

## **HIST 180: History of Natural Disasters in the Americas**

Spring 2007  
Tuesday/Thursday: EFG (12:20 – 3:25)  
Tucker Hall 404

### **Professor Mark Carey**

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Office Hours: Tues. 10-11; Wed. 1-3; and by appointment

This course examines the history of natural disasters in Latin America and the United States. Why study disasters? First, natural disasters literally open up societies, allowing us to peer into areas and worlds that we might not see in day-to-day life. Just as Hurricane Katrina in 2005 brought us into homes and communities that we don't normally encounter, the Lima earthquake of 1746 takes us into the residences and even the bedrooms of the rich and poor—areas that historical records usually neglect. Second, natural disasters don't just open up physical places; they also illuminate spiritual and mental worlds to show how people viewed life and death, and how they understood religion, nature, science, and technology. Finally, disasters transformed both physical and mental worlds. They shaped urban planning, agriculture, and the economy, and even made societies collapse.

Disaster studies thus generate several questions that we tackle in this course:

- Are disasters “natural” or human-induced?
- How have disasters—and reactions to them—changed over time?
- Are there differences in reactions to disasters in Latin America and the United States?
- What are the social and political forces that push people to live in dangerous places?

As a seminar, this course emphasizes intensive readings and several short papers to foster lively discussion about hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, climate, and fire in the history of the Americas. Additionally, students will research the historical contexts, and then share their work with the class, of the most recent and most raw natural disaster in the Americas: Hurricane Katrina.

### **READINGS**

#### **Books:**

- Ari Kelman, *A River and Its City: The Nature of Landscape in New Orleans* (2003)
- Erik Larson, *Isaac's Storm* (1999)
- Elena Poniatowska, *Nothing, Nobody: The Voices of the Mexico City Earthquake* (1995)
- Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (1998)

## Articles and Book Chapters:

\* denotes readings available by internet through Annie Catalog

\*\* denotes readings included in the Coursepack

- \* Stuart B. Schwartz, "The Hurricane of San Ciriaco: Disaster, Politics, and Society in Puerto Rico, 1899-1901," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 72, no. 3 (Aug., 1992): 303-334. [available via JSTOR]
- \* Theodore Steinberg, "What is a natural disaster?" *Literature and Medicine* 15, no. 1 (1996): 33-47. [available via Project Muse]
- \* Susan L. Swan, "Mexico in the Little Ice Age," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 11, no. 4 (1981): 633-648. [available via JSTOR]
- \* Charles Walker, "The Upper Classes and Their Upper Stories: Architecture and the Aftermath of the Lima Earthquake of 1746," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 83, no. 1 (Feb. 2003): 53-82. [available via Project Muse]
- \*\* Jared Diamond, "The Ancient Ones: The Anasazi and Their Neighbors," and "The Maya Collapse," chapters 4 and 5 in *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (New York: Viking, 2005), pp. 136-177.
- \*\* Mark Healey, "The Fragility of the Moment: Politics and Class in the Aftermath of the 1944 Argentine Earthquake," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 62 (2002): 50-59.
- \*\* Alan Taylor, "The Hungry Year': 1789 on the Northern Border of Revolutionary America" in *American Disasters*, edited by Steven Biel (New York: New York University Press, 2001), pp. 39-71 (chap. 2).

## GRADING

Participation:	25%
Short Papers (4):	30% (10% each; lowest grade dropped)
Final Paper Mileposts:	20% (5% each for the four components)
Final Paper:	25%

## OBLIGATIONS

**Participation.** The course is a seminar that requires active participation in every class. You must do the reading and bring questions to discuss in class. Attendance is mandatory: only one excused absence is allowed without penalty, and each additional absence will lower your participation grade by a letter grade. Additionally, each week (on Tuesdays) two small groups (4 people each) will present on the readings and the week's specific disaster. One group will analyze the day's readings, pose questions, and raise objections. A second group will explain the scientific processes triggering that week's specific type of disaster. Consultation with geology professors will strengthen these presentations on the disaster science and make the course more interdisciplinary.

**Short Papers.** Once a week (on Thursdays in Weeks 2-5) you must write a written discussion paper, not to exceed two double-spaced pages. This short paper should focus on one of the assigned readings for that particular day and the paper must: (1) identify the author's thesis statement; (2) explain the author's main points; and (3) provide critiques and questions to discuss. These reaction papers should be typed and carefully edited. Double-sided printing is encouraged.

**Final Paper.** The final paper (10-12 pages) will focus on historical forces that contributed to the 2005 Hurricane Katrina disaster. The paper should grapple with these questions: Why was Katrina so deadly? Was it the result primarily of environmental, social, political, gender, cultural, class, racial, economic, religious, or other historical factors? You should select a specific aspect of Katrina that interests you, and research it from an historical perspective; you also must find primary sources to evaluate. In addition to the final written paper, students will give a presentation of their research in the last class. To ensure that you produce excellent final papers, there will be several mileposts through the course: (1) you must select your topic and have it approved by the end of week two; (2) identify primary sources and bibliographical materials by week three; (3) hand in an outline by week five; and (4) present the paper in week six. These weekly check-ins will help us work together to produce high-quality research, writing, source evaluation, and historiographical analysis. Final papers must use footnotes following the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

## **IMPORTANT POLICIES**

- Students must complete all course assignments by finals week to pass this course.
- Late papers will be penalized one-third of a letter grade per day, including weekends.
- Papers are due in class, and those papers handed in after class on the due date will be considered one day late.
- Papers will not be accepted by email.
- Extensions on papers will occur only under extraordinary circumstances that must be verified in writing and approved beforehand.

## **COURSE SCHEDULE**

### **Week 1. Natural or Man-Made Disasters?**

4/24 Course Introduction

4/26 Disaster Theory: What is a "natural" disaster?  
Read: Steinberg, "What is a natural disaster?"  
Read: Kelman, preface

#### For Further Reading:

David Alexander. *Confronting Catastrophe: New Perspectives on Natural Disasters* Oxford, 2000.  
Kenneth Hewitt, *Interpretations of Calamity: From the Viewpoint of Human Ecology*, Boston, 1983.  
Ted Steinberg, *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America*, Oxford, 2000.  
Ben Wisner, Blaikie Piers, Terry Cannon, and Ian Davis. *At Risk: Natural Hazards, People's Vulnerability and Disasters*. 2d ed., Routledge, 2004.

## **Week 2. Engineering Disaster in New Orleans**

- 5/1 New Orleans History: Race, Levees, and a Waterfront Society  
Read: Kelman, prologue, chap. 1
- 5/3 Yellow Fever and the Overflowing Mississippi  
Read: Kelman, chaps. 3, 5

For Further Reading:

- John M. Barry, *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How it Changed America*, New York, 1998.  
Craig E. Colten, *An Unnatural Metropolis: Wrestling New Orleans from Nature*, Baton Rouge, 2005.

## **Week 3. Drought, El Niño, and Climatic Disaster**

- 5/8 Ancient Changes: The Maya (Mexico), Anasazi (New Mexico), and Moche (Peru)  
Read: Diamond, "The Ancient Ones"  
Read: Diamond, "The Maya Collapse"
- 5/10 Weather, Famine, and Revolution  
Read: Taylor, "The Hungry Year"  
Read: Susan Swan, "Mexico in the Little Ice Age"  
Read: Larson, *Isaac's Storm*, 3-55

For Further Reading:

- Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World*, New York, 2001.  
Eric Klinenberg, *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago*, Chicago, 2003.  
Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*, New York, 1979.

## **Week 4. Hurricanes at the Turn of the Twentieth Century**

- 5/15 Puerto Rico's San Ciriaco Hurricane, 1899  
Read: Schwartz, "The Hurricane of San Ciriaco"  
Read: Larson, *Isaac's Storm*, 56-172
- 5/17 Galveston, Texas, 1900  
Read: Larson, *Isaac's Storm*, finish

For Further Reading:

- Matthew Mulcahy, *Hurricanes and Society in the British Greater Caribbean, 1624–1783*, Baltimore, 2005.  
Louis A. Pérez Jr., *Winds of Change: Hurricanes & The Transformation of Nineteenth-Century Cuba*, Chapel Hill, 2001.

## **Week 5. Earthquake Politics**

5/22 Trembling in South America: Peru 1746 and Argentina 1944

Read: Walker, "The Upper Classes"

Read: Healey, "The Fragility of the Moment"

5/24 Mexico City 1985

Read: Poniatowska, *Nothing, Nobody*, Foreword and pp. 1-121

For Further Reading:

Barbara Bode, *No Bells to Toll: Destruction and Creation in the Andes*, New York, 1989.

Virginia García Acosta, Gerardo Suárez Reynoso, *Los sismos en la historia de México*, México, 1996.

H. Paul Jeffers, *Disaster By the Bay: The Great San Francisco Earthquake and Fire of 1906*, 2003.

Anthony Oliver-Smith, *The Martyred City: Death and Rebirth in the Andes*, Prospect Park, 1992.

## **Week 6. Fire Society**

5/29 The Inequality of Urban versus Suburban Fires

Read: Davis, *Ecology of Fear*, pp. 93-147

5/31 Student Presentations of Final Projects

**Final Papers due by 5pm on June 4**