

DEBATE—TEST—DUMMY

Reaction to Hewitt

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There are many famous last words. My favorite one was said by Debate 4, a word-processing machine constructed for the Simulation of scientific arguments. "Missed the mark" was the last phrase it uttered before being disassembled. Later, an autopsy showed that the argument recognition System was disconnected. Thus, the programmed aim, a scientific debate, could not be ignited because the machine reprocessed its own database.

That was exactly how I felt when I finished reading the Hewitt paper. His nice and friendly cover letter accompanying it, initially induced the opposite feeling. With his sentence in mind—"I hope you will find the comments that do relate directly to your paper are fair and constructive, and that the paper will at least provoke some useful debate," I looked forward to reading his paper. I longed for such a debate. From my point of view, our field of study badly needs a debate. There should be one between the various scholars and their different paradigms, and between the views held in different countries and their adaptations for a disaster sociology. From the first time I heard it, I liked Quarantelli's idea of having a cross-cultural collection of theory-oriented papers on the question: "What is a disaster?" I was very enthusiastic about his idea of inviting a discussant to write a reaction paper with the possibility also of later replying to his remarks. This was a good chance and a good challenge. Theorems that might seem to be large in Germany might shrink to being very small when they were put into the intellectual context of the North American tradition of disaster research. There would be a chance to learn and grow. Conversely, some dwarf ideas might mutate into Davids who would conquer Goliath. A great challenge for paradigmatic change and progress. That is what I looked for. What did I find?

After reading Hewitt's paper, I was disappointed and disillusioned. My illusion had been to expect a debate. Instead, Hewitt wrote an interesting and agreeable article. However, his article has only very little to do with the course of the arguments in the five initial papers from the roundtable. The papers are mentioned, of course, but more in the sense of being used as

illustrations rather than being critiqued. There is no attempt to rethink the train of thought in the five articles, to test their load capacity and suitability in terms of building theory, disaster theory.

The basic structure of our "dialogue" had been arranged in this way. I talk about teeth and Hewitt asks: "Hey, what about the toes?" I try to develop logical and epistemological arguments and Hewitt says that I have neglected famine and the food System, the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR), and the insights from relief workers in the field. As a matter of fact, my institute is a member of the German IDNDR committee. I have done research and on-the-scene counseling in Rwanda/Zaire and other dangerous places, and we continually train and educate field workers. However, all this has nothing to do with my paper. It does not deal with the IDNDR, refugees, plagues and famines, relief workers and missions, and it was never my intention to do so.

In addition, besides a general shadow-boxing, there is what might be considered a punch below the belt. Hewitt tries to impute a hidden line of *Weltanschauung* in the five papers. According to him, disasters are too much seen as a problem of management organization, power and order. Very easily his argument shifts from technical to technocratic, from instruments to instrumentalism, and from managerial to being cold-hearted and inhuman. Consequently, to him, Chernobyl, Hiroshima, and Auschwitz appear as the logical outcome of a thinking that is identified as being in the five papers as well. That is far beyond shadow-boxing.

To sum up, if I were to discuss Hewitt's contribution in the same manner he used with our presentations, I would need only to merge the five papers under a common title: "Excluded perspectives in the social construction of disaster." In doing so, each party would then orbit in their own circle of autoreferentiality (as indicated in the System theory of Niklas Luhmann), that is, in one's own sophistic thinking. The idea: if I were to do as Hewitt did, we would all circle in our own thinking, and instead of dialogue, insults—such as references to Auschwitz, Hiroshima, and Chernobyl—would be at least implicitly hurled. Given that, a debate would never Start, but the dummies would die while muttering "missed the mark."