

A Paradise Built in Hell

Rebecca Solnit explores the spontaneous commons that arise in the midst of disaster.

By [David Bollier](#)



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Anyone who sees the world through the lens of economics is likely to see humanity as an unruly mass of selfish individuals clamoring for as much as they can. It's a dog-eat-dog jungle that is only constrained by the rule of law and government.

How is it possible, then, that human beings are capable of such spontaneous altruism, resourcefulness and joy when faced with disaster? Why, in the midst of earthquakes and fires, do people so intuitively self-organize themselves into communities of mutual aid, opening their hearts to utter strangers and sharing each other's burdens and joys?

Why, in short, are we so often exemplary people under the most horrific conditions when "normal life" finds us alienated from each other and locked into our self-made shells of grievances, prejudices and human disconnection?

Author and essayist Rebecca Solnit's new book, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster*, is an absorbing empirical rebuttal to the cynics who see only the worst of humanity. Her book is an answer to the economists and political leaders believe that the world is comprised of isolated, selfish individuals who must be governed through authoritarianism and fear.

Solnit's approach is disarmingly simple. She looks at how people behave collectively in the face of stunning disasters: the San Francisco earthquake of 1907, the German Blitz of London during World War II, the Halifax harbor ship explosion of 1917, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the devastating Katrina hurricane, and many other large-scale disasters.

The standard assumption among government planners, Hollywood filmmakers and wealthy people is that disasters result in anarchy, crime and panic in the streets. If you believe in the political philosopher Thomas Hobbes, human beings are essentially nasty, cruel and selfish. Civilization is simply a thin veneer of civility. If government, law and civilization were to suddenly disappear, as they often do in disasters, why of course pandemonium would reign!

Or would it? Solnit's admirable contribution is to show that members of communities beset by disasters

tend to show joy, resolve and aching love toward each other. They are truly “paradises built in hell.” People who went through the San Francisco earthquake or the immediate aftermath of 9/11 in lower Manhattan or the bombing of London report that it was a “peak experience” of human connection and shared purpose.

How can we account for this fact when we “know” that people are selfish and nasty at heart?

Solnit weaves a compelling narrative about the spontaneous commons that arise in disasters. These commons reveal some deeper truths about the human condition — truths that are usually masked by the social traditions and norms of any given culture.

The sad, pathetic truth of modern market societies is that they offer so few opportunities to experience a genuine, sustained sense of community. E.M. Forster advised, “Only connect” — but that is precisely what we have so much trouble doing. This may be the singular failure of modern times, Solnit writes — for which disaster often serves as a form of liberation.

Solnit explores this paradoxical phenomenon with considerable firsthand reporting and archival research. She also delves into the sub-discipline of “disaster studies” and discovers a near-forgotten sociologist, Charles E. Fritz, who became a towering scholar of how people behave in disasters following his own experiences in England during WWII.

Solnit deftly applies Fritz’s deep wisdom to many of the disasters she depicts. For example, Fritz once wrote: “Disasters provide a temporary liberation from the worries, inhibitions and anxieties associated with the past and future because they force people to concentrate their full attention on immediate moment-to-moment, day-to-day needs within the context of present realities.”

Although disasters may be profoundly disruptive in a practical sense, Fritz notes, they are perhaps more significant for liberating people psychologically. The conventional social norms that may regiment our behavior and divide us from each other, come tumbling down when earthquakes and fires strike. Suddenly the day laborer and banker, small businessman and mother, ethnic outsider and shopkeeper, are all thrown together in their elemental humanity.

And what a liberation that turns out to be!

In one representative testimony, a woman who experienced the Blitz of London reported, “I lay there feeling indescribably happy and triumphant. I’ve been bombed! I kept saying to myself over and over again — trying the phrase on, like a new dress, to see how it fit. It seems a terrible thing to say, when many people must have been killed and injured last night; but never in my whole life have I ever experienced such *pure and flawless happiness*.”

A medic who helped people following Katrina said, “I don’t know how to describe it, but there’s a depth to my understanding of pain and a depth to my understanding of joy. I was never a person who cried about happy things, but I find that I cry more often. I feel like I have a much stronger sense of the harshness of life and also the beauty. It’s like they’re one and the same.”

In exploring the sense of mutual aid and shared purpose that people experience in disasters, Solnit takes us on mini-tours of the work of philosopher William James, Catholic activist Dorothy Day and the Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin. Each in their way was a tribune of the power of our shared humanity, over and above the contingent historical and political circumstances that divide us.

The power of disasters, then, may be in their power to give us a real-life glimpse of the “utopias” that exist within us and our communities every day, but which are papered-over by the accumulated patterns of culture and politics. “Disaster provides a form of societal shock which disrupts habitual, institutionalized patterns of behavior and renders people amenable to social and personal change,” the disaster expert Fritz wrote.

What makes this book so remarkable is its deep and subtle exploration of the inner psychology and outer sociology of disaster commons. Solnit writes, for example, “The ability to act on one’s own behalf, to enter a community of mutual aid rather than become a cast-out or a recipient of charity, matters immensely. Fritz describes the satisfaction and the power that comes from membership and agency....”

This is precisely what our everyday secular, market culture denies us: *membership and agency*. We are castouts in our own country! We are forced to play the role of consumer and audience to the media celebrities who ply the public stage; we ordinary citizens are pathetically inconsequential to their dramas and decisions....or so we are led to believe.

Disasters disclose another reality. We can actually matter. We can actually work together with strangers of different backgrounds and races. We can actually play heroic roles and improvise effective solutions. We can actually experience membership in a beloved community.

Disasters are often causally related to revolutions for precisely these reasons: people can begin to experience their own personal agency and collective power, and to witness firsthand the incompetence and venality of established governments. It is perhaps not so coincidental that the French Revolution followed a series of crop failures and bad harvests; that a major earthquake preceded the Nicaraguan revolution in the 1980s; and the Katrina hurricane exposed the callous indifference and corruptions of the Bush II administration.

In disasters,” writes Solnit, “the hierarchies, administrations and institutions — the social structures — tend to fall apart, but what result tends to be anarchy in Kropotkin’s sense of people coming together in freely chosen cooperation rather than the media’s sense of disorderly savagery.” The experience of “freely chosen cooperation” in disasters allows people to see the rigid, inept, self-serving, authoritarian nature of their rulers, and encourages them to entertain the commons as an appealing alternative.

The rise of spontaneous commons is precisely what is so threatening to elites, which is why they tend to react to disasters with over-bearing martial force. Solnit calls it “elite panic” — the deep fears among elites that the commoners will go wild and destroy their personal property, upend the government and their way of life.

Solnit notes that after the San Francisco earthquake, the resulting fires were being put out reasonably well by citizen-volunteers who improvised their own water-brigades. The arrival of the police and fire departments actually made things worse. They cleared the scene of volunteers, which slowed the fire-fighting, while officialdom blew up buildings that, unknown to them, contained explosive materials — which merely expanded the fire.

Solnit writes: “Citizens themselves in these moments [of disaster] constitute the government — the acting decision-making body — as democracy has always promised and rarely delivered. Thus disasters often unfold as though a revolution has already taken place.”

Rebecca Solnit has written a remarkable book, one with special relevance to the commons and the effort to establish new orders of mutual aid as a normal reality of life. To learn about the “recovery of purpose and closeness” in the midst of disaster is to glimpse how such feelings and social connections animate the commons so many people are striving to build. Alas, it is more difficult to nourish and sustain the commons in the more forbidding soil of everyday, normal life.

But disasters reveal, at least, that this cooperative, transcendent human reality actually exists. A paradise built in hell is not utopian; it is merely transient. The challenge for commoners is how to sustain the sense of personal agency and membership long after a disaster has abated.

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