

ZiF-Research Group *Communicating Disaster***Closing Conference “Dealing with the Disasters of Others”**

26-28 January 2012

Presentation:***A Disaster in Slow Motion: The ‘Smoke Menace’ in Urban-industrial Britain***

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Abstract:

In recent years catastrophes such as the flooding of New Orleans in 2005 have begun to attract a good deal of historical attention to environmental disasters. Such disasters have usually been viewed as sudden and unexpected events. But environmental disasters also occur in slow motion, and cause damage over decades rather than days or hours.

In this paper, drawing on the ideas of Philippe Roqueplo and Reiner Keller, I will discuss what was perhaps the first major ‘disaster in slow motion’: the case of smoke pollution in industrial Britain. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, sulphurous black smoke billowing out from industrial and domestic chimneys dominated Britain’s cityscapes. Its adverse effects on human health, its destruction of vegetation and the built environment, and the economic costs of wasting valuable and finite fuel resources were all issues that attracted contemporary criticism. However, despite the tangible nature of this particular form of air pollution, most contemporaries endured living in smoke-blackened surroundings without much outward sign of complaint – largely because smoke was also closely associated with jobs and prosperity.

In line with the ‘communicating disaster’ theme, this paper examines the complex issue of public perceptions of the ‘smoke menace’. Drawing on a diverse range of texts, from scientific and government reports, business records and travel writing, to cartoons and documentary films, I will explore competing narratives of ‘wealth’ and ‘waste’ that gave meaning to, and created, common understandings of air pollution in major British cities such as Glasgow, London, and Manchester. Urban environmental degradation was rationalised and naturalised – as well as criticised – by the stories contemporaries told about smoke. To conclude, I suggest reasons why the concept of smoke control did not capture the public’s imagination.

For further questions on the conference or the research group,
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