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Chaos Organization and Disaster Management

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Chaos Organization and Disaster Management

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Abstract

Scholarly approaches to understanding chaos theory as it applies to emergency management, especially within the context of homeland security, would be extremely valuable to local practitioners. Alan Kirschenbaum postulates a chasm between the perceptions of disaster victims and the delivery of services by disaster management bureaucracies. Kirschenbaum argues that the chasm has been created by the bureaucracy itself and that bureaucracy focuses on its own survival and usurps the role of the community in disaster management.

KEYWORDS: emergency management, community, response, bureaucracy

Chaos Organization and Disaster Management

By Alan Kirschenbaum
New York: Marcel Dekker, Inc.
ix+ 285pp., references, index, 53 figures, 1 chart, 2 tables
$150 (hardcover) ISBN 0824747151

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Alan Kirschenbaum intends his book to "go beyond temporary fads, buzz words, or ideological arguments" (p. vii) to analyze the effectiveness of disaster management around the world. He postulates a chasm between the perceptions of disaster victims and the delivery of services by disaster management bureaucracies. The blame, he argues, lies directly with the bureaucracy itself for essentially usurping the role of community and focusing on its own survival. He tries to make his case, unfortunately, by using fads, buzz words, and ideological arguments, as well as research with limited applicability or dubious credibility.

Scholarly approaches to understanding chaos theory as it applies to emergency management, especially within the context of homeland security, would be extremely valuable to local practitioners. This book tries to do that and, regrettably, falls short. Uppermost in my mind as I read it was: "Have I ever before read a book about emergency management that had me simultaneously irritated and amused?" I do not think so.

Kirchenbaum begins his argument solidly: Responding to a disaster is part of our basic survival mechanisms. Disasters create chaos, and humanity has learned to reduce chaos by relying on social bonds, not only within individual families but also between families as part of our community. Although those social bonds have traditionally been strong and resilient, they have not developed as easily with increased urbanization, especially in Western civilization. As a result, responsibility for survival has been transferred to more formal organizations, specifically, to civil servants in complex public administrations, who (Kirchenbaum states) are more concerned with their own welfare and survival than the welfare and survival of their customers -- their disaster victims.

The explosion of disaster management bureaucracies in the past several decades has been driven by several factors. Kirchenbaum views one factor as the United Nations designation of the 1990s as the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction, which focused attention worldwide on disaster management concepts and agencies. The primary factor, however, is not an altruistic ethos, but a bureaucratic drive for jobs, funding, and resources—tools necessary to ensure the survival of the bureaucracy that is being created.

Kirchenbaum questions whether this increase in disaster management agencies in fact mitigates or exacerbates disasters. His proposal that "the greater the number of disaster agencies, the more the number and severity of disasters" (p. 25) begins with statistics from an international disaster database (from the Centre for Research in Brussels, Belgium) on the number of natural disasters reported each year between 1900 and 1999. By that measure, disasters have increased substantially, especially since 1960.

He discusses population *distribution* as a potential reason for the increase in the number and severity of disasters and then dismisses it as an inadequate explanation. He suggests that population *density* is a popular reason for this increase but then argues that, if true, "disaster agencies would be more numerous in areas that are more prone to disasters" (p. 32). Thus, population density cannot be a significant factor, he states, because, while overpopulated Asia tops the list in the number of disasters, Europe houses most of the global disaster agencies

Furthermore, bureaucratic organizations create space for themselves, Kirchenbaum argues, by redefining disasters. "For example—forest fires or floods— once considered natural events—were socially redefined as disasters. Industrial output, once a key in measure progress, was now redefined as hazmat disasters for producing potential toxic waste" (p. 5). "In the United States, a disaster has occurred when the President says it has" (p. 6). Whether or not I agree with those statements, they do seem a little exaggerated, especially since they are backed up only by statements made through an Internet e-mail chat list.

How much credence should we give to a random posting in a chat group? How can that information be validated? I question the necessity, as well as the reliability, of using this kind of source. Throughout his book, Kirschenbaum highlights and emphasizes points by copying statements made in an unnamed e-mail forum. It is not difficult to discover which one it is. The listmail offered through the International Association of Emergency Managers (IAEM) (http://www.iaem.com) tends to be very active and opinionated. As chair of the IAEM Communications Committee for 2004, I have been involved in monitoring this list. Even though Kirschenbaum references each statement he quoted with only a first name and date, I recognized many of them. I wonder why Kirschenbaum did not contact the posters directly for permission to use their words.

Kirchenbaum's research relies heavily on focus groups and surveys done in Israel in 1999, when many Israelis felt the threat of another Gulf-style war. While the findings are interesting and well-documented—and could possibly be shifted to other states as well—the environment in which this research was done must be considered. Israel's population is unique today in its almost universal military service, its active civil defense, and its nearly constant wartime footing. (Part of this research looked at the importance and effectiveness of distributing gas masks.) Israel is also unique for its history of communal settlements (*kibbutzim*), where property is held in common and decision-making is often collective. That experience just is not going to translate well to an urban setting where the bureaucracy that he is arguing against actually exists.

Kirchenbaum does present two intriguing concepts: the "mother hen" gatekeeper and "disaster communities." Based on his research (again, done in Israel), he presents several chapters that trace survival behavior back to the societal bonds that kept us alive as a species in the first place. He describes the gatekeeper as the guardian for survival of the basic unit of community—the family—and the person within the community who commands the respect of all potential victims. His choice for that gatekeeper is the "mother hen"—the women who, in his scenarios, play the essential role in the survival of their families. He goes so far as to endorse them as a "serious rival to disaster management organizations" (p.181). These gatekeepers together play a larger role of helping to create "disaster communities," that is, the social networks that we live in. While much of this reads like material that the Federal Emergency Management Agency in the United States used to promote "disaster resistant communities," it is interesting to see the notion of disaster communities backed up by some empirical data.

Finally, criticizing the global disaster management system as incompetent and power-hungry, his last chapter discusses privatization as an alternative to public disaster management bureaucracies. Kirchenbaum argues that citizens are often willing to pay for information and assistance, especially if there is a proven value over what the public sector can provide. I suppose that may be true for the less than 1% of the world's population who can afford it. In fact, affluent people do pay for disaster information and assistance on a regular basis. It is called "insurance." Nonetheless, privatization is unlikely to be a viable global solution in the short or long term.

What Kirchenbaum fails to discuss in his attacks on disaster management, however, are the advantages gained by standards, specialization, and global communication. Some issues can be addressed only by an overarching authority; for example, harmonizing incompatible firefighting equipment in neighboring cities; fielding disaster medical assistance teams and urban search and rescue teams; and coordinating the work of international aid societies (such as the Red Cross, Unicef, and Doctor's Without Borders). In the not-too-distant past, an earthquake in an isolated region of Iran that killed a few hundred people would not have been recognized. Today, everybody knows about it—and the response is international in scope. Disaster assistance is much more available and forthcoming because of a disaster management bureaucracy somewhere.

The bottom line is that much of the reasoning in Kirchenbaum's book is inapplicable to a global audience, especially to a Western European one. I would argue that the kind of social bonds he advocates still exist, just in a different shape. I would also argue that bureaucracies were created for pretty good reasons—to share risks, create economies of scale, and increase capabilities, for example.

I will admit that as an emergency management practitioner, I had a lot of trouble reading *Chaos Organization and Disaster Management*. I expected to find facts and ideas that would help me develop my programs and serve my community. What I found instead was a judgmental argument for getting rid of me. Read it with caution.