

## Natural Disasters in American History

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Bobst LL1-42

Tuesday and Thursday, 2:00-5:00

Office Hours: Thursday, 11:30-1:30 Think Coffee – 248 Mercer st.

Floods, fires, storms and earthquakes violently re-shape the lives, politics, societies and lived spaces they strike. This seminar traces the history of natural disasters in the United States from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. Students will investigate the ways in which natural disasters are understood at different historical moments, how people place blame for disasters, and how disrupted environments are re-built.

### The “Big” Questions:

- How “natural” are natural disasters?
- How do American conceptions of natural disasters change over time?
- How do people in America understand and imagine natural disasters?

This seminar is organized as a series of case studies. Each week consists of one general discussion of a category of natural disaster, and one discussion of a specific example of that category. These case studies cluster around the turn of the twentieth century and include events that shaped disaster history and theory in America. These case studies also serve as a lens through which to view subsequent similar natural disasters. Students are encouraged to bring their thoughts on similarities between disasters to bear in these conversations. At the end of this course, students will be familiar with both the historical theories used to discuss natural disasters, and with the specific events, causes and repercussions of some of the most devastating natural disasters in American history.

### Policies

- Plagiarism: I do not like it. It will not be tolerated, as per NYU’s honor code.
- Contact: I can be reached by e-mail during normal business hours (9-5, m-f). Do not expect speedy responses outside of normal business hours.
- Office hours: I encourage you to come by office hours to check in once during the term – feel free to discuss concerns or drafts, or to ask questions about things we have covered in class.
- Drafts: I am happy to look at drafts up to ONE WEEK before the final paper is due. However, in order to get my comments you must come to meet with me in person.
- Food, laptops and other distractions: Bring your laptops, bring your snacks, even bring your phones, but do not let any of those distract you or other students from class.

### Assessment

#### Attendance

- Absences excused only in cases of emergency – with documentation.
- We are meeting for three hours in the afternoon twice a week. Feel free to bring food, coffee or soda to sustain you through class.

- We will break for fifteen minutes in the middle of class.

#### Reading

- Complete the readings for every class, and come prepared to discuss them.

#### Weekly assignments

- The first part of the first meeting each week will be devoted to primary source analysis. You should come to class prepared to write for 5-10 minutes (about 1 page) about a primary source, which will be distributed in class. These exercises should incorporate what you learned in the readings for the class.
- The first part of the second meeting of each week will be devoted to a directed writing assignment on the week's readings. You should come to class prepared to write for 5-10 minutes (about 1 page) on a discussion question drawing on all of the readings.
- The two lowest graded writing assignment will be dropped for your final grade.

#### Discussion leader

- For two readings of your choice, prepare a short presentation and set of discussion questions. At the end of the class period for which the reading was assigned, you present your questions to the class and lead a discussion on the reading. Some meetings will have more than one discussant, and some will not have any. For *Isaac's Storm* and *The Johnstown Flood* we will have a less structured conversation without formal discussion leaders.

#### Class participation

- You will have multiple opportunities to participate during each class. We will begin each class with a writing assignment and discussion, I will frequently pause lectures to ask questions, and you are encouraged to interrupt if you have a question. At the close of each class meeting, we will discuss the readings in depth, and you will have the opportunity to introduce discussion questions yourselves.
- Class participation is worth one quarter of your final grade. In order to get full participation credit, you must contribute to the discussion consistently throughout each class meeting. Please see me outside of class if you have anxiety about speaking in front of others, and we will work out alternative means of assessment.

#### Final assignment

- You will be permitted to use your notes, and all readings from the course of the semester, as well as external primary and secondary sources to complete the final, which will be in the form of a 10-15 page essay. A brief statement of your final paper topic, with a preliminary bibliography is **DUE June 9<sup>th</sup> IN CLASS**. A draft or detailed outline of your paper is **DUE June 16<sup>th</sup> IN CLASS**. Final papers are **DUE July 1<sup>st</sup> BY EMAIL**.

Options for final projects include:

- Write an assessment of a website, museum exhibit, monument or any other expression of history dedicated to acquainting the public with a natural disaster. Compare and contrast the treatment of that disaster with what we have learned in class.
- Write an assessment of a piece of film, art or literature that deals with a natural disaster in American history. Compare and contrast the treatment of that disaster with what we have learned in class.
- Write a piece of well-cited imaginative history set during or immediately after a natural disaster. This work must be based in historical fact, and any claims that you make must be substantiated and footnoted.

More detailed assignments for final projects will be distributed on May 31<sup>st</sup>

Weekly writing assignments – 10 x 3%	30%
Class participation	20%
Discussion leader	10%
Final paper topic/ bibliography	10%
Final paper draft	10%
Final paper	20%

**Main readings: available at NYU bookstore and on reserve at Bobst library**

- Steven Biel, *American disasters* (New York: New York University Press, 2001).
- Erik Larson, *Isaac's Storm: A Man, a Time, and the Deadliest Hurricane in History* (Vintage, 2000).
- David G. McCullough, *The Johnstown flood* (Simon and Schuster, 1987)
- Theodore Steinberg, *Acts of God: the unnatural history of natural disaster in America* (Oxford University Press US, 2006).

**Supplementary readings: available at NYU bookstore, on reserve at Bobst library, or photocopies of assigned portions in my mailbox on 5W**

- Mike Davis, *Ecology of fear: Los Angeles and the imagination of disaster* (Vintage Books, 1999).
- K. Hewitt, *Regions of risk: A geographical introduction to disasters* (Longman Harlow, 1997).
- Stephen J. Pyne, *Fire: a brief history* (Jeremy Mills Publishing, 2001).
- Gregory Squires and Chester Hartman, *There is No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster: Race, Class, and Katrina* (Routledge, 2006)

**Class Schedule**

**Week One – Introduction to the field.**

The first week will be devoted to discussing the theoretical framework in which natural disasters are discussed, and the ways in which that framework has developed since natural disasters became a topic of historical study. This discussion will presage our investigation of five of the most deadly and expensive disasters in American history.

- 5/24/11 – Introduction to the course
- 5/26/11 – Theories of natural disasters
  - Browse <http://www.fema.gov/hazard/>
  - Theodore Steinberg, *Acts of God*. Chapters 1-3 + interlude, pp. 3-78
  - K. Hewitt, *Regions of risk: A geographical introduction to disasters* (Longman Harlow, 1997). Introduction and chapter 3. pp. 1-17, 55-89

**Week Two - Fire**

The second week focuses on histories of drought, and the fires that often take place in drought times. We focus on the most expensive fire in American history, the Peshtigo fire, in conversation with one of the most well known fires, the Chicago fire. Both of

these events happened in 1871, but popular culture only remembers one. We will discuss the reasons why some natural disasters are remembered and others are forgotten. Our discussion of the history of fire will additionally foreground subsequent weeks, in particular our discussion of the San Francisco earthquake and fire of 1906.

- 5/31/11 – Drought and Fire
  - Review the history of fire events at: <http://chicagowildernessmag.org/issues/fall1998/historyfire.html>
  - Stephen J. Pyne, *Fire: a brief history* (Jeremy Mills Publishing, 2001). Introduction, chapters 1, 5 and 6, pp. xv-20, 85-118
- **FINAL PAPER TOPIC DISTRIBUTED**
- 6/2/11 – Peshtigo and Chicago fires (1871)
  - C. S. Smith, ““Faith and doubt: the imaginative dimensions of the Great Chicago Fire”,” in *American Disasters*, ed. Steven Biel, 2001, 129–169.
  - C. G. Lorimer and W. R. Gough, “Frequency of drought and severe fire weather in north-eastern Wisconsin.” *Journal of Environmental Management* 26, no. 3 (1988): 203–219.

### Week Three – Flood

The thirds and fourth weeks are spent on storms. These weather events take many forms, and have a varied range of impacts. During our third week, we discuss the Johnstown Flood of 1889. This flood was the consequence of the coincidence of torrential rains the catastrophic failure of the South Fork Dam. We will use the Johnstown flood as an opportunity to develop our discussion of the interactions between human spaces and natural disasters.

- 6/7/11 – Storm and Flood
  - Theodore Steinberg, *Acts of God*. Chapters 4-5 + interlude, pp. 79-117
- 6/9/11 – Johnstown flood (1889)
  - David G. McCullough, *The Johnstown flood* (Simon and Schuster, 1987). Entire
  - **FINAL PAPER TOPIC DUE.**

### Week Four – Wind

The fourth week continues our discussion of storm with a focus on the Galveston hurricane and flood of 1900. Responses to this hurricane and the Johnstown flood, both from individuals and from the American government prefigure the responses to and preparations for storms today. We will also use the Galveston hurricane to discuss popular conceptions of “unsafe” weather spaces in American history.

- 6/14/11 – Hurricane
  - Review the events of the storm at <http://www.1900storm.com/>
  - Patricia Bellis Bixel, ““It Must Be Made Safe”: Galveston, Texas and the 1900 Story,” in *American Disasters*, ed. Steven Biel (NYU Press, 2001).
- 6/16/11 – Galveston hurricane (1900)
  - Larson, *Isaac's Storm*.

**Week Five - Earthquake**

The final weeks cover earthquakes and tornados, and we will intersperse the discussion of the San Francisco earthquake of 1906 and the “tri-state tornado” of 1925 with discussions of two recent natural disasters: Hurricane Katrina and the earthquake in Haiti. Our discussion of earthquakes will compare them to the other kinds of natural disasters we have discussed, and question whether they can be put into the same conceptual categories.

- 6/21/11 – Earthquake
  - Mike Davis, *Ecology of fear: Los Angeles and the imagination of disaster* (Vintage Books, 1999), chap. 1. pp 3-56
  - Hewitt, *Regions of risk*. Chapter 8, pp. 197-231
- 6/22/11 – **PAPER DRAFT DUE**
- 6/23/11 – San Francisco earthquake (1906)
  - T. Steinberg, “Smoke and mirrors: the San Francisco earthquake and seismic denial”, *American Disasters* (2001): 103–126.

**Week Six – Twisters and hurricanes (reprise)**

The sixth week will both cover tornados through the case study of the “tri-state tornado” of 1925, and will contextualize more recent natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina, the Haitian earthquake, Hurricane Mitch and the San Francisco earthquake of 1989 in terms of their historical precedents. The “tri-state tornado” is still the deadliest tornado in American history. We will close with a discussion of why the disasters we cover in the course were some of the most expensive and deadly, why some of them have been forgotten and others remembered, and how they shaped American responses to natural disasters in the present.

- 6/28/11 – Tri-state tornado (1925)
  - Theodore Steinberg, *Acts of God*. Chapters 6-epilogue, pp. 120-201
- 6/30/11 – Hurricane Katrina (2005)
  - Gregory Squires and Chester Hartman, *There is No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster: Race, Class, and Katrina* (Routledge, 2006). Chapter 1-2, pp. 1-36