

COURSE : DISASTER MANAGEMENT (MA/MSc PART I)

Paper : I

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Topic : Theoretical Importance of Disasters

Theoretical Importance of Disasters

Apart from the current popularity of the concept that catastrophes were a powerful agent for cultural change, there are a number of compelling reasons why studying natural disasters is important for archaeological theory and practice. Archaeological theory about the pace and character of cultural change has generally assumed that the process is mainly internally generated, unfolds slowly through time, and inevitably leads to greater socio-cultural complexity and so-called levels of progress. Although environmental determinism has also been quite influential, various forms of the Functionalist or Processualist theories, which dominated archaeological and anthropological thought from the 1970s until recently, stressed homeostasis and equilibrium, properties which are in conflict with the notion of rapid change induced by external factors.

Processual archaeologists are unlikely to have envisaged one-off events as having had a major effect over the very long time scales that archaeologists generally study. Despite experiencing a major catastrophe, societies are expected to have picked themselves up, dusted themselves off, and continued on their relentless social evolutionary path to complexity. As a result, scholars focused on what they saw as 'normal patterns of behaviour' and 'had little to say about systems whose normal coping mechanisms failed' (Torry, 1979). In contrast, disasters are an important subject for study because, as noted by Oliver-Smith (1996), they 'signal the failure of a society to adapt successfully to certain features of its natural and socially constructed environment in a sustainable fashion'. Since they demonstrate what were the limits of adaptive processes, a focus on how societies respond to disasters would seem to be an important way to understand the general processes of evolution. Alternatives to social evolutionary thinking which focus on non-linear change, chaos, punctuated change and catastrophism (e.g. studies in van der Leeuw and McGlade, 1997) provide a significant challenge to archaeological theory, but have received very little attention to date, although their role within modern studies of natural hazards has been promoted by Bryant (1991). Chance events or what Gould (1989) has called 'historical contingency' are also beginning to be recognised as key factors within the process of cultural evolution (e.g. Terrell, 1988; Zeidler and Isaacson, 1991). We argue that studying the cultural consequences of natural hazards and the disasters they may have caused in the past may suggest a very productive methodology for breaking out of established patterns of thought.

Careful studies of past disasters also provide a useful format for testing alternative approaches to cultural change and may perhaps even lead to new ways for conceptualising non-linear processes.

Finally, archaeological research can make a contribution to helping managers cope with contemporary disaster events. From archaeological research we may establish the principal components of a disaster, reconstruct the physical event itself, assess the physical damage it caused, and identify the response strategies of the exposed culture. More importantly, since archaeology operates over a large enough time scale, it can assess the long-term impacts of a disaster that might be overlooked in a modern study.

Studies have already shown that long after the world press has moved on, local catastrophes can have profound long-term effects on the lives of the people involved and these have the potential to permeate and eventually alter the society as a whole (Mbunwe-Samba, 1999; Grayson and Sheets, 1979; Oliver-Smith, 1986). Furthermore, disasters can accelerate social processes that were in train beforehand (Blong, 1984; Oliver-Smith, 1996). It is therefore very important to promote research which specifically evaluates the effects of natural disasters over longer time scales than is usually the case in modern disaster studies. Detailed archaeological case studies can make a significant contribution to this goal.