Book review

The Cure for Catastrophe: How We Can Stop Manufacturing Natural Disasters
Robert Muir-Wood
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The guidelines for reviewers of the UN Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction 2019 specifies that the term "natural disasters" is no longer to be used upon agreement with the UNISDR's recommendation. This signifies an important change in the global perspective about disasters that I have preached to my students for years: "there are no natural disasters." If a Category 5 storm develops in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, then it may certainly be considered a natural hazard, but the storm is not a disaster until humans put themselves in its path. Thus, the term "natural disaster" is outmoded inasmuch as it should never have existed in the first place. The destruction caused by a natural hazard on unoccupied territory is not a disaster, it is just nature happening. If we subscribe to the literary trope of "man vs nature," then that only adds to the argument against thinking that modern human activity is a part of the global ecosystem. Putting radical fatalist evolutionary theories aside, what humans are doing on the planet is anything but natural and the planet's hazards are only disasters insofar as they interfere with anthropogenic development.

Does this cognizance undermine Robert Muir-Wood's *The Cure for Catastrophe: How We Can Stop Manufacturing Natural Disasters?* We may excuse the convenient use of the misnomer because most of the world did not get (or has filed away without reading) the memo yet; this becomes abundantly clear in the book as it traces the history of human development in the context of natural hazards. In fact, Muir-Wood even suspends quotation marks over the first half of the term in the introduction before abandoning the "natural" descriptive thereafter in favor of just discussing disasters (p. 4). Humans have continually conceived nature as a foil to our objectives, but the thesis in this book is that the real enemy is our own negligence in properly situating our place in nature and understanding that while we may be a hazard to nature, natural hazards do not care one whit about us.

One of the great strengths of this book is its presentation of events and lessons to be learned: "Central to risk culture is storytelling" (p. 257). Each chapter tells a little story from the history of disasters, ranging from earthquakes in eighteenth century Europe to volcanoes in the Caribbean in 1902, recounting the development of fire insurance in seventeenth century England as well as the system of canals and levees erected around New Orleans in the 1960s. Each tale provides some nugget of caution that, when gathered together, portrays the evolution of societies as being regularly beset by misguided disaster prevention measures. Echoing the sentiments of Thomas Birkland's (2006) *Lessons of Disaster*, Kathleen Tierney's (2014) *The Social Roots of Risk*, and even Thomas Drabek's (2013) text *The Human Side of Disaster*, the curation of stories reinforces the role and responsibility of human agency in disasters.

One of the more interesting themes of the book is a repeated tendency for people to invest in the misplaced notions of disaster panacea. Muir-Wood targets specific technologies that were initially believed to mitigate a natural hazard but then were shown to fail people's

confidence when the next unknown threat materialized. Recalling the fable of the Three Little Pigs, the book traces the evolution of building materials and methods as a Darwinian process. At every turn in societal development, the next best thing opens the door to greater exposure of a different catastrophe from the one that it was supposed to resolve. Wooden buildings were susceptible to fire, so bricks became the norm. Brick buildings were susceptible to earthquakes, so concrete became the norm. And so on.

The misplaced confidence in technological solutions to natural hazards is further undermined by the misplaced confidence in government planning and governance. While the intentions of policy are noble and true, the implementation is continually susceptible to corruption, incompetence and ignorance. Frustrating episodes are scattered throughout the book that tell of a good idea that was executed poorly to the detriment of citizens. The analysis and detailed stories about the Japanese communities during the 2011 earthquake and tsunami are particularly effective at communicating how designs and preparations cannot be taken at full faith.

It is only at the end of the book that the new paradigm of anticipation (rather than prevention) – as advanced by the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR, 2015) – is made explicit as Muir-Wood reminds us of the lesson from Charles Perrow's (1999) *Normal Accidents* by warning that, "With our reliance on technology come new consequences and new vulnerabilities" (p. 252). Muir-Wood calls for societies to cultivate a culture of resilience, in contradistinction from disaster prevention, noting that "it takes a disaster to reduce disaster risk" (p. 254) and "it is the irony of the flood wall that can make us less resilient" (p. 266). He implicates the global catastrophe insurance industry in the expansion of hazard risk; if one can buy insurance for a particular practice, then it must be sanctioned, right? What would be preferable for Muir-Wood is to focus on reducing disaster risk, rather than meeting it with ever more complex constructs that merely accommodate its growth. He ends the book with a foray into the future, hypothesizing how society has done a better job of integrating technological advancements into disaster risk reduction practices in the year 2030. We can only hope that some of these ideas are taken into consideration.

I commend Muir-Wood for asking the hard questions throughout the book, primarily phrased as "Should we […]?" inquiries about development. He even ponders the positive contributions of disasters: they provide perspective to our worldviews, draw attention to the effects of our activity and make us contemplate resilience as the true defense against natural hazards. Adherents of Manifest Destiny and the biblical notion of humans' rightful dominance over beasts, boulders and berries should take pause after reading this book. Climate scientists, disaster researchersand emergency managers can appreciate Muir-Wood's effort at putting humans' struggle in a world of natural hazards in the proper context. While the ideas in *The Cure for Catastrophe* may be a little too familiar as a required reading on a graduate-level course syllabus, it would certainly be a worthy addition to the "recommended" column for disaster management students or a good suggested reading for the layperson who wonders whether to buy a beach house.

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