The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster

My title is taken from Rebecca Solnit: *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster* (2009), and I begin by discussing her book, before looking at some other, non-fictional, accounts of disasters and finally offering a comparison of what Solnit and others show of disaster and what the fictions considered in *Apocalypse in Crisis* show of catastrophe. The discussion of other non-fictional accounts of disaster throws light on the role of national psyche in response to disaster in Japan, the Soviet Union, and Britain, as compared to Solnit's mainly American examples. The comparison of disaster and catastrophe points to a degree of pessimism built into many fictions of apocalypse, especially recent ones, as against the positive political lessons that Solnit draws from disaster.

Here is a quick summary of what Rebecca Solnit draws from her accounts of a series of disasters. Disaster disrupts. For a while, normal life is impossible, and the prevailing order of things is suspended, or on the defensive. The survivors do not panic or form mobs that rape and loot. According to one authority, the prevailing movement is towards the site of disaster, rather than in flight away from it (195). People on the periphery of the disaster tend to be fearful and uncertain (16; 55 - William James), and those further way from that are often misinformed, but those closer, those immediately affected, remain calm and set about responding to the situation and solving problems. Authorities on the other hand tend to react slowly, ineffectively, and violently. They are subject to 'elite panic' (37; 127-130). Those on the spot – not the injured, necessarily, but those able-bodied, of all kinds - not just heroic men as in the Hollywood disaster movies - form a temporary utopian community. They organize, improvise; they find useful things to do; they collaborate with and find fellow feeling in complete strangers. The clear need to solve practical problems liberates them from the harassing uncertainties and constraints of daily life and gives them purpose and energy. They often feel happiness, even in the aftermath of death and destruction. They feel they have rediscovered what is important in life. They feel solidarity with others (of different races; the rich) who are all in the same situation. They are not usually traumatised – Solnit criticises the tendency to assume that the distress and anxiety natural to disaster means that people are traumatised; the inflation of the latter term does no good to those who really are traumatised.

The achievement of the book is to illustrate and establish that disaster has this effect, consistently, and that those who expect and proclaim that it turns people into panicking mobs who need the firm hand of authority, or the help of a hero, are wrong. *A Paradise Built in Hell* has other, broader ambitions, however. It sets out to sketch how this post-disaster utopia points the way to a better kind of society and life.

This sudden, emergent utopia is temporary, and not always as perfect as the above summary might suggest. Its quality depends on the nature of the disaster and the nature of the community that hits it. Solnit is not always consistent on this point. Sometimes she emphasises how disaster temporarily frees us from the loneliness, competitiveness and anomie that passes for normal life in modern times (107-8); sometimes she emphasises the already existent richness of community that survivors could draw upon – the day to day community and sharing that was part of life in New

Orleans even though it was poor and crime-ridden;[1] the way New Yorkers were used to a crowded street life that involved walking (she speculates that people in other car-dominated American cities could not have handled the pedestrian evacuation from the disaster area that took place in New York City on 9/11, 188-9); the way people in Mexico City, though they had withdrawn from their corrupt politics, were used to communal life and gathering, and experienced in and involved in the dramas of political upheavals.

These facts – that people remain calm, discover solidarity, and organise in practical ways in the aftermath of disaster – are known to those who study disasters, and are met with in different degrees in all the disasters Solnit focuses on or mentions – the San Francisco earthquake of 1906, the huge explosion in Halifax Newfoundland in 1917, the Mexico City earthquake of 1985, 9/11 in New York City, Hurricane Katrina, and, in passing, the Blitz, and Chernobyl. (She does not discuss the recent disasters in Asia, though Richard Llyod Parry's *Ghosts of the Tsunami* confirms her contentions as regards the Japanese earthquake and tsunami.) These facts are not known to the general public, however, and they are repeatedly forgotten by governments and central agencies when they are brought to their attention, though Solnit thinks things may be improving in the US in that respect. They are replaced by a myth, believed by governments, promulgated almost, it seems, reflexively, by journalists and pundits (on the Left, Naomi Klein and Timothy Garton Ash figure unimpressively), and shaping Hollywood disaster movies (120-122). The basis of the myth is undemocratic to the point of being anti-democratic. According to the myth, ordinary people become a mob when disaster happens; the members of the mob either flee in blind panic or (especially if they are non-whites - this is not spelt out but it is crucial in the responses to Hurricane Katrina) they turn to looting and raping. Behind this view, which surfaces in the aftermaths of many disasters, and, unfortunately, is acted on, is the notion that there is an essential substratum of the primitive in humans, this is released, or emerges, when civilization and social decency (assumed to be mere veneers, at least in ordinary people) are cracked open (for instance, 88-91). These helpless or dangerous people need the help of a heroic Hollywood actor, in the case of the disaster movies, or they need to be policed, repressed, shot on sight, prevented from getting anywhere near the disaster area, as regards the response of government and army. Government response is usually slow, hampered, and ineffective, because bureaucracy is not good in sudden emergency; as control is lost (the disaster itself shatters it at first, the failure of the official response then prolongs its absence), the elite suspicion and fear of ordinary people kicks in. Most scenarios preparing for disaster in the Cold War – and often, later – assumed that the problem was how to control the panicking or looting mobs, though the evidence and the sociological studies showed that this assumption was mistaken. The assumption is often that the danger from panic is greater than that from the disaster itself; the protection of property is given more importance than the saving of lives, and this protection often takes violent forms.[2] This is elite panic. 'Imagining the public is a danger, they [the authorities] endanger the public' (130): information is

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[1] In the case of Hurricane Katrina, however, the temporary utopia emerged more among the volunteers who came from elsewhere and stayed, than among the locals, many of whom, of course, were left in the limbo of a badly handled evacuation that set them far from the city.

[2] After Katrina there were also murderous vigilantes, engaged in a sort of race war, though claiming to protect property from marauding mobs.

withheld lest it give rise to panic, movement is restricted, property is protected by shoot on sight police and soldiers who sometimes kill people returning to their homes, trying to rescue survivors, or breaking into stores to requisition supplies in the absence of help from the authorities (always defined as 'looting').

A Paradise Built in Hell mainly concentrates on the positive side of the popular response to disaster, the temporary utopia. This is the side that is neglected, ignored or obfuscated, not only by the official view, but by pundits, editorialists, and many journalists, so it needs emphasis. The heroes of 9/11, in her account, were of almost every kind, white and black, Jewish, Asian, Moslem, women and men, gay. Solnit aims to build on this positive history to suggest the social and human potential for a more widespread and permanent utopia of love, generosity and mutual aid. If these qualities are natural to humans, or anyway natural enough to be drawn into action very frequently and among very diverse people in response to disaster, then they can be built upon more generally. Solnit is joining the various thinkers who emphasise ways in which humans are naturally social and co-operative, though she is also defining how this is a potential that needs some pre-existing conditions to bring it out. This view of what humans naturally can be replaces a contrary view, which is seen as false and also as self-interested.

Solnit is surely right about how elite panic embraces this view for its own reasons: to regain the power disrupted by the disaster – most evident in how the aftermath of 9/11 was channeled into war; to restore its privilege as the group that claims to know about power and organization. This is the view of human nature that in effect underlies the 'normality' that disaster disrupts. It can be seen as underpinning capitalism, consumerism, and competition; in the aftermath of disaster it is expressed as the veneer theory. Yet there's no use displacing one view of an underlying human nature (underlying our civility is the reality of our brutality, or anyway our capacity for brutality, panic, and so on) with another (underlying our usual acceptance of capitalist 'normality' is a capacity for love and co-operation). 'Normality' itself must be seen as *un*natural, a condition of anomie, isolation, and individualism which is the product of the triumph of capitalism. It must be seen as both real and false. Perhaps the notion of something underlying, derived from a metaphor almost unavoidable in thinking about the swings and shifts of behaviour, needs to be discarded altogether. Both pictures of the 'natural' point at the same time to a reality and to an ideology. This is made plain in the analysis of the behaviour of the elite, which is seen as subscribing to a false view of human nature, and then acting on it in such a way that it becomes true, partly as real actions (soldiers shooting on sight, survivors virtually imprisoned in a hellish New Orleans), partly as a myth that is widely propagated. Yet, when we think about normality, we don't conclude that it is simply and wholly a state of anomie and alienation. The situation is rather that the disruption of the ruling order prompts people to see these alienated aspects of their lives when the situation has helped them to act very differently for a while, releasing the other potentials that the view of humans as co-operative stresses. The help that comes to the place of disaster from elsewhere as well as from within the city – the supplies, the crowds of volunteers who sometimes stay and work for months or longer – suggests a good deal of non-alienated social life persisting in churches, in activist and alternative groups, simply in idealists of all kinds. Solnit I think feels it as misleading and dangerous that this kind of unalienated life is often associated with the private not the public, with lovers, families, the private economy of gift and exchange. She wants to emphasise how it needs to be part of the

broader public sphere.[3] Co-operation and even love *among strangers* is what she most asks us to value, and indeed it does have a glow and a freshness that is lacking to the more routine co-operation among friends and lovers and colleagues. But at times she makes a too strict division between private and public. Elsewhere, for instance in *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (2005), she explores the value and depth, rather than the alienatedness, of being solitary, in meditation, in nature. And certain kinds of freely exchanging solidarity exist in public life already, to the degree that (in spite of many impediments) they exist in workplaces, among people who are strangers in the sense that the vagaries of employment and appointment have thrown them together in some common task which they often value for its own sake, in spite of the pressures to compete and to monetise what they are doing.

Disaster and Catastrophe

A disaster of the kind that Solnit discusses is a particular kind of event. It is local, though widespread in the locality, and it is natural – earthquake or hurricane, though very many aspects of its destructiveness will have been shaped or worsened by political arrangements, greeds, and failures. (The horrendous explosion of the ammunition ship in Halifax harbour was an incident in the history of the First World War, but it had the shape of a natural disaster.) Solnit points out that in the aftermath of natural disaster the sense of the natural as the unquestioned way things are is likely to be weakened – especially if the ruling order fails in the aftermath of the disaster (160). It is interesting that Solnit points out that Hurricane Katrina was not so much a disaster as a catastrophe, and Katrina gives rise to the bleakest balance sheet of all the events discussed; the temporary utopia does come into existence but so does a condition of abandonment and suffering that this local help cannot really cope with, and the longer aftermath with its greed and ineptitude (for instance, the abolition of the public school system in New Orleans) suggests that most of the change has been for the worst.

Broader disasters amounting to catastrophe and lacking the focus of a centre of destruction make it much harder for a temporary popular utopia to come into existence, and this is what we are facing more and more since *A Paradise Built in Hell* was published in 2009 – the Covid virus, which put the weight on government and those with scientific knowledge and medical and nursing skill from the beginning and left the rest of the population to some degree (but not totally) as passive and more or less compliant; and global heating, at least insofar as its local disasters are becoming so widespread and repetitive as to outdistance the responses both of ordinary people and of the authorities (though with floods and fires the situation is developing and changing from week to week). I think Solnit knows well that any book about the contemporary scene is hostage to the immediate future. Obama, a hopeful and uplifting sign, was succeeded by Trump, product and metastasis of the corruption of the Republican style of the Bush years. The signs of hope in Mexico and in Nicaragua which Solnit points to are a lot harder to see now than they were in the early years of the century. But then Solnit is not really looking for political change at the top, such as produced Obama and

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[3] See Martin Jay's discussion of the disagreements between Agnes Heller and Hannah Arendt on the nature of the political and the public sphere, the realm of freedom and the realm of necessity. Solnit is saying that responding to necessity opens the way to the realm of freedom. Martin Jay, 'Women in Dark Times: Agnes Heller and Hannah Arendt, *Force Fields*, 1993, 64-65.

Biden as well as Trump. She sets out to define a utopia that is essentially local and working in multiple ways at the grassroots, trying to foster the kind of humanity that burst into life in the weeks after the disasters she looks at.

Apocalyptic fiction tends to be committed to a pessimism which it is Solnit's aim to counteract. Apocalypse involves not just disaster but global catastrophe and the end of material civilization everywhere, though in fact most apocalyptic fictions are local in scope, so the issues that Solnit raises about community and sociality are still very relevant, even though the people on the spot can't expect help and volunteers - or interference from authority - from elsewhere – elsewhere is in the same plight and so is authority. What kind of sociality, or regression to violence, do the characters in their limited areas exhibit, then? The answer mostly is, they exhibit neither the festival of love and generosity (carnival does sometimes have a place – to be discussed in a moment) nor the regression to violence. They can be a bit passive and unenterprising, but peaceful and co-operating, as in *Earth Abides* (chapter 2). They can stubbornly but quietly persist in normal domestic life as doom approaches, as in *On the Beach* (chapter 2), where it is a given that nothing can be done to avert global doom, and as in *Girlfriend in a Coma*, where it is clear that normal life was already, before the catastrophe, a degraded consumerist façade, barely hiding emptiness (chapter 7). There can be signs both of co-operation and of the primitive, but both of them observed as if from a detached and puzzled distance, as in *The Memoirs of a Survivor* (chapter 5). Carnival appears in Ballard's apocalyptic novels, especially in *The Drought*, in the form of manic impersonations, inversions of roles, but it is individualistic, not communal: the various characters who assume roles and shed normal purposes do so as separate individuals, or in the course of dominating others, as Strangman does with Kerans and Beatrice in *The Drowned World* (both novels are discussed in chapter 3). The Solnitian effect of local disaster giving rise to helping community is dramatized several times in *Green Earth*,[4] and this in the context of a rising general and global movement to alleviate climate change, though this movement involves also conventional politics and the mobilising of the bureaucracy of science.

The effect is different in two more recent novels in which apocalypse is in progress in the city, *Cosmopolis* and *Kraken*, and both suggest how festivity (taking over the street) and shedding of normal roles can liberate and point to a better kind of society, but can also make a space for violence (*Cosmopolis* and *Kraken* are discussed in chapter 8). The funeral of Brutha Fez in *Cosmopolis* is carnivalesque (and maybe related to the jazz funeral that Solnit mentions in her treatment of New Orleans, as well as being a transformation of the conventional American parade), the anti-capitalist demonstration has a nastier and more threatening edge – the demonstrators are confronting people rather than being part of the people. The proliferation of street events, festivals, demonstrations, occupations, crowd events (see also the scene of 'the last rave' in *Cosmopolis*) which Solnit touches on has sometimes a disturbing edge to it in DeLillo. This may reflect his customary style of detachment, aloofness, which is evident in his other treatments of urban apocalypse (*Falling Man*, his take on 9/11, comes to focus repeatedly on the solitary, as with the character who ends up lost in the world of gambling; the falling man of the title is carnivalesque in a general way, but completely solitary, not part of any carnival; *The Silence*, treating another urban apocalypse, is steeped in anomie, passivity, the breakdown of language). It may also, however, reflect the churn of contemporary movements and occasions, whereby

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[4] See 319-320 of the discussion of *Green Earth* in *Apocalypse in Crisis*.

something hopeful can quickly turn routine, or nasty, or (as with demonstrations and angry gatherings in the time of Trump) can be appropriated and inverted, love and appeal to decency become violence and threat. Note how everyone at the Capitol invasion and everyone at Trump rallies is costumed, bedecked with badges, face-painted, as if in parody of carnival in its more positive manifestations. And notice how in *Kraken*, set in a world in which the old rules do not apply, and realms and categories are inverted, the malign adjust and flourish as well as the decent. This danger that a phenomenon analogous to carnival might embrace and liberate everyone, good and bad, is also explored in China Miéville's *The Last Days of New Paris*.

The broader issue that is raised by the comparison of Solnit's discussion of disaster and the depiction of catastrophe in fictions of apocalypse is whether the founding premise of the latter avoids or ignores too many of the possibilities that Solnit shows as emerging in disaster. If the disaster is a catastrophe, that is, is global, then help from elsewhere cannot happen, and, it may be, work in community or to remake a community will be futile. Communal effort of this kind is possible in the postwar novels discussed in chapter 2, but after this it fades from view. Suspending the power of the state and of the capitalist system can release various energies, as Solnit shows; eliminating them together with most people and most cities, as in apocalyptic novels, can release other feelings, most vividly in Ballard's apocalyptic novels. More recent novels show disaster less as a definable event that can be coped with and more as a condition in which everyone is immersed.

National Psyche and Communal Behaviour

Solnit mostly discusses disasters that happened in the United States (or North America, if we include the Halifax explosion), yet it seems that what is in question is human nature in general and in particular what reality might underlie our 'normal' behaviour. How much of the response to disaster is conditioned by national culture? (The same question could be asked of the imagination of apocalypse, though *Apocalypse in Crisis* does not pursue it because it is based on discussions of British and American novels.) There is plenty of non-fictional material for comparative judgement: a trio of texts about Japanese disasters, very relevant because Japanese culture is monocultural and highly values solidarity: John Hersey, *Hiroshima*; Richard Lloyd Parry, *Ghosts of the Tsunami*; Haruki Murakami, *Underground: the Tokyo Gas Attack and the Japanese Psyche.* Svetlana Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, gives us the grassroots experience of and feelings about the Chernobyl disaster; Andrew O'Hagan's long article in the London Review of Books ('The Tower', 7 June 2018, 3-43) is a fierce narrative of reactions to the burning of Grenfell Tower. All but that last of these texts are based on interviews with survivors, so that in that respect they begin from the sympathetic attention to ordinary people that also marks Solnit.

Hiroshima gives the responses of five survivors of the attack. The book focusses tightly on their responses, knowledge, and ignorance: they at first think the attack is confined to their neighbourhood, they have no context for its especially horrible features, though they have experience of 'conventional' bombing; they react and act with impressive energy and kindness, given how shocked and bewildered they are, and in that respect *Hiroshima* confirms *A Paradise Built in Hell*. The Japanese government is slow to react and no help in the crucial early days after the attack, and the American occupation authorities busy themselves censoring information about it and thwarting the work of Japanese scientists: the authorities figure much as in Solnit. *Hiroshima*

notes how the culture of solidarity tilts towards obedience and apology, but here we are still in imperial Japan (many of those who hear Hirohito announcing Japan's surrender on the radio as so moved that he is speaking to them that they don't take in that Japan is surrendering).

Underground records a similar response to an attack that is also completely puzzling at the time, Aum Shinrikyo's sarin attack on passengers on the Tokyo underground railway: ordinary people help, the authorities are slow to act. This time, of course, the attack is indigenous, so that Murakami's reconstruction is following the actions of the apparently ordinary individuals who released the poison as well as the other ordinary individuals who did what they could to help the ill and dying. As a result, the quality of randomness and arbitrariness that prevails in all of these disasters, the fact that there is no clear pattern to individual survival or death (or action as murderer) is more disturbing in this case.

Ghosts of the Tsunami catches the uncanny, monstrous power of the giant wave (see for instance p.134) and the bewilderment of witnesses, but again it is the resilience of those who search for survivors and then for corpses that is also highlighted. The response of the authorities, even in the phase of cleaning up, is often clumsy (see for instance the protest of the schoolboy who survived – the site of the school is not just rubble, it's a place of memories; p.213). Lloyd Parry's account of the later behaviour of survivors is more mixed: Japanese people are slow to complain or protest, Japan suffers a 'democratic deficit', by which the failure of politics is treated as something natural (179-180). Protest does gather force, but *Ghosts of the Tsunami* also emphasises the lonely work and struggles of isolated individuals, fighting or coping with the 'ghosts', the residue of trauma as Japan's traditional cultural imaginary shapes them.

I suggested that all the texts discussed in this section rely on interviews with ordinary people; Svetlana Alexievich's *Chernobyl Prayer* takes this to an extreme. Hersey, Lloyd Parry and Murakami guide us quietly through a sequence of events while keeping to the experience of those involved; Alexievich does intervene from time to time and scholars have suggested that her books are more shaped than might appear, but *Chernobyl Prayer* does give the feeling of unmediated talk, outpourings of memory and feeling. There is no overarching narrative assembled by a detached author; there are painful episodes. The disaster is on-going and has pitched survivors into a world in which time is not progressing, and there is instead repetition, an angry or pained circling, a bumping up against perennial and stubborn failings: all things that the basis of the book in monologues brings out, because of their (natural, but here intensified) backtrackings and repetitions. We gather a picture of Belorussian (really, late Soviet) culture – largely from the ferocious criticisms of those who are part of it (163, 211, 179). We see how people's immediate responses and actions were shaped by memories of the Second World War (60, 134, 145, 173, 181), and how this led to heroism and waste, and we see how Chernobyl, unlike any of the other disasters treated in these texts (even, in Hersey's account, Hiroshima) brought about a rupture, a final loss of belief in the Soviet system, though this sense of a historical break has to be qualified by the very strong sense that people are still mired in the aftermath – reinforced by the repetition of the fact that the radioactive pollution will last forever.

The Grenfell Tower fire is – very approximately – comparable to the Chernobyl disaster in being the result of carelessness and corruption, and Andrew O'Hagan's account and analysis brings out a major difference. In a liberal democratic society, those responsible for the disaster can be named and blamed, and the response is anger aimed at them rather than the fierce self-criticism accompanied by despair that

dominated the responses of Alexievich's interviewees. There is a twist, however. O'Hagan is sceptical and critical of the angry protests and the quick allotment of blame. He feels this illustrates the toxic unhealth of British society as surely as did the carelessness and corruption which led to or at least worsened the fire itself. I don't think that later commentators have either agreed with him or shown where he is wrong. In this case, in O'Hagan's account, British popular culture can't find the political forms or spaces to make sense of a disaster – and in this case there was much less chance for ordinary people to act to help in the immediate aftermath than in the other disasters discussed in this section and in Solnit. There is perhaps an analogy with Hurricane Katrina in Solnit's account, less positive than the other disasters she treats.

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