

Risk International: Prediction, Disaster, and Emergency Management in the Age of Globalization

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A tremendous hurricane swept through Galveston, Texas in 1900, leaving approximately 8000 people dead and a thriving port city in absolute ruins. It was, of course, a tragedy experienced in its full horror by Galveston's residents. At the same time, the Galveston disaster was a national event, eliciting massive interest in the press and popular culture--it remains the largest loss of life in any natural disaster in U.S. history.

The storm highlighted the authority and the failure of a fledgling national scientific organization, the United States Weather Bureau, to predict the storm. Reconstructing Galveston was also a national concern, as the city was raised and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers built a protective seawall. By 1900, predicting and managing American disasters was increasingly a bureaucratic function of an expanding federal government. And yet, accounts of the Galveston hurricane highlight the fact that weather reports from Cuba and other stops along the path of the storm, if taken seriously, might have avoided the massive death toll. Hurricanes, after all, do not pay attention to national borders. Within 100 years such a profound lack of international cooperation related to a disaster would seem unthinkable.

Disasters: from hurricanes to earthquakes, terrorism to war, are more often than not international in scope. This paper details the growing attention to the international prediction and management of disasters over the course of the 20th century. By the turn of the 21st century, a web of risk-focused institutions covered the globe, competing for authority and defining and reacting to the dangers of modern life in the name of both individual nations and the international community as a whole. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in the United States is only one of scores of similar national-level risk-response bureaucracies. These days, when an earthquake or a hurricane strikes, it is met with a barrage of scientific, technological, and bureaucratic tools, wielded by the powerful bureaucratic machinery of organizations like the United Nations, national-level organizations like FEMA, and international aid groups like the Red Cross. Describing themselves, these "Risk International" organizations talk about a world in which all risks can be effectively predicted, tracked, monitored, or failing that, effectively managed and met with response teams that minimize suffering and learn from the destruction. In addition to chronicling the rise to authority of "Risk International," this paper brings to light the political questions associated with the aggregation of risk-information and authority to fewer and fewer organizations with greater powers of information gathering and control. Disasters will continue, as will the globalization of risk management and authority. Now is the time to investigate the recent and inseparable connection between the two.

