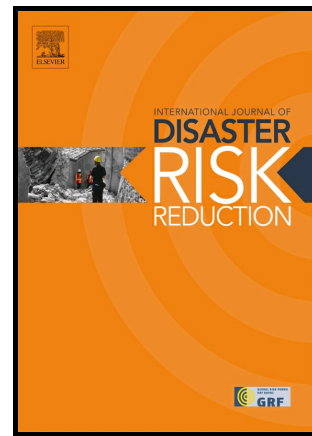


Author's Accepted Manuscript

Demonisation as explanation? A systems theory-informed analysis of the origins of, and reaction to the 1946 Burnden Park and 1989 Hillsborough football stadium disasters

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www.elsevier.com/locate/ijdr

PII: S2212-4209(16)30580-5
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdr.2016.12.013>
Reference: IJDRR471

To appear in: *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*

Received date: 12 October 2016
Revised date: 18 December 2016
Accepted date: 20 December 2016

Cite this article as: S.A. Bennett, Demonisation as explanation? A systems theory-informed analysis of the origins of, and reaction to the 1946 Burnden Park and 1989 Hillsborough football stadium disasters, *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdr.2016.12.013>

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Demonisation as explanation? A systems theory-informed analysis of the origins of, and reaction to the 1946 Burnden Park and 1989 Hillsborough football stadium disasters.

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Abstract

This paper argues that disasters and disaster accounts originate in systems of practice and belief. It suggests that to assert control and defend their interests, authorities may demonise the victims of disaster. The paper demonstrates how systems thinking, specifically the application of actor-network theory, explains the organisation and resourcing of accounts that blame victims. It shows how, by 'bending space around themselves', texts and claims, appropriately amplified and reproduced, can quickly and enduringly shape perceptions and responses. Analysis of the narratives that held sway in the immediate aftermath of Burnden and Hillsborough suggests that, at least in regard to football disasters and with reference to the work of Goldman, Horlick-Jones and Cook, victim-blaming may be an enduring feature of the social landscape.

Key words: Burnden; Hillsborough; actor-network theory; reductionism; victim-blaming; enduring;

1 Introduction

Analyses of the 1946 Burnden Park and 1989 Hillsborough football stadium disasters seldom draw on systems theory. None reference actor-network theory (ANT) in a deliberate way. This paper uses systems theory:

To explain how certain authorities avoided culpability for the Burnden Park and Hillsborough disasters by organising for the scapegoating of supporters. Referencing systems and actor-network theory, the paper provides a nuanced understanding of the framing of the disasters. In regard to Burnden and Hillsborough the paper concludes that the tendency towards, motivations for and mechanics of victim-blaming changed little between 1946 and 1989. Early analyses were in both cases reductionist

To show how, by 'bending space around themselves', texts and claims, appropriately amplified and reproduced, create durable actor-networks that are able to quickly and enduringly shape perceptions and responses

To encourage commentators' and investigators' awareness of processes of post-disaster agenda-grabbing

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