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Advocacy After Bhopal: Environmentalism, Disaster, New Global Orders, by Kim Fortun

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BOOK REVIEWS

Advocacy After Bhopal: Environmentalism, Disaster, New Global Orders. By Kim Fortun. University of Chicago Press, 2001. 413 pp. \$55.00.

Ethnographer Kim Fortun examines the Bhopal Disaster through the lens of an activist, addressing such issues as globalization, disaster relief, and environmental politics in the aftermath of one of the world's most noted chemical disasters. Fortun employs a descriptive analysis of the disaster that breaks free from the more traditional forms of research so prevalent in the social science of today. For the empirical purist, *Advocacy After Bhopal*, can be a disconcerting read. In lieu of laying out a quantitatively "sound" thesis, Kim Fortun seeks to immerse the reader in a qualitative examination of the tragedy at Bhopal. *Advocacy After Bhopal* starts from the premise that the Bhopal Disaster is without a boundary of space, time, or concept. Fortun seeks to divert from a more normative approach to disaster research that is confining and restrictive. In her research, Kim Fortun uncovered gross inequity in the provision of services to those most devastated by the chemical release at Bhopal, India in 1984. One interpretation of Fortun's work leads to the conceptualization of a timeline of tragedy. On this theoretical timeline, the tragedy at Bhopal begins before the actual release of deadly gases. Fortun argues that globalization is partly to blame for the deaths and lax recovery efforts at Bhopal, and this premise is inferred in the author's discourse and analysis. In the Introduction of *Advocacy After Bhopal*, Fortun argues that various factors contributed to the death and destruction. Poverty, corporatism, bureaucracy, and trade liberalization all worked in unison to bring about the horrific loss at Bhopal.

Advocacy After Bhopal examines how the rule of law failed in addressing the needs and concerns of those injured by the tragedy. Soon after the chemical release, victims and their representatives initiated civil law suits in India. Plagued by politics and power struggles, the Indian legal system grappled with the determination of liability.

Employing the risk and vulnerability model of disaster research, Fortun seeks to re-interpret disaster from a deconstructionist perspective of postmodernism. Critical of the judicial response to the disaster at Bhopal, Fortun holds the law in contempt, likening it to a form of societal exorcism, and a means to protect globalization (p.7). Despite her demonization of the law in this particular case, Fortun recognizes the need for activists to involve themselves in the legal process.

Fortun holds that established institutions in the United States and India sought to employ litigation as a means to reach a definite end to the disaster. With the financial health of Union Carbide at issue, Fortun contends that the final settlement agreement, ratified by the Indian Supreme Court, served to silence those still hurt by the tragedy at Bhopal. In this sense, the settlement with victims served to finalize any competing interests in enviro-globalization matters stemming from the tragedy. Following Fortun's logic, the litigation and eventual settlement served as political "rituals" designed to reinforce the power-elites and corporate development within India. Fortun holds to the premise that Indian Chief Justice Pathak's decision in the settlement failed to address the local impacts that the Bhopal Disaster may have made for future generations in the afflicted areas, those localities hardest hit by both poverty and loss of life. From Fortun's perspective, the legal answer to the Bhopal Disaster did not provide a solution for social change. Rather, the settlement simply provided financial compensation to those victims that were capable of establishing legal standing before the courts.

Kim Fortun also addresses the Bhopal Disaster through analyzing the differences between "stakeholder" and "enunciatory" models of community in the world of enviro-politics. According to Fortun, a "stakeholder" community is one in which various parties that have a stake in institutional decisions come together to reach consensus on particular issues. Fortun critiques this model by demonstrating that such communities may seek to attempt to manage diversity through forcing consensus. In contrast, Fortun approves of the enunciatory model of community. Under this construct, participants in an enunciatory community have the freedom to think differently and not have a basic consensus on particular matters. Instead parties with conflicting views of the world might still come together and collaborate on central issues of key importance without the need to reach a consensus on every level:

In my account, stakeholder communities become "enunciatory communities." Some, like gas victims, are relatively tied to one locale; others are more dispersed and include corporate and government officials; medical and legal professionals; and environmental activists working at various tiers of regional, national, and transnational organizations" (p.11).

In *Advocacy After Bhopal*, Fortun examines how enunciatory communities addressed the Bhopal Disaster and how these communities dealt with the socio-political and economic forces involved in the tragedy. According to Fortun, enunciatory communities are created by "double binds," which the author describes as situations that create dual obligations that are related, are of equal value, and yet are incongruent with one another (p.13). Fortun claims that double binds predominated

the social and physical environment before and after the actual disaster occurred at Bhopal.

Based on the analysis of double binds, Fortun claims that enunciatory communities are similar to global disasters in the sense that both are emergent and crosscutting forces of change. In the author's resistance to macrotheorization, *Advocacy After Bhopal* examines how emergent enunciatory communities of various groups responded to the double binds produced by the litigation involved in the Bhopal tragedy, as well as in political power structures.

An interesting aspect of *Advocacy After Disaster* is the author's focus on the varying definitions and interpretations of the Bhopal Disaster. After tragedy struck Bhopal, residents were left with more questions than answers. Debates developed over how the centralized hospital system in India fell short in the treatment of the injured and dying. Many residents began to question the speed in which recovery efforts took place, blaming the Indian government for a lack of planning in the response and recovery phases. At Bhopal, numerous stakeholders responded to the disaster, with divergent agendas among them. Some activists and residents claimed that Union Carbide was to blame while others looked at the disaster in a more abstract way, blaming unchecked globalization. Fortun interweaves the various social positions taken by different groups into a mosaic of ethnography. Blending the word with spirit, Fortun demonstrates how the Bhopal Disaster represented a struggle for change and social justice. Making note of the diversity of theory and discourse on the disaster at Bhopal, Fortun shows how competing perspectives of political economy developed among the various stakeholders.

Advocacy after Disaster serves as a reassessment of what advocacy is and can become. For students of activism or social causes, Fortun's work provides an alternative approach to progressive thinking and the opportunities for collaborative efforts during times of crisis. For the traditionalist, *Advocacy After Bhopal* provides the reader with an understanding of how advocacy develops, and the diversity within such causes. Fortun seeks to examine the rhetorical stage on which the various actors of environmentalism perform. Demonstrating that advocates can come in many political persuasions, Kim Fortun explains how differences in world view shape and mold social, legal, and political behavior.

In early 1989, the Bhopal case led to a settlement of \$470 million. According to Fortun, many of the victims were not capable of maintaining standing to sue, while others opted out of lawsuits for various reasons. Using the out-of-court settlement as a backdrop, Fortun demonstrates how the effects of a disaster can continue after legal

settlements are reached and barristers depart. From a legal standpoint, Fortun's work calls into question normative perspectives of jurisprudence and traditional forms of conflicts of law theory. Scholars of law and society, as well as those of the critical schools of jurisprudence, may find Fortun's work of interest.

Key ethnographic questions permeate throughout *Advocacy After Bhopal*, with Fortun asking the reader to consider what double binds called advocates to speak, and how advocates strategized and developed their own roles in dealing with the Bhopal Disaster (p.21). In many ways, Fortun's work demonstrates how societal symbols, norms, and values can be greatly influenced during the various stages of a global tragedy. Through examining the Bhopal Disaster from various levels of concept and description, Fortun has created very interesting and thought-provoking work in the emergent area of disaster studies and discourse.

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Water and American Government: The Reclamation Bureau, National Water Policy, and the West, 1902-1935. By Donald J. Pisani. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press. 2002. Pp. xviii, 394. \$49.95. (This review copyrighted by the American Historical Association. Reprinted with permission.)

This volume is the second in a series of three by Donald J. Pisani that began with *To Reclaim a Divided West: Water, Law, and Public Policy, 1848-1902* (1992); the author plans a concluding work taking the story from the New Deal to the 1980s. As the titles and dates suggest, Pisani has undertaken the most comprehensive survey to date of water policy in the United States. Focusing on the reclamation era, this volume is informative, painstaking, firmly rooted in archival sources, by turns both analytical and descriptive: in short, altogether reliable. It is a book for specialists in the field of water policy, yet copious detail is also relieved by engaging case study comparisons and cogent political interpretations. Underpinning the whole is a bold demonstration of how an ideologically inspired and politically constructed policy regime results in abject failure judged by standards of equity and efficiency.

Prevailing scholarship interprets federal reclamation and related programs for western development at the turn of the twentieth century as exemplars of a new and progressive era dedicated to administrative reform and personified in Teddy Roosevelt. Pisani demurs. "The thesis of this book is simple. Historians have portrayed federal reclamation as a