

Cultures of Catastrophe

Natural disasters such as droughts, floods or earthquakes have always terrified and fascinated observers in equal measure. However, for historians these ‘normal exceptions’ to daily life offer unique opportunities. The way affected societies deal with disasters can reveal conflicts, inequalities and collective mentalities that otherwise remain hidden. In many cases the closer inspection of individual disasters also reveal them to be ‘cultural’ as well as ‘natural’ phenomena – with the structural or individual choices of the affected population often facilitating and prefiguring later catastrophic events. As a result the study of disaster has become a lively field of debate on the entanglements of humans and their (built) environment. Students in this field might explore individual disasters or a series/type of catastrophic events to answer questions such as:

- How did historical societies prepare or facilitate disaster?
- Are droughts, fires and floods natural, cultural or rather socionatural phenomena?
- Who suffered and who benefited from catastrophic events?
- Is there a trend from a religious to a secular framing of disasters?
- Are there specific ‘cultures of disaster’ to cope with such extraordinary events?
- Why do past (and current) societies find it so hard to adapt to natural disasters?

Students are also encouraged to revisit individual disasters from the Black Death, the Lisbon earthquake 1755, the Eruption of Mt Tambora in 1815, the potato blight of 1845-52 to Hurricane Katrina and explore their long prehistory, socionatural character or long-term consequences. They can also tackle individual cases to compare historical and contemporary or Western and non-Western ways of coping with disaster.

NB: The proposed themes are only meant to illustrate a range of possible topics. Students are also encouraged to bring in their own proposals and interests.