

Interview

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Cultures of Disaster Revisited: An interview with Greg Bankoff

Greg Bankoff is professor of modern history at the University of Hull. Over the last twenty-five years, he has worked and published extensively on both the historical dimension of how societies adapt to risk as well as engaged with contemporary civil defence and emergency management practices in Asia, Australasia and more recently in Europe. His most recent publications include co-authoring The Red Cross's World Disaster Report 2014: Culture and Risk, and a companion coedited volume entitled Cultures and Disasters: Understanding Cultural Framings in Disaster Risk Reduction (2015). He is currently completing projects on urban fire regimes, flooding, and forestry particularly in the Philippines. New research looks at social vulnerability to earthquakes in Kazakhstan as part of a five-year NERC/ESRC funded project. Among his other publications is Cultures of Disaster: Society and Natural Hazard in the Philippines (2003).

Nicole: I think I can speak for both Jonathan and myself, that we both got acquainted with your scholarship through your work on cultures of disaster. And I imagine that's true for a lot of sociologists in the Philippines as well. It feels like that has been the anchor of your scholarship.

Greg: Well, there's more interest now than there used to be. There was almost none. I was in a conference last October in Ateneo. All these people were suddenly talking about it. Ten, fifteen years ago, people



Pick-up Where We Left-off. (Photo by Pamela Carbonell, Caelestis Productions Inc., Philippine Red Cross)

used to ask me, “Why are you doing this? Why are you looking at hazards? Why are you looking at disasters?” And of course, I did not start off that way at all. I started off doing my PhD on the emergence of the middle class in the Philippines in the 1960s and 70s. But my interests took me back to the nineteenth century to trace where they came from—and so I got hooked on the nineteenth century.

I originally began looking at society from below. I was looking at the judicial records to try and create a picture of Philippine society in the 19th century. There was an article I wrote in the late 1990s, which was called “Landscapes of Crime” and I began to put a set of ideas together—about social action in an actual environment¹. I was looking at how a particular topography, the geography, the ecology actually influence what kinds of crimes take place. So I was beginning to put together my interests in human behaviour with the environment.

Then all the time while I was doing my PhD, and doing this kind of work, I was aware of the frequent references to disasters. They began to make me think, how often does it happen? I was intrigued with the idea that if it happens very often, surely people must in some ways adapt. And I take adaptation in a very, very broad sense. It could even be flight [laughs] because that is often a rational thing to do.

If you start looking at the old and modern maps in the Philippines, you will find that in fact a lot of towns and villages have moved. Their locations moved primarily because they were vulnerable where they were. Around Lake Taal, for instance, towns have a tendency to move to avoid inland tsunamis and, at the same time, mindful of the perils of the volcano. And so I began to start seeing that kind of trajectory all over the place. And that made me begin to think, well, if disasters are what I call “a frequent life experience”, then how have they influenced a people’s history, society and culture? How, in a sense, could they change people’s character, the whole psychosocial range of things? So that’s what set me off. Basically, cultures of disaster work on the premise that if you have hazard as a frequent life experience, then it will influence society.

1 Bankoff, Greg. 1998. “Bandits, Banditry and Landscapes of Crime in 19th Century Philippines.” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 29(2):319-339.

My recent work now focuses on Kazakhstan. Their last major earthquake there was in 1911. There is nobody alive today who survived that. So there is no memory. In a sense, very periodic trauma and catastrophic events, I don't think—of course there's a terrible devastation—but I don't think it actually has much of an influence on society in the long term while in somewhere like the Philippines, it does. Because in the Philippines, you can calculate how many times in a lifetime people will experience some major trauma. That's quite unusual. So to me, the interesting question, therefore, is how have people, in this case specifically Filipinos, normalized threat over time?

N: Can you give an example of responses that work toward normalizing threat?

G: One way people adapt is through mutual assistance especially when you have a very weak state. The Philippines hasn't had a particularly centralized strong state. Never has been, not under the Spanish. The nearest it came to having one was under the Americans. But even then it really wasn't that strong. It was very much a sub-contractual kind of state. Basically communities have had to look after themselves. So people responded by forming mutual alliances, mutual benefit associations, which you find all around the Philippines. While I will never be able to measure that historically, what it shows is that there is a relationship, an intriguing relationship, between risk and the incidence of people's organizations and civil society organizations. So I wrote an article about that called the "Dangers of Going it Alone."² It is very interesting that regions with the highest incidence of risk are where you can find the highest concentration, per capita, of civil society organizations.

N: That included religious organizations as well?

G: Well, yes. I went back to the sixteenth century. Yes of course, they were religious associations then but what's interesting to me is what else they did. When you can get a measure of what they really did, then you realize they're actually mutual benefit associations as well.

2 Bankoff, Greg. 2007. "The Dangers of Going It Alone: Social Capital and the Origins of Community Resilience in the Philippines." *Continuity and Change* 22(2):327-355.

Under the Spanish, the only acceptable form of self-organization was to appear as a religious organization. And what's interesting is when you get to the American period when religion is out, right? Then there are parent-teacher associations. It's the PTAs that take on this role—because education is the American “religion.” And so when you look at the proliferation of PTAs and other kinds of networking that has to do with education in the earlier part of the twentieth century, then you find out that they're actually doing a lot of other things as well, things to help people.

There is this idea that suddenly there was a proliferation of civil society organizations in the 60s. Why? No society suddenly just develops this. Nothing emerges from nowhere immediately. What we're looking at is a trajectory. So that's the trajectory that I argue existed. Filipino society has had such organizations for a very long time. It's just that nowadays we call them NGOs, POs (People's Organizations) or Civil Society Organizations but they were called by other things in the past because that was the only acceptable way they could appear in public. And this has been the way in which society in the Philippines has organized itself to deal with risk throughout essentially the last 500 years.

Jonathan: It's just interesting though that in spite of the long history that you charted in civil society in the Philippines, that even to this day they are not professionalized, that the practices are still around gleaning resources in the short term rather than actually implementing processes.

G: That, of course, is one of the interesting questions. Why are some communities so much better organized and some so much more adept than others? The only explanation comes down to leadership, especially local leadership. This seems to me to be the key and how to sustain it on an everyday basis because it's so personalized. I don't mean to say that it has to be only one person; it can be a group of people. But local leaders tend to burn out because there are no institutions with which to support them or to ensure succession. But, for a time, you can have a very well organized community. If you look at the past, communities in the Philippines were actually quite effective in looking after themselves in many ways. The big question

is then why did they become so much less effective in the twentieth century?

N: Can you characterize that effectivity in terms of the delivery of relief?

G: There are certainly mutual benefit associations that provided support and actual help. They used to be called *turnuhans* in the Philippines. You take turns. So everybody takes turns in doing things. Now, interesting enough, the only modern usage of the word is in religion. That's what I've found among religious groups when people take turns in reading the bible. That's the only modern usage that I can see. But in the past, if you needed a new house, or you needed to sow your field, or something like that—people took turns. Everybody helped everybody else because that was the only way you could manage to do things in a community. There was no external support. There was a very vibrant cooperative movement in the nineteenth century. This is the way societies, local societies, local communities organized themselves. I mean, in the Philippines, it was even more so because you had the added risks of hazard in the environment. Hazards were frequent, so that added, how shall I put it, encouraged such kinds of behaviour.

N: That's a very interesting way of looking at it, especially since there's a tendency to understand mega-disasters as critical historical junctures that change everything. So, I, for example, in my own work, talk about pre- and post-Haiyan.

G: That's right. I'm not negating the importance of that in the short term, but I think, in the long term, it's less about the magnitude of disasters but the ones that happen frequently. There are always typhoons; there's always something somewhere. The last typhoon was...

N: I can't remember either.

G: I don't remember. These are so frequent. That's the point.

N: Our forgetfulness of recent typhoons is an indicator of normalization.

G: Exactly: because we can't remember because there are so many of them.

J: I'd like to go back to the theme of cooperation and how they are reconfigured in relation to disasters. On the one hand, you have movements of mutual aid and cooperation but, at the same time,

you have issues of divisiveness between barangays and small communities competing for resources. And also issues between elites and local people. Can you speak a little more about how you relate these processes of mutual aid and cooperation, on the one hand, and competition and divisiveness within communities on the other?

G: In a sense, Jonathan, I've been focusing more on the cooperation than the divisiveness, though I've clearly seen the divisive side. But if you're asking me more about class...

N: Yes, and you've also written about that—about the elites' tendency to benefit from disasters as well.

G: It's a really interesting area because it's not as if class doesn't matter. Obviously it does. But at the same time, to me, class—in terms of access to resources—doesn't become a variable, not a defining characteristic. You could look at people and you could look at a community and you could say certain segments of it are resilient and certain segments of it are more vulnerable. But it doesn't necessarily have to do with class. In fact, in many cases, higher status can actually make you more vulnerable in many ways.

N: Can you unpack that further?

G: The best example to illustrate this doesn't come from the Philippines, but from Southern California, all those great mansions on the seafront: you pay megabucks to have your house situated on the seafront and actually you're exposing yourself to greater risk.

N: So it's like Mayor Romualdez's house in Tacloban.

G: Yes, it's that sort of thing. I'm not trying to deny that poverty is usually associated with higher degrees of vulnerability...

N: Because that's the dominant discourse in disaster risk reduction.

G: Yes. But it's not the only one. Poverty is too clumsy a tool to simply apply like that. As I think class is too clumsy a tool. If Marx had been born in the Philippines, he would have written *Das Kapital* differently. I'm not in any way trying to negate class's importance; I'm simply trying to establish other criteria and ways of looking at societies and judging them. It doesn't mean that you can't have, as you said, a very poor, lower class society that's extremely vulnerable. I'm not denying that. Poverty can be very divisive. But it doesn't necessarily have to be like that. Poverty and lack of resilience don't all go together in the

same package. I can think of one community where I have worked on the fringes of Manila, which is poor and at risk, especially from flood and erosion, but is incredibly well-adapted. I mean community members work extremely well together. Poverty and risk don't have to go together.

J: I think that's been one of the most helpful things about cultures of disaster for me, how it theorizes agency in a nuanced way. It doesn't very neatly locate agency within specific sectors or experiences. History has something to do with it, access to resources and sometimes the combination of all these things.

G: Agency. Well, of course there have been people who have criticized me for being too environmentally determinist on that score. But I'm not saying that. All I'm trying to say is "yes, but..." You need to factor in other things too.

N: How then does understanding cultures of disaster in the Philippines give us an account of change? From normative theory, the next question is so what? What value judgments does it allow us to make? Sometimes, I get the impression that cultures of disaster tend to underscore resilience. But why do we want things to be resilient whereas things have to be changed? They have to be challenged.

G: Do you see resilience as not being about change? I would argue that it isn't. Dorothea Hilhorst and I wrote an article called "The Politics of Risk in the Philippines".³ What we were looking at was Albay. We took Albay as an example to look at different ways in which NGOs and the disaster authorities look at resilience. Everybody was using the same language but they meant different things by it. So as you've said, from the point of view of the Albay authorities, it was all about vulnerability and resilience, to bring society back to normal. But what NGOs meant by resilience and vulnerability were actually making society less vulnerable in the future. So the NGOs were about change, but the authorities were after restoring normality, the existing status quo, as quickly as possible. They were saying the same words, speaking the same lingo, and yet they totally misunderstood each

3 Bankoff, Greg and Dorothea Hilhorst. 2009. "The Politics of Risk in the Philippines: Comparing State and NGO Perceptions of Disaster Management." *Disasters* 33(4):686-704.

other. So really it depends what you're talking about by resilience. To make a society resilient means to make it better, to improve the way it deals with hazards, and not to restore normalcy which made it vulnerable in the first place. So it isn't a passive state or condition.

But I think it's an interesting question to ask: "so what?" I guess because I am more interested in explaining why things are as they are. It's quite tricky. What I've tried to do in the last twenty odd years, what I call "applied history", is about understanding how things have happened so that we can change them in the present. If you understand that, then you can begin to make meaningful changes.

N: I just remember this debate after Haiyan. Some people were saying the Filipinos are so resilient but the activists would say I don't want us to be resilient. I want us to be militant. I want us to be angry. So we want to rupture from that normalization of disasters as a way of life to something more progressive.

G: Yes, that's exactly what it is or should be. Part of the discourse of resilience is it fits within the state's parameters. It's comfortable. But as soon as you start saying militant, especially somewhere like the Philippines, you raise all sort of other specters, which perhaps you don't want to do.

J: Perhaps a final question on Haiyan, whether you think it represents an exception or do you see more continuities in relation to how communities coped, especially with the presence of international agencies, which perhaps was not there with other disasters that you've studied?

G: Yes. In 1897, we had a similar strength typhoon that hit the same area but there was a very different magnitude of population then that was affected. So in that sense, it's always continuity in the Philippines because these kinds of hazards recur. There are differences, of course. I would say one of the major differences is now you've got a huge population that is very exposed. Then you are likely to have a large scale disaster—which is what you got. Because I work in a lot of places now, I don't see the presence of international NGOs as making a big difference. If it did anything, it raised the profile of the Philippines as a place where hazards occur more frequently. But to answer your question, I would see it much more in terms of continuity. Of course

the scale of Haiyan was larger. There were more people there, so the scale of the disaster was greater. The government, given its limitations, its limited resources, did its best. Or, at least, it tried to do something, but, then, you probably have your own opinions about that.

N: So, you're saying, if judged on its own record, the government did quite okay?

G: No, it didn't do okay. It did try. I mean that's more than that you can say about some places. It did try.

N: To be fair, it's the same critique against the Nepalese government after the earthquake.

G: Absolutely. It's always the same critique because you're getting an international media assessment that's based on the capabilities of a western state's resources. And of course, states like the Philippines are always going to fall short. They're never going to live up to those expectations. I mean there are a few exceptions like Cuba. Cuba was, at one point, the UN model of how a state should respond to hazards. I am not sure if it still is. But, then, you have a very regimented population that enables the state to take measures designed to avoid disasters. I think it's only fair to look at the actual capacities of the state rather than try to assess it by criteria that have very little resemblance to the conditions on the ground.

N: Any final thoughts you'd wish to share to sociologists conducting research in the Philippines? We started the interview discussing how influential the concept of cultures of disaster has become in the past few years. What advice or message can you give to sociologists working on the same topic or pursuing similar lines of inquiry?

G: Advice? I guess I would just like to remind people not to view people in the Philippines as simply vulnerable with all its associated negative connotations but to see Filipinos as primarily resilient with great capacities to organize, resist, learn, change, and adapt. The Philippines are as much cultures of coping as they were ever cultures of disaster.