NYU Gallatin School of Individualized Study

FIRST-UG 102: Critical Disaster Studies
First Year Interdisciplinary Seminar
Fall 2016

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1 Washington Pl., Room 510
Office hours: TTh 1:45-2:45, W 2-4

Description
Disasters are moments of severe distress, deprivation—and also possibility. How people, organizations, and governments have responded and continue to respond to disasters says much about how we imagine society to be and how we hope it will be in the future. The years since the September 11 attacks and Hurricane Katrina have seen increased attention paid to disaster prevention, mitigation, response, and relief. Included in this scholarship is what we might call critical disaster studies, which explores interpretive questions about how and why disasters operate in society. This course focuses on this critical scholarship. That is, we will explore only very briefly empirical questions like how people act in disasters; rather, we will focus on broader questions about what disasters are, how we think about them, their role in society, and the role of politics in disaster. Readings will include texts by Ted Steinberg, Kai Erikson, Karen Sawislak, Eric Klinenberg, Naomi Klein, Rebecca Solnit, and others. Students will use the concepts we read and talk about to analyze a disaster of their choice, thus developing expertise in a particular contemporary disaster and develop their academic writing and research skills.

Learning goals
- Students will gain in depth knowledge of the field of critical disaster studies
- Students will acquire expertise on a particular disaster of their choice
- Students will develop competence to analyze disasters and disaster response using the theories and concepts in the field of disaster studies.
- Students will practice and improve their critical thinking and analytic skills.
- Students will engage with their colleagues in person, and they will practice engaged, respectful, and informed intellectual debate.
- Students will practice and improve their abilities to read academic and popular texts carefully, engage with them and their arguments, and constructively critique them.
- Students will practice and improve their writing and argumentation abilities.

Required texts
In general, books in which we will be reading at least 100 pages are listed below, are available for purchase at the NYU Bookstore, and are on reserve at Bobst. Books in which we will be reading less than 100 pages will be scanned or otherwise linked to and available on NYU Classes—look under “Resources.” If you are concerned about spending too much on books, I encourage you to (a) shop around for used books, and (b) consider
relying on the library for books of which we are reading only excerpts. Note that ISBNs refer to specific editions of a book, and you are welcome to obtain whichever edition of these books that you want.


**Assignments and Grading**

The core of this class is a series of ideas about disasters, that is, a thing we should understand about disaster or an argument about the nature of disaster. We will read a text or set of texts—usually written by a North American scholar—and come together to discuss that lesson. For that reason, it is imperative that you do the reading and start to think about it before you come to class. The assigned readings are a central building block for the course. Remember that when we read our texts, we should be reading for content—what the texts say, what they argue, what stories they tell—but also for form—how they say it, how they argue it, how they tell those stories. Reading and understanding the texts does not necessarily mean agreeing with them. Indeed, I disagree with some of the readings I’ve assigned. Engaging with the readings means understanding them, critiquing them, and learning from them.

In addition, each student will study for the entire term a disaster of his or her choice. This disaster can be domestic or foreign, and it can be historical or contemporary. It must be a single, actual disaster. That means, for instance, the Salem Fire of 1914, not just “fire.” It also has to be a disaster that has happened, not one imagined or feared or planned for. (N.B.: In keeping with Gallatin being a school of individualized study, if you can make a compelling argument for departing from these general guidelines, I am happy to let you. Please speak to me if you have questions.)

The readings are arranged in seven groups of various sizes, each of which we can think of as a single “lesson” about disaster. Throughout the term, you will relate each of these “lessons” to the disaster you choose. A week after we complete each section, you will write a short memo relating the reading to your disaster. At the end of the term, you will take the short memos you have written, revise them, and turn them into a single, unified term...
paper on your disaster. I look forward to learning from you about the disasters you choose!

Class participation and discussion: 26%
The purpose of class participation is not only to show that you have done the reading assigned, but also to help yourself and your classmates better understand the readings and the issues discussed in them. In addition, class participation provides practice for the skill of engaging in honest, respectful, and thoughtful intellectual discussion. The point of discussion is quality, not quantity; you don’t get points each time you open your mouth, and the person who talks once but says something brilliant that moves the discussion forward is more appreciated than the person who talks every five minutes but never says anything useful. That said, you can’t participate well if you never participate, so you can’t be silent; if I don’t know the sound of your voice by the end of the term, you’re unlikely to get a good class participation grade. Likewise, you can’t participate if you’re not in class, so please prioritize attendance.

Weekly memos: 8% each (48% total)
You will write a total of six memos of roughly four pages each, double spaced. In them, you should describe and synthesize the ideas we have read in discussed in the preceding section of the class and apply those lessons to your chosen disaster. Memos are due on paper in class one week after we complete the “lesson.” (Dates are listed in the class schedule below.) These memos should be both analytical and research-based. To be research-based means that you should be conducting your own research to learn about your disaster. Read books and scholarly articles. Don’t rely on random webpages or what you think you know. You should show your research by citing your sources; every factual claim you make should have a footnote to show how you know it. To be analytical means that you should explain how the readings you’re discussing relate to your disaster, and how the lesson in them changes your understanding of your disaster. You should refer explicitly to the readings and to each author’s ideas. (Note, you will not write a memo for the final section of the class on foreign aid, soldiers, and experts, but you will be expected to include that section in your final paper.)

Final paper: 26%
At the end of the term, you will combine all your memos, revise them, and turn them into one term paper in which you thoroughly analyze your disaster. You will also show your analysis of your disaster through the theories and ideas we have read about throughout the term. As with the seven short memos, you need to show that you have done research on your disasters, and you need to show how the readings have affected your analysis of your disaster. You should take into account the feedback I give you on your memos.

Course schedule
Each day below is listed with readings and assignments. In each class session, we will talk about the readings listed for that day, which means it is essential that you have completed that day’s reading before class.

Introduction
Tues., Sept. 6 – Introduction


There’s No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster


The Social Is the Psychological is the Physical


** First memo, on “There is No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster,” due **

Disasters Are Not (Just) Acute

* This is the second day of Rosh Hashanah. If your religious observance requires you to miss class, please let me know ahead of time.

Thurs., Oct. 6 – Superstorm Research Lab, "A Tale of Two Sandys" (white paper, December 2013). [Link]
** Second memo, on “The Social Is the Psychological Is the Physical,” due **

People Act Pretty Well During Disasters; Organizations Not Always So Much

[N.B. Office hours will be cancelled on Wednesday, Oct. 12 for Yom Kippur.]


** Third memo, on “Disasters Are Not (Just) Acute” due. **


Thurs., Oct 20 – Justin Elliot and Jesse Eisinger, “Long After Sandy, Red Cross Post-Storm Spending Still a Black Box,” ProPublica, 11 April 2014 [Link]
Justin Elliot, Jesse Eisinger, and Laura Sullivan, “The Red Cross’ Secret Disaster,” ProPublica and NPR, 29 October 2014 [Link]
Jesse Eisinger, Justin Elliot, and Laura Sullivan, “The Red Cross CEO Has Been Serially Misleading About Where Donors’ Dollars Are Going” ProPublica and NPR, 4 December 2014. [Link]
Justin Elliot and Laura Sullivan, “How the Red Cross Raised Half a Billion Dollars for Haiti and Built Six Homes,” ProPublica and NPR, 3 June 2015. [Link]
Justin Elliot, “The Corporate Takeover of the Red Cross,” ProPublica, 14 December 2015. [Link]
Sarah Smith, “After Mississippi Flooding, Red Cross Stumbles Again,” 19 May 2016. [Link]

Disasters Are Experienced on a Social Gradient


** Fourth memo, on “People Act Pretty Well in Disasters; Organization Not So Much,” due. **


Disasters are a Time for Politics

Tues., Nov 8 – No class – Election Day.
I encourage you to volunteer at the polls or for the candidate of your choice.

No readings, but the next few weeks are heavy, so I encourage you to get started this week.
**Fifth memo, on “Disasters Are Experienced on a Social Gradient,” due.**

Tues., Nov 15 – Klein – exact pages TBA

Thurs., Nov. 17 – Klein – exact pages TBA


[N.B. Office hours cancelled Nov. 23 for Thanksgiving.]

Thurs., Nov. 24 – No class – Thanksgiving Day


Beware of Aid: Foreign assistance, experts, and soldiers


Roberto Barrios, "Budgets, Plans and Politics: Questioning the Role of Expert Knowledge in Disaster Reconstruction," *Anthropology News* (October 2010), 7-8. [Link]

**Sixth memo, on “Disasters Are A Time for Politics,” due.**


Wednesday, December 21

**Final paper due.**

**Course Policies**

*Attendance.* As described elsewhere in this syllabus, participation in class discussion is a—perhaps the—key thing we do in this class. You can’t participate if you’re not in class. Therefore, attendance is required. Absences will be factored into your participation grade. It is always better to come than not to come, if you can. If an absence is unavoidable, please email me ahead of time; depending on the circumstances, I will excuse your absence.

*Electronic devices.* Electronic devices can sometimes help and sometimes hinder active participation. They can be resources for looking things up; they might have your text on them; and they can be essential to students with disabilities. But they can also be
distracting to you and to your classmates (and your professor!). Texting, IMing, or otherwise playing on your devices shows a lack of respect for the others in the room. (So too, for that matter, do things that don’t involve electronics, like reading the newspaper or sitting at the table reading a novel.) While you are welcome to have your computer or other device for class related work while in class, please refrain from checking your email, IMing, texting, playing games, tweeting, or otherwise using your screens for non-class purposes. The general rule is, Don’t be rude.

Academic integrity. As a Gallatin student you belong to an interdisciplinary community of artists and scholars who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity. Failure to uphold these values will be subject to severe sanction, which may include dismissal from the university. Examples of behaviors that compromise the academic integrity of the Gallatin School include plagiarism, illicit collaboration, doubling or recycling coursework, and cheating. Please consult the Gallatin Bulletin or Gallatin website (http://gallatin.nyu.edu/about/bulletin/undergrad/policies/integrity.html).

Beyond the above boilerplate warning, the best rule is: When in doubt, cite. This admonition is not just about following the rules. To be convincing, arguments must be based in fact, and in order to assess facts the reader must know from whence they came. Academic dishonesty also robs you of the education you’re here for; if you don’t do the work you’re supposed to do, you don’t get the educational experiences you’re supposed to get. If you have questions about what constitutes academic dishonesty or plagiarism, ask.

Deadlines and extensions. Written work must be turned in on time. All work that is turned in late will be marked down a third of a grade per day; that is, a paper turned in a day late that would otherwise have gotten an A- will get a B+. If a legitimate delay is unavoidable, you can ask for an extension, but you must ask for one no less that 24 hours before the deadline.

Office hours and help. I encourage you to come to my office and chat about disasters, the class, or about anything else. No appointment is necessary during office hours. If you want to meet outside my office hours, feel free to email me for an appointment and we’ll make something work. You’re also welcome to email me about anything else at jacob.remes@nyu.edu (but please don’t expect a fast response on weekends). Always, the rule is, if you don’t understand something, or if you’re having trouble, ask for help, whether in class, by email, or in office hours.

Academic assistance. This is a first-year course, so everybody in this class is reading, writing, thinking at the college level for the first time. It’s hard! Part of my job as your instructor is to help you do it. But I’m not the only one you can turn to for help. I strongly encourage you to make use of the Gallatin Writing Center at every stage of your writing, from conceiving of your topic to your final revisions. See http://gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/undergraduate/writing/writingcenterappointments.html for more details, or email Syma Mohammed at sm5845@nyu.edu. The general rule,
whether for reading or writing, is, *If you’re having trouble, ask for help.* That’s what I’m here for.

*Disabilities.* New York University is committed to providing equal educational opportunity and participation for students with disabilities. It is the University’s policy that no qualified student with a disability be excluded from participating in any University program or activity, denied the benefits of any University program or activity, or otherwise subjected to discrimination with regard to any University program or activity. If you have a disability and need accommodation, the first step is to talk to the Moses Center for Students for Disabilities. You can contact them at 212-998-4980 or email mosescsd@nyu.edu; see http://www.nyu.edu/life/safety-health-wellness/students-with-disabilities.html for more information. Before or after you speak with the Moses Center, I am happy to talk to you about accommodating you.