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# Introduction: The Politics of Recognition and Response

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## CHAPTER 1

# Introduction: The Politics of Recognition and Response

*Eric Tucker*

On the morning of February 1, 2003 seven astronauts died when the space shuttle Columbia broke up in the sky high over Texas and Louisiana while reentering the earth's atmosphere. The event was immediately characterized as a disaster and the media interrupted its normal broadcasts to focus on the developing story. Within hours an independent review board was convened, headed by retired Admiral Harold W. Gehman Jr. (Broder with Oppel Jr. 2003). Almost unnoted in the ensuing discussions, and certainly of no great significance to commentators, was that these seven astronauts were also workers killed in the course of performing their jobs: six were members of the military (five American and one Israeli) and one a civilian employee of NASA (Shuttle Victims 2003).

At first glance, this characterization of the event and the reaction to it seems quite natural. Public attention is focused on manned-space missions, which are presented as and perceived to be dramatic instances of heroic risk-taking in the name of advancing the boundaries of human knowledge. Thus when missions fail so spectacularly and publicly, killing all those aboard, it seems intuitively obvious that we have witnessed a disaster. A noble pursuit has ended tragically in the loss of life. In that context, the status of the astronauts as workers, either military or civilian, is of no obvious public consequence because we are given to understand that they were voluntary risk takers: that is why they are celebrated as heroes, not mourned as victims. Thus, according to the *New York Times*' editorial writers, "They accepted the risks, the ones they knew and perhaps even the ones they couldn't have imagined. Their acceptance was unsentimental, just part of the job" (Remembering the Columbia Crew 2003). Moreover, we are also assured that the exposure of these workers to the risk of death and their voluntary acceptance of that risk is consistent with NASA's overarching commitment to safety. On the one hand, NASA proclaims that "[e]xploration involves risk, including the

risk of failure” but, on the other that, “[b]eing an Agency workforce willing to accept risk, but only in an informed manner, is consistent with our unwillingness to compromise the safety and health of people and property or do harm to the environment” (NASA 1999). Although we are not told exactly how NASA’s willingness to accept the risk of failure that can materialize in multiple deaths is consistent with an unwillingness to compromise health and safety, such statements seem to be sufficient to satisfy the government and the public. Perhaps for this reason, there was almost no public outrage over the deaths at the moment they occurred: everything humanly possible had been done to ensure the safety of the astronauts, but something unforeseeably went wrong. But because the commitment to safety is genuinely felt, and because it is socially unacceptable to operate a space program whose risks materialize in multiple and highly visible deaths such as these, it also seems natural that an inquiry should be conducted to determine what went wrong so that more deaths may be avoided in the future.

As much as the public perception of and reaction to this working disaster seems natural, upon closer examination competing causal stories (Stone 1989) may begin to emerge that offer different constructions of the events and their meanings. For example, NASA’s critics question the scientific utility of manned missions, taking the view that their primary purpose is to generate public support for an expensive space exploration program that provides little civilian benefit (e.g., Kuttner 2003). Viewed this way, the space shuttle program is not a noble endeavor but rather a spectacle, mounted by NASA and promoted by the cheer-leading media, that diverts the public from insisting that government address pressing problems here on Earth. If that is so, are the inherent risks to human life associated with manned spaceflight worthwhile? As well, the supposed unstinting commitment of the program to safety may be more myth than reality. According to one journalistic account produced in the days following the loss of the Columbia, although there was a renewed emphasis on safety backed by increased funding immediately after the Challenger disaster of 1986, “NASA’s pursuit of a safer shuttle has largely stalled. It is a story of seesawing budgets, political infighting and radical policy shifts against a backdrop of falling public interest in space exploration” (Barstow and Moss 2003). The Columbia Accident Investigation Board (2003, p. 187) adopted much the same view of NASA’s safety program. “Despite periodic attempts to emphasize safety, NASA’s frequent reorganizations in the drive to become more efficient reduced the budget for safety, sending employees conflicting messages and creating conditions more conducive to the development of a conventional bureaucracy than to the maintenance of a safety-conscious research-and-development organization.” From this perspective, the status of the astronauts as workers may not be so insignificant. NASA, it seems, behaved much like other employers: faced with a conflict between production and safety, they stunted on safety to achieve production targets. Perhaps these astronauts did not truly accept the risks to which they were exposed, including “the risks they could not have imagined” (whatever that means) in that, like other

workers, they put too much faith in the commitment and competence of the organization to which they provided service to provide them in turn with the safest possible working conditions.

It is unlikely that the above reconstruction of the story will change anyone's view that the death of the seven Columbia astronauts was a disaster—although it may be viewed as a disaster of a different kind than initially thought—but hopefully it raises questions about the naturalness of the category and the meanings attached to it. For example, if it were revealed that tens of workers were killed and thousands injured or made ill in the course of designing, building, and maintaining the shuttle, the rockets, and the rest of the infrastructure supporting a manned space program, would that be construed as a disaster? What are the social processes that lead to the attribution of some events as disasters but not others? Why, for example, do we focus on single incidents in which there are multiple worker deaths and virtually ignore the far greater toll of death, injury, and disease that workers suffer one by one on a daily basis?

The events surrounding the deaths of the Columbia astronauts and the Challenger astronauts before them also amply demonstrate that the characterization of an event as a disaster may imbue it with enormous emotional, social, and political power. A disaster may cause people to question assumptions that allowed them to accept with more or less equanimity the conduct of risky activity. It may trigger inquiries into the social utility of the objectives for which the risk is undertaken, or at least a reassessment of whether the benefits justify the risks. The social construction of an event as a disaster may also lead to an examination of the distribution of risks and benefits: for whose benefit are workers dying or being injured? It may produce inquiries into the adequacy of the systems of risk prevention and risk regulation that were supposed to protect workers: was the risk detected?; if not, why not?; if so, what was the response and why did it fail to prevent the risk from materializing in deaths and injuries?

Just as we need to interrogate the social processes of disaster recognition and the attribution of meanings to that designation, so too we need to investigate more deeply the social, political, and legal processes that determine how the state responds to such events. Will the disaster designation change the balance of social forces so that groups previously unable to effectively assert their concerns in the policy arena may now have their voices heard and even heeded? Will the processes of re-examination result in significant and meaningful changes to public or private systems of risk regulation, or will the momentum for change be dissipated through processes that lead to a restoration or relegitimation of the *status quo ante*?

The politics of recognition and response to working disasters are the subject of the essays gathered in this book. Although there are published case studies of the struggle for recognition of occupational disease (e.g., Clark 1997; Levenstein, Delaurier, with Dunn 2002; Rosner and Markowitz 1991) and of the aftermath of occupational health and safety (OHS) disasters (e.g., Cherniak 1986), the

subject of working disasters as a general phenomenon has not received sustained attention. One reason for this is that the topic intersects a number of different intellectual streams that are not commonly joined, and so it will be useful at the outset to briefly identify them.

Disaster research is a relatively new field that has been dated back to a study by Prince (1920) of the Halifax Harbour explosion of 1917. It was not until the end of World War II, however, that the field began to develop a distinctive analytical or research paradigm. To a great extent, this paradigm was shaped by the professional commitments of the authors in the field who were largely concerned with the management of the aftermaths of natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods, and hurricanes. Coming from this orientation, Charles Fritz (1961) provided one of the first definitions of disaster as:

... an event, concentrated in time and space, in which a society, or a relatively self-sufficient subdivision of society undergoes severe danger and incurs losses to its members and physical appurtenances that the social structure is disrupted and the fulfillment of all or some of the essential functions of the society is prevented. (p. 655)

This definition, which focuses on time, space, and severity, continues to inform much of the literature in the field (e.g., Fischer 1998, pp. 2-3) and coincided precisely with those events that governments defined as disasters justifying extraordinary interventions. The ideal-type disaster, so to speak, was a sudden, natural occurrence that severely affected a discrete community.

This definition did not exclude social factors from an analysis of disasters, but it also did not make them central.<sup>1</sup> Later researchers addressed this deficiency. Yet while they emphasized that the vulnerability of a community to harm from a natural event like a hurricane was a contingent social condition, not a natural state of affairs, this did not change their understanding of what constituted a disaster (Gilbert 1998).

The study of socially or technically caused (as opposed to natural) disasters developed later. Barry Turner's seminal book, *Man-made Disasters* (1978), set the tone for much of the research that followed. He focused primarily on disaster causation, arguing that disasters largely stemmed from an accumulation of errors resulting from misinterpretation, false assumptions, poor communication, cultural lag, and misplaced optimism (p. 395). While others have criticized Turner's model and advanced alternatives (e.g., Perrow 1984; Vaughan 1996) their focus remained on events that fit Fritz's definition. For example, Turner's study was based on detailed analysis of 84 official reports of inquiries into single-incident events that produced multiple deaths; Perrow's focused on nuclear accidents; and Vaughan's on the launch of the shuttle Challenger. However, the approach to disaster causation taken by these studies laid the groundwork for undercutting the definitional certainty of their object. This was because in different ways these analysts theorized disasters not as the outcome of technological failures

alone, but rather as a result of the interaction between technology and organizational, political, and economic contexts. Technological or man-made disasters, then, were not caused by single incidents and the harm they produced was not necessarily experienced immediately.

While these authors were not led to problematize the object of their study, others were beginning to question the concept of disaster itself, as they recognized that at some level disasters were socially constructed phenomena (e.g., Quarantelli 1985). This approach received an additional boost in 1980s and 90s from writers in the rapidly expanding field of risk studies. Lupton (1999, ch. 2) traced three epistemological positions in the risk literature: realist, weak constructionist, and strong constructionist. Realists treat risk as objective, measurable, and independent of social and cultural processes, but recognize that these processes may distort risk perception and assessment. Weak constructionists recognize the material reality of risk, but see its perception and assessment as inevitably mediated by social processes. Finally, strong constructionists see risk itself as a social construction.

Strong constructionism has attracted few adherents among those writing in the field of disaster studies; if only because, as Oliver-Smith (2002, p. 39) notes, "the physical reality of disaster explicitly challenges theoretical currents that hold that nature is a purely social construction at the ontological level." Assuming broad agreement with the view that it is unproductive to sever the ties between disaster and material reality, however, still leaves unanswered the question of how social constructionism operates to select some set of harm-causing events as disasters while ignoring others.

Kreps (1998) attempted to reformulate Fritz's definition in a way that incorporated social constructionist perspectives. He defined disasters as:

nonroutine events in societies or their larger subsystems (e.g., regions, communities) that involve social disruption and physical harm. Among the key defining properties of such events are (1) length of forewarning, (2) magnitude of impact, (3) scope of impact, and (4) duration of impact. (p. 34)

While Kreps recognized that "precise thresholds of when historical happenings are socially defined as disasters have never been determined," his attempt to impose a threshold limited to "nonroutine" events seems artificial unless the goal of the exercise is to affirm the existing selection practices of state disaster relief agencies. By definitional fiat, this precludes so-called "routine" events that cause enormous harm on an ongoing basis from being constructed as disasters, thereby contributing to a process that normalizes both the occurrence of that harm and the state practices that permit it.

A more promising model that focuses on the *process* of social construction is that of Robert Gephart Jr. (1984). His political sensemaking model joins, perhaps somewhat oddly, a post-modernist sensibility with a political economy perspective. According to Gephart, social reality is constructed by individuals

through the process of reflecting on and interpreting the meaning of phenomena. However, the process of sensemaking is fundamentally political because divergent social interests, motives, and knowledge generate competing descriptions of reality. As a result, those who are more powerful are better able to have their versions of reality become the dominant one. In contemporary society, capital is better organized and mobilized to make its interests appear as the general interest, leading to the widespread acceptance of its construction of reality. The logic of Gephart's analysis lends itself to radical critique of conventional understandings of disaster:

The occurrence of a disaster is a political accomplishment. . . . Industry/government makes claims minimizing the disruptive impact or nature of events. . . . Public critics make claims maximizing the disruptive impact or nature of events. (Gephart 1984, pp. 214, 218)

Gephart's approach, however, does not seem to have attracted much attention among disaster researchers.<sup>2</sup>

Although social constructionist approaches have led to a broadening of the scope of disaster research, it still has not reached into the workplace. Perhaps for this reason, occupational health and safety researchers have not drawn on the sociology of disaster literature in their studies of the processes of recognition/non-recognition of working disasters. Indeed, to a great extent OHS researchers have not been concerned with the labeling of the harms that workers experience as disasters because the workers they are studying are confronting the logically prior problem of just getting employers and state officials to recognize that their work environment is causing harm (e.g., Levenstein et al. 2002; Markowitz and Rosner 2002). Much of the research into harm recognition is informed by a social constructionist perspective, although not in its strong forms, if only because the materiality of workplace hazards and harms seems all too apparent, even if only retrospectively. However, it is widely accepted that the recognition and assessment of risk is a social process that takes place against a backdrop of often conflicting objectives among workers and employers, and in a world in which scientific knowledge and research, and political, administrative, and legal decision-making do not escape the effect of unequal power relations. Recognition of OHS hazards is thus an intensely political process. Thus for example, Levenstein et al. (2002, pp. 4-7) theorize that workers' OHS concerns get recognized when unions are in a position to challenge the power of employers (rarely) or when progressive forces, including occupational health researchers, coalesce to form a strong alliance in support of reforms, and some employers find it in their interest to accept that existing practices need amelioration. Numerous studies (Clark 1997; Derickson 1998; Levenstein et al. 2002; Markowitz and Rosner 2002; Rosner and Markowitz 1991) have amply documented the shocking role of industry, often assisted by doctors and scientists, in suppressing available hazard information and in blocking further research.

The essays in this collection that address the politics of recognition, draw on this body of OHS research, and seek to extend it by challenging the historically narrow paradigm that has conventionalized the harm that workers routinely suffer. That is, they seek in various ways to question why the massive harms that workers endure are either not recognized as being work-related, or if work-related are not being recognized as disasters that require an extraordinary state response. Quinlan, Mayhew, and Johnstone (Chapter 2), for example, take the case of the death and injury of truck drivers, one of the most dangerous occupations, and interrogate why it does not attract the kind of recognition that is given to a coal-mine explosion that kills far fewer workers. There is, of course, the obvious point that truck drivers are killed one-by-one while coal miners are killed in groups when mines explode, but that that does not answer the question of why only clustered deaths tend to be socially constructed as disasters that require extraordinary responses. They suggest a number of reasons for this, focusing especially on the roles of ideology and of institutions. At the ideological level, Quinlan et al. point to the growing influence of neo-liberalism and the emphasis it places on individual agency, responsibility, and risk management. This facilitates a shift in the focus of attention onto the behavior of individual drivers, rather than on the underlying social causes of transport accidents that include economic pressures, work restructuring, and regulatory failures. By obscuring common themes that might be seen to link these individual events, it is less likely they will be aggregated and viewed as a common phenomenon that causes immense harm—a disaster. They also point to the role of regulatory arrangements in the politics of trucking deaths. Road transport regulation, not OHS, has primary authority over these incidents. As a result, common work arrangements that increase the risk to drivers or induce riskier driver behavior have little regulatory or social significance. Indeed, they go largely unrecognized as health and safety officials who might be more attentive to such issues are unlikely to be involved. In sum, because truck driver deaths are individualized and not viewed through the lens of work, they are unlikely to be recognized as working disasters.

The role of institutions also plays a prominent part in Hopkins' chapter, which considers the rise and fall of repetitive strain injury (RSI) in Australia during the 1980s (Chapter 3). While not suggesting that this epidemic should have been characterized as a disaster, Hopkins' discussion of the politics of RSI recognition makes an important contribution by focusing on the process through which official statistics are constructed and how that data may be used to provide evidence of a social problem. According to Hopkins, for contingent political reasons the workers' compensation system was open to RSI claims at a time when the federal public service was being restructured and work was being intensified. Because work injury statistics are derived from successful workers' compensation claims, this facilitated bureaucratic and social recognition of RSI as a real problem demanding a regulatory response.



Rennie's study of Newfoundland (Chapter 4) fluorspar miners' struggle to gain recognition that the lung diseases they suffered from were work-related also points to the important role that the workers' compensation system plays in the politics of working disasters. But in his case, its major role was to resist, not facilitate, recognition of the work-relatedness of the high incidence of lung diseases that miners suffered. Thus a major focus of Rennie's analysis is on the struggle of the miners, their union, and community to overcome this institutional and legal resistance to recognition. Rennie works from a political economy perspective that emphasizes the role of conflict in the politics of working disaster recognition. Not only did the miners have to deal with problems of scientific uncertainty, they also faced a government and an employer that seemed more concerned with the economic consequences that would ensue from acknowledging that miners were becoming sick from their work than with providing them with proper protection and fair compensation. The combination of a growing body count, medical investigations, media attention, presentations to review committees and a royal commission, industrial action, and public protests for over thirty years was necessary to gain recognition of the full extent of the harm inflicted on the miners.

By contrast, Thörnquist's discussion of silicosis in Sweden (Chapter 5) shows that recognition of an occupational disease by workers' compensation authorities does not necessarily lead political and regulatory authorities to accept that continued exposure of workers to a given danger will have disastrous consequences unless preventive measures are taken. The central question she asks in her chapter is: why was there an extended delay between the time silicosis was recognized as an occupational disease in 1931 and the time stricter controls on dust exposure were mandated? In part, the answer lies in the authorities' limited recognition of the scope of the problem and in their misguided belief that medical supervision of exposed workers exclusively in high-risk work places was a sufficient response. Indeed, Thörnquist argues that medical supervision legitimated the continued exposure of workers to silica. Consequently, the struggle for recognition of silica exposure as a serious problem—as a disaster requiring a strong state response—needed to continue. The shape and timing of that struggle for recognition was influenced by many factors, including the development of the Swedish model of industrial relations in the 1930s (with its emphasis on cooperative union-management self-regulation), the challenges to it in the 1960s and 1970s, and the activities of committed physicians and researchers who documented the true scope and consequences of worker exposure to silica.

These chapters also demonstrate that the politics of recognition necessarily join with the politics of response, if only because the nature and extent of the recognition of harm to workers as a disaster will influence the state's response to it. Nevertheless, it is also clear that the outcome of the political struggle over recognition will not determine how the politics of response will play out.

Therefore, it is necessary to explore separately the processes that influence whether individuals or organizations will be held accountable and whether significant change to regimes of OHS regulation will follow upon disaster recognition.

Arguably one can identify three inter-related dimensions to the politics of response. First, there is likely to be a debate over causation. Victims and others who seek accountability and change will argue that the disaster was avoidable because it was the result of purposeful actions, regardless of whether the result was intended, whereas those who wish to avoid blame will claim both that the outcome was unintended and that it was the result of unguided actions (Stone 1989). Second, even if a disaster is identified as the outcome of purposeful behavior, there will still be disputes about the measures necessary to avoid similar outcomes in the future and whether they are practicable. Finally, even if a technical consensus is reached, there are likely to be political obstacles that will need to be overcome to implement the necessary changes.

Although the politics of response to occupational health and safety disasters has received relatively little consideration, the disaster literature, especially that part dealing with man-made disasters, provides some useful insights. There seems to be widespread acceptance of two points, both of which are implicit in much of the discussion so far. The first is that the impact of disasters on public policy is largely determined by political processes rather than by the characteristics of the disasters themselves. For example, according to Freeman (2002, p. 3), "[t]he aftermaths of disasters are influenced less by the extent of the tragedies as by the political contexts in which they occur." The second is that the response to a disaster may produce significant changes. Thus, according to Michael Reich (1991):

Disasters provide an opportunity, and sadly may even be necessary, for realigning the mobilization of bias and for redefining the dominant symbols in ways to tip the balance of power, at least momentarily, in the direction of public interests and in favor of the relatively powerless. Crises not only provide opportunities for viewing the ordinary processes of society, they also provide the powerless with brief chances for reforming those processes, for redirecting social resources in more equitable ways. (p. 266)

The more difficult question on which there is less agreement is what factors shape the politics of disaster response and influence their outcomes. One focus of research has been on the characteristics of victims and their power resources. Ortwin Renn uses the metaphor of an arena to describe institutional settings in which policy is determined and is particularly concerned with decision-making about risk. In his view, "[t]he fundamental axiom is that resource availability determines the degree of influence for shaping policies" (Renn 1992, p. 195). Social resources include money, power, social influence, value commitment, and evidence. Renn recognizes that these resources are unequally distributed, but has little to say on the subject. Writing about the likelihood of activism in response to

pain and loss events (of which disasters would be a subset), Michael Jennings (1999, p. 8) suggested a four-category typology generated from the combination of two characteristics of the affected group: their power and their social approval. The resulting categories are the advantaged (high on both dimensions), contenders (high on power, low on approval), dependents (low on power, high on approval), and deviants (low on both). OHS disasters will by definition have working-class victims and although locating them within this matrix is not entirely straightforward, in most cases they would be identified as a group with relatively little power but with reasonably high levels of approval. Jennings also suggests that the magnitude of the affected population and the distribution of victims will also be significant. While the magnitude of OHS disasters will vary, in most cases the distribution will be concentrated within a narrow, relatively powerless segment of the population.

Because of these characteristics of the victim population in OHS disasters, it is especially important to inquire into the ways in which a disaster might alter the power and political influence that a group normally exercises. Jennings (1999, pp. 9-10) suggests a number of reasons why activism may be enhanced when it is harm-related: the stakes are all too apparent and immediate for those whose own bodies have been damaged or who are close to someone who has been injured or killed; the propensity for people who have pain and loss experiences to join with others in support groups helps overcome collective action problems; the events are highly emotionally charged and attract media attention; and death and injury provide activists with an accessible stock of vivid representations that resonate with widely held social beliefs about compassion, justice, safety, and health.

As these considerations suggest, OHS disasters may not only enhance the voice of victims, but may also help produce a more receptive environment in which their messages are received. Arthur McEvoy (1995) addressed this phenomenon in his discussion of the aftermath of the Triangle Shirtwaist fire in 1911 that killed 146 workers. One of its most important outcomes was that it "work[ed] a change in the patterns of causal attribution that underlay public thinking about industrial safety" (p. 624). But of course disasters do not naturally produce shifts in common sense views, as this too is a political process, partially influenced by the ability of the victim group to have "[its] account of reality become the reality perceived by others" (Gephart 1984, p. 213). McEvoy (1995, pp. 627-631) identified a number of reasons why the Triangle Shirtwaist fire had such a powerful social effect including: workplace accidents were already a high-profile issue at the time of the fire, in part because of debates about the introduction of workers' compensation legislation; the highly public way in which the victims died; and the fire could not be coded as an accident because of the obvious role of the employer in creating the hazard and obstructing the exits, thereby making visible how employers were extracting wealth from the bodies of workers (also see Bender 2004; Von Drehle 2003).

While the kinds of contingent factors mentioned by McEvoy are no doubt important, other researchers have tried to locate more systemic influences on the politics of causation. Kasperson (1992) and Renn (1992) have developed the concept of the social amplification of risk to explain perceptions of risk and risk behavior. The focus of this analytic framework is on the social processing of information about risks, paying particular attention to the role of groups and non-state institutions in either heightening or attenuating concern. The roles of social movements and the media, for example, have received considerable attention from these analysts.

Of particular interest given the focus of this book are the characteristics of the state institutions in which the politics of response are played out. Wells (1995) examines the legal responses to disaster, paying particular attention to the role of inquiries and inquests, compensation systems, and criminal prosecution. While most of her book discusses specific legal issues, Wells also addresses particular features of the institutions in which legal redress is sought, and their impact on outcomes. In her discussion of corporate manslaughter prosecutions, for example, Wells notes the problem of institutional resistance, which she traces to a number of factors, some internal and others external to the criminal law. Thus, on the one hand, Wells notes, "[a] real tension exists between the paradigm of criminal culpability based on individual responsibility and the increasing recognition of the potential for harm inherent in large scale corporate activity" (p. 173). On the other hand, Wells also recognizes that the criminal justice system is not static and isolated from society, but rather that the social construction of events will shape their legal construction. As Wells (1996) noted in a later article, "[t]he desirability or likelihood of a prosecution for corporate manslaughter, following transport or other disasters caused by management disregard of safety policies or precautions, are not matters that can be assessed from a purely legal standpoint" (p. 57).

Thus, in some ways we have come full circle. State institutions potentially shape the outcome of the politics of disaster but are simultaneously shaped by those politics as they play themselves out in non-state settings. But this should not be surprising given the complexity and interactive nature of legal, social, and political systems. Differences in approach to the politics of response, then, may lie more in the way researchers view social and political systems generally than in their view of the elements that constitute the political terrain. Thus, those who emphasize the salience of unequal power relations in shaping outcomes tend to take a more pessimistic view of the likely aftermath of a disaster. Reich (1991) for example concluded his study of toxic politics by observing that "[d]isaster may provide the opportunity and the impetus for institutional change, allowing for a redistribution of power and a transformation of policy. But the existing distribution of power creates formidable blockages to social change that might benefit the relatively powerless" (p. 281). Gephart (1984) takes a similarly bleak view, noting that, "[t]he primary social change which occurs as the result

of [organizationally based environmental disasters] is the normalization of the problems of pollution and environmental degradation" (p. 222). This outcome is explained on the basis that capital, which benefits from certain forms of resource exploitation, is better able to have its view of reality accepted than that of those who bear and are concerned about the cost of that exploitation. Those who are more optimistic operate from a more pluralistic perspective, which sees greater opportunities for those who are relatively less powerful to influence public policy, in part because of openings that disasters may create (e.g., McEnvoy 1995; Renn 1992).

The chapters in this book adopt a case study approach that contributes to these larger debates by providing rich accounts of state response to working disasters across a wide range of times and places. In some of these studies the politics of recognition and response are deeply interrelated. For example, Quinlan and colleagues' study of long-haul road transport in Australia demonstrates that the widespread and incremental nature of fatalities in that industry not only impedes recognition of its disastrous outcomes, but that it also undercuts the ability of regulators to connect these outcomes to their underlying causes related to economic conditions, work organization, and regulatory changes. Indeed, they find that truck fatalities and injuries are not even recognized as an OHS problem, but rather are dealt with through road transport regulation, which characteristically focuses on individual behavior.

Rennie's study traces the slow response of the Newfoundland government to the high levels of industrial disease developing among fluorspar miners in the mid-twentieth century. He identifies a persistent pattern of minimalism: at each stage of the miners' struggle for protection and compensation, the government dragged its feet, doing as little as was politically acceptable at the time. As a result, not only were many disabled workers denied compensation, but also excessively high dust levels persisted in the mines. To explain this phenomenon, Rennie adopts a political-economy-of-knowledge approach that focuses on the processes by which information and opinions about industrial disasters are disseminated or suppressed by the parties involved. Medical recognition of the problem was not sufficient to generate an appropriate response and so workers struggled to publicize their plight, but lacked the power to trigger state action. Rather, incremental improvements were made almost exclusively in the aftermath of favorable conjunctures, including findings of public inquiries, heightened levels of industrial conflict, and media attention.

Thörnquist's chapter looks at a similar phenomenon involving Swedish workers suffering from silicosis. She also works from a political economy perspective that focuses on unequal power relations between workers and their employers. These inequalities, however, were mediated in various ways. Ideologically, they manifested themselves in an approach that focused on regulating the worker rather than the workplace. Instead of regulating exposure, a matter under the control of employers, regulatory action emphasized medical

surveillance of workers. The regulatory response was also shaped by the broader labor market and industrial relations policies of the Swedish social democrats that relied on centralized collective bargaining by a heavily unionized workforce. It was only in the context of growing public awareness of environmental hazards and mounting labor militancy during the 1960s and 70s that stricter controls on the exposure of workers to industrial dusts were introduced.

Separating recognition and response issues is less of a problem when a large number of workers are killed in a single incident: these events are immediately coded as disasters, typically triggering some kind of public inquiry, and often accompanied by prosecutions and civil actions. However, this was not always the case. Patricia Reeves' study (Chapter 6) of the aftermath of the 1860 Pemberton Mill disaster in Lawrence, Massachusetts that killed over one hundred workers—the majority women and girls—examines both the immediate response and the role of the disaster in reshaping popular ideas about work relations that ultimately led to protective legislation. There was neither a formal public inquiry nor legal action taken against the employers. There was, however, an effort to enact protective legislation, but for reasons not transparent from the historical record, this effort failed. Reeve speculates that in the absence of an organized movement of mill workers and supporters, state industrialists opposed to regulation were able to prevent the bill from becoming law. Yet Reeve also finds that in the longer run post-disaster interpretations of the events at Pemberton contributed to the construction of labor narratives of employer avarice and negligence, and of employee susceptibility to bodily harm. While on the one hand this was useful in the fight for protective labor laws, it simultaneously raised doubts about the fitness of industrial workers to participate equally in social and political life, precisely because of their vulnerabilities and lack of independence.

Whyte's study of the aftermath of the Piper Alpha disaster of the British North Sea in 1988, which killed 167 people, also emphasizes the need to take a longer view of the response to disasters (Chapter 7). Here, however, the pattern found by Reeve was reversed. The immediate aftermath of the disaster disrupted the self-regulatory approach to OHS that dominated at the time. Closer monitoring of the scheme of self-regulation was imposed, and some costly safety controls were prescribed. The disruption, however, proved to be temporary. As political and economic conditions changed, the oil industry mounted a cost reduction strategy that led to a loosening of external controls as well as to work intensification. OHS regulators accepted these changes notwithstanding consequent increases in injury rates because they accepted the oil industry's argument that it needed to become more "efficient" to survive. As well, their underlying assumption that workers and employers fundamentally have a common interest in safety led them to accept a return to self-regulation without strong worker participation rights. Whyte concludes that because of the ongoing and growing structural advantage enjoyed by capital, the disruption caused by the Piper Alpha disaster to its regulatory agenda was only temporary.

Tucker also takes a traditional disaster, the explosion of the Westray mine in Nova Scotia that killed 26 miners in 1993, and follows the politics of response as they played out in a variety of institutional settings. He begins by constructing a model of the determinants of a working disaster that incorporates interactions between the pre-disaster OHS regime, political-economic context, disaster characteristics, and features of the institutions of redress. Like Whyte, he finds that in the immediate aftermath of the Westray disaster, the legitimacy of the province's OHS regime was struck a severe blow. Public inquiries, administrative and legislative reviews, criminal prosecutions, and civil litigation—all extraordinary responses in the OHS context—were called into play. Yet more than 12 years later, no individual or organization has been held legally accountable despite the obvious reckless disregard for workers lives by the mine operators or for the complete failure of OHS regulators to stop the ongoing and serious violations of the province's health and safety laws. A public inquiry condemned the employer for its neglect of safety and the government for its failure to regulate the mine, but it also endorsed the underlying health and safety model, with its emphasis on internal responsibility, rather than seeing it as a cause of the disaster. That finding, in conjunction with the relative weakness of organized labor in the province, allowed for the re-legitimation of the OHS regime through tinkering.

However, the continuing public perception of Westray as an egregious example of corporate criminality gone unpunished, and more recent corporate scandals such as Enron, put the federal government under pressure to address perceived technical barriers to the successful prosecution of corporate offenders. As a result, in 2003, more than ten years after the disaster, the so-called Westray bill was passed, amending the *Criminal Code*. Overall, the Westray story demonstrates that there may be a multiplicity of responses to a working disaster, some of which legitimate and reinforce pre-existing ideologies and practices, while others hold more promise for effecting meaningful reform and change to popular perceptions.

It is much too early to assess the instrumental impact of the Westray bill, but experience elsewhere suggests caution. Johnstone takes up this issue in Chapter 8 on criminal prosecutions in Victoria, Australia. Although his study does not focus on disasters conventionally understood, the reality is that employers are almost only prosecuted when a worker is killed or seriously injured. Johnstone argues that each one of these events could be characterized as a disaster with the potential to disrupt the "membrane of normalcy" but that, paradoxically, prosecutions have the opposite effect of normalizing the traumatic events that motivate prosecutions in the first place. He explains this outcome as an effect of "pulverization" techniques routinely used by defense lawyers in the criminal process to isolate each event from its broader context, making it appear as something quite unique and unexpected, rather than the outcome of a systemic problem. As well, Johnstone points to the form of the criminal law itself that facilitates decontextualization and individualization through its focus on the

immediate event giving rise to the prosecution and its concern with individual wrongdoing, isolated from the underlying social relations in which that action is embedded. As a result, prosecutions are infrequent, and when convictions are secured, sentences tend to be light. According to Johnstone, the current practice of criminal prosecution may unwittingly serve to legitimate inadequate health and safety management and regulation by creating the impression that there are only a few bad apples in an otherwise healthy barrel.

Finally, Dodd (Chapter 9) examines the history of public inquiries into coal mining disasters in Nova Scotia using the techniques of discourse analysis. She shares the view that disasters are potentially disruptive—that multiple deaths challenge people's unreflective acceptance of social and productive relations. The role of inquiries is to resolve these cultural coding problems by constructing a story or explanation of the event that convincingly explains the disaster in ways that reassure the reader that nothing is fundamentally wrong. But in order to succeed, disaster reports must draw on prior plausibility structures and follow literary conventions in order to establish their own legitimacy and definitiveness, establish chains of causation that lead elsewhere than an indictment of exploitive class relations, and make recommendations that if followed provide reassurance that future disasters can be avoided. Prior plausibility structures, however, are historically contingent and change over time. Dodd's investigation of the specific historical practice of writing inquiry reports in Nova Scotia delineates three periods, each dominated by a distinct narrative that, in its own way, ultimately reasserted the underlying harmony within the mining "community."

Overall, these case studies are not meant to be the last word on the study of working disasters, but hopefully they demonstrate the richness of the field and will stimulate further research using a variety of methodologies and disciplinary approaches.

## ENDNOTES

1. This definition and the management focus of most disaster research may explain why Merton and Nisbet (1966) chose not to include a chapter on disasters in the second edition of their book, *Contemporary Social Problems*. Fritz's essay appeared in the first edition (1961).
2. For example, his article is not cited by any of the contributors to Quarantelli (1998).

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