



# The Sociology of Complex Emergencies

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‘Complex emergencies’ – disasters caused by natural events (famines, tsunami, earthquakes, forest fires, landslides, flooding) or through socially engineered problems (such as wars, pogroms, ecological devastation and the forced migrations of peoples) are an alarming, often tragic, but seemingly permanent part of human life and have been since history was first recorded or can now be recovered through archaeological techniques. What has possibly changed in more recent years has been the frequency and intensity of such events, their increasingly interrelated nature and the complexity of both the problems themselves and of the responses to them – by the state, by civil society, by individuals and by the ecosystem itself. The perception of the scale and unmanageability of such problems has given rise to a not inconsiderable sociological industry – that of risk analysis (Beck 1992, Douglas 1994), reflecting the insight that the problems themselves have become greater, seemingly intractable, outside of the competence of (or indeed caused by) politicians and “experts” and dangerous in that complete knowledge of the processes leading to risks (climate change, nuclear accidents, hidden pollutants in the environment, new diseases or the unexpected revival of old ones) is unobtainable or certainly inaccessible by the average citizen. Environmental degradation has now become a major concern, while inconclusive or dilatory argument continues as to its causes and solutions. Despite the high level of general civilisational and technological ‘progress’, it is estimated that the world has never once been free of a war somewhere on the globe at

any time in this century or the last. Mass involuntary movements of people as a result of these wars, famine (often occasioned by those wars themselves), ‘natural’ disaster (frequently with a human induced cause such as deforestation), or environmental pressures have become a major and tragic feature of modern history. While the actual number or intensity of natural disasters has almost certainly not increased, their impact has because of the rising density of human populations and the complexity of social, economic, technological and political networks that now link human communities into what is effectively a single global system. With the spread of telecommunications, knowledge of such crises is no longer localised but is disseminated rapidly, creating involvement at some level (including the psychic and emotional) of almost everybody within that global system who has access to information, which means now very many of us.

The study of disasters of large scale – ‘complex emergencies’ – can proceed at three levels – that of causes (political, economic, social, environmental or as the result of human interference with the ecosystem); of responses (policies, emergency humanitarian aid, delivery systems and rehabilitation); and/or of the rather underdeveloped analysis of human responses to complex emergencies and their effects on social organisation, culture and psychic life. This paper will concentrate, after dealing with some essential preliminaries, on the social and cultural consequences of complex disasters, and on the practical lessons for rehabilitative efforts that can be learnt from these. The premise here is that, even in the cases of those emer-

gencies that cannot be avoided (and many politically or economically engendered ones clearly can be), a fuller understanding of their social consequences and of the human responses to such massive disruptions of 'normalcy' leads to far better efforts at aid and rehabilitation, especially by grasping the far deeper consequences of such dramatic disruptions that go much further than the meeting of only physical needs.

In the paper, I will proceed as follows: a survey of the types of complex emergencies and of the key elements that enter into an understanding of such disasters; an examination of the major consequences that flow from these various types of emergencies; a consideration of the nature of both immediate aid and long term rehabilitation of the victims of such emergencies; an analysis of the role of the state, international organisations and non-governmental agencies in relief efforts; and finally an attempt to sketch out some of the wider issues involved in developing a deeper and more systematic theory of social responses to complex emergencies.

## A Typology of Complex Emergencies

A 'complex emergency' is the term now given to events of two main types: large scale natural disasters or humanly induced disasters stemming usually from wars. They are complex precisely because of their scale, the number of secondary problems that they give rise to (food shortages, sanitary provisions, health issues, and shelter being common ones), and the range and size of necessary or desirable rehabilitative efforts. Recent food crises in Africa for instance (e.g. Somalia and the Sudan) have been the result of the complex interaction of politics (civil war), human impact on the ecosystem (promoting desertification through overgrazing) and climatic factors (especially drought). The responses to such crises have also been complex, involving a wide range of international agencies from within the UN system such as the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, the World Health Organization, UNICEF, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, agencies within the local governments, and a wide range of international NGOs (in Kosovo at one

point it was estimated that over 300 NGOs were active at the same time). International news agencies, individuals, religious organisations, shipping and air freight lines and even the militaries of a number of countries have also been involved at a number of levels. An emergency is 'complex' because of its size, its usually multiple causes, the social, economic and infrastructural effects of the disaster, the range of responses necessary to deal with it, and the depth of the problems that it creates for its human victims and the larger biosphere and its non-human inhabitants.

While such emergencies clearly have a range of visible effects – devastation of property and the physical landscape and infrastructure, movements of population, massive financial requirements to bring about reconstruction, immediate need for food, shelter and medical assistance – to name some of the chief ones, they also have other, less immediately visible, consequences. At an institutional level these include the fact that, being complex and large scale, they bring about the interaction of many agencies of often very different types and operating styles which under normal circumstances would have little or no contact with each other. NGOs may be required to deal professionally with both international agencies and with local governments, local bureaucrats with foreign ones, and relief agencies with military organisations. At another level altogether, complex emergencies bring about a range of often invisible or ignored effects on local social structures, family life and kinship patterns and on psychological and emotional security, to name some of the principal ones, and it is this last level that will concern us here.

Complex emergencies themselves can, as suggested earlier, be classified into certain main groups. The first of these is natural disasters, including earthquakes, famine, drought and floods. While in terms of primary causes these may all be natural (although these are often aided and abetted by human interference in ecosystems, poor building standards, bad urban planning or failure to create or maintain defensive infrastructures), their consequences vary considerably depending on where they occur and the availability of resources and delivery systems to bring immediate relief as well as to mobilise longer term rehabilitation

efforts. Earthquakes in densely populated urban areas (San Francisco, Kobe) have devastating effects proportionally greater than those occurring in rural areas, although poor access and in the case of the earthquake in Sichuan province in Western China in 2008 where substandard buildings collapsed leading to a high casualty rate, can both heighten the disaster and make emergency relief hard to deliver. The second category are those clearly caused by human actions – war, situations arising where ethnic violence is endemic (Rwanda, the former Yugoslavia), the mass displacement of peoples (e.g. of Indians from Burma and Uganda), internal politics or ideological factors (Stalinist and later Maoist collectivisation, Khmer Rouge policies towards both national minorities and their own population), and technological failures, of which the Chernobyl nuclear meltdown and the Bhopal chemical plant disaster are amongst the best known and were amongst the most humanly and environmentally damaging). The third, which clearly overlaps with the first, are problems that involve or emerge from human interference in the ecosystem and the pursuit of non-sustainable development. These include forced ecological changes through over-urbanisation, flooding and global warming caused by deforestation, the effects of pollution on humans and the natural habitat, desertification, epidemics and spread of infectious or antibiotic resistant diseases. Many complex emergencies straddle the boundary between the natural and the human, famines being a very good example. In many cases of famine it is not crop failure or climatic conditions that alone are the cause, but very directly human factors including deforestation, war, and failure to create or use existing emergency stockpiles or food delivery systems are almost always also implicated (Sen 1987, Cahill 1982). In discussing the social consequences of complex disasters and the ways in which rehabilitation can best be managed, it is important to remember this multiple and overlapping causality and to note that many apparently “natural” disasters might be avoidable if their actually complex causes are more fully understood and the role of human factors taken more fully into consideration (Wijkman and Timberlake 1984).

## The Socio-Cultural Consequences of Complex Emergencies

The notion of socio-cultural consequences in this context will be taken to mean collective factors on the one hand such as sociological, economic effects and their interrelation, and also the more immediately ‘human’ effects including the emotional and psychological results of the massive disruption of normal everyday life, often violently, suddenly or in unimaginable ways impossible to prepare for (as with Holocaust victims). I will start by listing the broad categories of such consequences and will then develop a few of them in greater detail. As with the causes of complex emergencies, it is again important to remember the interrelated nature of these categories in actual practice and experience. The physical loss of a home and the material possessions that it contains in a natural or humanly induced disaster can also mean the loss of the locus of memories, the destruction of the site of family life, and the collapse of a psychological relationship to a place, as much as it means the loss of shelter, clothes and utensils. Response to any emergency, while there are undoubtedly universal features, is also cultural. The same objective conditions can create different responses and these need to be taken into account both in identifying social responses and in considering best practices in effective rehabilitation and relief. The following listing should consequently be seen as a fairly abstract set of categories, to be filled in practice with specific cultural and local content as appropriate to individual cases.

### 1. *Death.*

Complex emergencies almost always involve the loss of life, the deaths of individuals, families, pets, or, in the cases of genocidal emergencies, of whole social or ethnic groups. This tragic fact has many consequences – loss of population, health problems arising where proper facilities for the disposal of the dead are not available, the immeasurable personal grief and trauma on the part of survivors who may have witnessed or experienced horrific sights themselves, and cultural stresses such as inappropriate burial or cremation (or lack of these) which do not meet the religious

requirements or expectations of the individuals or group in question. Complex emergencies tend to bring sudden and catastrophic loss with few social or cultural resources that can be mobilised as they would normally be to cope with death, mourning and funeral arrangements. Rehabilitation efforts need to recognise profoundly that families will have been shattered and relationships severely and abruptly disrupted and that in light of this pre-emergency conditions of reproduction, socialisation, and economic life may not be able to be reestablished and that long term feelings of loss and even guilt will accompany survivors into their post-emergency lives, which necessarily cannot ever be the same as before the crisis (Lifton 1979).

## *2. Health.*

One of the primary and initial consequences of complex emergencies is the breakdown of previously available medical services because of the destruction of facilities and damage to equipment, and the rapid spread of infectious diseases on the other as a result of deaths, breakdown of water and sanitation facilities, lack of hygiene in relief camps or transit facilities, and the uncontrolled proliferation of disease carrying animals such as rats. Those who survive the initial stages of the crisis usually continue to be at risk in the secondary stages, especially those who are already vulnerable because of their age or pre-existing medical conditions. Until such facilities to which many of us are now accustomed break down, it is difficult to grasp how far the medicalisation of modern societies has gone, and how much of daily and family life and consumption revolves around health or health related practices (Illich 1990, Coleridge 2001).

## *3. Food.*

Complex emergencies usually involve food crises, either because the emergency itself is a food crisis (as in famines), or because the emergency conditions themselves destroy the basis of food production and distribution (often the case in civil wars as in the southern Sudan or in Cambodia where military operations and land-mining made cultivation difficult or impossible).

In either case a major problem for relief agencies is the delivery of food in sufficient quantities and of sufficient qualities to avert starvation and further secondary emergencies such as deaths, threats to health, forced migration and extensive damage to the ecosystem, and also to prevent such food aid as is available from being appropriated by the feuding militaries or militias that are the cause of the initial problem. Studies of the daily life of emergency victims, such as civil-war displaced refugees shows, not surprisingly, that much of their energy (which is almost certainly low) and time goes into food acquiring activities, and social life correspondingly becomes organised around basic survival and other social activities are consequently inevitably neglected (Jackson 2005, chaps. 1,3, 4 and 9).

## *4. Shelter and property.*

Shelter is a basic and essential human need in all climates (RIHED 1982), not only for physiological reasons, but has deep emotional ties as well. Consequently, its destruction brings with it a range of problems. These include of course the obvious physical ones of the provision of emergency shelter, and the infrastructural costs of rebuilding adequate housing as a major part of long term reconstruction costs together with the attendant access roads, drainage, sanitation, water, electricity and transportation. But they also include the psychological costs that come with the involuntary destruction of a familiar habitat and the personal possessions that it contains. It is well known that identity is very much tied up for many people with things which encapsulate memories, provide them with a sense of place and rootedness and connectedness to particular places, the loss of which is psychologically and aesthetically damaging to those cut off from familiar places, landscapes and 'memoryscapes' (Hiss 1990). The destruction or loss of objects invested with social and cultural (rather than monetary) value – heirlooms, antiques, gifts from significant others, childhood toys, photographs, the house or shelter itself – can create depression, sense of loss and mourning, identity confusion, alienation, stress and feelings of rootlessness, which in turn

contribute to physical and psychological health problems and even suicidal behaviour (Dittmar 1992). Loss of familiar shelter is a traumatic experience for most people, and it is no surprise that in older human needs approaches to development, it is very high indeed on all lists of human desiderata (Dube 1984). While property embodied in houses or personal objects of significance is a major source of identity and security, it also provides the basis for many forms of social relationships – for example, it establishes authority over territory, creates social status, provides the basis for local political networks, and of course is a primary resource and basis for material security in itself. Destruction of property not only represents personal loss, but also undermines a whole range of social, political and economic networks and constitutes the wiping out of savings, capital and, in many cultures, inalienable resources such as tribal lands, hunting or gathering territory, or sites intimately connected with the religious life of the group, which cannot easily be reassembled or reconstructed after their destruction. Aboriginal land disputes over mining, dam construction, agribusiness expansion, new airports on tribal land and the like, and the corresponding conflicts between native law and the abstract law of the state represent the same mechanisms at work, although often in the context of supposedly ‘democratic’ societies in which appropriation takes ‘rational’ forms rather than the extreme and sudden crises of emergencies, but with the same kinds of long term results (Melkevik 2004).

### 5. Kinship patterns.

Every culture has patterns of everyday family life which for most members of that society will frame and give meaning to normal existence, even in such apparently trivial ways as creating daily routines and regular meals. These are rarely recognised as significant until they are disrupted. Yet the structural patterns of kinship are recognised in many if not all societies as the most basic organising patterns of life. These are frequently destroyed in complex emergencies through the deaths of members of the kinship network, migration, separation, destruction of the

family home or disruption of communal economic activities. Social isolation, loss of support (physical and emotional), breakdown of essential economic functions and subsistence activities, collapse of normal socialisation patterns and child care facilities are all common consequences of the impact of complex emergencies on kinship patterns. Where kinship is organised in small groups such as nuclear families, the loss of key family members can be catastrophic for the functioning, continuation or viability of the group and of course is emotionally devastating for the remaining members. Where it is organised on larger corporate bases, such as lineages, support for individual members may be easier to provide, but the continuity of the group as such can be threatened, for example by removal from ancestral lands with which the group is symbolically identified and from which brides are taken and where the dead are buried. Many anthropological studies support this and the world is now full of displaced peoples, many of them still deeply symbolically attached to their real or imaginary homelands (Clammer 1992, Gold 1987).

### 6. Insecurity and violence.

Normal social life implies and indeed requires a certain level of security, both physical and psychological and ideally financial, yet it is these very fundamental securities that are destroyed or seriously disrupted during complex emergencies. Life itself becomes uncertain in situations where state violence against the individual is commonplace, where war and conflict provide the context of everyday life, where crime rates soar and where fears of rape, murder, mutilation or other extreme abuses are all too justified. Such emergencies bring with them the breakdown of civil authority, in which either no protection is available from those authorities, or the ‘authorities’ are themselves the cause of insecurity. Such chronic or acute insecurity radically and negatively transforms and undermines the basis of any kind of normal everyday life, which in turn intensifies the breakdown of family life, worsens problems of food supply, health and the provision of shelter and makes basic economic activities difficult or impossible. While such situations are

usually associated with acute emergencies, many parts of the world face such situations of a chronic basis – Iraq, and Afghanistan as a result of war, parts of urban Brazil as the result of endemic violence experienced on an everyday basis as a result of poverty, drug related conflicts and police brutality (Scheper-Hughes 1992).

### 7. *Stress and Ontological Insecurity.*

In a number of fields, the reality of the seemingly informal and not very scientific concept of stress is being more and more widely accepted, in areas as diverse as medicine and environmental psychology. Complex emergencies bring with them a huge range of often extreme stressors: anxiety, grief, insecurity, short term and long term fears about the future, the stresses that inevitably accompanies relocation, loss of possessions, health and food problems, and identity confusion. Such insecurities can in turn fuel further forms of family and community breakdown, and very importantly, can destroy trust and make future psychological adjustment to post-trauma situations in which objective security may well be present very difficult, as long term studies of Holocaust survivors for example have demonstrated. In many ways, the ability of humans to absorb extraordinary levels of stress is remarkable, except that the situations that are the cause of the stress have to be assimilated in some form or another, often in the forms of fear, nightmares, guilt at having survived, psychological hardness, denial, suicide long after the triggering events have receded into the distant past, persistent health problems, social exclusion and difficulty in forming relationships (for two classic case studies, one of concentration camp inmates and survivors and the other of Atomic bomb survivors [see, respectively Bettelheim 1986 and Lifton 1967]). These stresses are not then merely external – they have a range of effects and implications that can perhaps best be called existential. They create deep questions of the meaning of life, of the reasons for suffering, of the existence of God, of human aggression – in other words, a whole range of issues that raise fundamental ontological questions for the victims and sometimes, perhaps later, for the perpetrators themselves. While ontological issues frequently arise in inter-cultural disputes over land, grazing, fishing rights and the con-

nections between identity and place (Clammer, Poirier and Schwimmer 2004), they also arise in intra-cultural conflicts, especially in contexts of traumatic experiences inflicted by one group on another within what was assumed (usually by the victims) to have been a homogeneous and reasonably just social order (for examples see Rupesinghe 1988).

### 8. *Uprootedness and exile.*

We often forget how territorial most humans are. They tend to be strongly attached to places and spaces, to colonise them with their cultural artifacts and subjective attachments and, as we have seen, to suffer stress and even grief if uprooted from them. Complex emergencies often bring about the destruction of such human habitats with their deep subjective associations through natural causes, war, and other causes, leading to the forced migrations of peoples. Such migrants – refugees in fact – face not only the dislocation of being severed from their familiar places, but then must face the problems of adapting to new spaces, sometimes already inhabited by peoples who have themselves invested those places with meanings (the Israeli/Palestinian conflict being a classic case in point). Unfamiliarity with the new place and its ecology and climate, breakdown of traditional family and social patterns, insecurity and worries about personal safety and the difficulty of investing new places with subjective meaning all tend to occur together or in very rapid succession in complex emergencies, causing not only acute distress, but also a sense of powerlessness and lack of control over the new environment (Newman and Van Selm 2006).

### 9. *Demographic patterns.*

Particularly where deaths are extensive through the primary disaster or through epidemics following, and/or where substantial displacement of people takes place, widespread demographic changes may occur. Fertility rates are likely to change, sex ratios may alter considerably (more men than women tending to die during wars for example) and the number of live births or of children surviving beyond the first year of life may substantially decline, yet paradoxically ‘baby booms’ often follow wars or natural disasters.

Relatively small short term demographic changes can have much longer social effects, for example on the future requirements of places in educational institutions or in the number of widows requiring economic assistance years after the primary disaster.

### 10. Human rights.

Complex emergencies stemming from human agency are often accompanied by human rights abuses either of an acute kind – rape, genocide, forced relocation, destruction of property, or of chronic ones such as accompanying or subsequent failure to provide medical or educational facilities deprivation of political, economic or legal rights, or exposure to continuing physical insecurity (Horowitz and Schnabel 2005).

In setting out these broad categories, three factors should be kept constantly in mind. The first is that they are all in practice closely related. In a relatively traditional society (e.g. Rwanda), breakdown of social groups means collapse of trust, of kinship groups and of economic networks that were to a great extent reliant on kinship and non-kin social relationships for labor and marketing. Loss of such networks and of property can lead to loss of self-image and esteem which can translate into depression and hence suppressed immunological response leading to illness in the long term. The second is the question of the relationship between short and long term consequences of complex emergencies. What happens in the short term can have very long term, indeed permanent, effects on the possibilities of successful rehabilitation and this is in large part because the effect of natural or humanly induced disasters are as much social, cultural and psychological as they are physical or material. The third is that it is important to remember that the victims of disasters are rarely passive observers of their own fates. While in the initial stages of a disaster shock may paralyse effective response, this inability to respond is rarely long term. Complex emergencies are not only 'problems' for states and international agencies to solve. They also bring out highly creative and humane responses in their victims, and the tests of ingenuity and courage that are involved produce remarkable cases of heroism and endurance. Indeed,

without such creative responses, rehabilitative efforts coming from the outside, however well intended or planned, will never succeed in transforming the inner relationship of the victims to the circumstances which have so radically altered their lives forever.

### Issues of Rehabilitation and Relief

Rehabilitation in the context of complex emergencies must consequently mean several different things. Immediate relief in the form of emergency food aid, shelter, medical services, rescue and security is of course the first priority, needing to be rapidly delivered and involving a wide range of agencies such as the military, police, fire and ambulance services and civil defense forces. As many and often tragic examples have demonstrated, such assistance is not very effective unless it is delivered promptly, administered effectively and fairly, and is of sufficient magnitude to meet the needs of the emergency. Of course a major problem is the ability to anticipate such emergencies and to ensure that the services likely to be mobilised are properly trained and equipped, and to foresee the extent of chaos, panic, breakdown of communications and competing demands for limited resources that actually accompany real disasters. Rehabilitation or response also means the creation of mechanisms for coping with the second stage of the crisis, typically including restoration of power, water and sewerage facilities, construction of temporary housing, ensuring continuation of food supply and the restoring of functions to essential services such as hospitals, transportation and communications. Social requirements are also involved here – proper burial of the dead, helping survivors to find relatives, and coping with children separated from their families. Long term rehabilitation of course includes the reconstruction of damaged or destroyed physical infrastructure, and most complexly, the restoration of relatively normal social functioning and the psychological rehabilitation of survivors. This last is probably the least understood and in many ways the hardest to manage, since such rehabilitation involves such sensitive and delicate matters as helping survivors cope with grief over the deaths of family members or friends, with the loss of homes and

possessions and with the radical disruption of everyday life and the familiar activities that so effectively but usually unconsciously structure it. In some cases – for rape victims, for children suddenly orphaned – very specific and long term forms of help are necessary.

Yet few social services, even in the most developed countries with the most sophisticated theories of social work, are actually equipped to deal with such needs on a large scale. Most social work education in universities, for example, does not contain training for dealing with such issues and surprisingly little research has been done on the specific needs of victims of complex emergencies of different types. It is here of course that the role of the state, of international agencies and of NGOs is crucial. This perhaps rather obvious issue raises some interesting issues in the sociology of globalisation. Arthur Kleinman and Joan Kleinman have written tellingly (Kleinman and Kleinman 1997) of the appropriation of images of suffering in contemporary globalised society, largely by means of the equally globalised media and the effects this has on the viewing of the suffering of others from a distance. In fact, suffering in this context has some strange characteristics – it is reported to us, often graphically, and yet often there is little that we can do as individuals to respond. And for all the talk about the ‘world system’ there is often an agonisingly slow or even non-existent response on the part of the perhaps equally non-existent ‘world community’ to disasters and atrocities in parts of the globe not immediately or obviously connected to our own. It has fallen as a result to the few genuinely international organisations (the UN system, the International Red Cross/Red Crescent) and the other large non-governmental and truly international relief agencies (Oxfam, Medecins Sans Frontiers, World Vision, Save the Children) and their many smaller colleagues to intervene in those cases where it is necessary to supplement local state agencies by mobilising aid and providing the specialised services which local governments cannot do, and deal with the multinational aspects of some crises (where refugees are involved, for example), in some cases to actively restrain governments from excessive actions that are to the detriment of their cit-

izens, and to generally facilitate post-crisis return to normalcy and political stability. Some such activities can only be carried out by international agencies with global mandates, yet in reality there are few of these – UNHCR and UNICEF perhaps, and some sections of the FAO and the WHO within the UN system – that are in any way equipped intellectually or practically to deal with, monitor or research complex emergencies and their long term consequences. International response, governed as it is all too frequently by political considerations, is consequently still piecemeal and uncoordinated and some types of emerging problems such as ethnic or religious violence and terrorism almost entirely escape the net of existing international institutions.

In practice it has often been NGOs that have proved in the short term to be most efficient – small enough to be flexible, focused in the services that they can deliver (food aid, medical assistance, etc.) and sufficiently independent of both local governments and large scale international organisations to be innovative in methodology. NGOs provide in many cases not only flexible relief services, but because of their independence can be sources of useful feedback and critique for their larger and more bureaucratic counterparts in international and governmental organisations. At the same time, NGOs too have their drawbacks – often too small to deliver large scale aid, too competitive with one another in the field rather than joining hands to provide a common cooperative front, often inexperienced in the local cultures and languages in the places where they must operate, with little skill in the social and cultural analysis that they need to operate effectively, and with often a short time frame of emergency humanitarian aid rather than the long haul job of psychological and cultural reconstruction.

### **The Applied Anthropology of Disasters**

The field of applied anthropology has expanded greatly, in particular in the area of applying anthropological insights to development studies (for example, Olivier de Sardan 2005). This has occurred in a



number of ways – through understanding the value systems of people in terms of their desired life styles, agricultural preferences and responses to social change, through exploring their indigenous technologies, farming techniques, ethnosciences and relationship to the environment (Sillitoe, Bicker and Pottier 2002), and in a few cases, exploring their responses to catastrophic changes brought about either by human agency – the flooding of their habitat and hunting grounds by big scale hydroelectric schemes for example, or because of natural disasters – volcanic eruptions being a well documented example (Dove 1988). In this context, and drawing on the accumulated ethnographic knowledge of anthropology, it is reasonable to suppose that a similar exercise can be carried out in relation to the cultural responses of peoples to complex emergencies, and in which a number of elements would be present.

There are many formal similarities between the social and cultural dislocation caused by natural and by humanly engineered disasters, but there are also significant differences in the ways in which such events are interpreted by their victims. Natural disasters are often seen (whatever the actual but often hidden role of humans in causing them) – including by insurance companies – as ‘acts of God’ – that cannot be foreseen or prevented and in relation to which no human blame can be apportioned. In such cases, there are no “causes” (as is apparent in much of the risk analysis literature), and so while grief is appropriate amongst the victims and sympathy from outsiders, rage, anger or revenge cannot be directed at specific human agencies. Sometimes of course it is – at scapegoats, for example, as witnessed by the violent aggression directed at Korean residents of Japan following the great Kanto earthquake of 1923, thought to be somehow responsible for the misfortune that had fallen on the majority Japanese inhabitants of Tokyo and its environs – but at a deeper level, this is usually rightly recognised as pointless: no specific human individuals or groups were responsible or could possibly have been. Yet the need to find an explanation for or meaning in the event is deeply rooted, and this is where cultural responses are invoked. These may take the form of religious explanations – anger of the gods over violations

of moral norms, of witchcraft as in Evans-Pritchard’s celebrated Azande case and the many subsequent anthropological investigations of cultural explanations of misfortune through magic, divination and ritual, messianic movements and conversion cults, or of secular and ecological ones. A common issue here is that of agency. While in humanly induced disasters, agency can at least be assigned even if it cannot be averted, in natural calamities it is not only difficult to do so, but the victims themselves feel deprived of any sense of agency: they are rendered powerless, physically and psychically and it is this latter psychic response that triggers typical repetitive behaviour and remembering – constantly reliving the moments of the catastrophe itself, musing endlessly on how things might have been different if one had been elsewhere, had not decided to stay home that day, constant embellishment of memories of life before the disaster, self-pity and lethargy. Agency proves to be extremely important in the management of the emotions that accompany and follow the experience of disaster, and the absence of any sense of control over events, or at least of the possibility of resisting or striking back, requires cultural explanations that place the agency beyond the realm of the individual actor necessary if a serious existential and psychic crisis is to be averted.

In any anthropological or sociological approach social factors are of course going to be stressed. As suggested above, disasters human or natural bring in their wake social and cultural breakdown – destruction of families, disruption of familiar economic and political networks, dissolution of communities, dispersal of tribes and ethnic groups, and collapse of cultural activity. Ideally of course really successful rehabilitation would mean not only the reconstruction of physical infrastructure, but even more fundamentally the reconstitution of the working social networks and cultural preferences of the people involved. For some of the peoples of the Sudan, for example, this would mean the reestablishment of a semi-nomadic lifestyle based on cattle herding in the context of a social life based on small village communities and large ramified lineages. Whether such conditions could ever be achieved again is moot, but the fact remains that full rehabilitation means more in this case than the

cessation of civil war and famine, essential as these are. This is in large part because, as suggested briefly above, rehabilitation comes in large part from the ability of a community itself to respond to a crisis. In those cases where the community in question cannot adequately respond because it has been disrupted beyond repair by war or genocide, the demoralisation of the remnant is precisely the result of this social breakdown. Even resistance to disease in such cases can be shown to be partly culturally determined. It is also the case that the impact of disaster varies with the resources and responsiveness of the social groups involved. Some groups just have more resources, better communications and much larger support outside of the area of disaster itself, as shown by response to the San Francisco earthquake compared to the 1995 one in Sakhalin. Some can move relatively easily from the site of disaster and reestablish themselves elsewhere, while others are rooted through culture, religion or agricultural techniques or agricultural techniques to a particular habitat, as in the case of Indonesian villagers dwelling on the dangerous but highly fertile slopes of active Javanese volcanoes. But the cultural and sociological factors still intrude as was shown so graphically in the 2005 Hurricane Katrina catastrophe in New Orleans. Here a whole group of factors came together to create a disaster of huge magnitude. Natural in origin (although arguably fuelled by humanly induced global warming), storm warnings were ignored by many, and yet others, largely poorer and from ethnic minorities and without private transport, could not flee and in any case had nowhere else to go, much of the city had been built knowingly below water level and the levees designed to keep the water at bay proved to be badly maintained as inadequate funding had gone into their repair and upkeep, despite warnings dating back some years before the disaster. The Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico are well known hurricane zones yet inadequate defenses against 'superstorms' were not in place, including tidal barriers and storm surge defenses, official responses from the government of a huge, rich and highly industrialised nation with a very large military proved to be too slow, too little and often inappropriate or ineffective, and crime and looting suggesting poor pre-storm social

and community cohesion broke out after the flooding and destruction had emptied out most of the city. While many analysts and the press tended to concentrate on the problems of the physical rehabilitation of the city, the real sociological issues concern the breakdown of order during the crisis, and the subsequent reintegration of the city, socially as well as physically, and in particular the status and situation of its poorer and ethnic minority inhabitants without the resources to quickly adapt to the loss of homes, possessions, occupations and social networks.

In his classic study of life and death in Nazi concentration camps cited above, Bruno Bettelheim provided a detailed and insightful account, partly based on his own experiences as an inmate and survivor of such a camp, of the psychology of people under extreme and unusual conditions. In that study, he not only identified certain traits that appear under severe conditions of fear and deprivation, including grief, loss of a sense of identity, a growing sense of unreality and uncertainty about the 'concreteness' of the world beyond the camp fences, but also the ability to adapt and survive in quite remarkable ways and to create a new sense of reality out of the apparently senseless and random environment of violence that comprised the everyday life of the inmates. He also discusses the ways in which the usual human defenses – education, social status, occupation and class origin – were rendered useless in the camps, but in which other resources of a religious or political nature as well as resources of character proved to confer much greater survival value. In particular, the ability to find meaning in suffering and to create communities of cooperation distinguished those who survived often years of extreme psychological tension and physical deprivation. Many of the features identified by Bettelheim apply equally to the victims of complex emergencies and their ways of coping are similar in all essential respects.

What Bettelheim identified are the psychological and emotional resources that make survival, adaptation and ultimately rehabilitation possible. His own analysis is paralleled in some respects by that of his fellow socially-oriented psychoanalyst Erich Fromm whose own work suggests that any society, including what we think of as a 'normal' society, is actually held

together by a tissue of conventions and repressions easily ruptured and which when analysed demonstrate that 'sane' society is itself often rigid, repressive and freedom denying (Fromm 1955). This is not to suggest that complex emergencies create freedom and space (although they may do for some individuals), but that their sudden and violent eruption allows them to call into question and very starkly reveal and expose the structures of normalcy and the ways in which these reproduce themselves, and which are not usually visible until that normalcy is breached.

If psychology, a subject usually excluded from the ambit of development studies, in fact has an important role in understanding human behaviour in complex emergencies – both from the point of view of the victims, and, as Bettelheim also showed, in understanding those who exploit extreme situations for their own benefit, so too do other more recent developments in social theory which have a potentially powerful role in the analysis of disasters and their social consequences. One of these of course is globalisation theory in which, at least in its more critical forms, attempts to analyse the complex interactions between different elements in the world system, and increasingly between that system and its environmental context. A further development of this trend has been the appearance of risk analysis, of which Ulrich Beck's now well known notion of the 'risk society' is one of the major manifestations, and which explores the ways in which modern society is pervaded by risks – situations of uncertainty, imponderable outcomes of policies and human activities, unexpected dangers, sudden disasters and lethal by-products of industrial processes such as nuclear accidents, and expanding technology with its inevitable but not fully assimilated consequences – air travel for example or the increasing medicalisation of society and technologising of medicine. But another and equally important aspect of risk theory is the study of the ways in which groups and individuals cope with these new and unmanageable dangers and even internalise these risks or even seek them out as part of everyday living. Seen from this perspective, complex emergencies are in a sense merely greatly heightened risks actualised on a large scale. This theory has consequently not only high-

lighted the increasing instability of world, social, economic, technological and ecological systems, but has likewise provided numerous insights into the ways in which risk is permanently present and is adapted to and even transformed into energy and excitement, suggesting again the complex responses of people to the equally complex emergencies that periodically confront them and may now be accelerating in historically unprecedented ways. Yet another, and related, example of theoretical developments that prove to be of great usefulness in understanding both complex emergencies themselves and human responses to them, is chaos theory. If chaos theory/complexity theory originally evolved as a product of attempts to explain and understand the behaviour of irregular and non-linear systems and processes in nature such as weather and the flow of liquids, as more and more people are now noting, it potentially has numerous applications to the understanding of human social systems which are inherently complex, and also to the interaction between human and natural systems (Mosko and Damon 2005, Eve, Horsfall and Lee 1997). Complex emergencies have many formal features in common with irregular occurrences in nature and considerable insight into their nature can be gleaned from this quarter.

### **Risk, Blame and the Minimal Self**

'Risk and Blame' was the title given to a collection of her essays by the late British anthropologist Mary Douglas (Douglas 1994) in which she addresses a number of questions pertinent to our current discussion. One of these is the linking of risk – disasters, accidents, new technological hazards – to the apportioning of blame. In other words, risks are not seen simply as natural, but as events with human agents as the key causative factor. This, as we suggested earlier, may have deep psychological roots: events to which no human agency can be ascribed or blame assigned are truly terrifying and in a sense unthinkable. They suggest the puniness of humans before the still equally potent forces of nature that we have simply hidden behind a cultural screen of management, technology, forecasting and ignorance, and

also place mitigation beyond human remedy. If there is no one to blame, then either we are still pawns of a (humanly) uncontrollable nature, or we are all somehow collectively to blame, a conclusion that a growing legion of ecologists, climate change experts and environmental historians are now beginning to espouse. In a sense the former is more comforting – there is nothing that in the final analysis we can do – for the former in ascribing collective and hence cultural blame logically entails certain painful collective consequences such as (in specific relation to environmental issues) a vast reduction in consumption, hugely diminished use of fossil fuel burning vehicles, massive energy savings, reduced industrialisation, urbanisation and travel and other sacrifices that severely undermine the style of living that affluent Westerners and Japanese have become accustomed to and to which much of the ‘developing’ world still aspires. But a by-product of this has been the emergence of risk analysis as a ‘profession’ – one like other professions in search of so-called ‘objectivity’ for its methodology and conclusions, a search that Douglas claims results in the exclusion of politics, morals and culture (including the culture of particular institutions) from their analyses (Douglas 1994:11). In fact, as say, debates on the safety and advisability of nuclear power testify, ‘It would be strangely innocent nowadays to imagine a society in which the discourse on risk is not politicised. Such a society would have to be lacking free debate about values. It would have to be without a forum for generating a shared ideology. In such a society the isolated members would themselves fulfil the ideal of the human person figured in the psychological theory of risk perception. Mercifully, that person is quite unreal’ (Douglas 1994:13). The unreality stems from the fact that culture is missing from most conventional risk analysis, which is why so much human behaviour appears irrational to risk analysts. Knowing the risks, we still take them (in sports, in building in unsafe places on flood plains and tectonic fault lines and on steep hillsides in earthquake or landslide prone places, in not buying travel insurance when we fly, in deliberately travelling to unsafe destinations, in cycling without crash helmets, sailing without life-jackets, driving without seat-belts... the list is endless).

Furthermore, institutions in the same industry or activity can have very different perceptions of risk and ways of managing it: in one university in which I have worked, faculty people were even checked to see that their chairs were ergonomically correct for typing safely and strain-free on their computers, fire escape procedures were explained in detail to new faculty and drills regularly held; in another, in an earthquake and typhoon prone county, no such training was given, no drills ever held, the fire alarms were tested on Saturday afternoons when virtually no one was in the buildings and a particular building, constantly radiated by high powered transmissions from an adjacent commercial television station and in which the percentage of faculty people developing cancers was exceptionally high and statistically very abnormal, was never once monitored or investigated. What is considered ‘risk’ at all is itself deeply cultural. For a Yanomamo Indian, warfare and violence are the stuff of everyday life; to the Malaysian Semai, living in a virtually identical tropical forest eco-system, conflict is to be avoided at all costs. For a certain class of affluent sportspeople, mountain climbing is considered a challenging sport; to Javanese villagers, mountains are a considerable nuisance that prevents them from travelling easily and reaching their markets in geographically close but geologically inaccessible towns and villages: they are certainly neither things of beauty nor sporting challenges. Indeed, in many cultures the idea of sport itself is alien and nothing seems more pointless than the expenditure of huge amounts of energy and the exposure in some cases to danger in the pursuit of an apparently purely symbolic or self-cultivating activity.

But as Douglas also points out, protecting against one category of risks exposes people to yet others: a sealed building designed to protect the sensitive information stored within it, also increases fire risk and dangers to the health of its inhabitants who must breathe constantly recycled air in the absence of windows that can be opened. Risk is thus a paradoxical concept – something we formally avoid, yet actively seek out in certain contexts (sport, joining the army), something which when identified as a central cultural concept proliferates – suddenly there are risks every-

where and batteries of regulations and procedures must be devised to deal with them and to guard against them, and if something untoward does occur, then blame must be apportioned, negligence assigned, compensation or restitution assessed. The end point of this is that the perception of disasters or other forms of complex emergencies has drastically changed – we have entered a blame culture rather than a responsibility one, especially one of mutual or collective responsibility, and have moved far from the dispute resolving mechanisms of many ‘simpler’ societies in which the peaceful resolution of incipient conflicts is of profound cultural importance. There are risk-taking and risk-averse cultures; there are individuals within either type of culture who are more prone to one pole or the other and there are institutions in both that have varying degrees of risk tolerance, often of a curious kind. The military, which one might expect to be risk-taking, is in fact on the whole a highly conservative institution. Business, which one might expect to be conservative, is often much more risk-taking. The arts, pretending to be risk-taking, often operate within remarkably narrow cultural boundaries. In the contemporary world, all are in any case framed within the bigger context of globalisation which trusts new risks on all of us as well as potential new opportunities. While Douglas, following Ernest Gellner, sees this primarily as the result of industrialisation which brings small local communities into ever widening circles of new social relations – national, regional, and ultimately global, it has other dimensions of cultural interest, including the psychological.

Christopher Lasch indeed has argued (Lasch 1985) that ‘risk’ is not a sufficiently strong word. In fact, faced with economic turmoil despite the claims to scientific status by economics, with terrorism, rising crime rates, environmental destruction and apparently new forms of disease, all despite, or because of the explosive growth of ‘information’, technology and ‘scientific management’, Lasch claims that people are withdrawing from long term commitments (that themselves presuppose a stable and predictable world) into an individualistic siege mentality. This is signaled by the growth of a vast literature on ‘survival’ and the

mass emergence of what Lasch calls the ‘minimal self’ – a defensive core armed against the disasters that now seem to constitute the global environment, as opposed to the political, collaborative self and in which everyday life rather than collective public life becomes almost the sole focus of attention, the risks of the former being at least minimally manageable, while the risks of the latter appear beyond any meaningful individual intervention. This view is corroborated at a sociological level by the work of Anthony Giddens who has similarly argued that one of the major outcomes of modernity has been the movement from ‘emancipatory politics’ (politics concerned with the public good, with revolution, with expanding the spaces of collective freedom) to ‘life-style politics’ – politics (if it can be called that at all) concerned with personal interests and essentially selfish concerns (Giddens 1991). Indeed the late 1980s through the late 1990s saw the appearance of a plethora of sociological books on the subject of selfhood – that sudden preoccupation, along with a sudden surge of material on the sociology of the body – signaling exactly this shift from the collective to the private.

This shift has major consequences in general attitudes to disasters in the affluent world. It is not clear however that it is equally true of the so-called developing one in which, as Michael Jackson has clearly shown, primary ‘existential’ issues are still very much at the forefront as the refugee victims of civil wars know only too well, and at a collective as well as at an individual survival level, as indicated by the very concept of ‘failed states’ and the radical societal breakdowns that accompany them. Indeed in the development field, the study of disasters is a growing field, with even a significant high quality journal being devoted to the subject (*Disasters: The Journal of Disaster Studies and Management*) and with organisations concerned with humanitarian aid creating detailed handbooks for the guidance of those finding themselves responding to disasters (Eade and Williams 1998). This latter work is of considerable interest as it not only sets out detailed guidelines for humanitarian relief workers in the field, but also reflects some significant contemporary thinking on disasters from a practitioner’s point of view. These

include the idea that emergencies are not simply temporary interruptions to an otherwise smooth process of development, but reflect much deeper and endemic turbulence, such that a dichotomy between emergency intervention and development work is false, since in many areas of the world prolonged conflict and political violence have been the order of the day for long periods, and in some cases continue to be. In the light of this 'Crisis does not refer therefore only to an unexpected catastrophe, but also to the culmination of a slow build-up of political, economic or environmental factors. The combination of these factors with a sudden event, such as an earthquake or a major accident, can prove overwhelming. It is therefore critical that relief interventions aim to address the underlying inequities that make people more vulnerable to extreme stress or crisis: these may range from broad and complex factors, such as the non-accountability of national political institutions or macro-economic systems, to highly practical considerations such as poorly-constructed housing or inadequate flood-control measures' (Eade and Williams 1998: 810-11). Although sudden events can be the precipitating element, it is also worth noting the expansion of 'slow' disasters – so-called creeping environmental problems, the deepening AIDS/HIV epidemic, the accumulations of pesticides and other chemical residues noted by Rachel Carson as long ago as the 1960s in her now classic *Silent Spring*, and the immense build up of non-biodegradable plastics in the environment (Weisman 2007) amongst others. Also amongst these considerations are deeply sociological ones – ethnicity and cultural and religious intolerance being critical dimensions of almost all internal conflicts and civil wars (ibid.: 812) – and the interests of certain groups to keep conflict going as they benefit from it or see it as the route to their own political, cultural and economic survival (Duffield 1994), and in some cases the media construction (or ignoring) of a crisis can have a major impact on perceptions of it and appropriate or inappropriate responses to it (Eade and Williams 1998: 819).

Three particular dimensions of the analysis of complex emergencies by Oxfam relevant here emerge from their Handbook. The first, as suggested above,

is the relevance of catastrophe, chaos and complexity theories to understanding non-linear situations in which rapid, discontinuous and turbulent change suddenly occurs. The second is the role of gender and age, studies having shown that '[w]here the emergency involves large-scale migration, there may be very high levels of women-maintained households. Such households are systematically amongst the poorest in most societies' (Eade and Williams 1998: 828). The third is culture: 'While the conflict itself may be rooted in a struggle for political ascendancy, nationhood, and control over resources or territory, it is the perceived "difference" of particular groups – socially and culturally – that renders them vulnerable' (Eade and Williams 1998: 890). A politics of difference rather than a politics of solidarity in other words underlies the socio-cultural causes or outcome of many complex emergencies, especially those arising from human agency.

What is of some interest is to bring together in dialogue the very practical concerns of humanitarian practitioners in the field, or reflecting on the lessons learnt or not learnt from catastrophic events (e.g. Birkland 2006), and the insights and preoccupations of social theorists and even literary scholars. In fact, as I have implicitly suggested, they converge in interesting ways, particularly around the issues of, on the one hand, complexity theory, and on the other, the existential experience of extreme situations, but in some unexpected ways. Thus, while in some cases in which victimhood is experienced as the primary focus of attention, the maintaining of memory becomes an important way for actors to assume historical agency. This is true of Holocaust memorialisation, or equally of survivors of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki Atomic bombings. As Lisa Yoneyama puts it in respect of Hiroshima, '[b]y formulating the question of historical knowledge in terms of memory, and by illustrating its constructed and mediated nature, we can determine more precisely the conditions of power that shape the ways in which that past is conveyed and ask how such representations interpellate and produce subjects. These exercises also demonstrate that we can conceive of historical agency in terms of the power to renarratise and re-cite past events and experiences. Certainly,

narrativity and citationality cannot exist prior to categories of signification and representation. Nevertheless, by juxtaposing and piecing together unexpected stories and forms, memory work can create gaps and slippages within the structural processes that ground an individual's historical positionality. Historical agency envisioned in this manner allows individuals to become subjects of history, of their own conditions. In this sense, to perform an act of remembrance and to possess a means of memorialisation become equivalent to demonstrating power and autonomy' (Yoneyama 1999: 33). This position, in which memory becomes the means of personally assimilating and preventing the appropriation of the originating experience by those who would for purposes as diverse as politics and tourism decide how it is to be represented, contrast very interestingly with W.G. Sebald's discussions of the 'inability to mourn' and its reflections in postwar German literature, or rather its 'negative reflection' in the inability of the society to come to terms with or even acknowledge in any coherent way the concentration camps, the murder of political opponents from within the German people themselves, the disappearance of large numbers of the defeated German army into labour camps in the Soviet Union, and the absence of any literary discussion of these subjects (Sebald 2006). In a similar vein, elsewhere he discusses the absence in postwar German literature of discussion of what was perhaps the biggest catastrophe to befall the German people collectively in the closing months of the war – notably the 'area bombing' or intensive mass fire bombing of largely undefended civilian populated cities of little or no military significance such as Dresden, Hamburg and Halberstadt, with immense loss of life and property carried out by the Allied air forces – a traumatic experience that occupies little space in Germany's postwar cultural memory (Sebald 2003). It is here that we see the issues of policy and socio-cultural analysis coming together. In a recent book, Beatrice Pouligny, Simon Chesterman and Albrecht Schnabel (2006) suggest that in human agency disasters where mass crime has been perpetrated on a huge scale, formal policy responses tend to focus on the level of the state – reconciliation processes, fair elections and institu-

tion building. But in fact there are radical transformations of people's belief systems, value systems and codes of conduct after the experience of mass crime, and while outside actors such as the UN or NGOs have a role in promoting the reconciliation process, the real onus lies on the individuals, social structures and institutions of communities that have turned on themselves. The structural and the existential must meet, and it is at that interface that post-conflict reconstruction must begin.

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