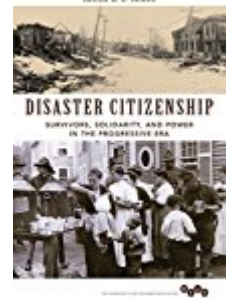


Jacob A. C. Remes. *Disaster Citizenship: Survivors, Solidarity, and Power in the Progressive Era.* Working Class in American History Series. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016. 304 pp. \$95.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-252-03983-6.



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In *Disaster Citizenship*, Jacob A. C. Remes offers a social history of the formal and informal responses to the Salem Fire of 1914 and the Halifax Explosion of 1917. Both events, he posits, were “working-class disasters” because they primarily “destroyed workplaces and workers’ neighborhoods” (p. 3). The fire in Salem, Massachusetts, burned large swaths of the city, including 3,150 homes and 50 factories, and left more than 18,000 people homeless, unemployed, or both. Similarly, the explosion of munitions aboard the French-owned cargo ship *Mont Blanc* in the port city of Halifax, Nova Scotia, killed nearly 2,000 people and left tens of thousands more injured, homeless, and jobless.

Remes identifies two styles of aid that emerged in the aftermath of each disaster. The first was the informal, unofficial, reciprocal response of Salem’s and Halifax’s working-class survivors. This style of aid was rooted in familial networks, communal ties, and intricate local knowledge. Remes contrasts this response with the formal, official, centralized style of aid favored by

the upper- and middle-class government workers and private reformers who stepped in to rescue their fellow citizens at the behest of the United States’ and Canada’s expanding Progressive states. These Progressive relief managers prioritized their own “expert” knowledge and hierarchical approach over the survivors’ more organic style of aid. Remes focuses on what the tension between these two approaches to rescue reveals about the nature of solidarity among survivors in Salem and Halifax, how that solidarity fared under the management of increasingly interventionist Progressive Era states, and why effective disaster relief requires recognition of the politics inherent in official rescue.

The concept of solidarity is critical to Remes’s analysis. He defines “solidarity” as “horizontal, reciprocal care: a care for someone, or a fight for someone, or a connection with someone not out of charity or sympathy but out of identity and empathy.” Remes writes that he uses the term solidarity—“A self-consciously more political term than *social capital*”—in order to demonstrate how

disaster citizenship emerges from “an often apolitical predisaster solidarity” (p. 10). Throughout the book, he refers to this apolitical predisaster solidarity variably as “mutual self-help,” “unofficial solidarity,” “informal solidarity,” “reciprocal solidarity,” “mutual solidarity,” “everyday solidarity,” and “interneighbor solidarity” (pp. 2, 18, 192, 131, 2, 190, 71). He asserts that both “predisaster connections” and a “growing sense of solidarity” among the survivors in Salem and Halifax formed the basis of the disaster citizenship that emerged in the aftermath of both disasters (p. 10). When the survivors aided one another they demonstrated solidarity, he argues, and this solidarity transformed into disaster citizenship as the survivors resisted Progressive relief managers’ efforts to control their movement, behavior, and labor.

Over the course of six chapters, Remes contrasts these responses of Salem’s and Halifax’s working-class survivors with those of American and Canadian Progressive relief managers. His source base and the depth of his research are impressive. In chapters that alternate between Halifax and Salem, Remes skillfully weaves the detailed accounts and personal narratives of individual survivors and relief managers into the framework of his major arguments. Fellow social historians will recognize and appreciate the significant amount of archival work required to uncover and faithfully represent so many personal experiences and perspectives. Remes successfully illustrates how survivors in Salem and Halifax rescued and aided one another not only in the immediate aftermath of the disasters but also through the difficult weeks and months of homelessness, financial insecurity, and joblessness that followed.

In the first two chapters of *Disaster Citizenship*, Remes examines how the Salem fire and the Halifax explosion affected each city and how the survivors and state aid managers responded in the initial phases of rescue work. Survivors of both disasters turned first to family, friends, and

neighbors for assistance. They aided those nearest them, then moved about the remnants of their cities to check on people within their familial and communal networks. Using in-depth knowledge of their communities and urban environments, survivors also proceeded to places in their communities where they felt immediate assistance would be available—a nearby doctor’s residence or office, a local drugstore, or the home of a neighbor people knew was a retired nurse. As they aided one another and migrated through their destroyed communities, survivors in both Salem and Halifax shared information by word of mouth.

To the Progressive relief managers who mobilized themselves in the aftermath of the disasters, the survivors’ responses appeared chaotic, inefficient, or even counterproductive. From the perspective of the local politicians, businessmen, bank managers, military commanders, and the leaders of women’s organizations who responded to the disasters, drugstores were “raided” and able-bodied survivors wasted valuable time moving about the city without direction. They believed that volunteers should be organized and their labor centralized. Doctors were best utilized at hospitals, where treatment could be provided in a more controlled, systematic manner.

In chapters 3 and 4, Remes illustrates how the tension between the survivors’ and Progressive relief managers’ styles of aid deepened as the focus of rescue shifted from saving lives and treating the injured to the more complex problems associated with mass homelessness and unemployment. In this phase of rescue, the issue of spatial autonomy featured prominently. Survivors wanted to be able to move freely through their destroyed communities to check on structures and collect what few belongings remained. They also often preferred to remain near their homes and lodge with family and friends when possible. In both Salem and Halifax, however, relief managers asserted control over the affected areas and created refugee camps. They assigned soldiers and lo-

cal militia to patrol destroyed areas of the cities, restrict movement (ostensibly to prevent looting), and enforce order in the camps. Progressive relief managers both enticed and coerced survivors into the camps, advertising them as pleasant, healthier alternatives to overcrowded shared housing while also sometimes withholding food, employment opportunities, or other aid until survivors acceded to demands to join the camps and comply with camp rules.

Throughout *Disaster Citizenship*, Remes shows the many ways survivors in Salem and Halifax fought Progressive relief managers for control over how and under what circumstances they would receive state disaster aid. Survivors did not passively accept restrictions to their movement, invasions of their privacy, control of their labor, or dictates about their behavior and choices. They pushed back against their official rescuers' demands in a variety of ways, particularly when survivors believed their own style of aid was more effective than that of the relief managers. When survivors in Salem discovered the neat, orderly arrangement of identical tents in the refugee camps made it difficult to locate and visit displaced family and friends, and that the post office would only share people's new addresses with the relief committee, survivors pinned pieces of paper with their names to the outside of their tents. When soldiers, militiamen, or police officers surveilled camp bread lines to ensure only authorized refugees received food—and no more than the single serving allotted—survivors sometimes overlooked “fakers” or “repeaters” in defiance of this control (p. 82). Remes offers many such examples of survivors' strategies to protect their autonomy and privacy or extricate themselves from the judgments and control imposed on them by Progressive relief managers. These examples, paired with the narratives of individual survivors, represent some of the most valuable aspects of the book.

At least as valuable is Remes's analysis of the underlying causes of relief managers' failure to understand those they set about to rescue. Throughout *Disaster Citizenship*, Remes employs a number of theories from the political and social sciences. He relies especially on political scientist James C. Scott's argument in *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (1998) that one of the major projects of states is to make their populations legible by arranging them in ways that simplify complex tasks, such as taxation or conscription. Remes extends this concept of legibility to the American and Canadian relief managers' approach to disaster relief, asserting that both legibility and illegibility played major roles in relief managers' efforts in Salem and Halifax. Because working-class culture, communal ties, and local knowledge were illegible to the upper- and middle-class government workers and private reformers who responded to the disasters, Remes argues, they often misunderstood survivors' responses and dismissed the value of survivors' insight into their own communities.

Remes's analysis of the many ways legibility and illegibility underpinned the relief managers' approach to rescue and informed the conflict between the two styles of aid he chronicles is keen yet nuanced. It represents a substantial contribution to the history of the character, growth, and functions of the Progressive Era state and is as useful to social historians as it could be for another segment of Remes's target audience: modern disaster relief officials and public policy experts. In the book's conclusion, Remes argues that the Salem and Halifax disasters offer practical lessons: “Rescue and relief are unavoidably political—that is, not simply a technical challenge—because they are inherently about the distribution of society's resources and about power. Planners, reformers, and relief professionals should be humble, remembering that the objects of their assistance have local knowledge that is inaccessible to them” (p. 196). The “best disaster policy,” he as-

serts, is a multilayered, community-centered approach that respects the informal solidarity and knowledge of local citizens while providing them access to the resources they need to recover (p. 197).

My criticisms of the work are, for the most part, minor. Remes's dense structural approach and use of esoteric language to explain critical theories may undermine his effort to reach a broad audience. His thematic division of the chapters works very well, but it is odd to read of the Halifax Explosion of 1917 in chapter 1 then move back to 1914 in chapter 2 as Remes introduces the Salem fire. Remes states that he begins with Halifax as a "reminder" that his analysis does not hinge on direct comparisons, nor does it "depend on the chronological difference between the Salem fire and the Halifax explosion" (p. 18). Yet the organizational choice only seems more idiosyncratic when readers learn some of the same relief managers who responded to the Salem disaster later traveled to Halifax to share their expertise.

Disaster Citizenship is a very strong example of comparative history. Although the book is weaker in its transnational than comparative aspects, Remes is attentive to some aspects of the US-Canada borderlands throughout. The final two chapters in particular contain significant attention to national context as Remes addresses how community organizations, such as churches and unions, responded to the disasters and tried to rebuild under the gaze and influence of expanded Progressive states. Some readers may also find Remes's application of the term "solidarity" too broad. Although his definition of the term (quoted above) limits its breadth somewhat, Remes uses many variations of the term interchangeably within the framework of his main arguments and does not disentangle the difference between formal and informal solidarity.

This difference matters, particularly if one is interested in understanding the perspectives, mo-

tivations, and experiences of the working-class subjects of Remes's study. The accounts and personal narratives of individual survivors he uses suggest that his working-class subjects were far more consciously aware of their shared identity as members of a particular community than they were of a common class identity. If an awareness of community played a more important role in the "identity and empathy" that formed the basis of their post-disaster solidarity, this is worth acknowledging and examining further. These important issues notwithstanding, *Disaster Citizenship* is an impressive accomplishment that offers a great deal to those interested in social history, the history of the working class, the history of progressivism, urban history, state building in the Progressive Era, the US-Canada borderlands, and comparative approaches to the study of history.

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