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WHAT DISASTER RESPONSE CAN TEACH US ABOUT DEMOCRACY IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

Malka Older

Disaster response has always been relevant for governance. Disasters—moments when hazards collide with vulnerabilities to create mass risk and mass damages—often lead to spontaneous organization; forced collective action; high-stakes and uncertain decision-making. The urgency tends to strip bureaucratic cushioning, bringing out choices, relationships, and leadership instead of procedure-following. Facing scarcity forces those in charge to confront questions of resource allocation more starkly than usual. Disaster responses tend to occur over a short period of time and are often documented under a spotlight of intense attention, highlighting governance issues that are harder to track in the welter of “normal” bureaucracy. Finally, crisis responses offer the best chance for thinking through preparedness for future disasters.

Disasters thus offer opportunities to learn about leadership (e.g., Knox, 2013), decision-making (e.g., Col, 2007), social capital (e.g., Aldrich and Meyer, 2015), vulnerability (e.g., Wisner et al., 2004), and many other issues. The urgency can serve to remove some of our mundane filters, allowing us to see the dynamics and structures that underpin non-disaster times more clearly.

The potential insights and usefulness of disaster studies are expanded in the Anthropocene, this current era in which human activities have a significant—or the most significant—impact on Earth’s ecosystems. Our relationship with disasters is changing. What we are doing to the planet is making disasters more frequent and severe: from emissions leading to climate change, to fracking causing earthquakes, to wetlands destruction worsening storm surges; it is possible that disasters are becoming more frequent for other, less clear reasons as well (see, for example, WMO, 2021). Expanded industrial activity leads to greater risk of technological accidents triggering disasters (Perrow, 1999).

At the same time, human settlements are expanding, covering more of the planet, and often in dense concentrations, meaning that natural hazards are more
likely to interact with human habitation and lead to disasters. And we are more aware of disasters now. An explosion or accident or volcanic eruption almost anywhere in the world can be recorded and made available on the internet in seconds, and drone cameras and satellites give us new perspectives. While such videos spread virally, attracting lots of viewers, traditional television and radio shows leverage that sense of crisis to encourage viewership during continuous news cycles, further heightening our sense that disasters are everywhere.

Even as crises become and are perceived as more frequent, our conceptualization of disasters is also changing. Traditionally, disasters are seen as sudden and unusual events, exceptional, abnormal, and brief, interrupting “normalcy” like a caesura. But more recent disaster literature, both academic and practitioner, seeks to disentangle the sudden onset of a hazard such as an earthquake or hurricane from the human vulnerabilities that are rooted in longer term policy and governance. A hurricane, for example, is a (relatively) sudden and unusual event, but it only becomes a disaster when it interacts with coastal habitations or livelihoods; poor drainage; lack of public transportation options for evacuation; badly constructed buildings; a malnourished or unhealthy population; old and/or poorly designed infrastructure; and so on. These are long-term vulnerabilities tied to policy choices, and at least some of them suggest deeper issues that may not attract the urgency of a hurricane, but that over time can be catastrophic for the people involved.

The cultural-political geographer Ben Anderson takes this further, describing a constant “state of emergency” in, for example, the situation of Black people living in the United States (2017). A government declaration of emergency, Anderson writes, “reproduces a fictitious line between emergency and a normality that has been in the past, and should be and can be returned to in the future” (Anderson, 2017: 464). However, “For those already living in emergency conditions, there is no such line. Emergency is the present and the past and, unless interrupted, will be the future” (464). This constant state of crisis, already familiar to oppressed and marginalized populations, is becoming pervasive. Already, we seem to be moving from catastrophe to overlapping catastrophe: forest fires to ice storms to ongoing pandemics to oil spills to explosions to flooding. In this context, disasters become backdrop rather than interruption, and their lessons ever more relevant as we look for new ways to govern ourselves in this volatile, precarious era.

Considering what we can learn from disasters to support efforts in Anthropocenic democracy, then, leads us to at least three main areas. As disasters become the norm, we can draw lessons about how to govern in times of crisis: what kind of organizations evolves, which are effective, what pitfalls emerge. We can look at the social construction of disasters and imagine how modulating that might affect our resilience to them. If we resist the idea of the constant crisis, we could also consider how to best prepare for and mitigate future emergencies, exploring the link between democracy and disaster preparedness. Disaster studies offer us a wealth of insight into governing disasters as well as governing, full-stop, while conversely there’s reason to hope that democracy, done well, can allow us to avoid some disasters as well as better weathering others.
Governance in Disasters: Framing

It may seem strange to look for hints about democracy in the governing of disasters. The popular conception of disaster response, bolstered by scenes from movies and television, is of panicking masses, screaming, and running, while in a windowless, possibly underground room filled with computer screens a grim-faced group of mostly men, some of them in uniform, make difficult, sometimes contentious, but always decisive decisions. In my experience, the rooms are indeed often windowless and generally have computer screens, and depending on the location the people in them may be mostly male and mostly in uniform, but decades of disaster literature and practitioner experience show that mass panic is rare.

More than fifty years ago, at the beginning of disaster studies as a field, case studies like the Disaster Research Group’s “Behavior In An Emergency Shelter: A Field Study Of 800 Persons Stranded In A Highway Restaurant During A Heavy Snowstorm” (Fritz et al., 1958) found that, rather than disruption and selfishness, the group of strangers responded with spontaneous organization and volunteerism. Informal leaders emerged and their “instructions and suggestions [...] seem to have been followed readily” (Fritz et al., 1958: 2). Nor was this an exceptional case. In 1985, the public administration professor Robert A. Stalling and the eminent disaster researcher E. L. Quarantelli wrote about “groups of citizens [...] that emerge around perceived needs or problems associated with both natural and technological disaster situations” (Stallings and Quarantelli, 1985: 94). They begin their article with a brief case study of a brush fire but note that “it could have been any type of emergency anywhere in the United States” (or, presumably, the world), so confident were they in the generality of these findings (ibid, 93). Stallings and Quarantelli offer the examples of:

- ephemeral teams of neighbors attempting search and rescue, to community residents organizing themselves to force removal of potentially hazardous waste sites or nuclear plants, to disaster victims getting together to pressure officials to take preparedness and mitigation measures for probable reoccurrences of the floods and landslides they have just experienced.

Such examples suggest that disasters may, in fact, create governance (at least under certain circumstances, a caveat discussed further below). In the case study of the highway restaurant, Fritz et al. write that “The development of organization seems to have been stimulated by the presence of interpersonal conflicts and tension over available food, space, and service” (2); the necessity of divvying up scarce resources prompted leaders to emerge and tasks to be defined and assigned. Indeed, there is a substantial body of work showing that experiencing disaster can lead to self-organizing, mutually supporting communities (see, e.g., Turner, 1967; in popular writing, Solnit, 2009).

However, there is also significant evidence that not all disasters have the same effects. As the environmental sociologist W. R. Freudenburg shows in a 1997
review of the literature, while naturally triggered disasters promote community cohesion, crises perceived as technological or industrial have, in general, the opposite effect, creating distrust, fragmentation, and stress extending long after the crisis itself. Freudenburg categorizes the causes of this difference into three specific issues: “ambiguity of harm, the emergence of ‘corrosive communities’, and the threats to the sociocultural fabric that result” (19). Ambiguity of harm is tied to uncertainty over the long-term effect of, for example, radiation leaks, chemical spills, or cell-phone towers; disagreement over the importance of potential damage can fracture communities. What Freudenburg terms “corrosive communities”—adversarial instead of mutually supporting—follow from that to some extent and are exacerbated by authorities attempting to evade responsibility in what becomes “a socially corrosive struggle over affixing blame” (31). That in turn leads to disillusionment with traditional sources of authority and, according to Freudenburg, “sociocultural disruption.”

While these three dynamics are associated with technological disasters, note that none of them are intrinsically linked to technology or industry itself. Indeed, we can observe all of them in play in the reactions to the Covid-19 pandemic. Bitter divisions over the severity, existence, and type of harm play out in violence and protests, sometimes latching onto long-running divisions (see, e.g., Tindall 2022). International finger-pointing and lack of clarity from authorities and institutions further fracture the collective understanding, leading to disillusionment with governments and other sources of legitimacy. The question is further complicated, and perhaps confirmed, by the persistent and as yet unresolved debate over whether the virus is, in fact, natural. The importance given to this question suggests that a human-made origin carries a psycho-social weight far beyond its usefulness in managing the crisis; the other technological element in the pandemic, the extensive networks of rapid transport that hastened its spread, gets far less attention.

Similar dynamics of uncertainty, rivalry, and loss of trust in authority can occur during disaster responses, leading to similarly toxic currents in communities (Older, 2019a). Governments, NGOs, and volunteers arrive suddenly in devastated communities, promising assistance and requiring paperwork or participation, creating uncertainty about what assistance might or might not be achieved by a given individual or group. Potential beneficiaries may find themselves competing against each other for first-come-first-serve goods, or communities may disagree about which offers of assistance to pursue. They may witness incompetence or media posturing among those supposedly there to selflessly assist; many may become disillusioned with the idea of “charity” or donating to disaster relief in the future, as well as with specific actors.

It is therefore not the type of crisis that leads to these damaging reactions, but the way the event is perceived, the way it is framed; indeed, the way it is governed. Uncertainty, blame posturing, and misuse of authority fragment communities, and if the involvement of technology and industry make these elements more likely, they can certainly be inspired in other ways.
On the other hand, if poor governing can lead the aftermath of a naturally triggered disaster to mimic the harmful dynamics of a technological disaster, it seems reasonable to suggest that good governance can support the formation of supportive, cohesive community behaviors regardless of the inciting crisis. What might that “good governance” look like? It is hard to avoid uncertainty in disasters (or in any type of governing), but transparency and information flow should be prioritized far more than they currently are. There is also almost certainly going to be blame; acceptance offers better chances for healing and community support than evasion and misdirection and, especially, attempting to blame the affected.

It is useful in further exploring this to compare Freudenburg’s description of the dynamics toxic to communities with the concept of elite panic (Tierney, 2008; Clarke and Chess, 2008). The sociologist Lee Clarke and environmental policy professor Caron Chess note that “the powerful are more likely to defend their behavior than to acknowledge vulnerability” (2008: 1007), echoing the aggressive attempts to assign blame related by Freudenburg. Their further statement that “When elite panic happens […], the disrupted relational bonds are those between status groups” (1001) reinforces the description of sociocultural disruption. In research on Hurricane Katrina, disaster sociologist Kathleen Tierney found that “Elite panic was shockingly evident during Katrina, as evidenced by media and public officials’ obsessions with looting and lawlessness, the issuing of shoot-to-kill orders arising primarily out of a concern with property crime” (2008: 131). Moreover, Tierney notes, this is not an isolated case: she cites the “draconian measures undertaken against the poor and people of color by government and civic leaders during the 1906 earthquake, the 1871 Chicago fire, and the 1900 Galveston hurricane” (131–132). The law professor and sociologist Michele Landis has written about how disaster assistance in the United States from its historical origins has consistently focused on assets (1998). Indeed, it’s notable that the field is usually referred as emergency management, that is, focusing on finding a way back to the pre-existing status quo and controlling any disturbances to that state occasioned by the crisis, rather than in terms of humanitarian assistance or community resilience. Under the condition of varying but continuous crises that seems to typify the Anthropocene, that focus needs to change.

Disaster governance intended at promoting cohesive communities, then, needs to consider the support and strengthening of community resilience and cohesiveness as one of the objectives, along with replacing damaged and destroyed assets. If we can adjust from chasing an imaginary normalcy and an illusory sense of control to, instead, strengthening communities as a whole, that would change our entire perspective on disasters—and, for that matter, governance more generally. Programs and procedures explicitly designed to work with communities, promote transparency and foster a sense of fairness, could vastly improve the experience of living through disasters. A willingness to admit fallibility might even help with the disillusionment with authority described by Freudenburg. Shaky democracies suffer from similar issues with fragmented communities and tenuous legitimacy; such approaches might prove useful for them as well.
However, though reconceptualizing, or changing the social construction, of disaster is less physically challenging than, say, building a sea wall, it is at least as complex and time-consuming. We therefore shift to focus on some more practical and immediate elements of disaster governance.

**Governance in Disasters: Participation**

The supportive communities that emerge after naturally triggered disasters express itself in the truism of disaster practice that the first responders are locals. Before international agencies or emergency management professionals arrive, neighbors pack cars full of food and blankets and strangers offer lodging on social media. Sociologist Ralph H. Turner wrote that “When rescue agencies arrive on the scene, they usually find that local people without formal training or responsibility have done much of the basic rescue work” (1967: 61).

It is important to note that along with heightened solidarity, Turner found reduced tolerance toward outsiders; therapeutic communities can be toxic for others, depending on how outsiders are defined. As Charlie Jane Anders (2021) has observed, we cannot assume that an external threat will heal all our social hatreds. The decision to turn back evacuees on the bridge to Gretna after Hurricane Katrina offers a recent example.

In addition to substantiating the theory of solidarity, the spontaneous and largely consistent willingness to help offers a recommendation for disaster governance, one concisely expressed by the doctor who organized the stranded people in the case of the blizzard at the highway restaurant: “Give everybody a job to do” (Fritz et al., 1958: 37). Another participant in the same study, described as “Air Force Major Who Took Leadership Role” agreed: “Put people to work. Give them responsibilities. Make them feel a part of the overall situation. Make them feel they are doing a constructive job” (Ibid, 38).

This advice was echoed by a school principal who, after the devastating tsunami in northeastern Japan in 2011, found himself unwillingly but effectively managing an evacuation center in his school. Faced with an overcrowded building and no way to run classes, the principal set the displaced children to cleaning their temporary living space: “Using these children, we made them awaken this consciousness of being volunteers, then we got them to do that kind of work. So that really let them feel like they themselves were moving forward” (Interview, translated by the author, quoted in Older 2019b, 152–153). While the principal came to this through his own philosophy of education, it was official policy in Sendai, where an emergency management official told me that “saying that the city staff were deployed doesn’t mean that the city staff did everything from one to nine [A to Z]; basically, the people who evacuated were supposed to cooperate” (Ibid, 152).

While this expectation of cooperation may seem opportunistic, involving evacuees, neighboring communities, and residents whose houses are still standing in the relief effort is as much for those doing the helping as for the helped. Turner
found it surprising to observe “people sometimes disregarding their own misfortune while helping others” (Turner, 1967: 61); in fact, helping others is one of the best ways to disregard one’s own misfortune, or one’s distress at the misfortunes of others.

A retired civil servant who took a leadership role at another Japanese evacuation center described how the division of labor became increasingly elaborate as time went on:

at around that time, food and relief goods started to come in. This time we [put in place] a relief goods manager. The thing is, as the relief goods came, rice came, there was someone to look after it but not someone to cook it. So at this time, we called some of the women in the evacuation center to help. We said ‘Isn’t there anyone who would take charge of food preparation?’ Then ten people raised their hands, so we said to those people, ‘You will help us by cooking.’ There were no bowls or anything so we had them do only rice balls. Then next thing, with rice balls, it turned out, the people in charge of food preparation had to work the full day, to deliver three meals and sleep, they had to get up before six am, and worked until ten at night, then they had to clean up after. So those food preparation people, they were already overwhelmed. Next thing we did was, this time, people for setting the table. We made a structure for [people] to carry that and deliver it to everyone after the preparation. […] The next time what we did was, this time, we said isn’t there anyone to clean up afterwards, then the food preparation people returned [were done] quickly. Then we needed someone in charge of washing bowls. That’s what we did.

Interview, translated by the author, quoted in Older 2019b, 153–154

While this work may have been onerous and exhausting, and by the leaders’ own description “overwhelmed” some people, it also galvanized community, made use of existing skills, and gave people who wished to volunteer an outlet for their energy, all while improving the conditions of the living environment.

Contrast that with the top-down presumption of idleness at places like the Superdome in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina. The 2006 United States Senate report on Katrina describes the Superdome as a place where “25,000 evacuees waited in heat and humidity for evacuation buses that wouldn’t arrive for days” (emphasis mine). One woman

had passed up the chance to evacuate to Mississippi with her daughter because she wanted to help at the Superdome. […] Morris says she offered her help to FEMA medics, as well as representatives of the state health department. “I could not understand with all the need they had how they could refuse help,” she said. (Generally, medical personnel turned away volunteers because there was no way to evaluate their skills.)

US Senate, 2006: 31–32
While reports of violence at the Superdome seem to have been largely exaggerated, the evacuees who had stayed there described overflowing toilets and the lack of any assistance or prioritization for the vulnerable. The contrast is even more notable since the Superdome was in use for only a few days, while many of the Japanese evacuation centers operated for months.

Beyond benefits for the individuals and the relief effort, involving everyone creates an ethos of equity and participation. It blurs, if not entirely erases, the problematic division between “aid workers” and “beneficiaries,” ensuring that people directly affected by the disaster are agents in the rebuilding of their own lives. It also includes those tangentially affected, who might otherwise find themselves bystanders or rubberneckers, underscoring the point that all people have a role to play in improving the situation. Organized participation underscores the collective nature of disasters, a critical perception: for the people stranded in the highway restaurant, “Organization seems to have been impeded by people’s tendency to view the situation as a personal emergency rather than an emergency for the total group of shelterees” (Fritz et al., 1958: 2). Developing leadership roles and defining tasks for those able to participate made the problems of scarce food and shelter a problem for everyone to solve together, rather than a competition that some would win.

This insight has obvious implications for democracies. While recognizing that full civic participation implies a contribution of time, travel, and research that should not be casually imposed on those with limited money and leisure, governance would be stronger if it expected citizens to do more than cast a grudging vote every two or four years. If the structures of government encouraged and facilitated active engagement and the contribution of diverse skills to different tasks, democracies might resemble Japanese evacuation centers, rather than the Superdome.

**Governance in Disasters: Mutual Aid**

While spontaneous, unprofessional assistance from less-affected or unaffected locals is usually the first type of aid to arrive, another critical and often underappreciated source of support is assistance from peer governments—city-to-city, for example, or county-to-county. Mutual aid may be provided either through pre-existing mutual aid agreements, less formal “loans,” or secondments of staff from an unharmed locality. The government’s focus in emergency management tends to be on vertical relationships to larger jurisdictions—state/prefecture, national—in large part because that’s where the disaster relief money is. But lateral relationships are often less contentious than hierarchical ones because they don’t involve funding requests. The assistance can also be more practical, given that the people providing assistance often operate under roughly the same constraints and expectations as those receiving it; an emergency manager from a county in a neighboring state might have a better idea of what the affected emergency manager is going through, including with advice on the hoops required by national agencies, than a representative of a national agency.
Years after hurricane Katrina, local officials still remembered the impact of emergency managers arriving from other counties, and especially those from Florida, primed by the experience of a difficult hurricane season the year before. A County Administrator in Hancock County recalled the assistance of an emergency manager from Florida:

She said, ‘[...] we’ve come with a team of people that can work with you and help you manage what you’re going through. [...]’ And so that was the turning point with Hancock County, hurricane recovery, and getting back on our feet, was the fact that they showed up.

*Interview, quoted in Older 2019b, 98*

While federal and state officials who arrived in Hancock County were aware of such systems, the perspective of those who put it into practice was more helpful to the traumatized and exhausted locals. Even the federal officials who had worked locally were constrained by the requirements of their relative position, as one FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) officer stationed in the same county explained that while he met with the local officials every day, he didn’t sit in their emergency operations center, purposely creating some distance:

We’re not—different levels of government, we have our own roles to take care of, and we collectively work together on those things that one level needs the next level’s help on. But we can’t get involved—if we got involved in the little things, we wouldn’t be able to help you on the big stuff. I mean if we’re gonna try to do all the little things for you, then we don’t need local government.

*Ibid, 96–97*

In Japan, mutual aid exchanges, like the ones that took place after the 2011 tsunami, are considered to benefit not only the receiver of the aid, but also to offer an opportunity for local officials to garner experience and to learn skills they might not otherwise have a chance to practice before facing their own catastrophe.

In democracies, as in disaster response, there is an overemphasis on hierarchical relationships and the power and fame associated with larger jurisdictions: residents tend to pay more attention to national politics than to those of our neighboring cities, states, or provinces. While the vertical relationships remain relevant, networks of peer jurisdictions offer an important route for developing cohesive policies and for supporting democracy.

**Disasters and Democracy**

Disasters and democratic countries have a somewhat contentious relationship. Disasters are, in fact, a relatively new thing for national governments to assume responsibility for; before the twentieth century, the speed of transportation didn’t
allow central authorities to arrive in time to do much disaster response, and even reconstruction was primarily funded by business leaders and subscriptions (Steinberg, 2000).

Over the last century, however, disaster management has become accepted as a role for national governments. As such, it has implications for the democratic process, and vice versa. Federal Reserve Bank researcher Thomas A. Garrett and economist Russell S. Sobel, for example, found in a 2002 working paper that “States politically important to the [sitting] president have a higher rate of disaster declaration by the president, and disaster expenditures are higher in states having congressional representation on FEMA oversight committees”; political structures and contests affect the distribution of disaster funds. Political scientists John T. Gasper and Andrew Reeves (2013) find not only that elections are impacted both by the occurrence of the natural hazards themselves, and by the actions of elected officials, but also that disaster declarations get a positive public response. This suggests that “there are potentially incentives to underinvest in disaster mitigation” (354), since the occurrence of a disaster could boost political capital.

Clearly, democracy and disaster best practices don’t always go hand in hand. And yet, economist and philosopher Amartya Sen famously asserted that there “has never been a famine in a functioning multiparty democracy” (2001: 178), offering the hope that through the accountability mechanisms of democracy, humans can save themselves from some of the worst impacts.

Nevertheless, some of the wealthiest and most apparently stable and democratic countries in the world fail to adequately prepare for and respond to recurring and predictable disasters such as hurricanes, as well as climate change. This may be due in part to the imperfect nature of democracy in these countries: significant gaps between proposed policies and public opinion; confused accountability; the influence of wealth. But there also seems to be a gap in what is possible in terms of disaster management and what humans believe they can expect or enforce. If disasters are painted as inevitable and there is no real comparison with other response actors, it is far harder for citizens to demand better preparedness, mitigation, and response.

Perhaps the most dangerous element is the tendency of political administrations to pretend that disasters won’t happen (at least on their watch), then in the aftermath of a catastrophe declaring it unprecedented and unpredicted. Part of the difficulty here is that the relatively new role of government in dealing with disaster remains somewhat uncertain. As political scientist Saundra Schneider determined in the aftermath of Katrina, there are significant misperceptions both within government and among the public about the role of government (Schneider, 2008). Meanwhile, definitions of success and failure are unclear, without any standardized metrics of the sort commonly used in international responses (see Sphere, 2018; Older 2019b). Defining these outcomes will allow democratic mechanisms for accountability to better influence disaster management.

Considering the relationship between democracies and disasters in preparation for writing this chapter, I was reminded of physical therapist Penny Simkin’s distinction between pain and suffering:
Pain is an unpleasant physical sensation that may or may not be associated with suffering. [...] Suffering is a distressing psychological state that may include feelings of helplessness, anguish, remorse, fear, panic, or loss of control and that may or may not be associated with pain.

Disasters, and the pain they cause, are all but inevitable. Failure to govern them properly—by refusing to commit resources to preparedness, raising unreasonable expectations, leaving people in uncertainty, assigning blame, not assisting the most vulnerable, or otherwise—causes unnecessary suffering.

But with their urgency, their complexity, and even their ambiguous status within government responsibilities, disaster responses offer insights for how we can govern better under all circumstances. Disaster case studies point to the importance of community, of participation, and of connection. Both because we’re faced with disaster more consistently than ever before, and in the aim of making our democracies more democratic and effective, we should be implementing these lessons throughout our governing.

References


