H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Eric Klinenberg. *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002. xvii + 320 pp. $15.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-44322-5; $27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-44321-8.

Reviewed by Ann E. Larabee (Department of American Thought and Language, Michigan State University)

Published on H-Urban (July, 2003)

As I read Eric Klinenberg's *Heat Wave* this summer, the usually conservative World Meteorological Organization announced that global warming was wreaking havoc with record high temperatures in Europe, a rash of tornadoes in the United States, landslides and flooding in Sri Lanka, and a heat spike in India that has left over 1,400 people dead. Focusing on a single event, a 1995 heat wave in Chicago that killed some 700 people, Klinenberg's book is a timely warning that modern societies, prideful of their technological progress and public organization, may be least prepared to protect their most vulnerable citizens. Klinenberg argues that the heat wave took its heaviest toll on the elderly because of decaying urban conditions that produced fear and isolation and insensitive social structures that ignored them. Aiming at a "social autopsy of disaster," Klinenberg dissects Chicago's social institutions–from the public health system to the news media–that failed the victims.

With its sensitivity to cultural narratives, Klinenberg's book makes a contribution to recent works on the social construction of "natural" disaster, such as Ted Steinberg's *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disasters in America*, Mike Davis's *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster*, and Steven Biel's edited collection, *American Disasters*. Because of the national media-driven obsession with spectacle and catastrophe, U.S. scholars are most prominent in critical studies of natural disasters as historical and cultural events. The approach is quite distinct from narrow sociological investigations aimed at correcting faulty emergency management practices or sweeping theoretical treatises on the "risk society," as promulgated by Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck. Some salient conclusions of this work are:

1) Through a variety of often conflicting public narratives, disasters become focusing events that reveal the implicit workings of culture, including its gender, race, and class politics.

2) The most powerful members of society control the meaning and definition of disaster through denial, apologia, civic boosterism, etc., while ignoring and silencing the victims.

3) Purely scientific and technological explanations fail to grasp the social complexities of disaster and are often overwhelmed by them.

4) Though a prevailing cultural myth is that natural disaster is a social equalizer, its victims are most often the poor, who are concentrated in high-risk environments.

5) A natural disaster is always a human-made disaster because social conditions determine who is most vulner-

able and because the meaning of any disaster is culturally negotiated.

Klinenberg begins by examining why the heat wave, despite its high death toll, did not have the impact of other historic catastrophes, such as Hurricane Andrew and the Oklahoma City bombing. In keeping with Kai Erikson's thesis that slow environmental disasters are often overlooked as public traumas, Klinenberg argues that the incremental rise in temperature and the confusion in determining cause of death led to irresolution in naming or understanding the disaster. Even after statistical analysis led to the unmistakable conclusion that heat was the killer, the argument that the elderly had simply died of natural causes remained compelling. Thus, the powerful persuasion of the "natural" continued to overtake any exploration of the social. A commission appointed by Mayor Daly, under fire for the city's lack of response, explained in an overly neutral, unenlightening language that concrete buildings and pavement absorb heat and that the relationship between human bodies and the built environment is a complex one. The report, Klinenberg says, self-protectively ignored social factors such as the isolation of the elderly and the poor, suffocating in their stoking "single room occupancy dwellings."

Without overly simplifying the reasons for this isolation, Klinenberg critiques the view that elderly people freely choose an independent lifestyle, even with its risks, and are likely to rebuff any overly paternalistic intervention by the state. Instead, he concludes that the isolation and alienation that led to heat deaths arose from a complex set of social factors having to do with a decaying urban environment. Using a cartographic analysis, Klinenberg asks why there were many more heat deaths in the African-American community of North Lawndale than in the neighboring Latino community of South Lawndale, or Little Village. Discarding the stereotypical pseudoscientific ethnic and racial explanations that emerged after the heat wave, such as Latinos' supposed physical adaptation to hot climates, Klinenberg focuses effectively on the disintegration of North Lawndale, which left elderly African Americans stranded among abandoned lots and houses that attracted violent crime and created a climate of fear. Thus, the aged were afraid to go out into the streets for cool air or to open their doors to social workers checking up on them. Meanwhile, Little Village's open, lively, and sociable street life allowed the elderly to walk about to cool themselves off and for other residents to check up on their more vulnerable neighbors. Klinenberg concludes that "place-specific risk factors," such as "the quality of public spaces, the vigor of street-level commercial activities, and the centralization of support networks and institutions" all contributed significantly to the high death rate.

The city government could not acknowledge that its neglect of communities like North Lawndale led to more deaths than the Great Chicago Fire. And its refusal to admit accountability led to its bizarre decision, in subsequent summers, to continue turning off the water of poor, elderly people who couldn't pay their utility bills. Klinenberg castigates not only the city's disorganized, ineffective emergency response to the disaster, but the lack of social and economic support for vulnerable citizens. All this leads one to wonder how cities will respond to the spiking temperatures of global warming, especially since the lessons learned through disasters are often very short-lived indeed.

Klinenberg also examines the new media's response to the disaster, calling this chapter "The Spectacular City," but his usually insightful analysis is disappointing here. He takes the wrong turn of tediously examining how journalists make the news, rather than how the Chicago news constructed the heat wave. The conclusions are simplistic, such as the rather obvious point that television journalists look for dramatic footage. A more thorough grasp of other cultural and historical studies of disaster that take on the analysis of spectacle, image, and narrative would have helped the author here. There are also limitations to a "social autopsy of disaster," in that the author does not conclude much beyond the 1995 Chicago heat wave and its import for Chicago politics and government. Since this work is a doctoral dissertation, I would now invite the author to join the wider examination of the complex and often contested meanings of national and global disasters.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban

Citation: Ann E. Larabee. Review of Klinenberg, Eric, *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago.* H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. July, 2003.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7954

Copyright © 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.