

## What disasters can tell us about human nature

Dennis McDaniel | Jun. 9, 2010

A PARADISE BUILT IN HELL: THE EXTRAORDINARY COMMUNITIES THAT ARISE IN DISASTER

By Rebecca Solnit

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One way to understand the stunned confusion of the left and the spirited regeneration of the right is through the analysis of the human response to disasters. Such an analysis, provided by Rebecca Solnit's thought-provoking *A Paradise Built in Hell*, gives us some fresh insights into the fortunes of the progressive agenda.

*Paradise* challenges common misconceptions about the behavior of disaster victims, and Solnit introduces new insights into the question of human nature. Drawing from news media accounts, victims' reports, and the testimony of disaster scholars, Solnit analyzes the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, the 1917 Halifax explosion, the 1985 Mexico City earthquake, the 9/11 attacks in New York, and Hurricane Katrina. She finds that, by and large, victims form not unruly mobs, but improvised communities in which they nurse, feed and clothe each other, often at the cost of their personal welfare. Working together without the aid of larger institutional structures that tend to be suspended in the immediate aftermath of disasters, victims feel neither depressed nor hopeless, Solnit argues, but experience a "strange pleasure" that seems to arise naturally from their cooperative effort.



Following most disasters, Solnit contends, citizens who have been

empowered by the process of providing mutual aid are more likely to seek out solutions via community organizations and similar grass-roots efforts. In this way, disasters often have the revolutionary effect of forming "civil societies."

Most important, perhaps, the altruistic behavior of disaster victims challenges the conservative position that people are by nature selfish, competitive and avaricious. In actuality, under the extreme need created by disasters, "social ties and meaningful work are deeply desired, readily improvised, and intensely rewarding." The result is a "utopia of transformed human nature and society." However, the anarchic social benevolence that disasters breed threatens established authority and spurs backlash by those in power.

Indeed, Solnit blames governments that use police and military forces to renew order at the scene of devastation for the savagery and criminality that occur in the wake of disasters. Solnit finds especially abhorrent the

?panicked? response of authorities, aggravated by juicy news reports and images of looting, because this response treats victims as criminals and protects property instead of people. Elites, in Solnit?s view, bear a criminal responsibility for much of the devastation because elites plan unsafe urban spaces, build unstable, cheaply constructed buildings, and command the armed security forces that threaten disaster victims with incarceration and death.

Now to politics. The dynamic of disaster, improvised mutual aid, community-building and the behavior that Solnit characterizes as ?elite panic? sheds some light on the present woes of liberals. During the Bush administration, which many progressives would consider catastrophic for its support of the rich, its attack on civil liberties, and its prosecution of the war in Iraq, progressives kindled hope and felt joy in their cooperative effort to end injustice. Anyone who attended an antiwar rally between 2001 and 2008 would share the happiness felt in engaging in shared, meaningful action to bring about change. The prospect of the Obama election held promise, because, as Solnit states, Obama won the election ?with a vision of collective strength and grass-roots power.?



The dismay that progressives endured during the first year of the Obama presidency

was assuaged somewhat by the passage of a watered-down health care reform package. However, with two wars intensifying, military gays still in hiding, a mammoth oil slick spreading, and tea partiers growing in political influence, liberals remain ill at ease with a president for whom they had such high hopes. Consequently, a year and a half into the Obama presidency, the joy felt by progressives has changed to disappointment and even despair at the prospect of losing a hard-won congressional majority. Without the fellowship forged by its opposition to the Bush regime, and with bewilderment wrought by a distance between campaign promise and actual performance, progressives scramble to find identity and direction.

Sadly, the recession has done little to rally progressives. Few would question that a lingering 10 percent unemployment rate is a disaster both in the physical sense of lost wages, cars and homes, but also in the anxiety, panic attacks, insomnia and depression experienced disproportionately by the unemployed. However, while the Haitian earthquake inspired a gratifying outpouring of charity, too few have responded to the catastrophe of unemployment.

Perhaps the number of unemployed is still too low and too dispersed to create a large-scale grass-roots movement, and perhaps progressives feel that their work was completed with the election of Obama, so they await a magic solution from above. Unfortunately, Obama?s tepid solutions to date have served only to divide and demoralize the community to which the promise of his campaign gave so much hope.

Instead, hope and joy and is being felt by the tea party fringe of the conservative movement, who declared Obama an alien and the Obama presidency a disaster even before he was inaugurated; it?s the partiers who now

exhibit ?elite panic.?

To the far right, the collective effort to elect Obama, as much as his policies, has raised the specter of socialism and thereby threatens their vision of a white supremacist, capitalistic America. Though they see themselves as grass-roots organizations, tea party groups were seeded, nurtured and orchestrated by right-wing media. Unlike most community organizations, tea partiers do not seek equal footing with privileged groups; rather, as many in these groups are already members of the elite, they don't wish to share or surrender the power that they have. In this way, the far right plays role of the civic authorities following a disaster: The far right sees mutual aid as looting and civil society as social disorder, and these elite are not afraid to back their demands with the threat of violence, as the presence of guns at tea party rallies attests.

*TIME* magazine has recently labeled the 2000s as ?the decade from hell.? Let's hope that the altruism and community spirit that Solnit discovers in the aftermath of disaster can create a ?paradise? civil society while we're still in the 2010s.

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