

## BOOK REVIEWS

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Kenneth Hewitt and Ian Burton, *The Hazardousness of a Place: A Regional Ecology of Damaging Events*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971, 154 pages.

This book is a first attempt to provide a systematic framework for the study of the hazardousness of a place. The authors state that theirs is essentially a human ecological perspective; and that this perspective focuses attention on the assumption “that hazard and disaster potential relate as strongly to the normal activity of a community as to the particular nature of the extreme event.” In this context, the notion of hazard “is essentially a relational concept linking man and his surroundings.” Thus hazardousness must be viewed as a function of both the specific features of the physical event, such as predictability, frequency, speed of onset, intensity, extent of impact, and duration, and the state of human society, such as its land use patterns, state of preparedness, types of adjustments adopted, level of community resources, etc.

In order to organize the research of the hazardousness of a place, the study adopted a paradigm which is referred to as the “adjustment-perception approach.” This approach identifies the essential features of the study of hazardousness as: 1) the specification of the parameters of the hazard, 2) the identification of the possible range of human adjustments, and 3) the analysis of the features of the perception-adoption process by which decision-makers select from among the range of possible adjustments.

Having identified the necessary framework for the study of hazards, the authors thoroughly explore the hazardousness (natural and man-made) of an actual place (London,

Ontario) in order to advance and discuss methods whereby the probabilities of various hazard incidence can be obtained, and to identify the problems and shortcomings of current methods.

Returning to a more general level of analysis, the authors provide an excellent discussion of the following specific disaster agents: river flooding, drought, freezing rain, hail, wind, hurricane, tornado, and snow. Each of these agents is discussed in terms of the following dimensions: definition, forms of damage, geophysical considerations, and human response to each hazard. This chapter provides a comprehensive and concise sketch of each of these disaster agents.

In the final chapter, the advantages and weaknesses of various classificatory schemes of hazards are discussed. This chapter also includes a discussion of direct human response to damaging events and also explores the potential usefulness and applicability of the general systems model for the analysis of human system adjustments to natural hazards.

This book makes several worthwhile contributions to the disaster literature. The discussion of the features and causes of the various disaster agents is thorough yet brief. The discussion of the methods employed in estimating disaster probabilities for a place is clear, critical and imaginative, and is constantly couched in terms of the very real problems associated with such probability methods. The discussion of the methods used to estimate industrial hazards is especially noteworthy. The development of a theoretical range of adjustments to geophysical events is an excellent organizing tool for community planners in their analysis of their community’s state of preparedness, especially in its ability to help

identify weaknesses and gaps in current arrangements.

There are, however, some problems with this book. The overall organization is disjointed with theoretical sections before and after the analysis of the hazardousness of London, Ontario. It is hindered by the mixed presentation of the general perspective, its partial application in the London study, and its modification as a result of this study. A more serious problem is the somewhat exaggerated rational model of community management portrayed in the discussion of human responses to disaster situations. Time and again, disaster research in emergency situations demonstrates that the impact of a major emergency hinders the execution of a centralized, coordinated and flexible response to hazards. While it is useful to identify the most adequate pattern of response in theoretical terms, it is imperative for any study of human response to hazards to identify the recurring social sources of problems that

hinder a more adequate response. The identification of and planning for these problems is a necessary part of research designed to minimize the damage created by disaster agents. Perhaps the most critical shortcoming of this book is the discussion of human response to damaging events. The response of communities to such events is rich, complex, and subject to many structural constraints. The general model of human response to natural hazards advanced does not attempt to identify and analyze the effects of such factors as disaster sub-culture, conflict, size of city, emergent groups, etc., and tends necessarily to oversimplification. These determinants of human response are crucial since they can dramatically increase or decrease the seriousness of the impact of a disaster agent.

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