The Death of “Natural Disasters”? A Commentary on Ilan Kelman’s *Disaster by Choice*

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When I first read Ilan Kelman’s *Disaster by Choice*, I got no further than a couple of sentences into the preface before a particular sentence gave me pause: “Stating that natural disasters do not exist because humans cause disasters seems *insanely provocative*” (emphasis added). It was not the claim that natural disasters do not exist that momentarily intervened in my reading, but rather the final phrase, which I will return to shortly.

As an anthropologist that has studied disasters and crises for well over a decade, I am well aware of this reasoning and the discussions surrounding the problem with the language of “natural disasters”; while we can talk of natural hazards (floods, storms, earthquakes, etc.) that inevitably will occur due to the moving of the earth, wind, and water, disasters are caused only if such hazards intersect with patterns of vulnerability in societies. According to this logic, the term “natural disasters” is simply an error of linguistic convention, a phrase that should not exist in our language.

However, as various scholars and commentators have pointed out, the problem with “natural disasters” goes well beyond semantics and linguistic conventions. Ksenia Chmutina and Jason von Meding have stated as such quite forcefully in an analysis of the persistence of the term “natural disaster” in scholarly discourse, claiming that:

> by continuously blaming “nature” and putting the responsibility for failures of development on “freak” natural phenomena or “acts of God,” we enable those who create disaster risks by accepting poor urban planning, increasing socioeconomic inequalities, nonexistent or poorly regulated policies, and lack of proactive adaptation and mitigation to avoid detection.

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The point is clear: by framing disasters as natural, those who are responsible for preventing such events seek to evade their responsibility with reference to the inevitability of disasters as events that simply happen since there is no escaping the wrath of nature.

Of course, we must remember that the argument against “natural disasters” is by no means new, as Kelman himself is very aware. One of the first explicit critiques was published almost half a century ago.\(^2\) And the argument has been advanced in various guises in key texts by disaster researchers ever since.\(^3\) Moreover, the unnatural disasters argument is no longer promoted solely by academics. The United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR, formerly UNISDR), the Red Cross, and other major humanitarian and international organizations have rallied behind the idea and are promoting it via campaigns. A change is indeed underway.

With all this attention towards disaster vulnerability and critiques of “natural disaster”, why do we need a book like Disaster by Choice at this moment in time? In my opinion, I think we need such a book not so much because of the main messages it tries to convey, but because of the way it presents them. Through a long range of empirical cases of disasters, Kelman’s book addresses the main tenets of the unnatural disasters argument in clear and concise prose, without oversimplifying the subject matter. Moreover, the book spends a great deal of time delving into the characteristics of the hazards themselves, explaining why wildfires erupt, rivers rise, and earthquakes rattle the earth’s surface. Despite this, the main argument of the book remains that disasters are produced by patterns of vulnerability in conjunction with these hazardous events. The agenda of the book is clear: we need to rid our language and understanding of disasters of the naturalistic determinism that sees disasters as events that “just happen” as a result of a dangerous natural world.

Coming back to the sentence from the book’s preface quoted above, what struck me was the phrasing of the claim as being “insanely provocative.” With this, Kelman indicates that he understands the challenge of writing to a broader audience than disaster researchers or disaster management professionals, and that ridding the world of the term “natural disasters” is likely to be no easy task. This is one of the major reasons why, to me personally, the book is so interesting. Kelman exemplifies a broader challenge that researchers are

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sometimes confronted with when attempting to reach a wider audience: how
do you make a paradigmatic or discursive change to the common public usage
of words and terms? In addition, why do these prove so hard to change?

The difficulty of detaching from the term “natural disasters” is in part related
to the need to distinguish disasters caused by natural hazards from disasters
caused by other causes. As such, “natural disasters” are logically distinguished
from technological disasters (e.g., a nuclear meltdown or a chemical leak)
or other calamitous events (armed conflict, genocide, terrorist attack, etc.).
Kelman himself notes this on page 15 when he states that:

Disasters not involving nature – such as chemical explosions, riots, and
terrorism – are clearly not natural. When an environmental component –
such as earthquakes and hurricanes – is involved, then disasters seem
to be caused by the environment and are blamed on nature. Then what
exactly is wrong with the phrase “natural disaster”?

As I have already noted, even scholars and disaster professionals have had a
hard time readjusting their vocabulary. For Chmutina and von Meding, the use
of “natural disaster” is in fact so widespread – especially in scholarly discourse –
that it warrants concern. And yet, some academics are not necessarily comfort-
able with abandoning the term. I have a personal anecdote that illustrates the
matter quite interestingly. During the defense of my PhD dissertation, one of
the opponents commented quite politely, in response to a point I was making,
that the idea that natural disasters do not exist is not yet a settled matter. Later,
at the reception following the defense, a member of the audience asked me
why on earth I would write that “natural disasters” do not exist, accusing me of
somehow buying into a constructivist, discursive ideology that takes terms and
concepts as invoking and performing reality. I am no constructivist, but I do
believe that concepts and terms shape our understanding of reality. And yet,
despite this, I do understand where the person critiquing me was coming from.

In my opinion, critics of “natural disasters” are sometimes too quick to
assume that people who do not understand the unnatural disasters argument
are blindsided by a kind of deterministic thinking that they cannot rid them-
selves of. That is, that they have somehow missed something fundamental
about what causes disasters. Yet the unfortunate consequence of this line of
thought is often that the unnatural disasters argument becomes more of a ban-
ter cry and slogan than a point of departure for serious research and carefully
communicated ideas.

Luckily, this is not the case with Kelman’s book (and neither is it the case
with Chmutina and von Meding’s work, for that matter). He takes great care to
explain the unnatural disasters argument in a cogent and non-condescending way to readers unfamiliar with disaster research and vulnerability theory. His use of case studies is exemplary from beginning to end. Disaster by Choice spends very little time on theory and concepts, and much more on concrete cases, while reflecting on practical lessons learned from these. For this reason, I believe both that the book deserves praise and that it should be read widely both as a fresh addition to the disaster vulnerability literature and as an interesting example of how researchers might address public understandings of events in the world.

It does however seem likely that not even a book of this quality will make a decisive difference in changing public discourse on “natural disasters.” Why? A probable reason is the fact that the conventions of the term “natural disaster” are perhaps too strongly ingrained in not just the English language, but in most Western languages (for instance naturkatastrophen in German, or catastrophe naturelle in French). Still, however difficult the term “natural disasters” has proven to be to get rid of, governments across the world still need to be held accountable for the shortcomings of their policies and actions that cause death, displacement, and trauma, in addition to being scolded for deferring their responsibilities for these to causes of nature. And while we can continue to discuss whether it is merely (or mostly, or also) a matter of semantics and language, one still needs to acknowledge that we would probably be better off without the term “natural disasters.”

While Disaster by Choice may not mean the death of “natural disasters,” it is by far the most updated, publicly engaging, and elegantly written work to argue why the notion of “natural disasters” is wrong and potentially dangerous.