencies (Hilhorst, 2004; Wisner, Gaillard et al., 2012; Kelman, Burns et al., 2015). This book challenges the current state of disaster research by arguing that most disaster studies have ignored the economic dimension of the 'resilience turn'. The consequence of this omission is that the interdisciplinary field fails to grasp the systematic reconfiguration of social life that has taken place in the last decades of the twentieth century.

I contend that developing an account that is sensitive to the disastrous effects that the state's withdrawal from emergency relief has had

on communities requires coupling the notion of disaster with that of social reproduction. This coupling allows us to de-escalate disasters; to see them not as shock events but as an everyday problem of reproductive labour. Concretely, I argue that the reshuffling of disaster relief from the sphere of the federal state to that of civil society unfolded as a crucial response to the economic crisis of the 1970s. It was then, after a period of incremental state involvement, beginning with the 1803 Portsmouth fire (Farber and Chen, 2006:102),<sup>6</sup> that the federal government withdrew from the provision of disaster aid, in an attempt to lower the state deficit.

### THE SHORT AMERICAN CENTURY

Focusing on what I call the ‘short American century’ between 1920 and 2020, this book develops a historical and theoretical account that maps the relationship between the federal state and disaster relief onto the unfolding economic crisis. In four extensive case studies and a shorter postscript, I trace disaster aid’s pendulum swing from becoming a federal responsibility in the 1930s in response to the Great Depression to becoming increasingly cast off in the 1970s in response to mid-century stagflation.<sup>7</sup> After examining the gradual integration of disaster aid into the remit of state-led social reproduction during the New Deal, I argue that the US government reacted to the decline in its productive power by resolutely scaling back social spending in all areas from housing to disaster relief, creating a situation of austerity,<sup>8</sup> in which diverse forms of reproductive labour increasingly have to be carried out by the people themselves. After decades of steadily growing investment into federal disaster aid, and despite a strong increase in natural and man-made disasters, the state sector is today increasingly withdrawing from the provision of relief services.

Since the 1970s, we are thus confronted with the following double-movement, relative to the spheres of the state and civil society. On the state level, a movement of integration, in which formerly specialist authority on disasters is relinquished and the vernacular skills and capacities of the people are drawn on during calamities. On the social level, a moment of exclusion, indexed by cuts to social spending and the exponentially rising unemployment that raised the number of so-called surplus populations, those permanently excluded from wage labour, to staggering dimensions. The inclusion on the level of participatory policies is thus undergirded by a growing and profound exclusion of

people from the basic possibility of reproducing themselves. Let me reformulate this development as a hypothesis regarding emergencies today: Since the economic crisis of the 1970s, disasters have served as occasions that absorb the reproductive labour of surplus populations as unwaged inputs, allowing the US state to cut back on social spending. While this development is a disaster for civil society, since it exposes communities to fend for themselves without support by the state, it is also, potentially, a disaster for the state, since austerity at the same time creates the forces that may contest it.

The following case studies seek to elucidate this dialectic. They show how political struggles around disasters are fundamentally struggles around the spheres and responsibilities of the public and the private, the waged and the unwaged, the state and the people. They thus impact the very structural foundations of social life, as we know it. Concretely, they make visible the double movement of the inclusion of citizens into disaster relief and the coextensive exclusion of populations from the possibility of reproducing themselves, while documenting their struggles to maintain their lives and livelihoods. Therefore, as much as this is a book about disasters, it is also a book about how the left grappled with the politics of social reproduction throughout the twentieth century. Through the lens of disaster aid, it charts the trajectory of social reproduction from its marginalisation by the official labour politics of the 1930s, to its centrality in the revolutionary movements of the 1970s and in the new millennium's quest for revolutionary commons.<sup>9</sup>

Taking disaster relief as its focal point, the book joins in the unfinished 'process of rewriting a general narrative of capitalism, class composition and state formation in the United States from the perspective of social reproduction' (Mohandesi and Teitelman, 2017:38). Posing the question of socialist politics throughout, I argue that in the twentieth century, social reproduction became a dominant arena in which socialists struggled with capital and the state over the value of life. Contrary to industrial antagonisms, the state emerged as a major player on this new battleground by first extending state-led social reproduction initiatives under the New Deal and then retracting them under 1970s stagflation and 2000s austerity. The ensuing crisis in reproduction forced the left to constantly adapt its tactics; an endeavour in which it sometimes succeeded and sometimes failed. The following chapters illustrate the reproductive antagonism between capital, labour and the state through the prism of disaster relief.

The book begins in the 1920s with the integration of disaster relief into state-led social reproduction during President Roosevelt's New Deal and in the immediate post-war era. I argue that federalising disaster aid served the purpose of creating employment in an ailing economic environment, as well as generating opportunities for infrastructural development. By examining the federal state's handling of the early twentieth century hurricane season in Florida, I show how the presence of a strong Keynesian state initially formed the relation between the state and civil society into a temporary union of shared interests.

Following the historical arc into the 1960s, the second comprehensive case study examines the mid-century watershed in the administration of American social reproduction. While, following desegregation, the federal state extended its welfare profile to formerly marginalised communities under Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society programmes, militant social movements began providing their own model of community-led social reproduction in response to the state's failure to live up to its promises of employment and prosperity. This chapter examines how the self-organised social reproduction initiatives of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense fostered community life in conditions of endemic violence. While this violence was structural and not event-bound, defying spectacular notions of disaster, its responses similarly defy vulnerability studies' schema of adaptation and resilience. The chapter examines the spread of a politics of social reproduction on both sides of the state/civil society divide, analysing how the terrain of social reproduction gradually replaced industrial labour struggles as a primary arena of political antagonism.

The third case study moves into the 1990s and travels East to examine the 1995 Chicago Heat Wave. Reviewing disaster scholars' singling out of Chicago's high crime rate as a primary vulnerability factor, I firstly show how it was not high rates of crime, but the Clinton era austerity politics that contributed to the disproportionately high death rate of senior citizens during the heat wave. Arguing that the rollback of state-led social reproduction in the 1990s created a reproductive vacuum that was not filled by community-run initiatives, I secondly demonstrate that the 1990s rise in crime is a symptom of this gap in social reproduction, making high levels of senior mortality and youth crime the two defining poles of the 1990s reproductive crisis.

The fourth case study addresses the role of community-based disaster relief during the 2012 Superstorm Sandy. Since the vulnerability turn of

the 1970s, disaster studies has vocally advanced citizen participation as a powerful tool for building community resilience (Bankoff, Frerks et al., 2004; Cutter, Ahern et al., 2013; Tierney, 2014; Patel, Rogers et al., 2017). Much is made of the field's turn away from technocratic state authority and its affirmation of local, embedded and decentralised aid practices in the fight against disasters. The case study complicates this progressive narrative. It examines the exemplary case of Occupy Sandy, a large-scale, self-organised relief initiative, launched by the social movement Occupy Wall Street in response to Superstorm Sandy. It firstly discusses Occupy Sandy's presence as the most successful relief provider on the ground, far surpassing the efficacy of the Red Cross and of FEMA. Secondly, it reflects on the counter-intuitive endorsement of the group by the government agency, the Department of Homeland Security. Situating the bizarre proximity between anarchist social movement and governmental mega-institution in the context of the continued withdrawal of the US state from the provision of social reproductive services, the chapter finally reflects on the political currency of vulnerability and its role within a new configuration between the state and civil society in times of austerity.

In a concluding postscript, I turn to the current Coronavirus crisis to examine the relationship between the federal state and the many mutual aid initiatives that emerged in response to the pandemic. Marshalling a social reproduction approach, I firstly argue that, confronted with the state's systemic failure to prepare for and mitigate the consequences of the virus outbreak, mutual aid was called upon to fill the gaps in the state's service provision. Secondly, by situating disaster vulnerability within the intergenerational transmission of health risks, I show how a social reproduction framework reveals the deep-seated socio-economic factors that led African Americans to experience elevated vulnerability to Covid-19. Thirdly, I examine how the recent wave of political protests in the US addressed the layered crises of both Coronavirus vulnerability and police violence, marking out social reproduction as the arena of current and future class and race conflict.

Before beginning the task of mapping the changes to the relief sector, let us ask why disasters are so often understood as exceptional moments, rather than as structural conditions. Asking this allows us to measure the urgency of a social reproduction approach to disasters.