

## ANTHROPOLOGY

# The dynamics of disaster

## A social autopsy of the 2003 Paris heat wave

By Laura Stark

In August 2003, hundreds of Parisians returned from their summer holidays to an unholy smell. Ascending the stairs in their apartment buildings, they found the source: dead bodies. Between August 1st and 20th, a heat wave baked Europe, and nearly 15,000 people died in France alone. Richard Keller's intrepid new book, *Fatal Isolation*, is a social autopsy of those deaths.

The heat wave was a tragedy in slow motion. In the first week of August 2003, government officials issued tepid warnings about the heat. French journalists mentioned the swelter only to wish middle-class readers a *bon voyage* on their August holiday. Hospital emergency rooms and morgues were overwhelmed by the second week of August, and medical workers described a health infrastructure pressed to its limits. Municipal ice rinks became acceptable venues in which to store dead bodies; newspapers published the names of unclaimed corpses with the hope that someone might retrieve them—and make space for more. When journalists finally began to cover the story, they quickly converged on a cause of death: the decline of social solidarity, exacerbated by government mismanagement. By autumn, spectacles of public remorse about the “forgotten” victims (and about everyone else's fabulous holidays) were *de rigueur*. Yet little ultimately changed, Keller argues, and in *Fatal Isolation*, he explains why.

The story of the 2003 heat wave has been told before but, as Keller shows, the victims have been remembered in odd and unhelpful ways. Media, government, and epidemiological accounts of the heat-wave deaths created an image of the “typical victim” in the public imagination. True, the bulk of the victims were elderly people who had few friends, distant family, and little contact with neighbors. Yet Keller argues that the aggregate

and oft-repeated profile of the lonely elderly person gave an incomplete sense of the wide range of victims and, thus, an incomplete understanding of the problem—namely, the biases in how governments participate in the lives and deaths of their citizens.

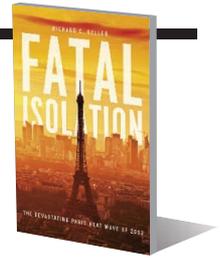
Richard Keller is a well-regarded historian best known for his work on French colonial medicine in Africa. In *Fatal Isolation*, he welds the perspective of a historian to the



Individuals sickened by the heat lie in the corridors of Saint Antoine Hospital in August 2003.

tools of an anthropologist in an effort to crack the puzzle of how citizens who lived in a generous welfare state could be consistently and completely abandoned by governments organized to protect them. He interviewed neighbors, shopkeepers, policy-makers, and medical workers. He explored the burst of film and literary nonfiction that the heat wave prompted. He visited addresses of the “forgotten victims” and photographed the crude living conditions of people eking out a bare life in the City of Lights. The result is masterful. Keller synthesizes these disparate sources of information into an impressive new explanation of the heat-wave deaths. More broadly, he demonstrates how social

**Fatal Isolation**  
The Devastating  
Paris Heat Wave of 2003  
Richard C. Keller  
University of  
Chicago Press, 2015.  
250 pp.



status, not only geographical location, predicts survival during natural disasters.

Keller's research shows that heat-wave victims came to be portrayed as people at the margins of French life because of age, infirmity, or personal failings. The narratives crafted and repeated—by locals, by journalists, by policy-makers—cast the victims as individuals who “had withdrawn from society as a consequence of their actions—whether voluntarily or as a function of their erratic behavior, their madness, their addictions,” Keller writes. “The rhetorical power of such portrayals is to redistribute culpability and to direct blame toward the victims themselves.”

Keller is as likely to follow leads he found buried in the archive as those he found in the cemetery for unclaimed bodies on the outskirts of Paris. In doing so, he suggests new tools for a critical epidemiology of disasters. For example, whereas traditional epidemiology tends to map health in horizontal space—across neighborhoods, for instance—Keller's visits to the victims' homes prompt him to consider the vertical dimension of the problem as well. He finds, for example, that victims tended to live in simple rooms located on the highest stories of popular residential buildings throughout Paris, meaning the victims were the literal neighbors of many well-off urbanites. Moving beyond the basic observation that heat rises, Keller explains how these top-story apartments have

historically been low-rent rooms, serving formerly as servants' quarters in Parisian residences. The heat wave produced death by urban design that was decades, not days, in the making.

Still, policy solutions are hard to come by for Keller. He argues that the French government was a major cause of the tragedy, and yet government is also his solution. Although Keller demurs on what precisely might be done—both in the immediate term and in the longer terms of climate change policy—*Fatal Isolation* makes clear that necessary changes will be as ordinary as they are profound.

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