



Hazard responses in the pre-industrial era: vulnerability and resilience of traditional societies to volcanic disasters and the implications for present-day disaster planning

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A major research frontier in the study of natural hazard research involves unravelling the ways in which societies have reacted historically to disasters, and how such responses influence current policies of disaster reduction. For societies it is common to classify responses to natural hazards into: pre-industrial (folk); industrial; and post-industrial (comprehensive) responses. Pre-industrial societies are characterised by: a pre-dominantly rural location; an agricultural economic focus; artisan handicrafts rather than industrial production, parochialism, with people rarely travelling outside their local area and being little affected by external events and a feudal or semi-feudal social structure. In the past, hazard assessment focused on the physical processes that produced extreme and potentially damaging occurrences, however from the middle of the twenty-first century research into natural hazards has been cast within a framework defined by the polarities (or opposites) of vulnerability and resilience, subject to a blend of unique environmental, social, economic and cultural forces in hazardous areas, that either increase or decrease the impact of extreme events on a given society. In the past decade research of this type has been facilitated by a 'revolution' of source materials across a range of languages and in a variety of electronic formats (e.g. official archives; major contemporary and near-contemporary publications – often available as reprints; national and international newspapers of record; newsreel-films; and, photographs) and in the introduction of more reliable translation software (e.g. Systrans) that provides far more scope to the researcher in the study of natural hazards than was the case even a few years ago. Knowledge of hazard responses in the pre-industrial era is, not only important in its own right because it reveals indigenous strategies of coping, but also informs present-day disaster planners about how people have reacted to past events and how characteristic methods of coping have developed to enhance resilience, and reduce vulnerability. The aim of this paper is reflective of this research frontier and with the use of Mount Vesuvius, Italy, as a case study, this paper summarises: the characteristics of the eruptions that occurred during the long nineteenth century (i.e. those that occurred in 1794, 1822, 1855, 1861, 1872, 1906 and 1929); the particularities of the societal responses over time and the role of the authorities; and, the important lessons this history holds for the management of present-day disaster planning. In order to reduce disaster susceptibility and increase what is termed, resilience or capacity, the more deep-rooted causes of vulnerability need to be addressed.