INTRODUCTION: 9.11 AS DISASTER:
ON WORST CASES, TERRORISM,
AND CATASTROPHE

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Things will never be the same, some say, because of 9.11. We feel more vulnerable, more threatened, more at risk. It was the worst terrorist attack on U.S. soil, goes the refrain. It was dramatic beyond our worst nightmares. Like millions of others, I watched the events of that lovely morning unfold on television. When the South Tower fell for a few seconds I could not see it collapsing. My blindness wasn’t because of the smoke and dust. It was a cognitive blindness. I could not believe my eyes and so, somehow, my mind denied my brain the truth of the moment.

The 9.11 attack – especially the collapse of the World Trade Center – was a worst case. One of the attributes of a worst case is that it’s overwhelming. That’s why we say things will never be the same. The attacks were overwhelming in a number of ways. They overwhelmed our imaginations as we watched airliners crashing. It was instant death on a scale that few people outside of war have ever witnessed. The attacks overwhelmed our political and organizational systems too. In the wake of 9.11, and the anthrax poisonings later that Fall, it became painfully evident how ill-prepared our organizations were to either prevent or respond to attack and disaster. The list of failures is long, embarrassing, and massive. America’s intelligence and security organizations had plenty of information and warning but were poorly organized and in some cases patently incompetent. None of the 19 hijackers were even detained at the airports, even though some of them were carrying knives and didn’t have proper paperwork. While it’s wrong
to say that all the horror could have been prevented, clearly some of it should
have been.

As bad as it was, it could have been worse. That, too, is an attribute of worst
cases – they can always be worse. The planes could have been full of people.
The planes could have crashed into the WTC an hour later, when the buildings
would have had many more people in them. The people in the plane that crashed
in Pennsylvania could have failed and that plane could have made its way to the
White House, or the Capitol building.

It has become cliché to ask what we have learned from 9.11. The reason that it’s
cliché is that asking the question comes to sound rather like asking children what
they’ve learned from their latest mistake. Just as children give parents answers
they think the parents want to hear, so the “lessons learned from 9.11” come to
sound homiletic, too easy, even vacuous. Nonetheless, here are some things that
we should have learned by now:

- People are resilient in the face of catastrophe;
- People hardly ever panic in disasters;
- Americans are despised in many parts of the world;
- We won’t be safe from terrorism by chest-thumping and bombing people;
- Our airports are vulnerable;
- Our critical infrastructure is vulnerable.

All of those things were known well before 9.11 by academics who know about
terrorism and disasters. That’s another reason that talk about “lessons learned”
is often so much hot air. The lessons are already there but elites have to pay
attention if they are to matter. But even after over 3,000 deaths, and the property
destruction, elites seemed not to have learned very much from the attacks. They
still think people are prone to panic, even though disaster researchers have known
for a long time that is false. As a result, political leaders and even professional
disaster planners, who ought to know better, create response plans that are based
on faulty assumptions. Worse, the chief response to all the intelligence failures has
been to create a monster bureaucracy with unprecedented powers to infringe on
people’s civil rights. (The coincidence of the attacks with the advent of a far-right
federal government lead to major compromises in people’s privacy rights.) But
the terrorists are organized in small networks so it’s unlikely that creating a big
organization will do much more than merely assure the public that something is
being done about the problem.

All worst cases have silver linings, and so does 9.11. At the time of the attacks
Mayor Rudolph Giuliani was facing a hostile public and press over his high-handed
dealings and his disastrous personal life. After 9.11 Giuliani was a hero, and will
now be remembered that way. At the time of the attacks President George Bush
was still reeling from having the Supreme Court hand him an election in which he
lost the popular vote by a significant margin. He was also being doubted because
of his lack of vision regarding public policy. After 9.11 President Bush was seen
as the defender of the free world, having crushed Afghanistan and the Taliban in
fairly short order, only to set up to overthrow Iraq.

Another silver lining of 9.11 is that it gave academics, including yours truly,
something new to write about. This volume is one such product. In November 2001
Barbara Reskin, the president of the American Sociological Association, and Felice
Levine, the ASA executive officer, made it possible for me to organize a special
session at the 2002 Chicago meetings on “The 9.11 Terrorist Attacks as Disasters.”
I then recruited a number of people to speak at the session. The final roster included
Tom Kneir, Special Agent in Charge at the FBI, in Chicago, Andrew Greeley from
Universities of Chicago and Arizona, Kathleen Tierney from the Disaster Research
Center at the University of Delaware, William Freudenburg from Universities of
Wisconsin and California-Santa Barbara, and myself as moderator.

The session was so well attended that people were sitting on the floor. The
speakers were dynamic and interesting, although the FBI representative didn’t say
anything surprising. But the others certainly did. Tierney drove home two points:
that panic is rare and that command and control models are the wrong ones to
follow if you’re preparing for disaster. Greeley looked at data on religiosity and
religious commitment following 9.11 and found nothing – people didn’t go to
church more, nor did churches get new members. The events of 9.11 had no sig-
ificance for religion in the United States. Freudenburg talked about some political
and organizational aspects of disaster response. The session couldn’t have been
more relevant, which is not always true of sessions at the ASA meetings.

Some time later, Bill Freudenburg asked me to edit this special issue of *Research
on Social Problems and Public Policy*. I asked all those who participated in the
ASA session to contribute. Kneir and Freudenburg declined. Greeley thought his
non-findings weren’t all that interesting and I failed to convince him otherwise.
In the meantime I asked a number of other people to submit something and the
results appear in this volume. It was a terribly demanding production schedule,
because we wanted to get the volume out as quickly as possible. Our authors
are to be commended for producing high quality work under quite pressing time
constraints.

You will notice that all the work here is not of a type. I solicited work from people
in the humanities as well as in social science. If we are to gain any illumination
from 9.11 it must come from several sources. Certainly, the social sciences are
not the only legitimate source of knowledge about 9.11. That Freudenburg and
Ted Youn, who usually co-edit this journal, encouraged this unorthodox approach
attests to their intellectual flexibility.
One of the things we all want to know is whether we’re safer now than on September 10, 2001. As a group, our authors are pessimistic that we are. They don’t think that actions now being taken by those who claim to protect us will do much good, and they do think that survivors will continue to suffer far into the future. Our authors also do not shy away from what we should be doing. That’s all to the good. It is foolish to withhold our advice, as long as we’re clear about the limits of what we know.

One issue no one raises is that there have been no attacks in the U.S. since September 11, 2001. Many of us thought there would have been more, certainly within the first year. The issue is hard to address because of a paucity of evidence, and because of national security concerns. Clearly one possibility is that Al Qaeda networks have been sufficiently disrupted that they’ve not been able to mount another attack. If that were the case then we can only hope that our leaders are learning the lessons from the disruptions. There is no reason to be confident that is the case.

This volume, like all edited collections, is not perfectly coherent. I don’t see how it could be so. My goal was not to present a coherent work but to gather together in one place some smart people with interesting things to say about the events of 9.11 or about larger questions, concerning disaster, posed by those events. I think the effort has been successful, and I hope you do too.

Orlando Rodriguez and Phyllis Schafer Rodriguez’s son died in one of the collapsing towers. His name was Greg. Two months after 9.11, Orlando was asked to give a speech at Fordham, where he is a professor, on the meaning of civil defense and the proper response to the attacks. His lecture, in the main, took the form of asking important questions. He’s expanded that lecture considerably for this volume. His intent is to make us think through our values and what those values entail for responding to the terrorists. The Rodriguez’ implore political elites not to commit further violence in their son’s name. I’m not sure I could do the same.

Ann Larabee tells us a cultural story about the stories that are told about 9.11. Fear is now part of the social fabric, she says, in new ways. Our institutions and leaders were revealed by the attacks to be inadequate to the task of protecting us. Their legitimacy was threatened, although it’s hard to find evidence of that in opinion polling regarding institutional trust and confidence. In response, leaders now assert more control over the world than they actually command, setting themselves up for embarrassment later on when their promises will be, again, shown to be hollow. The new empire of fear colors nearly everything we see, and Larabee points out that pervasive fear fits well with the urge to command and control. Crisis management now becomes an excuse to stifle dissent and narrow arguments about public policy. In that way the worldview of the terrorists is quite similar to the worldview of key policymakers in the Bush administration.
Kathleen Tierney has spent a great deal of time since 9.11 debunking disaster myths. She is uniquely qualified to do it, having served as the Director of the Disaster Research Center, at Delaware, and now as Director of the Natural Hazards Center, at the University of Colorado-Boulder. One reason such debunking is important is that disaster myths are not politically neutral, but rather work systematically to the advantage of elites. Elites cling to the panic myth because to acknowledge the truth of the situation would lead to very different policy prescriptions than the ones presently in vogue. The chief prescription is, she notes, that the best way to prepare for disasters is by following the command and control model, the embodiment of which is the federal Department of Homeland Security. Thus do panic myths reinforce particular institutional interests. But it is not bureaucrats who will be the first-responders when the next disaster, whether brought by terrorists or some other agent, comes. It won’t even be the police or firefighters. It will be our neighbors, it will be the strangers in the next car, it will be our family members. The effectiveness of disaster response is thus diminished to the degree that we over-rely on command and control. This is another case where political ideology trumps good scientific knowledge about how the world works.

Ken Mitchell talks of the “hard won lessons” that are being ignored in the political and organizational response to 9.11. He points out that defense is trumping real security, and in ways that compromise not only democratic culture but also make us less safe. Certainly he’s right. But we have to ask what can the government actually do against such things? He is clear that the things the American government is doing in the name of protecting its people are in fact putting its people in greater danger. The larger issue is that in times of great emotional turmoil there’s a tendency to think about the government as a protector of us all, as per the phrase “the national interest.” But it is unwise to forget, especially when emotions and patriotic fervor are running high, that there are very few single interests. Mitchell also notes that the goal of preventive efforts is directed mostly at “critical infrastructure.” That means that most attention is directed at protecting things rather than people, leaving us terrifyingly vulnerable.

Brent K. Marshall, J. Steven Picou and Duane A. Gill are ambitious. They mine the literature on disasters to see what predictions might be made about the prospects of long-term recovery for 9.11 survivors. They see parallels in how people typically respond to natural disasters. But they especially draw lessons from work on technological disasters. Technological disasters, they note correctly, have been shown to be highly correlated with the development of a “corrosive” rather than an “altruistic” community. The primary reason for that is that lawsuits are more likely to be filed in technological events. That sets people against each other, which has obvious implications for possibilities of developing a sense of community and
common recovery. Marshall et al. predict that the 9.11 survivors will look much
like survivors of other technological disasters, which is to say recovery will be
halting and possibly won’t happen at all for many people.

James Kendra and Tricia Wachtendorf were scheduled to be in New York City
on September 12, 2001. As researchers from the Disaster Research Center, they
were going to witness a simulation of a bioterrorist attack. That simulation was
upstaged by the real attack, and on September 13 Kendra and Wachtendorf went
to New York, where they were welcomed into the reconstituted New York City
Office of Emergency Management. They stayed in New York for two months.
They thus have a unique perspective on what happened in lower Manhattan in
the intermediate aftermath. One thing they observed was what they say is a new
kind of convergence in disasters. Convergence – where people of all sorts are
drawn toward a disaster scene – has long been noted in the disaster literature.
Kendra and Wachtendorf advise disaster managers to plan for and explicitly
incorporate unofficial volunteers. This is yet another way in which informal
organization becomes at least as equal as formal organization in disasters. Their
chief conceptual innovation is to point out the study of convergence should center
on how people negotiate legitimacy in their attempts to be part of recovery.

In the Fall of 2002 I published an article in *Contexts*, the American Sociological
Association’s magazine directed at a general audience. That piece concerned the
myth of panic in general, although I used some stories from the 9.11 attacks
as evidence. The *Contexts* article was extracted and refined from a longer, more
academic piece that I was working on. That article appears here. My chief point is to
suggest the outlines of a theory of people’s response to disaster that gets away from
usual categories. Specifically, I suggest the idea of “failing gracefully” as a social
structural perspective on what we usually see as panic. Behavior is embedded in
social contexts of various sorts, and that central fact doesn’t disappear in disaster.

This collection of articles raises more questions than it settles, but that is
appropriate. We are only now beginning to fathom the deeper meanings of 9.11. It
will be a long time, I think, before anyone should feel confident in their knowledge
about those meanings.