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John Singleton
Economic and Natural Disasters since 1900. A Comparative History
Edward Elgar, Cheltenham/Northampton 2016, vi u. 247 S., 72.00 £.

This interesting but sometimes puzzling book begins by laying out the modified disaster cycle used in this analysis. The next six chapters discuss, among other things, Hurricane Katrina, the First World War, the Great Depression, mining disasters, the problem of tobacco in the later 20th century, and the "twin financial disasters of the early 21th century", i. e. the "Anglo-American Financial Disaster" that began in 2007, and the "Eurozone disaster" that followed. The author's work in economic history informs the chapters on the great depression and the 21st century. Indeed, as the author was finishing a book on central banking, he found that "the hypothesis between financial disasters and other types of disaster intrigued me".

Like most such books, this book starts by outlining what a disaster is. What all definitions have in common, the author argues, is that disasters are *social* phenomena that have measurable and unmeasurable costs. Disasters can be conceived of as external shocks, the manifestation of existing social vulnerabilities, or as states of uncertainty and confusion. The author notes that most disasters have all of these features.

A traditional disaster researcher will look at the choices of disasters studied in this book and will ask "how are all these disparate events disasters?" The author argues that we should cover a wide array of these kinds of events in order to understand how the disaster cycle works. The basic conception of the disaster cycle, as used by the United States National Governors' Association (NGA), consists of four phases: relief, rehabilitation, reconstruction, and mitigation. To these basic elements the author adds notions of warnings and blame allocation to the cycle and introduces four critical periods: the triggering event, sensemaking and decision making, the unfolding disasters, and rescue and relief. The author argues that this structure has its roots in disaster social science but that the disaster cycle has largely been used as a conceptual tool by practitioners.

What propels this cycle is human activity. This is sensible, but it still does not overcome the classic problems of the disaster cycle: When does it begin or end, when does the cycle move from one phase to another, and what characterizes the activities within each stage? And, indeed, when is the critical triggering event? In the case of a relatively sudden event, such as a hurricane or an earthquake, the triggering event may be easily found. But a discussion of the "triggering event" of, say, the First World War or of the 21st century economic crises or disasters will likely find all manner of warning signs, but these warnings are often unheeded, and we often don't know that these signs *were* warnings until well after the disaster occurs. In the tobacco case, there were so many warnings and signs and potential triggers over time that it is difficult characterize tobacco-related health problems as a "disaster". While the author argues that the costs, not the speed, are key to understanding disasters, we might take a lesson from John Kingdon's[1] work on agenda setting in the policy process; Kingdon distinguishes between indicators of a problem – statistical evidence, for example, derived from epidemiological studies – and sudden, attention grabbing "focusing events" that concentrate attention in a very short period of time. The way in which political systems deal with these two ways of attracting attention to problems are considerably different.

The easiest cases to which to apply the disaster cycle are, unsurprisingly, Hurricane Katrina and mining accidents. The discussion of Katrina contains some errors that detract from the argument. The author argues that New Orleans' drainage canals drain the Mississippi to the sea; in fact, they drain storm water into Lake Ponchartrain, and the primary causes of flooding in New Orleans from Katrina was the storm surge from the lake into these drainage canals, causing this failure. Later in the chapter, we learn that "there was a degree of looting and disorder in the city, which was only to be expected after any disaster, but it was not as bad as was depicted in the media" (p. 37). The sociological literature on disaster makes clear that looting and disorder are, in fact, not at all "expected" events, but are unusual, and are usually the result of a combination of factors, including diminishing hope that civil authority would help those in need, which means that "looting" may actually be "scavenging for supplies". These critiques, however, are relatively minor; the broad story of the problem of Hurricane Katrina is well outlined here, although other scholars, particularly well grounded in natural hazards research, have written more authoritative accounts of this disaster.

The balance of the book contains some fascinating case studies, but one is left with the impression that the fit between the disaster cycle, as explicated by sociologists and as extended in this book, and its applications to the cases, is rather forced. For example, the First World War can be said to have been the result of so many related factors that it is hard to apply to the disaster cycle to as complex a problem as this war. And while there appears to be a sensemaking phase after the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand, this sensemaking reveals the deeply contradictory thought processes of the small group of leaders who took the world to war. And the application of the disaster cycle to economic crises and public health issues is less straightforward, given that these events have much more ambiguous warnings – much like in the World War I example – and very complex sensemaking processes.

The attempt to apply the disaster cycle to these different kinds of events is interesting, and provides the volume with an organizing principle that allows for some fascinating case studies. The book's strengths, like the author's, are in the description of the financial disasters of the 1930s and the early 21st century. Students of these kinds of events will find these case studies illuminating. But, given the vast range of kinds of events being considered under the rubric of "disaster", the book's extension and application of the disaster cycle may be puzzling to more traditional scholars of disasters, as they are traditionally defined in the social sciences. But there is value to improving our notion of the disaster cycle and in showing common features among different sorts of "disasters".

1 John W. Kingdon: Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies. 2nd Edition, Boston 2011.

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