Recovering Inequality: Hurricane Katrina, the San Francisco Earthquake of 1906, and the Aftermath of Disaster

By Steve Kroll-Smith
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In the last year alone, the United States has watched mudslides engulf Montecito, Hurricane Florence flood the Carolinas, Hurricane Michael devastate the Gulf coast, wildfires scorch Paradise, tornados tear through Alabama, and floods swallow large swaths of Nebraska and Iowa—and these storms are just the most well-known. Hundreds of other natural disasters have swept through communities across the United States, killing residents and costing millions in damages. In fact, since 2000, 99.7 percent of U.S. counties have experienced at least one natural disaster, resulting in thousands of deaths and costing billions. Moreover, research repeatedly shows that the devastation does not stop when the storms die down. Recovery aid creates an aftershock of sorts, whereby inequity is exacerbated and marginalized populations suffer cascading setbacks (Howell and Elliott 2018).

Since the Fall of 2017 when Hurricane Harvey hit Houston and Hurricane Maria devastated Puerto Rico, the surmounting cost of these disasters and their propensity to aggravate inequity has gained increased attention in the news media and congressional hearings (e.g., Hersher and Benincasa 2019; U.S. House of Representatives 2019). As is often the case, these conversations expose the specifics of the latest disasters but lack vital historical prospective. It is into this void that Steve Kroll-Smith’s Recovering Inequality: Hurricane Katrina, the San Francisco Earthquake of 1906, and the Aftermath of Disaster masterfully weaves a compelling sociohistorical narrative.

Echoing W.E.B. DuBois’ ingenious interdisciplinary combinations of poetry, history, quotes, and statistics, Kroll-Smith combines fictional renderings, newspaper clippings, policy decisions, and first-hand descriptions with rhythmic prose to create a page-turning analysis of the similarities and differences between two iconic U.S. disasters: the San Francisco earthquake of 1906 and Hurricane Katrina. A century apart, these two catastrophes devastated their respective cities, galvanized collective goodwill while simultaneously evoking fears of looters.
and rioters, distributed aid based on moralistic assessments of residents’ worthiness, and reinforced entrenched inequities with their development projects. Retelling the story of these two disasters side by side, Kroll-Smith is able to illuminate that our failures to respond swiftly and justly after tragedies is not just an isolated occurrence but the pattern. Explicitly making these connections enables Kroll-Smith to draw conclusions as to why exactly these inequities persist.

Pulling from a wide variety of first and secondhand accounts, Kroll-Smith carefully curates passages about both disasters to help illuminate their similarities. Beginning with the disasters themselves, Kroll-Smith familiarizes the modern reader with the destruction caused by the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and demonstrates its parallels to Hurricane Katrina. He discusses how, in the immediate aftermath, residents in both cities came together and, in both places, how the news media depicted a different story—one of chaos, looting, rioting, and even rape. Uncannily similar, these news stories and later retractions due to falsification begin to illuminate Kroll-Smith’s overarching thesis: the “market logic” of a divided and unequal city has and continues to drive U.S. urban development before, during, and after disasters.

Kroll-Smith builds his case by discussing how recovery aid was distributed. In both cities, aid was allocated based on moralistic assessments of who was worthy of the assistance. For example, in San Francisco organizations used evidence of “immorality”—laziness, vicious habits, drunkenness, and unemployment—to determine whether or not households should receive aid and whether they required surveillance. Unsurprisingly, most of these evaluations were based on racial and class stereotypes, so the system privileged White middle and upper class residents and left their Chinese and lower class counterparts without needed assistance.

Deliberately juxtaposing the rationales and experiences of receiving aid after the earthquake to those after Katrina, Kroll-Smith not only illustrates their similarities but also brings into sharp focus the absurdity of our contemporary processes. Entrenched in contemporary stereotypes and dominant logics, it is easier to look retrospectively and see the blatant inequity in historical accounts than uncover it in our own time. The brilliance of Kroll-Smith’s approach is that by pointing out the similarities between the historical and contemporary approaches, he reveals the illogicality of today’s inequities.

Kroll-Smith goes on to describe construction and development post the disasters. At this point in his narrative, the reader is not surprised at how government officials and corporate developers used the need to rebuild as a catalyst for displacing racially marginalized populations. Under the guise of “market logic,” powerful actors made decisions that preserved inequity and cost taxpayers more money.

Kroll-Smith ends with a compelling call for us to consider how defaulting to “market logic” recovers inequality but not community. In particular, Kroll-Smith emphasizes that even without deliberate conspiracies cities recreate unequal cities under the disguise of restoring markets. This is a helpful clarification as it pushes readers away from the common temptation of identifying a racist actor or actors who are to blame for the observed inequality. However, this
clarification and Kroll-Smith’s argument more broadly fails to theoretically unpack the intersections between racial and the so-called market logics.

Like much of sociology, Kroll-Smith approaches race as an outcome or side effect of the larger capitalist society. In doing so, he does not unpack the mechanisms by which racial inequality are actively created and maintained. Without articulating a robust definition of market logics or theoretically centralizing the role race plays in shaping these logics, Kroll-Smith limits his theoretical contribution and ability to illuminate the specific mechanisms that perpetuate inequity. Nevertheless, this limitation is far outweighed by his accessible, engaging narrative that demonstrates the resilience of U.S. inequality.

Kroll-Smith’s monograph provides a timely sociohistorical explanation of why disaster preparation and response is critical for larger issues of equity. As climate change continues to inflate the intensity and frequency of natural disasters, it is more important than ever to learn from our past in order to cultivate a future of equity instead of habitually Recovering Inequality.

References


Hurricane Katrina was the most destructive natural disaster in U.S. history. The overall destruction wrought by Hurricane Katrina, which was both a large and powerful hurricane as well as a catastrophic flood, vastly exceeded that of any other major disaster, such as the Chicago Fire of 1871, the San Francisco Earthquake and Fire of 1906, and Hurricane Andrew in 1992. For the survivors, the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina has been characterized by a mixture of grief, anxiety, and frustration. Although the severity of Hurricane Hugo exceeded that of the San Francisco earthquake, no significant differences in health impacts were found. Both groups reported significantly increased ratings of RA activity, pain, and depression compared with ratings during the first year. However, comparison with the rest of the sample (n = 767) showed that increases in disease activity and pain were a general phenomenon but that the increase in depression was unique to the disaster subsample. The 1906 San Francisco earthquake and subsequent fires killed an estimated 3,000 people and left over half of the city's population homeless. Around 500 city blocks with 28,000 buildings were destroyed during this devastating natural catastrophe. The Earthquake Strikes San Francisco. The earthquake was so sudden and the devastation so severe that many people didn't have time to even get out of bed before they were killed by falling debris or collapsed buildings. Others survived the quake but had to scramble out of the wreckage of their buildings, clothed only in pajamas. Aftermath of the 1906 San Francisco Earthquake. The quake and subsequent fire left 225,000 people homeless, destroyed 28,000 buildings, and killed approximately 3,000 people.