SETTLEMENT AND CHANGE IN 'BASAL ZONE ECOTONES': AN INTERPRETATION OF THE GEOGRAPHY OF EARTHQUAKE RISK[1]

Kenneth Hewitt

Introductory Remarks: Disaster Geography

The geography of disaster presents severe problems of interpretation as of practical response. Not least is the complex way both discontinuities and continuities of material life are involved. There is not only the disarray, uncertainty and destablisation that the disaster event itself is most widely typified by. Also there is always a carry-over of some stable features, or definite expectations; behaviors, struggles to restore an implied 'norm', that link disaster strongly to the rest of life, and the on-going patterns of its spatial organization.

In the present discussion I shall be concerned primarily with aspects of human geography that do express spatial continuities, asking how they may exercise an influence upon the location, form and recurrence of earthquake disaster. This seems to be the function of a human ecology of risk. That is to say, we shall look at the incidence and features of disasters as they relate to the habitats where they occur, the human occupancy of those habitats, and larger spatial continuities of socio-economic organization. Little will be said about the seismic issues or crisis behavior. If so much had not already been written about them this would lead to an unbalanced approach. But here we shall look essentially at earth surface features rather than seismicity; at the phenomena of human settlement and on-going relations to habitat rather than of crisis.

This is a frankly academic piece of work exploring such data and ideas as are available, rather than an attempt to guide policy or management. It will differ too in the balance of abstraction and concreteness from so much of the specialized work on seismic risk [UNESCO, 1978]. I would argue, however, that the matters discussed are essential parts of the realities of place and people into which earthquake-triggered disaster intrudes; with which relief efforts must