

Natural around this
argument and i will do



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Natural disasters are often viewed by the mass as catastrophic happenings that are often beyond our human power. However, in the recent years attitudes are changing as disaster scholars, social scientists and geographers argue that there is no such thing as a natural disaster. The argument that there is no such thing as a natural disaster is formed on the claim that the human interference removes the naturalness of the disaster, therefore as a result, disasters are most times rather unnatural. On the other hand, theorists such as Turner (1976) and Steinberg (2000) argue against this claim and instead support the existence of natural disasters. In this essay I am going to explore the natural disaster debate. I will do this by analysing two disasters in depth, the 2010 Haiti earthquake and the Foot and Mouth disease of 2001.

Also, I will briefly touch upon a third disaster, Hurricane Katrina. I will then end by coming to a conclusion and offering my opinion after my research into the disasters, as to whether or not it can be argued that there is such a thing as a natural disaster. Understanding whether there is such a thing as a natural disaster is a complicated topic. Firstly, this is because for example, according to researcher Whatmore (1999) there is an extensive discussion around if humans should be viewed as part of nature and being a natural element, or if we should be expelled and separated from the nature argument. Whatmore (1999, as cited in Cloke, Crang and Goodwin, 2014, p156) argues that nature is "...socially constructed in the sense that it is transformed through the labour process and is fashioned by technologies of human production." With this argument in mind in the first half of this essay I am going to tackle the statement "there is no such thing as a natural disaster" by supporting it and

building my case around this argument and I will do this by taking the word nature and separating it from the concept of humanity.

The first disaster that is going to be explored in this essay is the earthquake which took place in Haiti in the year of 2010. Haiti is a small country which is located on the island of Hispaniola. Haiti is a less economically developed country and it is also one of the world's most poverty-stricken countries (Schuller and Morales, 2012). In Haiti there are limited opportunities for people and because of this as mentioned many people face heavy levels of poverty. With the theme of poverty in mind the locals have restricted pliability to a potential disaster for example, there are no evacuation plans, there is poor protecting infrastructure and the people of Haiti also have minimal and poor emergency access (Lackoff, 2007 and Newman, 2010). However, despite this on January the 12th 2010, an earthquake with a measured magnitude of seven on the Richter scale devastated the small country of Haiti. The effects that followed after the earthquake hit Haiti where catastrophic, devastation followed in the forms of damage to infrastructure, families left torn apart and a death toll estimated at two hundred and thirty thousand people.

Haiti was left torn apart after the earthquake destroyed the country. To begin with, Pierre-Louis (2017) argues that what we call natural disasters such as, earthquakes, hurricanes and floods are indeed natural, but they are just natural hazards. According to Pierre-Louis (2017) population in the area which is affected by the hazard plays a key role in defining what has occurred. To use an example, according to Pierre-Louis (2017) if the population is affected it is a natural hazard. However, if a population is not affected we should just

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label a flood as the weather because there have been no lives lost or damage to buildings and infrastructure (Pierre-Louis, 2017). This can be linked to Pelling's (2003) environmental outline whereby a natural hazard merged with human vulnerability results in a disaster. Pierre-Louis (2017) takes problem with the word 'natural', such as used by Pelling (2003) in the environmental diagram, because according to Pierre-Louis (2017) it should be used loosely as there are often predictions and warnings about disasters, therefore we should in fact as a population we are able plan accordingly for a disaster.

Therefore, as a result they are not 'natural' because we have had predictions and warnings. Consequently, only when there are problems such as, lack of infrastructure and poor planning we can then label it as a disaster (Pierre-Louis, 2017). If we refer to disasters such like, the Haiti earthquake and Hurricane Katrina as natural we immediately untie ourselves from the responsibility and adequately planning for the hazard as instead as a population we adopt a seemingly lazy it is inevitable attitude (Pierre-Louis, 2017). Therefore, it could be argued that natural disasters are socially constructed events which are tied up in problems of marginalisation and prejudices. There is no such thing as a natural disaster and rather it is a term used which allows people and groups to avoid responsibility and blame. Secondly, Sheller (2012) in the article introduces the concept of the 'islanding effect' to help us understand that there is no such thing as a natural disaster. In the article Sheller discusses how islands such as Haiti are at a severe pitfall when it comes to escaping from a post disaster.

The islanding effect works firstly by restricting movement in a triad of stages. Firstly, in the case of Haiti, travel out of the island is restricted

during evacuation for safety purposes, travel was restricted after the disaster has occurred and travel is often restricted if the disaster can be predicted. In the case of the Haiti earthquake there was little distress warning given and additionally there was no time to evacuate when the disaster earthquake struck and therefore people become trapped.

According to Sheller (2012) the islanding effect is down to unequal access to mobility and this can be linked to the theme of marginalisation.

Consequently, this unequal access to mobility resulted in the Haitians becoming confined and trapped on their own island (Sheller, 2012).

Moreover, in the case of the Haiti earthquake the disaster logistic tragically produced uneven mobilities, for example outside foreign aid workers held the ability to bring in supplies and they could come and go with free will, whereas the poverty-stricken locals faced decreased mobility (Sheller, 2012). The people that generally escaped the island were United States citizens of a Haitian origin, or the affluent citizens of Haiti (Sheller, 2012). Therefore, the people trapped after the disaster and unable to flee were the marginalised poorer citizens of Haiti, with some people having no passports, or money to travel.

In a like manner, the theme of marginalisation of the poorer social groups is not just aligned to the Haiti earthquake. Marginalisation of the poorer social groups is a common theme throughout many disasters and to give another example this can be seen in the disaster of Hurricane Katrina. The evacuation plans for Hurricane Katrina relied on automobility as Sheller (2012, p188) states "...evacuation plans relied on systems of automobility..." Therefore, again the theme of marginalisation of the poor can be seen because those

who cannot afford their own transport are not covered in the evacuation plan. Brooks (2005, as cited in Squires and Hartman, 2006) argues that Hurricane Katrina was mislabelled as a natural disaster and rather it was a social disaster. Then, with this argument in mind it can be concluded that both the Haiti earthquake and Hurricane Katrina are human-induced disasters rather than natural because if it was not for the marginalisation of the poor then there would not have been such a high death toll and destruction rate. Therefore, with this second argument in mind we can indeed say that there is no such thing as a natural disaster.

Moreover, disasters are further made worse by human interaction and vulnerability. To put this into context, disaster reconstruction more often than not deepens the exploitation of the marginalised (Smith, 2006). After the disaster struck New Orleans with Hurricane Katrina and the dead became unaccounted for it was found that developers had already begun to look for a new opportunity. The takeover of the developers was compared to a "developers' gold rush" (Streitfield, 2005, as cited in Smith, 2006, para 3).

This is a common theme after disasters as developers seek to rebuild. However, the poor and marginalised often become worse off after the disaster due to a decrease in wages, an increase in stigma and an increase in costs for alternative housing (Smith, 2006). Therefore, again there is a theme of the marginalisation of the poor as the money-focused developers strive to make a profit and as a result the poor are displaced. Smith (2006, para 16) claims that "There is no such thing as a natural disaster, and the supposed naturalness of the market is the last place to look..."

" I agree with this because as demonstrated it is human interaction as proved which almost always links up with disasters and often this worsens them, especially in the case of post Hurricane Katrina. To sum up, the argument put forward by theorists such as Squires and Hartman (2006), Smith (2006) and Sheller (2012) that there is no such thing as a natural disaster. I believe is accurate.

Firstly, I am in support of the claim because if it was not for the marginalisation of the poor in Haiti and Hurricane Katrina then the damage and death toll could have indeed been reduced, or even prevented.

Moreover, if it was not for the ignorance of warning given pre-disaster then again, the damage could have been on a much lower and less damaging scale. Additionally, I believe it is important to take the stance like theorists Smith (2006) and Sheller (2012) by insisting that there is no such thing as a natural disaster because through taking this stance we are able to take responsibility as a society and also take action to minimise the possibility of such disaster, or hazard happening again. On the other hand, it is important to recognise that there is a weakness to the argument formed by the social scientists, geographers and disaster scholars in that there is no such thing as a natural disaster. In the second half of this discussion essay I am going to consider nature and humanity as intertwined concepts.

I will explore why it could be argued that there is such thing as a natural disaster. I will achieve this by using the Foot and Mouth disease case which visited the UK in 2001 and again the Haiti earthquake of 2010 to demonstrate this point of view. The Foot and Mouth disease is an infectious and often fatal disease that affects cloven-hoofed animals. In 2001, over a

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period of seven months the Foot and Mouth contaminated over 2030 premises. The contamination led to slaughter of six million animals and it was particularly hard hitting for the rural communities (Law and Singleton, 2004). Animals which are affected by Foot and Mouth are cloven-hoofed animals such like, sheep, goats and deer. Cumbria was the hardest hit compared to any other place in the United Kingdom, the outbreak lasted for months on end in upland areas and this was particularly tragic because the farming community was already suffering due to the dropping global prices and the changes in exchange rate between £ sterling and the Euro (Law and Singleton, 2004). Turner (1976, as cited in Alexander, 1999, p4) defines a natural disaster as "...an event concentrated in time and space, which threatens a society or a relatively self-sufficient subdivision of a society with major unwanted consequences..." The definition given by Turner (1976) aligns to the 2001 Foot and Mouth disaster.

Firstly, the farming society was threatened because farmers lost their animals and this in turn led to farmers losing their livelihoods, an unwanted consequence. Moreover, referring back to the 2010 Haiti earthquake according to Turner (1976) this could also be seen as a natural disaster. The Haiti earthquake could be seen as a natural disaster because the earthquake destroyed infrastructure, homes and families, all of which are major unwanted consequences.

For this reason, the Foot and Mouth disease (2001) and the Haiti earthquake (2010) could be seen as natural disasters as they correlate to the definition presented by Turner (1976). Secondly, it is argued that natural disasters do exist and occasionally they are said to be 'acts of God' and this therefore

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meansthat natural disasters are both inescapable and certain (Apodaca, 2017). Therefore, it could be argued that the Foot and Mouth disease, Haiti earthquake and HurricaneKatrina where certain to happen, no matter what. Erikson also explores thistheme and can be seen to be supporting it within his book “ Natural disastersare almost always experienced acts of God or caprices of nature. They visit us, as if from afar” (Erikson, 1994, as cited in Law and Singleton, 2004, p3). Therefore, from Erikson (1994) and Apodaca(2017) points of view natural disasters cannot be stopped. Natural disasters have been previously criticised in the first half of this discussion essay for not existing because as according to Sheller (2012) disasters such as HurricaneKatrina and Haiti could have been prevented, or at least impacts minimisedthrough early preparation and emergency planning.

In major contrast, the ‘ actof God’ viewpoint assumes that disasters are entirely natural and are a resultpunishment for sin (Steinberg, 2000). However, a key weakness of the ‘ act ofGod’ theory is that it is used by officials such as governments to escaperesponsibility for the disaster (Steinberg, 2000) For example, through namingHaiti earthquake as an ‘ act of God’ governments are able to escape therealities of marginalisation of the poor. Moreover, in the case of Foot andMouth disease by claiming an ‘ act of God’ officials avoid realities of thedisaster and how to prevent an outbreak from happening again in the futureyears to come. Overall, the argument putforward by Turner (1976), Steinberg (2000) and Apodaca (2017) in that disastersare natural I believe is that of a weak one. Firstly, using the statementdisasters are an ‘ act of God’ is an escapist term and a way to avoidpunishment. I use the term avoid punishment because officials do not

want to be seen as responsible because if they are they may incorporate fines for disasters and this claim of responsibility can also lead to imprisonment. Therefore, then as a result, negative press will follow and whoever is fined to be responsible will be faced with stigma.

However, on the other hand the definition of a natural disaster put forward by Turner (196) of an event which threatens a society with unwanted consequences does hold some logic I believe. There is always going to be a split in society of the classes, for example rich and the poor and more often as we have found the poor are mostly affected, due to marginalisation. However, class division on one hand should not stop a disaster such as, Haiti earthquake from being labelled as 'natural', since the weather is a natural element which tragically destroyed a community. To conclude, this essay has explored the claim that there is no such thing as a natural disaster using three disasters, Haiti earthquake, Hurricane Katrina and the Foot and Mouth disaster. This essay has concluded the two sides of the argument and I have incorporated my views into each section's conclusion. However, as I have established the causes of disasters are more complex than they appear to be at first and this is because they transpire out of complex social and natural interactions.

It becomes increasingly hard to distinguish whether a disaster is natural because as this essay has revealed humans are almost always involved and because of this many argue that this removes the naturalness from the disaster (Whatmore, 1999). Nevertheless, I am concluding that indeed there is no such thing as a natural disaster. I am concluding with this opinion because if it was not for the social and economic issues coupled with human

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interaction then the primary and secondary effects of Hurricane Katrina and Haiti earthquake would not have been so adverse.

On the contrary, this arguably does not explain the reasoning behind Foot and Mouth disease (2010). However, it was found that the Government ignored advice given in 1969 Northumberland report into previous Foot and Mouth whereby it was said infected animals should be killed and buried on the same day (Brooker and North, 2001). This crucial piece of information again signifies that humans contributed to the intensifying disaster and if farmers did kill and bury infected animals on the same day then the disaster may not have destroyed such high numbers of livestock.

Therefore, with this in mind it can be argued there indeed is no such thing as a natural disaster, humans coupled with inequalities almost always do remove the naturalness from disasters. Word count - 2, 893