

AJEM BOOK REVIEW

by Peter Arnold, Director Emergency Management Liaison, Emergency Management Australia

Perry, Ronald W. & Quarantelli E.L. (Eds) 2005 *What is a Disaster? New Answers to Old Questions*.

Xlibris Corporation (International Research Committee on Disasters).

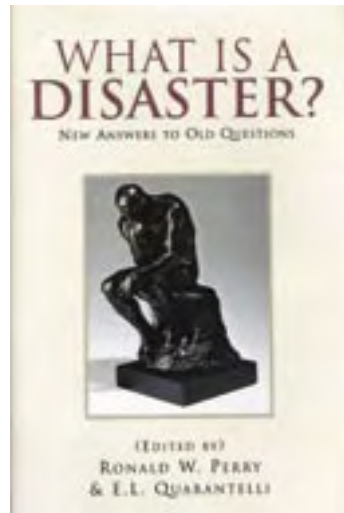
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What is a disaster? Prior to starting the review, I consulted the Macquarie Dictionary which defined a disaster as “any unfortunate event, especially a sudden or great misfortune.” In emergency management terms, this is not terribly useful. The question is clearly not a simple one.

What is a Disaster? New Answers to Old Questions does not in fact attempt to give a definitive answer, at least not in the form of an agreed definition of disaster. The intent of the book is as much an exchange of ideas as an examination of meaning.

Structurally, *What is a Disaster? New Answers to Old Questions* is a book of three “d”s: disaster, definitions and debate. The book is different to many academic studies, in that the first two parts each constitute what may best be described as a debate. In each part, four authors present and explain their definition of disaster. A “discussant” then presents a critique of each paper and the authors respond to the critique. A number of interesting points were raised in the response, so the debate approach did work. Finally, the third part reviews the debates and examines potential for future work in disaster research.

Several authors make the point that the literature is broadly divided into studies that focus on the practical characteristics of disasters, and those that focus on the theoretical underpinnings of



disasters as process. The book is definitely in the latter category. Most of the authors are sociologists or researchers in the disasters field. This is not a criticism as the editors are clear in their aim of exchanging information and the work is successful in meeting that aim.

The authors and discussants were deliberately chosen from a wide range of academics from many different social science contexts and national backgrounds. It is interesting that a considerable degree of consensus is exhibited in the overall perception of a disaster, while it may also be argued that the differences indicate that further research and debate is required.

In the first debate David Alexander, Susan Cutter, Rohit Jigyasu and Neil Britton offer their papers to Wolf Dombrowsky as discussant, then reply to his critique. Barton offers a social science perspective on disaster; Cutter is less concerned with theoretical issues than with implications for social action, while Jigyasu deals with disaster in a perceptive context. Britton concentrates on blending the academic with the practical and he cites Australian and New

Zealand governmental concepts. Dombrowsky's critique I found a little circuitous, with a strong emphasis on sociology and scientific method, but he stimulated four very interesting responses, which clarified the papers in a number of areas.

The second debate sees Allen Barton, Arjen Boin, Philip Buckle and Denis Smith present their papers, with Robert Stallings as discussant. Buckle and Smith explore practical definitions, while Barton and Boin offer analytical definitions and examine the critical issue of classification. Stallings discusses the practical versus analytical approaches before raising points with each paper and emphasising the importance of the question. The responses cover the issues raised.

In his review paper, Perry agrees that “A social science definition can also reasonably differ from a mandated or policy definition.”¹ Perry also argues that classification systems provide a means of defining disaster more precisely. The final paper by Quarantelli differs from the rest of the book in that it broadens the discussion and puts the case that improvements in disaster research requires going well beyond theoretical issues. He covers some theoretical issues, but focuses on methodological and research aspects.

What to make of this book? I actually think the title is slightly misleading – 440 odd pages about attempting to agree on a definition would be turgid prose indeed. The book is more a debate about the theory of disasters from a social science perspective and in that respect it is both interesting and serves a very useful purpose. Practitioners and policy makers alike would gain substantially by entering the debate.

1 Ronald Perry, “Disasters, Definitions and Theory Construction”, in *What is a Disaster? New Answers to Old Questions* p319.

Australian Journal of E February 2006 – 20

To cast a look across the contents pages of the 79 issues of this publication over the past 20 years, anyone would be forgiven for imagining that Australia is not just very active but is the hub of global emergency management action. Such is the depth and breadth of subject matter and topics that have been brought forward for discussion. Alas we are down-under to most of the world and only a small player on a huge stage.

The *Australian Journal of Emergency Management* was first published as a six page newsletter in March 1986, with the name of *The Macedon Digest*, to fill an identified “information void within the counter-disaster community.” It was recognised that a need existed for a publication to provide summaries of activities, research and meetings to “operatives, planners, trainers and researchers in the counter disaster/civil defence field.” According to this first issue, “the success of the *Digest* will depend to a large extent on reader reaction; contributions and comments on content will

be welcomed, and will help the *Digest* to evolve into a useful periodical for all who are involved in the humanitarian field of disaster management.” These sentiments still hold true and continue to have relevance 20 years on.

In September 1988 a sub-title was added – *The Australian Newsletter of Disaster Management* – and the journal doubled in size. Due to continued support from EMA and the industry, the journal had developed into a substantial black and white publication by 1994, the year of the first special issue, Environmental Health and Disasters. Also in that year a survey of subscribers was undertaken with the findings indicating the journal was considered a valuable source of information that reached a significant proportion of emergency management personnel. A survey of readership conducted in 2004 indicated that the journal continued to maintain its high reputation as a comprehensive, multi-disciplinary publication, regarded by its readership as a reliable and

credible source of information covering the full spectrum of emergency management.

By 1995 the title had changed to *The Australian Journal of Emergency Management* and a special issue focused on ways that the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction had an impact on Australia and the Pacific. By 1997 *AJEM*, as it had come to be known, had undergone a change in appearance with a full colour back and front cover, which by 1999 had developed to full colour throughout.

International as well as Australian disasters have always received attention in *AJEM* which has published information on such incidents as the Port Arthur shootings, ice storms in Canada, floods in Katherine, Northern Territory, the tsunami disaster in Papua New Guinea, the Thredbo landslide, and the Auckland electricity supply disruption. More recent coverage includes the Indian Ocean tsunami, bombings in Bali, and *Hurricane Katrina*, which appears in this issue.



Emergency Management 20th anniversary issue

A change in editor and editorial advisory team in 2002 resulted in a new look and direction for *AJEM*. Over the last three years the journal's profile has been enhanced through its inclusion on the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training Register of Refereed Journals. *AJEM* is indexed by the National Library of Australia's Australian Public Affairs Information Service (APAIS) and has recently been accepted for selective indexing by the Attorney-General's Information Service (AGIS). Access to *AJEM* articles is made available through the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology Informit service.

In 2004 there were two special issues of *AJEM* developed through partnership arrangements. In

August, in conjunction with the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, an issue dedicated to the role of government and industry in agricultural emergencies was published. This was followed in November 2004 with a special edition featuring articles from the New Zealand Recovery Symposium, conducted in July of that year. Special issues dedicated to contemporary themes continue to have a role in the emergency management industry. A recent example was the May 2005 issue on counter-terrorism and emergency management.

We have seen some highly esteemed emergency sector participants both as content contributors and as members of the editorial advisory committee. Rather than name any, EMA wishes to record sincere

thanks to every one of them for their professionalism and their genuine concern that this country has a robust, forthright and independent forum for expression of views on ways to ensure future generations can enjoy living in 'safer sustainable communities'.

While *AJEM* has come a long way in the past 20 years, its commitment to providing access to information and knowledge for the research community and practitioners of emergency management remains unchanged. EMA is excited by this milestone and proud to continue such a significant publication into the future.

