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**CATASTROPHE AND SOCIAL CHANGE**



**STUDIES IN HISTORY, ECONOMICS AND PUBLIC LAW**

EDITED BY THE FACULTY OF POLITICAL SCIENCE  
OF COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

Volume XCIV]

[Number 1

Whole Number 212

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# **CATASTROPHE AND SOCIAL CHANGE**

BASED UPON A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF  
THE HALIFAX DISASTER

BY  
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AMS PRESS  
NEW YORK

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY  
STUDIES IN THE  
SOCIAL SCIENCES

212

The Series was formerly known as *Studies in History,  
Economics and Public Law*.

Reprinted with the permission of Columbia University Press  
From the edition of 1920, New York  
First AMS EDITION published 1968  
Manufactured in the United States of America

Library of Congress Catalogue Card Number: 68-56683

AMS PRESS, INC.  
New York, N.Y. 10003

*Halifax*  
*is not a large city*  
*but there are those who love it*  
*who would choose to dwell therein*  
*before all cities beneath*  
*the skies*

65  
ALL SUCH  
CITIZENS, PAR EXCELLENCE,  
I COUNT IT AN HONOR TO DEDICATE  
THESE LINES



## PREFACE

THE following pages embody the result of an observational study of the social phenomena attendant upon one of the greatest catastrophies in history—the Halifax Disaster. The idea of the work was suggested while carrying out a civic community study of the disaster city under the direction of Professor F. H. Giddings of Columbia University.

The account deals first with the shock and disintegration as the writer observed it. Individual and group reactions are next examined in the light of sociological theory. The chapters on Social Organization are an effort to picture that process as it actually occurred.

The writer has also tried faithfully to record any important contribution which Social Economy was able to make in the direction of systematic rehabilitation. Special reference is made to private initiative and governmental control in emergency relief. This monograph is in no sense, however, a relief survey. Its chief value to the literature of relief will lie in its bearing upon predictable social movements in great emergencies.

Nor is the book a history of the disaster. It is rather, as the title suggests, an intensive study of two social orders, between which stands a great catastrophe, and its thesis is the place of catastrophe in social change.

In the preparation of this work, which the author believes to be the first attempt to present a purely scientific and sociological treatment of any great disaster, he has received invaluable assistance. A few grateful lines can ill-express his obligation to his Professors of the Department

of Sociology. To Professor F. H. Giddings the volume owes its inspiration and much of its social philosophy. To Professor A. A. Tenney it owes its present form and structure and any literary excellence it may possess. Professor R. E. Chaddock has read the manuscript throughout and has contributed many helpful suggestions. Professor S. M. Lindsay has read the chapter on Social Legislation, and Professor R. S. Woodworth of the Department of Psychology, that on Disaster Psychology. The author is under special tribute to Professor H. R. Seager, and to Professor Tenney, who most cheerfully sacrificed part of a summer vacation to read and revise the manuscript and proof.

Without the walls of the University there are also those who have given aid. The author gratefully acknowledges the assistance of Dr. Edward T. Devine of New York, of Mr. C. C. Carstens, of Boston, of Mr. Thomas Mackay, of Ottawa, and of Miss E. M. A. Vaughan, of the St. John Public Library. He has enjoyed the coöperation of many friends and fellow-townsmen of Halifax. He desires to thank particularly, Miss L. F. Barnaby, of the Halifax Citizens' Library, Miss J. B. Wisdom, of the Halifax Welfare Bureau, Rev. W. J. Patton of St. Paul's Church, Mr. W. C. Milner, of the Public Archives of Canada, Mr. L. Fred. Monaghan, Halifax City Clerk, Mr. G. K. Butler, Supervisor of Halifax Schools, Mr. R. M. Hattie, Secretary of the Halifax Town-Planning Commission, Dr. Franklin B. Royer, Director of the Massachusetts-Halifax Health Commission, Mr. E. A. Saunders, Secretary of the Halifax Board of Trade, Mr. E. H. Blois, Superintendent of Neglected and Delinquent Children, and last of all and most of all his friend of many years, Mr. A. J. Johnstone, editor of the *Dartmouth Independent*.

S. H. P.

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY, NEW YORK, OCTOBER, 1920.



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"This awful catastrophe is not the end but the beginning. History does not end so. It is the way its chapters open."—*St. Augustine.*

## INTRODUCTION

The "catastrophe" in sociological literature—The "catastrophic view" vs. progress in evolution—Factors in social change—The stimuli factors—What crises mean—Communities and great vicissitudes—Causes of immobility—Catastrophe and progress—Historic cases suggested for study.

There are many virgin fields in Sociology. This is one of the attractions the subject has for the scientific mind. But of all such fields none is more interesting than the factor of catastrophe in social change.

And strangely enough, if there are but few references to the problem in all our rapidly-growing literature, it is not because catastrophies are few. Indeed it would seem that with the advent of the industrial age, disasters grow more frequent every year.<sup>1</sup> Many are small, no doubt, touching but the life of a village or a borough—a broken dyke, a bridge swept out by ice, a caved-in mine. Others again write themselves on the pages of History—an Ohio flood, an Omaha tornado, a Chicago fire, a San Francisco earthquake, a Halifax explosion. Each in its own way inscribes its records of social change—some to be effaced in a twelve-month—some to outlast a generation. Records they are, for the most part unread. How to read them is the problem. And it may be that when readers have grown in number and the script is better known, we shall be able to

<sup>1</sup> "Within a score of years disasters . . . have cost thousands of lives, have affected by personal injury, or destruction of property no fewer than a million and a half persons and have laid waste property valued at over a billion dollars . . . the expectation based on past experience is that each year no less than half a dozen such catastrophies will occur." (Deacon J. Byron, *Disasters*, N. Y., 1918, p. 7.) This quotation refers to the United States alone.

seize the moment of catastrophe and multiply immeasurably its power for social good.

To define the term catastrophe is scarcely necessary. The dictionary calls catastrophe "an event producing a subversion of the order or system of things," and such as "may or may not be a cause of misery to man."<sup>1</sup> It is desirable however to limit the use of the term, in primary investigations at least, to those disasters which affect communities rather than states or nations, for restricted areas are more amenable to study. National cataclysms, such as war, famine, and financial panic are too general in character, and function on too grand a scale for satisfactory treatment, at least until the ground is cleared. It is necessary also to limit this investigation to those social changes which follow upon catastrophies, rather than precede them. For there are social effects which result from living in anticipation of disaster, such as are observable among communities in volcanic areas. Interesting as a broad study might be, it would be likely to lead the investigator too far afield into the realm of speculation. Nevertheless a general point of view is necessary to give meaning to even a limited treatment of the theme. For this purpose there may be contrasted the catastrophic view of history, as illustrated by that of the Hebrew peoples, and the modern conception of progress through evolution. The former looks upon history as a series of vicissitudes mercifully ending one day in final cataclysm. The spirit of apocalyptic expectancy prevails. Social conditions rest hopelessly static. Faith is pinned to a spiritual kingdom which can grow and can endure. Against this has been set an optimistic evolution, pictured like an escalade with resident forces lifting the

<sup>1</sup> Catastrophies are those unforeseen events which the Wells-Fargo express receipts used to call quaintly "Acts of God, Indians and other public enemies of the government."

world to better days. Progress becomes a smooth continuous growth. On the other hand the newer philosophy sees in history not necessarily the operation of progressive evolution but also of retrogressive evolution and cataclysm.<sup>1</sup> There are great stretches of smooth and even current in the stream, but always along the course are seen the rapid and the water-fall, the eddy and reversing tide. The latter is the general subject of this dissertation, and its thesis is the place of the water-fall. Only a very small, and specialized treatment is attempted; the great Niagaras must be left to abler hands.

The conception of social change as used in this monograph also needs definition. By social change is meant those rapid mutations which accompany sudden interferences with the equilibrium of society, break up the *status-quo*, dissipate mental inertia and overturn other tendencies resistant to structural modification. The various forces which initiate such disturbances are factors in social change. These factors may be intra-social,—within the group—such factors as operate in the regular social process, imitation and adaptation, for example; or they may be extra-social, “stimuli” factors—from without the group—such as, accidental, extraneous or dramatic events. Of the latter conquest may be one, or the sudden intrusion of a foreign element, or rapid changes of environment.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> If nature abhors a vacuum, she also abhors stagnation. Is there not reason behind all this action and reaction, these cycles and short-time changes which her observers note? May it not well be that the ever-swinging pendulum has a stir-up function to perform and that the miniature daily catastrophies of life are the things which keep it wholesome and sweet?

“The old order changeth yielding place to the new.  
And God fulfils Himself in many ways  
Lest one good custom should corrupt the world.”

—Tennyson, Alfred, *The Passing of Arthur*.

<sup>2</sup> Ross, Edward A., *Foundations of Sociology* (N. Y., 1905), ch. viii, p. 189.

These sudden changes are fully worthy of careful study by scientific method. However important the accumulation of impulses toward social transformation may be, there is often a single "precipitating factor" which acts as the "igniting spark" or "the knocking away of the stay-block," or "the turning of a lever."<sup>1</sup> It is among such extra-social or "stimuli" factors that catastrophe falls as a precipitating agent in social change.

The significance of crisis in social change likewise requires attention, and it will be clarifying to our thought at this point to distinguish carefully between crisis and catastrophe, and to inquire what the nature of the former really is. The word "crisis" is of Greek origin, meaning a point of culmination and separation, an instant when change one way or another is impending. Crises are those critical moments which are, as we say, big with destiny. Battles have crisis-hours when the tide of victory turns. Diseases have them—the seventh day in pneumonia, or the fourteenth day in typhoid fever. Social institutions afford numerous illustrations, such as the eighth year of marriage.<sup>2</sup> There are critical years of stress and strain—the ages of fourteen and forty in life-histories, the latter being according to Sir Robertson Nicoll the most dangerous hour of existence. Other crises are "hours of insight" in the world of thought, and hours of opportunity in the world of action,—that "tide in the affairs of men, which taken at the flood leads on to fortune," hours of doubt in religion "when all the gods are dead." "Crisis," Professor Shailer Mathews observes, "is something more than a relative term. It describes a situation which is no ordinary member of a line of antecedents and consequents, but one that assures radical change in the immediate future." He distinguishes

<sup>1</sup> Ross, *op. cit.*, p. 198.

<sup>2</sup> Jeune, Sir Francis, a celebrated judge in divorce cases.