

**Fourth Annual UCSD Culture Conference:
Calhoun, Swidler and Others Address “Crisis, Emergency, and Global Processes”**

by

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Emergency and Crisis as cultural categories were the theme of this year’s Annual Culture Conference at the University of California, San Diego on May 9, 2008. Now in its fourth year, this event took on a global perspective.

Craig Calhoun of the Social Science Research Council and New York University gave the morning keynote address. Calhoun spoke about humanitarian emergencies as a cultural category, and argued that conceptualizing a natural disaster or a technological failure as a humanitarian emergency is only possible due to certain assumptions about human suffering and global responsibility. Calhoun outlined some of the ideological shifts that have occurred over time to establish and redefine the parameters of the category “humanitarian emergency.”

Calhoun asserted that while suffering is an age-old concept, humanitarian emergencies are relatively new. In the contemporary era, humanitarian emergencies exist because: 1) it is possible to organize action from a remote distance; 2) the concept of human suffering is ethically compelling to strangers; 3) humanity is implicated as a whole to take responsibility to alleviate unjust suffering; and 4) response seems urgent. He also made the case that without the historical ideologies of charity for strangers, imperialism, and progress (specifically the decline of the idea that humans are resigned to fate or God’s will), the cultural frame for humanitarian emergencies that we employ today would not exist in the same way.

Calhoun argued that humanitarianism today has become a field in the Bourdieusian sense. Humanitarianism must defend itself by having boundaries that protect it from being received as political action, economic action, or military force. Category boundaries are critical, particularly because humanitarianism, indeed, involves political action—emergencies are moments when global aid must step in to resolve crises that local governments cannot resolve on their own. Humanitarianism also involves economic action. In fact, entire economies of aid and relief efforts exist, from businesses and institutions devoted to producing goods, to training service-people for aid work. These conditions give rise to tensions in conceptualizing humanitarian efforts, and such tensions are coupled with the complicated cultural logics behind designating which particular world events count as emergencies that demand a humanitarian response.

Calhoun’s talk was followed by a panel of speakers, each of whom examined a particular type of crisis. Ann Hironaka from the University of California, Irvine discussed the cultural category of “genocide” as a crisis that is identified in some cases, while other, similarly catastrophic cases are labeled “civil wars,” the latter of which do not evoke a crisis response. Hironaka highlighted the tensions that arise when international intervention takes place in situations that are not recognized as genocide. Weapons transfer, economic aid, permission to use military resources such as bases—all are seen as attempts at imperialism unless the help is offered to local forces who are defending themselves from a recognized genocide attempt. Genocide has official

definitions according to international human rights language, and Hironaka emphasized the important role that institutions play in creating and enforcing the definitions of both crisis and the appropriate responses to crisis.

Peter Levin of Barnard College was the second panelist. He focused on market crises, specifically the sub-prime lending crisis, which was the result of institutional and technical infrastructure that allows risk, itself, to become a commodity. In an effort to avoid risk as much as possible, banks pool loans and then sell the bundled loans on the market to investors. What is being bought and sold is the risk associated with the loans being repaid by the debtors. Since risk can more reliably be calculated in aggregates, the loans are bundled, and then percentages of each bundle can be sold separately to multiple investors without any one investor's portion being tied to a single loan with a single debtor. It becomes an oxymoron: reliable risk. And it is everywhere, not just in mortgage loans, but in all types of investment arenas.

However, these structures of reliable risk also make the market vulnerable to crisis. Levin pointed to the way that markets which were previously isolated from one another are now linked and correlated. It is no longer the case that some markets deal in agricultural products, while other markets deal in real estate; now everyone is selling the same product: risk. This creates systematic risk. We no longer have crises *in* markets, instead we have crises *of* markets.

Sociologist David Pellow from the Ethnic Studies Department at the University of California, San Diego rounded out the afternoon panel with a provocative discussion of crisis as a social construction which reflects, sustains, and exacerbates existing social inequalities. Focusing on events here in the United States, Pellow elaborated the ways that crises are constructed and framed to benefit elites. He argued that crises, just like inequalities, are automatic outcomes of a market economy, yet they are disguised by language such as “natural disaster,” even when they are triggered by human activity rather than nature. He termed such events “disasters by design,” pointing to the reality that natural disasters in the United States have a much more devastating impact on already vulnerable populations such as racial/ethnic minorities, women, and the poor.

Pellow also acknowledged that the language of crisis is more effective at mobilizing citizen's hearts and efforts toward change—particularly vulnerable citizens—because it invokes the dream of creating a better world rather than reminding them of an imminent or already evident crisis situation of which they are already victims.

The momentum of the day's presentations culminated in the afternoon keynote address, given by Ann Swidler from the University of California, Berkeley. Swidler presented some of her current research on responses to AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa. She discussed, in particular, the question of why male circumcision has been “ignored, avoided, and disdained” as a prevention measure against AIDS, despite having reasonable levels of data which support its potential efficacy. This particular question serves as an example of cultural and international frameworks for appropriate responses to crisis.

Institutions such as the World Health Organization, UNICEF, UNAIDS, and others are heavily mobilized in response to the AIDS crisis in sub-Saharan Africa, and exert a great deal of influence over whether and how potential AIDS interventions are selected. These organizations follow internationally shared logics about how to determine which techniques will be most effective. They favor pre-existing solutions that

have strong success rates in clinical trials and similar field sites. They also tend toward individual thinking rather than population-oriented solutions. In this, Swidler emphasized that condoms are preferred over male circumcision because condoms theoretically give every individual the opportunity to absolutely protect him or herself. While male circumcision might reduce overall rates of HIV, it does not place the power of prevention directly in women's hands—a Western cultural ideal. Further, Swidler argued, due to a commitment to cultural sensitivity by institutional representatives, the “micropolitics of culture” affect the way in which various interventions are discussed. Specifically, who is in the room when a topic such as male circumcision is discussed has an impact on how it will be handled.

Swidler's talk concluded with a discussion of the ways in which cultural categories are projected onto responses to crises. She suggested that international health organizations rely on three fundamental beliefs which become imposed on the population receiving aid. One is a belief in a rational actor, and this creates the assumption that the best course of action is to educate people who are vulnerable to crisis to protect themselves. The second is a belief that people need to be mobilized to help themselves. The third is a belief that issues that matter for *us* also matter in the lives of the vulnerable population, issues such as empowering women, gay rights, and democratic participation. Swidler left the audience to consider the question of whether we, as First World international aid actors, are perhaps only interested in Africans as far as they allow us to project our social and moral imaginations onto them.

The conference addressed weighty concerns through a cultural lens, exploring the cultural boundaries in conceiving of crisis and emergency in our contemporary global era. The day's event was dedicated to Joe Gusfield, professor emeritus and founding member of the cultural legacy at UCSD.

The organizers are looking forward to the September 2008 special issue of *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*, titled “Culture and Its Diversity,” based largely upon the last three years' conferences.

The Fourth Annual UCSD Culture Conference was organized by Amy Binder, John Evans, Mary Blair-Loy, Kwai Ng, Andrew Lakoff, and Lisa Nunn. It was sponsored by the Department of Sociology and the Division of the Social Sciences at UCSD.