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Review of the book *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago* by E. Klinenberg

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At the time of publication, author John L. Jackson, Jr., was affiliated with Duke University. Currently (October 2014), he is the dean of the School of Social Policy & Practice at the University of Pennsylvania.

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Keywords

Eric Klinenberg, ethnographic study, Chicago, social autopsy, ecological inequalities, geography of vulnerability, African-American

Disciplines

Communication | Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Communication | Inequality and Stratification | International and Intercultural Communication | Interpersonal and Small Group Communication | Race and Ethnicity | Regional Sociology | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Comments

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Book Reviews

Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago. By Eric Klinenberg. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002. Pp. xvii+305. \$27.50.

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Eric Klinenberg calls his ethnographic study of the 1995 Chicago heat wave a “social autopsy,” which is a useful and suggestive way to describe both the horrific event itself and his holistic research methods. Using formal interviews, participant observation, archival research, and quantitative data analysis, Klinenberg paints a nuanced and multidimensional portrait of what happened in Chicago that fateful July. Over the course of less than one week, when temperatures in the city topped 100 degrees, many of the most vulnerable city residents were found dead and alone in their sweltering homes. City officials chalked this tragedy up to the freakish whims of meteorological excess, but Klinenberg refuses to let them off the hook so easily. Instead, he examines the social factors that helped contribute to and compound an already taxing situation.

Beginning his analysis with a discussion of Chicago’s everyday social and ecological inequalities, Klinenberg argues for a “geography of vulnerability” linked to race, place, and the specificities of elderly living. Klinenberg offers historical and ethnographic evidence to explain the statistical differences between the high heat wave death rates of African-Americans in North Lawndale and the relatively lower heat-related mortality rates for Latinos in nearby Little Village. Why did so many more elderly African-Americans fall victim to the heat than did Latinos just “across the tracks”? Eschewing popular myths about Latinos having extraspecial cultural respect for their elderly or better-adapted physiological defenses against the heat, Klinenberg looks for other explanations—and finds them.

These two groups seem quite demographically similar in many respects, but Klinenberg finds important differences—and most of them are community specific. He argues that the Latinos of Little Village inhabited a vibrant neighborhood much more thoroughly populated and commercially developed than North Lawndale. The more sparsely populated, deindustrialized, and decidedly militarized landscape of North Lawndale discouraged elderly citizens from leaving their homes in search of air-conditioned safety. Many elderly residents did not trust their own neighbors, let alone strangers on city sidewalks. This distrust, far more palpable in North Lawndale than in Little Village, translated into a greater propensity to avoid the outside world. According to Klinenberg, it was this

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difference in “social ecology” that best explains what happened to so many people in July 1995.

Klinenberg also looks at late-20th-century familial dispersions that left many elderly residents farther away from relatives who might otherwise have looked after them. Without increased government resources, Klinenberg argues, many community organizations and church groups were unable to fill the void. In fact, sometimes such organizations could not even find these needy elderly residents hiding inside their apartments, residents who seldom answered their front doors when strangers came knocking anyway.

The author finds that much of the government’s response to the heat wave was slow and defensive, especially after dismissing advanced warning from the Emergency Response and Research Institute (a nongovernmental, privately held corporation) about the need to take aggressive steps against the meteorological threat. A spatial mismatch between the location of Chicago’s most vulnerable citizens on one side of the city and the concentration of medical treatment facilities on the other combined to overwhelm an already understaffed emergency service infrastructure with too few ambulances taking too long to arrive on the scene (even in normal circumstances). This argument is most compelling when Klinenberg allows the medical workers to describe their own experiences during the crisis.

By the time the city realized that it had to act (a realization borne of sensationalized television news coverage of dead bodies piling up inside the city morgue—as well as inside meat trucks parked in the coroner’s parking lot), it was, according to Klinenberg, already far too late. Chicago had an alternative policing strategy in place that was unable (some Chicagoans would even say unwilling) to successfully deliver needed protective services to the city’s elderly black residents in places like North Lawndale—places where, Klinenberg argues, everyday deprivation was tolerated and rendered invisible.

Klinenberg links his discussion of the crisis to additional structural factors such as energy and water rates that made air conditioners unaffordable luxuries for poorer elderly urbanites on fixed incomes. He ends with a sociological study of digital and electronic news gathering, the political implications of infotainment impulses in the mass media, and a far-too-brief analysis of post-heat wave changes in Chicago’s emergency response structure. Some readers might have gained a great deal more from Klinenberg had he rewired his comprehensive media analysis back into a discussion about how the most vulnerable senior citizens (who were also, according to Klinenberg, often trapped at home watching such news offerings) actually interpreted these media representations. He stops just a little short of adequately connecting those important nodes. Even so, Klinenberg creates a compelling sociological history that is in critical and productive conversation with current cultural analyses of catastrophe and contemporary urban sociologies of race, class, and marginality.