

The Charisma of Impending Doom: Disaster Solidarity and Emergency Mentalities

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In the drive toward its ‘Global War on Terror’, the Bush administration famously claimed that one was either for ‘us’ or for the ‘terrorists’ – each and every man, woman, and child in America was suddenly reclassified as either an anti-terrorist combatant or an evildoer. Since there were no longer bystanders, everybody was also reclassified as a legitimate target of annihilation (Worrell, 2013). The sacralization of 9/11 resulted in the metamorphosis of all reactions into various phases of what amounted to an American jihad. The ‘Global War on Terror’ (i.e. the military aspect of post-Fordist speculative hegemony) is over, in name, but the holy war continues unabated (Worrell, 2011). Indeed, the days of periodic war have given way to continuous warfare on multiple fronts. Just as war has become a fulltime American occupation, natural and social disasters (‘superstorms’ and floods, rapacious energy extraction and the proliferation of ‘sacrifice zones’, collapsing markets and corporate bailouts, ballooning student and consumer debt, budgetary fiascos and austerity, manufactured political crises, and massacres, etc.) now tumble along unrelentingly (Austin and Clark, 2012; De la Barra, 2006; Fasenfest, 2010; Hassan, 2011). There is a propensity for self-destruction, just as we saw with the war on terror, to make the abnormal something sacred and, in so doing, risk discounting the value of everyday life in the mad dash to combat monsters. The charisma of the emergency cannot and will not increase the value of those who create value in the humdrum, routine world of the everyday.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, the American Federation of Teachers declared that the ‘superstorm’ ‘highlights [the] vital role of public employees’.

New York City public schools were closed all week. Some schools have become evacuation centers, host to families that have been displaced, and even pets that have been rescued from floodwaters and areas without power. Other schools are still closed due to damage or lack of electricity. Some teachers will be reporting to alternate sites for work, and the UFT is coordinating carpools on its Facebook page to help them. The union also has set up an emergency hotline for members. (American Federation of Teachers, 2012)

Look how useful and even altruistic union workers are in addition to simply teaching kids! In this age of disasters, apparently, we shall need the AFT and other unions more than ever. “‘Once again, we’re seeing how the working people of America pull together when things get hard and their efforts save lives,” said Vincent Alvarez, president of the New York City Central Labor Council’ (quoted in Shapiro, 2012). However, the unintended message communicated by labor is

different: disasters are now an opportunity for labor to participate in *atonement rituals* and genuflect to hyper-exploited and resentful workers flailing about in the private sector. As neo-liberalism continues to gut the working class, public workers are expected to not only partake in voluntary givebacks ('shared sacrifice' and other nonsense) but also apologize to society (via disaster relief) for earning something approximating a living wage. When labor adopts this logic for impression management and public relations purposes, not only are public workers reduced to boot-lickers who have to demonstrate some kind of altruistic (self-defacing) value beyond value produced, but also this undermines the attempt to sell labor as good for 'the economy' (i.e. jobs and corporate profits) by splitting labor in two: the mundane or profane and the extraordinary or charismatic – i.e. irrational.

Worse than using 'disaster' as an opportunity to demonstrate the social utility of labor is the fetishization or splitting of disasters into two species: the social and the natural (cf. Rigakos and Law, 2009). The social disaster that is neo-liberal capitalism is retroactively reclassified and normalized (actually naturalized) once labor makes its stand on the frontier of calamity – the social becomes naturalized and the natural becomes a 'spiritual' battlefield. This process also compartmentalizes (fetishizes) the role of organized labor as relevant to exceptional moments – making it, weirdly, related to the mentality of political theology; it also displaces blame from the creators of disaster and places responsibility upon victims to clean up the other's mess.

Only in disasters or emergencies, it will seem, are public workers *actually* useful: firefighters put out the occasional fire but are otherwise a social burden; police respond to crimes but their pensions are a millstone around the necks of the middle class. However, teachers, custodians, and so on, are not 'first responders' (unless the National Rifle Association has its way) and therefore do not fit into the disaster-emergency model of labor utility.

The current gun violence debate offers another view on this problem when we not only see recommendations to place armed police in every school (or weaponized janitors, parents, veterans, and vigilantes) but, additionally, hear the call to arm teachers and transform them into tactical first responders: Mrs. McMurphy teaches English but her real social value, her labor *vitality*, lies in her ability to put down a mass murderer with a handgun on Friday and then work the soup line on Saturday in the wake of the next Frankenstorm. The tolerance for labor or just collective bargaining is made palatable by labor's emergency preparedness instead of its power of value creation and insistence on a dignified life.

The logic of liquidating or perverting traditional institutions between the level of the family and the state has reached a crisis point. Between the unraveling family and the state behemoth are an endless series of contingent disasters that require a response, a SWAT team, evacuations, fire trucks, etc. Violence and catastrophe are now the norm and anybody with any value, it seems, will have been realigned with this reality. The public worker adopts a disaster mentality and a tumbling of disasters, one after another, becomes the opportunity to justify existence and display a new species of value: disaster-value.

Teaching, say, sociological theory may no longer suffice. One's 'calling' or specialization can only be justified so long as it is augmented with sniper skills. Once public workers are reclassified into disaster and non-disaster categories it will be incumbent upon 'regular' workers to not only make ritualized disaster appearances but pick up the slack in non-disaster moments: taking out the trash, cleaning office floors, mowing the grass, and so on. For the privilege of remaining underpaid, every opportunity for voluntary debasement will be taken to justify continued employment. For the 'disaster worker' a kind of moral power adheres, suggesting to all other forms of public work that they too should accrue disaster 'capital'. Sociology professors of the future may face a day when rifles, ladles, brooms, and plungers are essential tools of the trade.

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