

Kelman, I. 2010. “Hybrid Disasters or Usual Disasters?”. Disaster and Social Crisis Research Network Electronic Newsletter, no. 41 (May-August), p. 9.

Full text:

Some disaster literature speaks of hybrid disasters. According to one definition, “a hybrid disaster is a manmade [sic] one, when forces of nature are unleashed as a result of technical failure or sabotage”<sup>2</sup>.

As we can see, the first category of hybrid disasters is technical failure. If a tornado rips a roof off a building or lofts a mobile home, then people become casualties because a technical failure unleashed the forces of nature against them. If an earthquake collapses a house or if a flood collapses a dam, then that was a technical failure unleashing the forces of nature against people in that structure.

But technical failures do not just happen. They happen because of long-term human decision-making, values, behavior, and actions that permitted, by commission or omission, the technical failure to occur. Certainly, ignorance has happened frequently in the past. But we know so much now which we still do not apply, leading to disasters, irrespective of our continuing ignorance.

As such, we need to be careful of insinuating that evil, destructive, or malign forces of nature are ‘unleashed’ and humanity must battle against them to protect our own and become safe – this plot thickening as righteous Man [sic] confronts and defeats and tames the wild, uncaring nature. We know enough to stop most (not all) disasters that involve environmental phenomena. But social processes lead to decision-making – usually (but not always) by those with power and resources over those without power and resources – so that technology and technical approaches are created and sometimes fail. That is the underlying social failure leading to technical failure leading to disasters, rather than forces of nature or technology per se.

Regarding hybrid disasters’ second category, sabotage, some would go so far as to interpret that the above described style of decision-making – “those with power and resources over those without power and resources” – is a form of social sabotage. Taking a narrower definition of sabotage, there are many examples in history of natural hazards being deliberately and inadvertently turned into weapons of war.

The misapprehensions in the discourse of hybrid disasters primarily stems from its category of technical failure. These mistakes are similar to those regarding so-called natech disasters, “natural disaster-triggered technological disasters”<sup>3</sup>. As argued by many disaster researchers and practitioners (<http://www.ilankelman.org/miscellany/NaturalDisasters.rtf>), few disasters are exclusively “natural”. Thus almost all disasters are by definition natech.

Nonetheless, at root, as always, is that natech and other disasters are social disasters. Society creates the technology that fails. The fault, dear disaster lovers, is not in our environment nor in our technology per se, but in ourselves.

<sup>2</sup>Boyarsky, I. & Shneiderman, A. (2002). Natural and Hybrid Disasters – Causes, Effects, and Management. *Topics in Emergency Medicine*, 24 (3): 1-25.