

Book Review

Learning from a Real-World Catastrophe

Susan Opotow and Zachary Baron Shemtob. (2018). *New York after 9/11*. New York: Fordham University Press (Empire State Editions) (278 pp., \$30).

Laboratory experiments are the gold standard in many social sciences: translate an event or other phenomenon into an experimental paradigm involving imagined “scenarios” or carefully scripted interactions, manipulate one or more “independent variables,” and observe the effects on “dependent variables.” Such experimentation has helped us understand many aspects of everyday life.

But horrifying and overwhelming events defy the possibility of creating laboratory analogues. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 are a vivid example. Even today, the mere phrase *9/11* evokes vivid memories—not only in those who experienced them directly but also in the hundreds of millions of people who watched them (often over and over) on television screens. For studying such an unexpected and unprecedented catastrophic event, experimentation may not be useful. For example, consider the following thought experiment: Imagine it is September 10, 2001 and you are conducting a psychological experiment in lower Manhattan. Having instructed your participants to “imagine that two airplanes have just hit and demolished the towers of the World Trade Center,” you then ask them “What will you do?” Would their hypothetical responses be at all comparable to how they would actually act a day later, after the real event? How could we know? And so perhaps the most fruitful study of such “world historic” events should begin with narratives and archives, tracing the manifold personal, interpersonal, and structural processes that went before and came after.

This is just one reason why *New York after 9/11*, edited by Susan Opotow and Zachary Baron Shemto, is especially welcome. The book is a collection of scholarly articles from a wide variety of disciplines (psychology, sociology, trauma medicine and psychiatry, emergency management, public safety, environmental health, architecture, human rights, and law). The common focus is how the attacks and their aftermath affected New York City: its people, the texture of its urban life, and its memorialization of 9/11 in architecture and personal memory. Both

specialists interested in an overview of a specific topic, and general readers looking for a broad account of long-term the impact of that terrible day and the resilience of those who experienced it directly, will find this book helpful and rewarding.

Two introductory chapters, by the editors and Patrick Sweeney, lay out themes that unite the diverse chapters: continuum of “moving on” (at the extreme, denial) versus “memory” (at the extreme, obsession); practicality versus emotion; and the power of money versus a pluralism of perspectives.

Hirofumi Minami and Brian Davis use the linking phrase “Ground Zero” to compare 9/11 with another “unspeakable trauma”—Hiroshima after the 1945 U.S. atomic bombing. They develop a “psychoanalysis of cities” to understand suppressed memories, survivor identity, collective healing, and the politics of memorialization in both cities.

The chapters by Daniel Libeskind (architect of the master plan for reconstruction) and Michael Arad (designer of the 9/11 Memorial) give fascinating accounts of how these concerns played out in details of design: for example, how to bring the city into the site, or how to place individual victims’ names on the memorial panels. These chapters present an excellent occasion to ponder links between architecture and psychology.

Opotow and Karyna Pryiomka carry these themes forward in their account of the design and contents of the underground September 11 Memorial Museum. Who would have thought that a reinforced concrete “slurry wall”—built in 1966 as part of the original World Trade Center construction to hold back the Hudson River and never intended to be visible to the public—would become a key artifact in that museum? Or that a description of its crucial role in 9/11—“it had stood its ground when everything around it was collapsing” (p. 237)—could move a reader to tears? Any visitor realizes that the WTC site has become not only a place of memorial and tourist pilgrimage, but also a “living part of New York City” (p. 88) that brings together diverse groups of people—business commuters going to work, nearby neighbors who have “resettled” lower Manhattan after 9/11, schoolchildren, and ordinary people relaxing and reflecting.

The chapter by Norman Groner recounts improvements in safety codes for tall buildings since 9/11. Unfortunately, the same story cannot be told about other aspects of security. Writing on “urban security,” Charles Jennings concludes that interagency rivalries, bureaucratic inertia, politics, tight funds—forces that increased destruction and hampered rescues on 9/11—are alive and well in New York City, making urban life more fragile than it need be.

Even more distressing is the chapter by Michael Crane and nine others on “Health impacts of 9/11.” It now seems clear that much advice circulated to the public shortly after 9/11 was designed to avoid panic and get back to “normal” as quickly as possible, but at the cost of minimizing risks and thus exacerbating negative health effects. One example can stand for many: a New York City Health Department advisory circulated shortly after 9/11 (reproduced on page 152)

contains the astonishing assertion that “Pregnant women and young children do not need to take additional precautions.” Psychologists studying “trust in government” would do well to ground their research in such vivid and sustained concrete examples of public evasion, misrepresentation, denial, and simple lies. How would we expect citizens to react to such a government?

The record on PTSD effects of 9/11 is complex, but the chapter by Ari Lowell and five others lists studies that identify different risk factors for different populations (people with high exposure, first responders, utility workers, community members) and highlight protective effects of social support. Gaps in the data (e.g., lack of follow-up, few recent studies of affected children) suggest priorities for future catastrophe policy.

After 9/11, the New York Police Department took it upon itself to begin systematic surveillance of Muslim residents, often coercing them to spy on each other. The chapter by Diala Shamas concludes that there is no evidence that this program was effective or even produced criminal leads; yet it had major effects on its targets—especially sense of trust, self-disclosure, and social development among young Muslims. (It is interesting that *Saudi Arabian* Muslims were not a particular focus of police surveillance, since 15 of the 19 hijackers of 9/11 were Saudi nationals.)

Readers old enough to remember September 11 may find their emotions stirred by a particular phrase or image that suddenly arouses some memory of that long-ago day. And so the book itself, beyond being a guide to many historical and social science literatures of 9/11, is also a site of memory.

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