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COMMENTS ON DRABEK AND OTHER  
ENCYCLOPEDIAS

Russell R. Dynes

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Russell R. Dynes  
Disaster Research Center  
University of Delaware  
Newark, DE 19716  
USA

When I was asked to comment on Drabek's work (1986), I was, at the time, involved in exploring disasters in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. Since I was familiar with Drabek's inventory, such an assignment would be easy. Then Drabek sent me a copy of his paper which was entitled revisiting an "encyclopedia." I thought I knew what an inventory was - an itemized list of articles with the number of value of each - since I once worked in a department store. (I also recalled that an inventory was a detailed account of the possessions of a deceased person.) The dictionary suggested that an encyclopedia was more inclusive - work containing information on all subjects. While I suspect that meaning was Drabek's goal, another entry caught my eye - that an encyclopedia was a work by some of the intellectuals of the French Revolution - the Encyclopediasts. Such a definition would allow me to stay in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century with my recent friends - Diderot, Voltaire, Hume and Rousseau. My task here is not to summarize what we have learned about disaster since 1986 but to think about efforts to summarize knowledge about a topic. My focus, then, is a short essay on the sociology of encyclopedias, historically and comparatively.

It was in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century when there was the first major attempt to develop an encompassing encyclopedia. This was also the time when there was discussion about the possibilities of a social science, and paradoxically, the first application of social science

knowledge about disaster. The foray to the 18<sup>th</sup> Century will be short but will provide a background for the discussion of Drabek.

In 1747, Dennis Diderot became the editor of a collective effort called the Encyclopedia. Originally contracted to translate an English work, he set out to inventory all fields of knowledge to identify the most advanced ideas. Such an intent conveyed an arrogance which threatened those in traditional institutions, such as the Church. In the fifth volume, in 1755, Diderot wrote that he wanted to change the “general way of thinking.” He suggested that:

-- All things must be examined, debated, investigated without exception and without regard for anyone’s feeling. (Diderot, 1967, p. 93)

Diderot did not anticipate that this effort would be popular. He defended the effort in the following way:

-- In general, we have tried to profit from just criticism without defending ourselves, while we have simply ignored all unfounded attacks. (p. 94)

Between 1751-1772, twenty-eight volumes were published, drawing on some 100 specialists. While science and technology were central, the encyclopedia also became a repository for what was then called moral philosophy - theories concerning social organization, human nature, political economy and government. At the time, scholars, such as David Hume, were arguing that a science of “man” was possible and necessary.

In this period of intellectual ferment, it is not surprising that disasters became part of the discussion. In a period when optimism for the future was spreading, disasters were often used as examples of what might go wrong. When the Lisbon earthquake occurred in 1755, the location was familiar to many Enlightenment intellectuals and the meaning of the earthquake became an

issue in many of the controversies of the time. Voltaire, perhaps the central figure among Enlightenment intellectuals, was bothered by the quake. Having argued against traditional Christian interpretations of almost everything, for Voltaire, the earthquake raised, in another way, the problem of evil, contradicting the sense of progress and optimism which then prevailed within the larger intellectual community.

In the summer of 1756, Voltaire, through an intermediary, sent Rousseau a copy of his poem on Lisbon. And in August, Rousseau sent a reply, critiquing Voltaire's pessimism and set forth a surprisingly modern social science view. Rousseau pointed out that it was not the seismic event itself which was important but the nature of the human community.

Without departing from your subject of Lisbon, admit, for example, that nature did not construct twenty thousand houses of six to seven stories there, and that, if the inhabitants of this great city had been more equally spread out and more lightly lodged, the damage would have been much less and perhaps of no account. (Rousseau, 1992, p. 110)

While Rousseau engaged Voltaire in his philosophical arguments, he also kept a focus on social factors. He said, "As for me, I see everywhere that the ills to which nature subjects us are far less cruel than those we add to them." (p. 111)

This excursion is intended to make the point that creating an encyclopedia in a period of intellectual ferment can be a creative act but not all encyclopedias are born in such a context. Most other encyclopedias reflect a static past, useful for historical accuracy but devoid of imagination. To identify dead poets and dead civilizations, such books are essential. For new directions, such documents trace ancient trails which do not end in discovery.

With that point made, we can shift to Drabek. In his paper, Drabek revisits decisions made earlier. In creating an inventory, a decision to include is also a decision to exclude

something else. Each set of categories excludes another. Drabek's suggestions of changes he would make provides the opportunity to second guess him on a couple of matters.

Drabek suggests that he would be more consistent in identifying research by country. That might be useful if one intends to encourage cross cultural or cross societal analysis. But, if we look at two major social trends, globalization and localism, one could argue that, as an explanatory variable, nation state is becoming increasingly irrelevant. Too, the risks of the future might require quite different and new social locations as the basis for analysis. Two examples might suffice. What is the relevant social unit to analyze Chernobyl? Should it be treated as a local community disaster, a national disaster or an international disaster? If it is a national disaster, for what nation? Russia, Ukraine, Sweden, etc. Also, recently, I developed a typology based on conventional notions of local community but I ended up with several residual categories (Dynes, 1998). One of those categories I called sector disasters since they only affected sectors, not the totality of communities. Drabek's frame goes from individual to international but even that inclusive classification may not locate the most appropriate social unit for future disasters.

In addition, Drabek also suggests that, in a revision, he would add a chapter on hazards and suggest some candidates for inclusion. Since he would freeze the definition of disaster by the extensiveness of his list, he could save space by simply declaring that "modern life is a hazard." More importantly, one can argue that we are in the middle of a paradigmatic shift, especially away from what has been traditionally known as "natural" disasters. The notion of "natural" disasters arose at a time when nature was considered to be external to human activity and could dominate it. More recently, however, there is the growing conclusion that human

actions now dominate nature. The risks of the future are not “natural” but as the result of human agency. In other words, there is nothing natural about nature. A number of weather related hazards are being re-evaluated. Global warming would be one example. Too, many new hazards should be included if a list is compiled. A universal variable used to identify disaster has been economic loss. Taking the three most costly “natural” disasters of the 1990's - Hurricane Andrew (1992), Midwestern Floods (1993) and the Northridge Earthquake (1994), estimates of their losses total 86 billion. Contrasting those losses with the estimated dollar losses on the 1987 stock market crash, that one-day event was eleven times more costly. Would Drabek include the stock market on his new list of hazards? Should it be included when over 50 percent of family assets or 50 percent of the U.S. population are invested in the stock market, as is close to the case in 1998? How would we map this on current geographic information programs? If hazards can only be identified by social effects, why shouldn't we identify disasters by these effects rather than by the hazard?

These illustrations suggest that a chapter on hazards might freeze the definition to conventional hazards when it may be appropriate to leave such questions open. Rather than seeking closure, especially now, it is necessary to maintain openness to find new approaches, new tools, new indicators. Fortunately, Drabek's paper was formulated in terms of revisiting, not redoing and as afterthoughts, not future planning.

Certainly, there are times when an encyclopedia can pull new ideas together, as both Diderot and Drabek did. But there is also a time when an encyclopedia only codifies outmoded ideas presenting them as universal truths. In the future, unconventional “hazards” will impact non-traditional social units. Standardizing formats could delimit flexibility and creativity. Creating a format to deal with the past can become an iron cage in conceptualizing the future.

Unfortunately, such a possibility only becomes apparent when we look back.

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