Towards a Politics of Disaster: Losses, Values, Agendas, and Blame

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Offering examples from around the world, including China, Mexico, Nicaragua, and California, this paper argues that disasters must be understood and analyzed more deeply and more often as explicitly political events. The paper also argues that because politics is the “authoritative allocation of values,” the politics-disaster nexus revolves around the allocation of several important values: life safety in the pre-event period, survival in the emergency phase, and “life chances” in the recovery and reconstruction periods. The paper concludes by suggesting that the literatures on agenda control and causal stories/blame management are particularly useful points of departure for analyzing disasters as intrinsically political events.

Why has it been so difficult to gain sustained, systematic attention to the political aspects of disasters? We seem to have the politics of virtually every other policy domain (e.g., air pollution, cancer, welfare, taxation), but we do not have a well articulated “politics of disaster.” This relative inattention to disasters as political occasions appears to stem from two facts. On one hand, most political scientists have not studied disasters, natural or technological, because they see them primarily (but incorrectly) as engineering problems or, at most, political epiphenomena. On the other hand, only in the last decade has disaster research begun accepting disasters as political occasions—and then primarily from a “policy” perspective. This relative neglect appears due

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to (1) political scientists not being among the founding leaders of the field, who were principally geographers and sociologists, and (2) a “politics of disaster” carrying serious negative (but very normative) connotations to many disaster researchers and virtually all practitioners, who essentially believe that there shouldn’t be a politics of disaster.

Ignoring the explicit political dimension of disasters, however, does not make it go away. Disasters constitute “exogenous shocks” to which modern political systems must respond, so it should not come as a surprise therefore that literally within minutes after any major impact, disasters start becoming political. The politicization of the event then only increases as the affected community, or at times an entire society, moves from emergency response through the recovery and reconstruction phases.

The most useful place to start deepening our understanding of the politics-disaster connection is with an often overlooked but fundamentally important fact: In any disaster, government officials are confronted with the need to not only manage the situation but also explain it. In any event involving major life loss, injuries, and serious damage, variations on three politicizing questions are almost always posed in the aftermath:

1. What happened? This question appears innocuous and is often couched in scientific or technical terms, but it starts the process of defining the event and constructing its meaning, which is political at least as much as it is scientific or technical.

2. Why were the losses (so) high and/or the response (so) inadequate? This combination question becomes political very rapidly because it focuses attention directly on fundamental pre-event as well as postevent public policy decisions and their effects, competing causal stories, and associated accountability/responsibility issues (often called the “blame game”).

3. What will happen now? Once the shock of impact wears off and emergency operations begin to wind down, people turn their attention to recovery and reconstruction, which invariably involve (a) large amounts of money and (b) decisions about that money. That combination is politics.
Toward A Framework

Disasters and Political System Stress

Inimitably direct in his 1930 classic, Harold Lasswell defined politics as “Who Gets What, When, How?”

The influential are those who get the most of what there is to get. Available values may be classified as deference, income, safety. Those who get the most are elite; the rest are mass.

Almost three decades later, David Easton (1965a, p. 50) argued that the distinguishing characteristic of a political system was its role in the “authoritative allocation of values for a society,” a phrase that became a kind of definitional mother’s milk for generations of political scientists. Dye, Ziegler, and Lichter (1992) supplemented the older definition with politics also being “who says what, in which channel, to whom, and with what effect?”

For our purposes here, it should be noted that Easton (1965b, pp. 58–59) specified “demand input overload” as a major source of stress on the political system and then subdivided overload into excessive volume stress as one type and complexity or content stress as another. This point is interesting because disasters induce both types of stress simultaneously. That is, disasters—understood as “nonroutine events in which societies or their larger subsystems (e.g., regions, communities) are socially disrupted and physically harmed” (Kreps 1989, p. 215; original emphasis)—invariably increase the number of demands on a political system as well as the novelty and complexity of those demands while at the same time wreaking havoc on system response capabilities. Disasters therefore become political crises quite easily. In fact, disasters as highly problematic political occasions have an ancient history.

Exemplar: One: Losing the Mandate of Heaven

Refining the concept of the Mandate of Heaven, Mencius (372–289 B.C.) argued that a truly moral king cared for his people, promoted their well-being, and protected them. If he failed to display those kingly qualities, however, then the people had a “right of rebellion” to depose and kill him. In a wonderfully self-fulfilling prophecy, if the rebels succeeded, then the king obviously had lost the Mandate, which then shifted to whomever emerged as the new ruler. Interestingly, a severe natural disaster was often seen as a harbinger of the loss of the Mandate (a “fail-
ure to protect the people\textsuperscript{4}), giving heart—or stark—to rebels, and as a
turning point in the dynastic cycle.

In their classic, A History of East Asian Civilization, Reischauer and
Fairbank (1958) described one especially interesting dynastic turn.
Around 22 B.C., reformer Wang Mang tried to save the Earlier Han
dynasty by expropriating poorly utilized lands, increasing income, and
in general revitalizing the dynasty. Thwarted by entrenched interests in
both rural areas and the imperial court, Wang was consistently frustrated.
The turning point, however, was a natural disaster:
A series of bad harvests contributed to the debacle, but
these were not simply the result of unfavorable weather.
Breaks in the dikes of the Yellow River, which sent part
of its waters into a new course south of the Shantung
Peninsula, and the breakdown of the water-control sys-
tem in the Wei Valley, which resulted in famines in the
capital district, were clear signs that the whole structure of
government was disintegrating. (Reischauer and
Fairbank 1958, p. 122)\textsuperscript{1}

Disaster Phases, Mitigation, Preparedness—and Political Control

Probing further into the political dimension of disasters, let us exam-
ine several important sub-concepts: disaster phases, mitigation, and
preparedness. Although other demarcations have been proposed (e.g.,
Drabek 1986, pp. 9–11), I would like to use the following phase termi-
nology for rapid-onset disasters (e.g., earthquakes, toxic spills): (1) Pre-Impact, a period of indefinite length preceding the event;
(2) Impact, those moments or hours in which the community sustains
its direct physical losses; (3) Response, the period in which rescue and
the saving of lives from impact effects are the paramount activities, usual-
ly lasting a maximum of a month; (4) Recovery, when the basic life
support systems (water, power, sanitation, food and energy supply lines,
medical facilities, etc.) of the affected community are repaired at least
temporarily; and (5) Reconstruction, another period of indefinite length
when the community rebuilds for the long-term.

The phases for a slow-onset disaster (e.g., drought, desertification,
famine) would be slightly different. "Pre-Recognition" would replace
Pre-Impact as phase 1, and "Recognition" would similarly replace
Impact as phase 2. The other three phases (Response, Recovery, and
Reconstruction) remain the same.
It is still not widely appreciated outside disaster research that disaster phases constitute a circle. Communities tend to face cyclical or periodic disaster occurrences, and therefore phase 5 (Reconstruction) from one disaster must also be seen as phase 1 (Pre-Impact) for the next. For example, after a damaging earthquake or hurricane, the building codes and land use regulations that are supposed to guide the rebuilding of the community actually create the physical environment for the next impact.

Understanding disaster phases as circular helps explain why so many people have trouble "placing" mitigation and preparedness. Because both mitigation and preparedness involve activities focused on the next event but are often pushed through a temporarily receptive political system after a disaster (see Birkland 1997), they are really in both places at the same time (Reconstruction from one disaster/Pre-Impact for the next).

The National Research Council (1991, p. 21) once defined mitigation as "actions taken to prevent or reduce the risk to life, property, social and economic activities, and natural resources from natural hazards," a definition easily extendable to manmade or technological hazards as well. That is, mitigation may prevent certain occurrences, but the recent emphasis has been on the "reduce the risk" part of the definition.

More stringent building codes for new construction, required retrofit of existing structures, and more enforced and enforced land use regulations are all classic mitigation measures. So are improved chemical storage facilities, safer railroad cars, double-hulled oil tankers, and automatic shutdown systems for chemical plants and oil refineries. Basically, mitigation prevents or modifies the event itself and/or reduces the damage it inflicts.

Disaster preparedness, on the other hand, is the "detailed planning for prompt and efficient response once a hazardous event occurs or seems imminent" (National Research Council 1989, p. 7). Preparedness typically includes public education, warning systems, simulations, emergency response and evacuation plans, and provisions for immediate shelter and food for victims. In that sense, the purpose of preparedness is to cope with the residual damages from inadequate or imperfect mitigation. That is, preparedness is supposed to improve response to whatever impacts mitigation was unable to prevent.

With these terms defined and in mind, let us now probe into more political constructions of damaging events. Quarnelli (1987, p. 25) once suggested that we handle "the threshold problem" of events by dividing and refining the concept of disaster into various categories or levels, depending upon response requirements. If only established response organizations are required, then it is an accident; if an event
requires the activation and expanding of latent response organizations (e.g., the Red Cross), that constitutes an emergency; if in addition to expanding organizations, extending organizations become involved (e.g., utility or construction companies doing search and rescue), then it is truly a disaster; if entirely new groups become involved as part of the response, then it is a catastrophe.

Quarantelli probably did not intend this argument to be so politically intriguing, but it is. As we move up notch by notch from accident to emergency to disaster to catastrophe, the political stakes logically increase as a direct result of event effects and therefore of the response requirements, a point that ties back to mitigation and preparedness. From a bluntly political perspective, the purpose of mitigation and preparedness is not only the cliché, to “save lives and protect property,” but also to control the political stakes, to keep events from crossing the thresholds to increasingly problematic political levels. “Accidents” do not really overload political systems. “Emergencies” might, depending upon the context within which they occur and especially if they are coupled with other events or tied to larger issues. “Disasters” certainly do overload political systems, and “catastrophes” can bring down regimes.

**Disasters and the Allocation of Values**

In the preimpact (for rapid-onset disasters) or prerecognition (for slow-onset disasters) phase, a political system—by action or inaction, decision or nondecision, advocacy or self-suppression—allocates the value of “life safety” in everything from land use and building code decisions to general development strategies (just ask the survivors of the 1984 Union Carbide gas leak in Bhopal about land use or the survivors of the 1985 Tlatelolco apartment complex earthquake collapse in Mexico City about building code enforcement). Then, in the response phase immediately after impact or recognition, “survival” is allocated (food, shelter, medical attention), and, as is commonly observed, no disaster is ever evenhanded in its socioeconomic effects among social classes and/or racial and ethnic groups. Finally, in the longer term recovery and reconstruction phases, the political system is allocating opportunities or “life chances” (e.g., grants, contracts, business niches, and new or altered lifelines). These opportunities are also seldom if ever allocated on an evenhanded basis between classes or racial/ethnic groups.

More specifically, if we simply take (1) the venerable Lasswell values of deference, income, and safety, and (2) disasters as events
involving societal disruption and life and/or property loss, then we see
that clusters put at least the income and safety values in jeopardy
(depending upon how the event was mitigated, prepared for, and then
responded to). Perhaps even more fundamentally, and also depending
on the perceived quality of mitigation, preparedness, and response, dis-
asters can throw into question the deference value and even the very
legitimacy of the authoritative allocation process itself—the regime.

**Exemplar Two: The Somoza “Kleptocracy”**

For those trying to help a victim society, the aftermath of the 1972
Managua, Nicaragua disaster was a nightmare. Explaining how the
earthquake figured in the eventual 1979 downfall of the Somoza regime,
the Kissinger Commission later noted that it merited the term “klep-
tocracy” and included a “brazen reaping of immense private profits from
international relief efforts following the devastating earthquake” (Kissinger Commission 1984, pp. 21–22). Among many other schol-
ars, Anderson (1988, pp. 179–180) noted that this incredibly stupid
behavior drove a major wedge between the regime and the Catholic
Church, which ultimately would join the opposition coalition led by the
FSLN (Sandinistas). Elizabeth Dore (1986) had previously concluded
that the kleptocracy of the Somoza regime encompassed not only the
response period immediately after the earthquake as well as the recov-
er, but also the reconstruction phase:

The earthquake marked the beginning of the end for
Somoza. The exclusion of the business elite from the
reconstruction boom was made even more bitter by a
slump in other sectors of the economy, caused in part by
increased prices of imports, particularly petroleum. This
slump coincided with, and perhaps partly caused, a
slowdown in growth in manufacturing, a sector that had
experienced rapid expansion in the 1960s. . . . These
economic pressures caused many wealthy Nicaraguan
families to convert their lack of support for Somoza into
active opposition. (pp. 322–323)

**Exemplar Three: Une stable Mexico, 1985**

In September 1985, a pair of devastating earthquakes struck Mexico
City. The official death toll reached 9,000, but the actual was probably
a multiple of that number. The administration of President Miguel de
La Madrid was faulted initially for a slow and disjointed response, and the president himself was castigated for being virtually invisible for several days. The political system was then more profoundly shaken by obvious corruption in the construction and inspection process (i.e., in preimpact mitigation) that had contributed to the structural failure of numerous public and government-financed buildings, including both apartment complexes and hospitals.

Long after the debris from the earthquake has been cleared, Mexico will still be reeling from the political and economic aftershocks. The earthquake destroyed more than buildings; it effectively ended whatever hope the Mexican government had for a rapid resolution of its foreign debt problem and a return to economic normalcy. Worse still, from the standpoint of Mexican political leaders, the earthquake exposed to the Mexican people and the world the weakness, impotence, and outright corruption of the government... (Schroeder 1985, p. 643).

One of the more perplexing aspects of the Mexican government's response to the 1985 disaster involved the downplaying of the human losses but the exaggeration of the economic losses. Albala-Bertrand (1993) has thrown some politically interesting light on this paradox. Albala-Bertrand reports that under the emergency laws then in effect, if the Mexican government had disclosed the number of people actually killed in the 1985 disaster, it would have had to cede control of the capital to the Mexican military. Because the PRI political leadership in Mexico had spent decades moving the Mexican army out of the country's politics, allowing martial law in the capital itself was "unthinkable for any government in Mexico and dangerous to the stability of the traditional and highly corrupt ruling party" (Albala-Bertrand 1993, pp. 135–136). At the same time, the Mexican government wanted to use the disaster losses as leverage in its ongoing foreign debt discussions with the International Monetary Fund. The result was to minimize the human losses for domestic, civil-military reasons but exaggerate the economic losses for foreign policy reasons.

Disasters as Political Crises

I argued at the very top of this paper that disasters are fundamentally political occasions because their impacts must be not only managed, but also explained. Therefore and more specifically, by virtue of the physical and human losses and societal disruption they entail, dis-
A crisis can and should also be analyzed as agenda control and accountability crises for public officials.

At least temporarily, disasters take, or at least threaten to take, agenda control from the hands of previously dominant leaders and groups (see Birkland 1997 and Olson et al. 1998). In the disaster response phase, government officials and other community leaders invariably face problems (e.g., rescue, shelter, potable water, relief supplies, mass medical attention, etc.) affecting hundreds to many thousands of people, problems of a nature and on a scale with which few, if any, have experience. Disasters put novel issues on agendas and generate a new set and number of demands, creating and/or empowering some groups and leaders while debilitating others. The situation becomes even more complicated as a community, region, or nation moves into the recovery and then the reconstruction phases because entirely new financial opportunities and developmental possibilities are often poised. Suddenly, agendas reflect vastly increased and often flexible resources, new demands, and an unusual number of high conflict items.

Complicating the situation even further, the disaster, or more precisely its effects, must be explained. When disasters were perceived as acts of God or otherwise outside the realm of possible human control or modification, political accountability was low and blame management a minor concern (not to be confused with scapegoating, which is a different phenomenon). Increasingly, communities and even entire national societies now hold leaders responsible for not only effective management of postimpact response, recovery, and reconstruction programs, but also adequate preimpact mitigation and preparedness programs. The concern with preimpact failures (e.g., lack of policies or corruption in building inspection and construction) focuses attention back to agendas and often poses difficult questions for those perceived as “in control” before the disaster, which resonates with some longstanding concerns in democratic theory.

Agenda Control/Non-Decisionmaking

The complacent 1950s taught some Americans, especially African-Americans and the poor, very hard lessons about barriers to placing an issue or problem on political agendas in the United States. With the real world and empirical theory proving depressingly contrary to classical democratic theory, scholarly attention began to turn toward the underbelly of American democracy, one part of which was agenda control. Schattschneider (1960) led the way with his observations about "mobili-
lization of bias” and how and why “some issues are organized into politics while others are organized out.” Bachrach and Baratz (1962, 1963, 1970) followed closely with their arguments about issue suppression and “non-decisionmaking” generally.

Cobb and Elder (1971, 1972) were the first to focus exclusively on political agendas and agenda control in the United States. They posited a relatively broad systemic agenda that included “all issues commonly perceived . . . as meriting public attention and . . . within the legitimate jurisdiction of existing governmental authority” (1972, p. 83). The much smaller institutional agenda included only “that set of items up for the active and serious consideration of authoritative decision-makers” (1972, p. 86). Kingdon (1984) developed further the institutional agenda concept and divided it into what he called the governmental agenda, which is “a list of subjects to which officials are paying some serious attention at any given time,” and the decision agenda, “a list of subjects that is moving into position for an authoritative decision.”

Perhaps Kingdon’s greatest contribution, however, lay in his repeated emphasis on the crucial process of “alternative specification,” because decisions are largely driven by the solution choices offered to address items on the decision agenda (see also Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993). Attempting to synthesize, we can identify several co-existing and only partially overlapping political agendas: (1) the systemic or “public” agenda; (2) the institutional-governmental agenda; and (3) the decision agenda. Based on the observation, however, that not all policies or programs are put into place with equal vigor (because of inadequate budgets, lack of direction, or the “wink of an eye”), I must also argue for the existence of agency-level implementation agendas, so we really have four political agendas.

Controlling agendas is important because political systems function primarily for conflict management and can handle only a limited number of items. Therefore, attached to each of the four agendas is a non-decisionmaking screen or zone in the sense of Bachrach and Baratz (who, interestingly, implicitly adopt the notion of at least three agendas). Non-decisionmaking is a means by which demands for change in the existing allocation of benefits and privileges (echoes of Lasswell and Easton) in the community can be suffocated before they are even voiced [i.e., kept off the systemic or public agendas]; or kept covert [screened from the institutional-governmental agenda]; or killed before they gain access to the relevant decisionmaking arena (the decision agenda); or, failing all
these things, manned or destroyed in the decision implementating stage [the implementation agenda] of the policy process (1970, p. 44).

A startling disaster exemplar of issue suppression, non-decision-making, and agenda control comes from, of all places, California.

Exemplar Four: Earthquakes? What Earthquakes?

California is an acknowledged world leader in earthquake policy and provides legislation and program models for many states and evaluations interested in improved seismic safety. This was not always the case.

In 1934, W. M. Davis, a founder of modern geography, wrote the lead article for the January issue of that year's Geographical Review. His focus was the very damaging Long Beach, California earthquake of the previous year. Amidst the usual scientific and technical discussions of the event, however, was a most remarkable observation about agenda control:

The Long Beach, California, earthquake of March 10, 1933, will be less remembered by reason of its contributions to seismology—for as a crustal tremor there was nothing especially remarkable about it—than it will be for having broken down the “hush-hush” policy that has hitherto been followed by the commercial organizations of the cities of southern California. It has most fortunately compelled public avowal by the most important of those organizations that earthquakes are a recurrent risk in their magnificent region and that the risk must be met by safer construction of buildings. But the loss of 120 lives and property destruction estimated at more than $50,000,000 are a high price to pay for such wisdom (1934, p. 1).

That “hush-hush” policy, however, had deep roots. In a fascinating 1979 article, Meltzner traced the history of seismology in California. Noting that suppression of information about earthquakes characterized the early history of the state, Meltzner discovered a 1906 Carnegie Institution report on the great 1906 San Francisco earthquake that in part addressed the mystery of what happened to a similar report about an 1868 earthquake in the same general area:

Shortly after the earthquake of 1868 a committee of scientific men undertook the collection of data concerning the effects of the shock, but their report was never pub-
lished nor can any trace of it be found, altho [sic] some of the members of the committee are still living. It is stated that the report was suppressed [sic] by authorities, thru [sic] the fear that its publication would damage the reputation of the city. Our knowledge of that earthquake is therefore not very full (1979, p. 333).

Perhaps even more astounding, Meltzer reports a systematic attempt to call the 1906 San Francisco disaster a “fire” rather than an “earthquake” because earthquakes were known to recur, but fires were not. Not coincidentally, it took the Carnegie Institution in Washington to launch the research on the 1906 earthquake. No organization in California was willing to be the sponsor.

In other words, disasters are political crises because they puncture, at least temporarily, the non-decisionmaking screens on all of the political agendas and thereby place a large number of new, complex, and conflictual items on all of the agendas simultaneously—hence the temptation to suppress issues or to define the disaster event in other terms. The struggle to regain old, or solidify new, agenda control privileges thus comprises one component of the politics of disaster. A second component is the political construction of reality.

**Constructing Meaning, Causal Stories, and Blame Management**

Edelman led the way to the realization that language and symbols create political realities and are essential tools for agenda control, issue definition, and alternative specification. Although not concerned with disasters specifically, Edelman (1985) offered several highly relevant insights, among them:

The critical element in political maneuver for advantage is the creation of meaning: the construction of beliefs about the significance of events, of problems, of crises, of policy changes, and of leaders. (p. 10)

Stone built on both the agenda literature and the work of Edelman to probe further into the role of causal stories in politics. Although primarily interested in the preagenda process of how “difficult conditions become problems” and therefore perceived as “amenable to human action,” Stone (1989) offered the following insight, quite relevant to disasters:

In politics, causal theories are neither right nor wrong, nor are they mutually exclusive. They are ideas about causation... The different sides in an issue act as if
they are trying to find the "true" cause, but they are always struggling to influence which idea is selected to guide policy. Political conflicts over causal stories are, therefore, more than empirical claims about sequences of events. They are fights about the possibility of control and the assignment of responsibility. (p. 283; emphasis added)

In the aftermath of disaster, much of the politics revolves around precisely that—the possibility of control and the assignment of responsibility, which is only a short step to a much more loaded term: blame.

Although again analyzing at a general public policy and political level and not specifically focusing on disasters, Weaver (1986) noted that public officials tend to be less and less concerned with claiming credit than with avoiding blame because constituents do not respond symmetrically to gains and losses:

Persons who have suffered losses are more likely to notice the loss, to feel aggrieved and to act on that grievance, than gainers are to act on their improved state. . . . [That is] voters are more sensitive to what has been done to them than to what has been done for them. (p. 373; emphasis in the original)

Building on Stone, Weaver, and Semin and Manstead (1983) but also tracing back to Austin’s 1935 classic “A Plea for Excuses,” McGraw (1991) noted “a growing scholarly interest in understanding citizens’ attributions of responsibility for political outcomes” but observed that most of the literature has dealt with broadly defined problems (e.g., unemployment) that defy easy causal linkages:

In sharp contrast, there has been very little research on assigning responsibility for discrete political events . . . where the behavior of a particular political official can be more clearly identified and evaluated. (p. 1134)

Echoing Edelman as well as the government vernacular of damage control, McGraw (1991) argued that public officials “influence their constituencies’ perceptions . . . through a variety of explanatory tactics, or accounts” and focused on the crucial distinction between two types of accounts: excuses and justifications (pp. 1135–1136; see also McGraw, Best, and Timpone 1995).
Disaster Excuses

Excuses are designed to separate a public official from a problem, to provide distance from a situation that is no-win or could easily become such. That is, excuses connote the depressingly familiar concept of denialability.

An excuse . . . focuses on the causal link between the actor and outcome and involves a denial of partial or full responsibility (if the actor is not fully responsible, then less or no blame is warranted). (McGraw 1991, p. 1135)

Justifications, on the other hand, admit or recognize the causal link between actor and outcome but attempt to create an alternate political reality, “to reframe the undesirable outcome . . . in a more favorable light” (McGraw 1991, p. 1137).

McGraw identified five excuses and seven justifications, but because his purpose was an experimental test of voter reaction to political accounts of hypothetical situations, we must adapt them for analysis of disaster situations. At this point therefore, I would like to offer six “disaster excuses” commonly used by government officials:

1. Blame the Event. A spiritual cousin to “God’s will,” this excuse says in effect that it was impossible to anticipate the event’s impacts because it was somehow so big, so bad, so intense. This is often called the “beyond code” excuse, which returns us to the important point of defining the event. For example, an enduring debate about Hurricane Andrew revolved around actual ground-level wind speeds in the northeast eyewall. It was very much to the benefit of several vested interests in south Florida (local building officials, construction companies, and subcontractors) to see Hurricane Andrew authoritatively defined as a “beyond code” event because blame could then be severely attenuated.

2. Blame the Previous Guys. This common excuse attempts to move the focus to the “policies of a previous administration.” The essence is that given the relatively short incumbency of most officials but the relatively long recurrence intervals between disasters, it is possible to blame predecessors for stupidity, cupidity, and/or lack of foresight.

3. Blame The Context, or I Would Have Liked To, But . . . This excuse attempts to focus attention on resource insufficiency (the economy, the budget) versus good intentions. In California, for example, inability of local government to attack the precata/earthquake-vulnerable building problem is often blamed on inadequate options for financing the generally agreed-upon solution (structural retrofit).
4. Blame Us All. McGraw would term this an excuse based on “horizontal diffusion of responsibility.” The essence here is that blame cannot, and should not, be fixed on one or a few individuals, or even one agency, because many people or agencies were involved. Given the complexity of most modern systems, this has real plausibility. A thread of this excuse can be observed in the aftermath of Hurricane Andrew, when the “beyond code” argument was not fully persuasive. Inadequate mitigation was then blamed on the design professionals (engineers and architects), the construction industry, building inspectors, local government, and even the victims themselves (“they wanted homes more quickly than we could safely build them”). Averch and Dhye (1997) capture many of the post-Andrew blame strategies in their study of South Florida’s 1992 crisis management.

5. Blame Them Up/Down There. McGraw terms this the “vertical diffusion of responsibility,” for example, blaming a superior in one direction or a subordinate in the other. In the aftermath of a disaster where the response is being criticized, this is a favorite. I do not want to beat Hurricane Andrew to death, but it provides some classics. The locals blamed the state and the federal governments, especially FEMA, for slow and disorganized response and inattention to victims. Washington turned it around, however, and began blaming the state (and Governor Chiles) for not making the required formal assistance request quickly enough. Within a few days, however, government officials at all levels took a new tack and began a concerted attempt to change the focus from postimpact response problems to preimpact mitigation (construction) failures, to the private sector, and to very low-level building code officials, which is a very interesting blame management strategy. Given that mitigation and preparedness are inversely related to response problems (i.e., the more hazard resistant and prepared a community, the less it will need outside assistance), the implicit message here was that—in a sense—it was the affected communities’ own fault (poor construction, lax inspection) that they suffered such high damage levels. This constructed political reality would then make the governmental response problems more “understandable” (read “forgivable”) with the blame shifting both temporally (to the preimpact period) and sectorally (to the private sector). Similar versions of this type of blame game played out in South Carolina after Hurricane Hugo (1989) and in California after the Loma Prieta earthquake (1989).

6. The Plea of Ignorance. Citing Ronald Reagan as an example, McGraw explains this strategy as an official claiming that “he or she did not intend or foresee the undesirable consequences.”
aster, a Plea of Ignorance can be effective if combined with all of the above and especially with #1, Blame the Event (because it was "beyond code"). Recognizable variants center on the theme, "Who could have known?"

Exemplar Five: The PEMEX Disasters

In 1984, a PEMEX gasoline processing and storage facility in Mexico City caught fire and exploded, killing at least the officially estimated 400 people. Attempting a combination horizontal (from the parastatal to the more purely private sector) and downward-vertical (to a much smaller operation) displacement strategy, PEMEX officials initially tried to blame a nearby cooking gas facility for starting the fire. This excuse failed when it was noted that the cooking gas facility sustained damage only from burning debris from the PEMEX explosions and therefore could hardly have been the cause.

Eight years later, in April 1992, an explosion ripped through the sewers of Guadalajara, destroying twenty blocks of a neighborhood and killing hundreds of people (the number itself became politically contentious). PEMEX again attempted a combination horizontal and downward-vertical blame shift a nearby cooking gas facility, but subsequent investigations pointed out that the facility was much too small to have caused the disaster.

Similar to the well-documented appropriation of the event by politically oriented organizations in the aftermath of the 1985 Mexico City earthquake disaster (see especially Tavera 1999), the 1992 Guadalajara disaster became highly politicized, especially around blame for the explosion on one hand and assistance to the victims on the other. Both issues then became linked to an even deeper problem. As Sheffer (1999) has explained:

The strong participation of civic associations, as well as the support by individuals in various protests and demonstrations, showed the wide dissatisfaction towards the government's handling of the disaster and aftermath.

These groups both condemned governmental negligence and tried to set up parallel aid efforts to keep the politicians from gaining political capital at the expense of the disaster victims. The political rhetoric used by the contentious supporters also demonstrated that this dissatisfaction was part of a wider antipathy to the political process that had prevailed for decades. (p. 153)
Disaster Justifications

While the above subtype of McGraw’s political accounts focusing on “excuses” is relatively straightforward, a treatment of disaster “justifications” is necessary to round out the argument, in part because justifications in a disaster context are more rare. They can, however, be quite startling:

1. The Unseen Benefits. McGraw notes that the first “reframe” strategy involves pointing out unappreciated benefits associated with an admittedly undesirable decision (or for us, disaster). The present author has observed public officials in a few unguarded moments taking a type of Malthusian approach to a disaster, indicating that losses were acceptable because they were concentrated in the lower-class tiers of the society, among minorities, and/or because they offered previously unthinkable urban renewal/redesign possibilities.

2. History Will Absolve Me. This reframe argument emphasizes future benefits of a policy decision and is especially useful in analyzing the politics behind mitigation attempts. In California, for example, leaders in those jurisdictions with the courage and resources to tackle their hazardous buildings problem have stressed (defensively and in the face of attack) that when the “Big One” hit, their communities will suffer less human loss and property damage and will recover more quickly.

3. We Have Been Through Worse. One way to reframe a bad situation is to change the reference point and draw comparisons that make the current situation appear more tolerable. In the aftermath of Hurricane Hugo in 1989, South Carolinians were reminded that a similar hurricane in 1883 killed thousands. Therefore, they should be comforted, if not actually grateful.

4. Others Have It Harder, Distant. Again changing the frame of reference to draw comparisons, this strategy emphasizes looking elsewhere for worse suffering. Hurricane Hugo again provides an example: Because the Loma Prieta earthquake struck the San Francisco area shortly after Hugo struck South Carolina, citizens in the latter state were encouraged to take heart because the hurricane did less damage than the earthquake (a debatable point, especially given impact-to-resource ratio differences between South Carolina and California).

5. Others Have It Harder, Near. It is often the case that the most disadvantaged are not the most vocal about fixing blame for their plight. After a disaster, staying alive tends to take precedence over political mobilization for the poor and marginalized. Officials can then point to individuals or groups who have suffered more than the vocal ones but who are “getting on with their lives.”
6. If Could Have Been Worse. McGraw notes that the final comparison is with the hypothetical. No matter how difficult the situation is now, it could have been far worse. Disaster examples abound: “If the earthquake had been about, occurred during rush hour, and/or had an epicenter closer to the city, . . .”; “If the hurricane had made landfall just another 20 miles north, . . .”; “If the fire had reached the storage tanks, . . .”; etc.

As McGraw (1991, p. 1137) states, all of these justifications involve attempts to change perceptions of the outcome. They do much more, however, and their justifications by comparison are noteworthy: Each tends to delegitimize the media, groups, and/or individuals who are attempting to fix blame and thereby both accountability and the locus of change or reform. Indeed, it would behove us to look more closely conceptually and empirically at the relationship between “justifications by comparison,” “mobilization of bias,” and “non-decisionmaking.” Disaster situations are rife with public officials, especially in the recovery and reconstruction phases when new or altered rules of the political game are being established, castigating “whiners” and “complainers” who will not let go of the blame issue and “go forward.” This combination strategy attempts to move the focus of public attention away from disaster causes and to the persons or groups who are voicing concerns.

Delegitimation of critics can be articulated at the highest levels and can be quite subtle. In the aftermath of Hurricane Andrew and in the midst of a very difficult reelection campaign made more difficult by the disaster, then-President George Bush faced questions in a session with the White House media. Reporters noted poor federal response to Andrew, and Bush had to answer. One facet of the presidential blame management strategy was to minimize the importance of assigning blame itself, Bush explicitly using the pejorative term “blame game,” saying that he didn’t want to play it. At one level, this constituted an attempt to transcend all the postevent acrimony and take a kind of moral and political high ground. At another level, however, demeaning and degrading all attempts to assign blame was pure self-protection. Stopping or undermining blame assignment not only protects incumbent reputations, but also signifies enhances incumbent chances for retaining or regaining control of political—or in this case campaign—agendas.
In Conclusion

I started this paper with the goal of reinforcing disaster research's increasing acceptance of disasters as political occasions and to encourage more political scientists to focus on disasters (and not simply as "policy" problems). I have tried to offer certain tools or points of departure—on values at stake, agenda control, causal stories, and political accounts/blame management—to facilitate systematic and cross national inquiry. The reason is simple: Disasters often strip away layers of semantic, symbolic, and process cover to provide clear insights into the nature, priorities, and capabilities of authorities, governments, and entire regimes. They are deeply, deeply political.

Notes

1. Several scholars have offered major insights or glimmers into various aspects of the interface between politics and disaster but have been limited by the relatively narrow "policy studies" rubric under which they worked: Alesch and Petak (1986); Birkland (1997); Drabek et al. (1983); Lambricht (1984, 1985); May (1985); Olson et al. (1989); Olson and Olson (1993, 1994); Olson, Olson, and Gawronski (1998); and Petak (1984), among others. A long forgotten article on 1693's Hurricane Betsy, which should be revisited, is Abney and Hill (1966). Delving back even further, see Burnhart (1923) and Hansen (1946). More recent work that ties political science more closely to the study of disasters gives hope for the future as well: Platt (1999), Schneider (1995), and Syvets and Waugh (1996).

2. In volume two (1963, pp. 156–157), Reischauer and Fairbank make a similar point about the fall of the Ch'ing Dynasty, China's last, in the early twentieth century. Obviously, the Chinese have a very sophisticated understanding of the politics of disaster—and have had for about two thousand years.

3. A different Davis (Mike Davis) makes interesting similar points about more recent downplaying in southern California. See his Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster (1998).

4. The disaster research community has not exactly neglected blame, but it has tended to see it in its narrower form, scapegoating (see Drabek and Quarantelli 1967, but also Neal 1984).
References


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