THE NATURE OF DISASTER
A GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY

Professor: Giacomo Parrinello
Academic Year 2019/2020
Formation Commune – Spring Semester
Wednesdays 10:15am-12:15pm

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Disasters loom large in the news these days. The devastation and losses they cause certainly justify the attention devoted to them. Part of their haunting power, however, stems from the recognition that present-day disasters may announce an even more disastrous future on Earth in the wake of the climate and ecological breakdown. As much as they are central to contemporary cultural and political imagination, disasters are not new to our fraught present. On the contrary, they have accompanied the making of the modern world, and they have ceaselessly exposed the contradictions of modern ways of inhabiting the Earth. While we often think about them as discrete events, disasters are in fact always rooted in long-term processes: slow accumulations of causes that lead to a breaking point, followed by long-term consequences. This course aims to historicize disasters by showing, through case studies ranging from the 1755 Lisbon earthquake to Hurricane Katrina in 2005, how they are always rooted in historically determined human interactions with nonhuman actors, processes and forces. Furthermore, by unpacking the histories of these disasters, it aims to show the structural linkages between disasters and the historical currents of modernity: technoscientific innovation, globalization of exchanges, urbanization and industrialization. Disasters offer a unique window into the environmental dimension of these processes, and into the limits to the project of mastery of nature that we have called modernity. Ultimately, the global history of disasters we will investigate in this course may help us to navigate better our menacing planetary present and, perhaps, imagine other ways of inhabiting the Earth.

Evaluation

The final evaluation will be based upon a mid-term (20%) and a final exam (20%) to assess grasp of lecture and reading contents, and an original research essay (60%). The research essay will consist of the historical analysis of one disaster of your choosing, recent or old, by applying the historical method and approach developed in this course: start from the disaster and identify its broader historical causes and consequences. By week 7 you will have to submit an abstract of your proposed essay along with a short annotated bibliography, listing the sources you plan to use,
summarizing their content and specifying how they will be useful to you (more information on how to do it will be provided on week 1). This will provide you with early feedback on your paper from the course instructor, and will count for 10% of the grade for the final assignment. The remaining 50% of the grade will be attributed on the essay itself, to be submitted on week 12.

Course plan

Each week we will focus on one particular disaster, as indicated in the titles below. Each of these disasters, in turn, will be the entry point for discussion of global historical processes that will allow us to make sense of them: urban growth and globalization of exchanges, imperial expansion and nation-building, the Cold War and nuclear weapons, delocalization and decolonization. Every week, thus, we will start from a relatively circumscribed point in time and space (the place and date indicated in the title of each lecture) and move across spatial and temporal scales, to interrogate the larger causes and the broader significance of that particular disaster. Each of these journeys, in turn, will show us new facets of modern ways of inhabiting the Earth and modern understandings of the natural world, and reveal some of their shortcomings.

Week 1 – Introduction: The Earth, Disasters, and Us
Week 2 – Lisbon 1755: Of Gods and Mortals
Week 3 – London 1853: Pathogenic Globalization
Week 4 – Bengal 1876: Imperial Cyclones
Week 5 – Paris 1910: The Flood of Modernity
Week 6 – Tokyo 1923: Earthquake Nations
Week 7 – Eniwetok 1952: Nuclear Apocalyptica
Week 8 – Sahel 1967: (Post)colonial Famines
Week 9 – Bhopal 1984: Geographies of Risk
Week 10 – Mexico City 1985: States of Calamity
Week 11– New Orleans 2005: The Climate of Disaster
Week 12 – Conclusion: Thinking through Disasters
Bibliography

What is a Disaster?


A New Planetary Condition


General Bibliography

An extensive bibliography on all the case studies discussed during this course – and much more – is available on Zotero through the Disaster History Bibliographic Project: [https://www.zotero.org/groups/2303976/disaster_history_bibliographical_project/items](https://www.zotero.org/groups/2303976/disaster_history_bibliographical_project/items)