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CHAPPELL LAWSON: Hi, everybody. Welcome to today's Starr Forum. I'm Chappell Lawson, Associate Professor of Political Science and affiliate with the Center for International Studies. So we're here to discuss the state's response to catastrophes with science fiction author and humanitarian, Malka Older.

This is an unusual event for us in that it is co-sponsored both by MIT's Center for International Studies and MIT's Literature Section. Let me just give you some background on Malka, for those of you who don't know her already. She is a writer, aid worker, and sociologist. Really, she has two separate lives, but she's focusing here on the sociologist and aid worker side of things, having already given a talk at MIT on her fictional work.

But by way of background, I should mention that she is the author of the political thriller *Infomocracy*, which was named one of the best books of 2016 by Kirkus, Book Riot, and the Washington Post. And she has been lead writer for two seasons of the licensed *Orphan Black* audio sequel on Realm, and her acclaimed short story collection *And Other Disasters* came out in November 2019. I should just mention also, since I'm a junkie for science fiction, she has a novella coming out next year called *The Mimicking of Known Successes*, I think early 2023, which is a murder mystery set on a gas giant planet.

But back to her first life, she is a faculty associate at Arizona State University, where she teaches on humanitarian aid and predictive fictions, and hosts the science fiction sparkle salon. Her opinions can be found in the *New York Times*, *The Nation*, *Foreign Policy*, *NBC Think*, among other places, and some really fun posts at wordpress.com

For those of you who are not familiar with the forum, I want to point out that we will have Q&A at the end of the talk. You can find the Q&A feature at the bottom of your toolbar. Put your questions in there whenever you want. I hope we can get to as many of them as possible.

In addition, please pay attention to the chat feature, also at the bottom toolbar, where we will be sending out resource links such as bios and information on upcoming events and other information that might be of interest. But for now, let me just turn it over to Malka Older. Thank you so much for being here.

MALKA OLDER: Thank you so much for having me. It's really a pleasure to be here, and a double pleasure since, as you mentioned, I did speak yesterday at the Hayden Library, where I read from my forthcoming novella. And that was a terrific event. I really enjoyed it.

And I'm so happy to be back to do this because it's really great to have a set of events where I can use both my hats, as you say, and draw on both of the areas that I work in. So today, we are going to talk about disasters. And in particular, I'd like to talk about the state and disasters, and what we mean when we talk about governing disasters and governing the unpredictable, and what that means for our futures.

To talk about this, I'm going to draw on two different sources or perspectives, in particular. One is my dissertation and the research I did for that. It's called *Organizing after disaster: the reemergence of organization within government after Hurricane Katrina, 2005, and the Tohoku Tsunami in 2011*. It's available at theses.fr because I wrote it and defended it in France, but not in French. There's a summary in French, but it is available in English.

And in addition to that, some other bits of research that I did and have published around this, which you can find on my WordPress site. But mainly, I'm drawing from my dissertation. And the other area that I'm drawing from, primarily, is my experience as a disaster responder for humanitarian organizations. I worked for international NGOs for around 10 years altogether, perhaps, a bit more, some of it in development and some of it in disaster response and disaster preparedness in a number of different countries around the world.

And I mention that because, well for one thing, if you read my fiction or any of my op eds, you probably have a good idea that I don't really believe in the possibility of neutrality as such. And I think that instead of attempting to be neutral or have a neutral academic voice in which I'm presenting my conclusions, we should attempt to be transparent and show the perspectives that we're coming from. And in particular, this is important to what I'm talking about today because one of the things that I noticed that surprised me initially as I started doing the research for my dissertation was some of the contrasts that came up across my two field sites, but also with my experience as a humanitarian worker.

So I'll give you a couple of brief examples. There's quite a lot more, but this is a short talk, so we're going to condense a bit and put in a few concrete things, get a little bit of the grit of the story. But to give an example, we're going to talk about distributions of relief goods.

And this is a quote from a book that was written about how Hurricane Katrina played out in Mississippi. And it describes the distribution of water, of potable water, after a period in which there was very little available to a group of people in Mississippi. It's distributed in a stadium.

And basically, they told people, you can take as much water as you can carry, and then kind of open the gates to the crowd. And I guess they just rushed there. Fast, but orderly rush is the quote from the newspaper. And this was incredibly shocking to me as a response worker.

Also, the bit about officers holding rifles is incredibly shocking to me. And I've written a piece that you can find on the internet for a review-- you can find the link on my website-- about the securitization of disasters in the United States. But I'm thinking here, particularly, of this idea of how it was very much a first come, first serve distribution, and how also, it was as much as people could carry. So the strongest people would get the most.

And I'm going to contrast that to a quote from a government official in a town in Japan after the tsunami, who talked about how, after a series of trial and error of trying to figure out how to distribute things, which included him and his colleagues lifting a lot of heavy stuff off of trucks and putting it down somewhere else until they could barely move. And eventually, they got the self-defense forces, the military of Japan, to do that.

What they ended up, as the government, doing was figuring out the fairness of where and when to deliver things. Fairness and things like that is the most important thing for us so that it doesn't become unequal. And this sounds very good. And I certainly prefer it to a first come, first served, but I should point out also that one of the things that these government officials decided was that, to be fair, they would not distribute anything to people in an evacuation center until they had enough of those items for everybody.

So instead of a first come, first serve rush where some people might lose out or people who didn't have a strong person or didn't have the strength themselves or didn't have a wheelbarrow might not be able to carry as much as they needed, this was a case where people might end up waiting for a longer time, including the vulnerable people within this evacuation center because there wasn't enough for the whole. So these are two, first of all, interestingly contrasting views on how to do what seems like a pretty basic component of disaster response, like getting things to people who don't have access to them. And these people thought very, very differently about how to do it.

But what was even more shocking to me was that both of these people, this official in Japan, and then I talked to a number of people across Mississippi and Louisiana who had made decisions about how to do distributions, some of which were first come, first serve, some of which were a bit different, was that they were each making these decisions themselves. This government official in Japan who is quoted here worked in the tax bureau before he suddenly got thrown into managing commodities in a major emergency. The people that I talked to in the United States, some were extension officers, some were retired, some more city officials with other positions, much like the tax bureau person. And they had basically no guidance on how to make these decisions.

Now in a way, this wasn't too much of a surprise to me because the reason that I chose this dissertation topic was that, after working for many years in different types of disaster response, I responded myself to this the emergency in Japan, the tsunami. And I came up across a local government official. I was working for an NGO. We asked them about getting water to people who were displaced, and he said, we're sending them two trucks. How much water does a person even need in a day?

And it was shocking to me at the time that he didn't have any guidance on how much water a person needs in a day. Because in international responses, when you're working for an NGO, you have a bunch of guidance. You have guidance like the Humanitarian Imperative and Humanitarian Principles that sort of say, well, you have to go in if someone is suffering.

And you have to go in impartially, and as much as you can, neutrally. Again, I hate neutrality as a concept. I don't think it's possible. But in this case, it's something that is aspirational that you tend to follow, and with reason.

We have the Sphere Guidelines, which is a collection of resources about precisely such things as how much water a person should have in a day, and that are meant, again, guidelines is something that you try for and that you know this is the standard are trying to meet, even if in some situations, it's impossible to meet it right away. And those guidelines, by the way, have been created on a largely voluntary basis by a lot of NGO workers coming together. At this point, they have an organization that pays people. But it's a voluntary thing that people put together, put a lot of time into it, and then work by. Individual NGOs have mission statements.

So when you come to making these decisions as, do we do first come, first serve? Do we help the most vulnerable people first? How do we define vulnerable? Individual NGOs, if you're in an NGO coordination meeting in a disaster, typically, you have some idea of what your agency's policy is. And if you work for Save the Children, you know that you have to be paying attention to what's happening to children.

And you can kind of relax about the other stuff because if Oxfam is there, you know they're going to start talking about gender and the importance of protection in gender. And if HelpAge is there, you know they're going to start talking about the elderly and what we need to do to look out for the special vulnerabilities of the elderly. And if Handicap International is there, et cetera, et cetera.

So when you're working in the kind of international situation, you have a lot of actors who come together and each have their own focus, which then collectively gets you to something that's, perhaps not complete, but more or less covers a lot of different areas. And then you have individual grants and program constraints. So if you're working in a disaster, you probably have funding, probably from a government like the United States or Japan.

And that government in that grant will say, are you abiding by the Sphere Guidelines? And what is your definition of vulnerable? And how successful have you been in this program? And so it was surprising to me to see that the governments that include these guidelines, when they're asking international organizations to work for them, don't follow them themselves, or have any kind of analog.

And so I was thinking a lot about why this is the case. And one of the conclusions I've come to is that NGOs are-- they don't actually have any kind of standing. They're not elected. They're not appointed by anyone in the government.

Generally, they're an organization that collected and decided they wanted to help people, and then they kind of go into a disaster area and ask permission to work there, usually with buckets of cash from other governments to use, which makes it hard to say no. Although, more and more governments are doing this. So although it was initially surprising to me to see that the governments did not have something similar themselves, I began to realize that perhaps they hadn't actually asked the question of, what is a successful disaster response.

And as I continued my research and looked into the evaluations that were done of these disasters I was studying, I became more convinced that they hadn't looked into this. This page is actually blank on this slide because nobody really knows what a successful disaster response looks like. And these governments have not tried very hard to figure it out.

In the case of Hurricane Katrina, there were three federal reports on what happened in Katrina. They are all incredibly different. They have different conclusions.

They have different tables of contents saying the areas that they look at. They have different methodologies, most of which are not clarified in the reports themselves. And that's aside from the state and local reports that were produced.

And the same is true of Japan. Different prefectures in Japan did their own reports. They often did not share them with their submunicipalities and vice versa. And they certainly didn't share them with each other to learn from each other.

And if they had, they would have found it very difficult because, again, they were all very different. They looked at different things. They had different methodologies. So there was no kind of serious methodology in terms of looking at, are we succeeding or not in this proposition of responding to disasters?

Which then led me to the question of, what is, in fact, the state's responsibility in a disaster? And so I quote here the Stafford Act, which is the legal basis for it. This is from the updated version from 2019. But this particular section hasn't changed much.

And it doesn't really say a whole lot, particularly when I contrast it with those things like the Humanitarian Imperative, which is, again, pretty aspirational, and not always followed, but quite clear as something to aim for. Or an individual mission statement, which might say something like, we seek to alleviate poverty and vulnerability. We want to always help the most vulnerable. We are interested in protecting the rights and dignity of children and so forth.

So the Stafford Act emphasizes the fact that the federal government is only supporting and assisting state and local governments, and is very, very general about what they do to do that. Now, this is followed by a list of sort of target areas, including helping individuals to help themselves by convincing them to buy insurance, which tells you something about that responsibility part. But it doesn't address any of the questions that the officials I talked to would have faced when they were trying to decide in how to deliver scarce goods.

The question of, do I give it first to the most vulnerable? Do I include people from outside of my county? Do I hold everything back until I can give the same amount to everybody? Do I, basically, put them all out and let people who have cars come through in an orderly manner? Or do I have to go, aggressively, and seek out people who don't have cars?

And so these sorts of questions that are value-based in many ways, as well as having to do with process and competencies in disaster response, there's no real basis in the state for how their officials should be thinking about that when a disaster happens, which in my opinion, not only complicates things, but also puts a very heavy burden during and after on those officials of taking responsibility for, what are essentially, the value judgments and resource distribution of the state, as well as making it different across different jurisdictions. Now, from there we can even ask, what is a disaster? Because the concept of disaster and the responsibility of the state in it has evolved a lot over time.

The idea that, particularly, the federal government, but even city governments, that they should be involved in responding to a disaster is relatively new. And in the United States particularly, it started out with things like loans to individuals, usually to recompense them for lost property. One of the earliest examples is Congress allocating funds to white people who fled from the slave riots in Santo Domingo to recompense them for their lost assets, meaning people.

And disaster response focus in the United States has continued to stay on assets. For a long time it was tax relief. Eventually, it expanded to being grants to replace lost assets. And then around the time that the Stafford Act was put in place, in conjunction with some of the civil defense that came up during the Cold War and also some of the safety net that came up during the New Deal, it sort of gradually drifted into taking a more and more active role.

And so now we're in a situation where people believe that the government and FEMA should come to save them when there's a disaster. And whether that is ethically true or not, there's no real basis for it legally. Ethically, we have this kind of vacuum of what should be done, in terms of the government's perspective.

And as Roberts notes here in this quote on the page, in addition to how the state's responsibility has changed in perceptions, the question of what is a disaster has changed significantly. And so you can see here that he's discussing how different things were considered disastrous or not at different times, and particularly, disaster of the level to require government support. But that conception is also changing further because when we think of a disaster, we tend to think of something that is episodic, that is unusual, that is something outside of the norm.

But as some scholars like the emergency geographer, Ben Anderson, here have noted, in fact, for a lot of people in our countries and our societies, disasters are a constant thing. Emergency is a constant state. And many of the conditions that we see as disastrous when they come as a result of a hurricane or an earthquake or forest fire are constants for a lot of communities for other reasons.

Now, this is particularly important when we look at the responsibility of the state because once the state starts looking into what their responsibility is for a disaster, it may become possible to connect those disasters to normal life, which is to say, there's a very strong truism in both disaster studies and disaster response and preparedness practice, which is that there are no natural disasters. There are natural hazards like hurricanes and earthquakes and fires. However, they only become a disaster when they interact with human vulnerabilities.

And so a forest fire where nobody lives is not a problem. An earthquake in the middle of the desert is typically not a problem. But when you combine an earthquake with poor construction, when you combine a storm surge with levees that are supposed to protect people, and then don't releasing that surge, the built up surge, much more suddenly, you have a very big problem.

When you have settlements that are on the coast without adequate protections and when they have decimated their wetlands and other areas that normally would absorb that shock, you have a problem. When you have any of these hazards occurring and you have a population that doesn't have access to information, doesn't have a lot of education about what to do in a disaster, doesn't have a lot of trust for government to help them, and if you have a medical system and a health care system that is, in the long-term, inadequate, which means you have a population with suboptimal health, and probably, that doesn't have a lot of trust in going to get help when they need it after such a hazard, then you have a very big disaster.

And so once you start to look at government responsibility in disasters, it is very easy to connect it to government responsibility all the time. And that is going to become more and more relevant as we continue into this Anthropocene period where disasters are more and more continuous. So disaster is, for more and more of us, not an episodic thing and not an unusual thing, but a kind of constant as we move from different levels and different types of hazards affecting us at different times, which means that we need to think very carefully and ask our governments to clarify what the government responsibility is to us in disasters, which means all the time.

Because without some clarity on what that responsibility is, it is impossible to hold them to account or to prepare for how we can support each other under those circumstances. Thank you.

CHAPPELL Thank you so much. We're already getting questions. But I was going to exploit moderator's prerogative and ask
LAWSON: one of my own, if that's OK?

MALKA OLDER: Absolutely.

CHAPPELL First, because I mean, I follow literature on Homeland Security to a lesser extent, what FEMA is up to. But I would
LAWSON: love to hear, based on your eight years of working and thinking about these issues, what are we doing wrong in the US? I think I have a sense of part of your answer, which will be clarifying the parameters of what constitutes a disaster and how we move to the normalization of, effectively, emergency management.

But what else are we doing wrong? What would you do differently if you could just change everything? I guess the other way to ask is, if you had a magic wand to wave at what was wrong with emergency response in the United States or some other country and you could just wave it once, what would you change?

MALKA OLDER: Can I wave it once and change everything? No, I think that there is-- to pick one thing, I'm going to have to pick kind of a level of analysis for this because, I think, one of the things that struck me also in shifting from doing humanitarian response to studying what governments do is that governments don't do humanitarian response. Governments do emergency management or crisis management.

And so the implications here in the international community, there's quite a lot of thought on what a humanitarian imperative means, and what it means to do humanitarian response. The implication of emergency management is that you are managing something that has erupted, and you are attempting to return to the status quo.

And again, as I pointed out at the end of my talk, the status quo is, A, not always that great, and B, often where the roots for this emergency are. And we see that in-- I want to interrupt here and say that while that is sort of the overall attitude, and again, it's implicit. This is not made clear anywhere. But looking at the name and drawing from that, and looking at things like the way that the funds for reconstruction often depend on exactly the value that existed there before as opposed to building back better. You know, it's very much about, let's get this back to normal.

But to interrupt that, I spoke to a lot of, both local emergency managers and FEMA officials, and many of them were enormously committed to what they did, and enormously empathetic in terms of the disaster and the people affected by it. So this is not to say that the people working there don't care about people damaged by disasters. Many of them are very, very dedicated and work extremely hard because they care a lot.

But when you have an organizational attitude or focus like that, that obviously affects what you can do, and particularly, when a lot of your funding is controlled by Congress. Oh, gosh, like do I even start with the attitude? Do I start with the funding? Disaster funding in the United States is extremely counterproductive in the way that it's structured.

But you know, I really think that connecting disasters--

CHAPPELL LAWSON: I think, tell us about the money too. I mean, I think the attitudes, the way we conceptualize disasters paradigmatically, this is a debate that exists between the people who advocate consequence management and emergency management, and the people who emphasize resilience versus the people who emphasize response. But yeah, tell us about the money side of it, or the organization side of it as well.

MALKA OLDER: I mean, a lot of the funding for disasters is controlled by Congress on an ad hoc basis. And you can see that into the past. I mean, this is of how it was from the beginning where they were giving money to former slave holders. It originally was-- a lot of it was to individuals.

This was quite a long time ago, of course. And whether it was given or not kind of depended on the impassioned speech that was made before Congress-- I'm paraphrasing from that same Roberts book here. But there continues to be very much an ad hoc thing in terms of figuring out how much money each disaster deserves, and a lot of jockeying in terms of representatives from different areas deciding whether it makes sense for another area to get money or not. It seems like a great idea when it's them and not so much when it's somebody else.

And there's actually research showing how disaster fund allocation affects subsequent elections. There's research showing how the importance-- the electoral importance of different areas affects whether an emergency is declared. So we have a very politicized disaster response in that specific sense of politicized because, of course, all disasters are political. But very election politicized funding for disasters.

And let me say just as well, the international funding for disasters is also a terrible system that involves writing desperate, late night proposals to go to very wealthy countries to spend a tiny insignificant fraction of their GDP, according to principles that they decide very far from the actual need. But well there's a lot of people who talk about that.

CHAPPELL

So the questions are already pouring in. And I was going to exploit my advantage further, but let me just go to

LAWSON:

two that I think really build on what you just said. But the first is, what risk mitigation strategies should we be contemplating from refraining, for building on or near coastlines, rivers, heavy industrial centers, et cetera, other high risk areas? I mean, should we be allowing banks to write 30 year mortgages on properties in Florida that we know will be underwater within 20 years, for instance?

And I think related to that is another question. Why do we continue to rebuild locations in, say, New Orleans where we're below sea level and we're just waiting for another disaster to happen? So I guess I gave you these two questions that's linked. And what's your take on it?

MALKA OLDER:

I mean, this is another area where we're kind of stuck between emotional connection to place, as well as the difficulty of somebody moving and starting over again, or of the government funding people to buy new houses, and the reality of what we're facing. I'm going to recommend a book called *Acts of God*, which is by Ted Steinberg, about disaster in America, and very much about this question of how disaster is removed from its context, and how poor decisions about where people are allowed to live are kind of subsidized by everybody else through their tax dollars. But there's a lot of complexity to it beyond that in terms of things like the federal flood insurance, which requires that people living in certain areas buy flood insurance, but is very out of date, and continues to get more and more out of date despite efforts to update it because the updating it, at this point, is going to be so brutal for everyone in those areas.

And what we see-- we also see this weird sort of two extremities that come out with these risky places to live. On the one hand, you have very rich people who want to live on the coast with ocean views or who want to live along the San Andreas Fault or whatever because it's beautiful and they can afford it. And there, you end up with a lot of major assets potentially getting destroyed, which will then have to be replaced because that's what we do as disaster response.

And then on the other hand, you have very risky places where poor people end up getting pushed into living there because those particular-- whether it's a flood plain, whether it's a coastal area that's not so pretty for various reasons, whether it's an area that's industrially contaminated and is at high risk because of our own actions and somebody else's very high profits, that ends up being cheap to live in. And so you have poor people being forced into there. So should we have risk mitigation strategies for all of these? Yeah, we should.

It's going to cost more in the long-term not to. However, we need to figure out how to do that while softening the blow for the people who are not at fault in these cases, while being more strict about the people who are, as you say, offering 30-year mortgages for places that don't have 30 years in them. And thinking about how we can provide the disaster support to the vulnerable people before the disaster happens.

CHAPPELL

So we have another terrific question, which is, what is the role of individuals, NGOs, non-government

LAWSON:

organizations in disaster planning, disaster management, disaster relief? Is it all up to governments? Is it up to experts? Is it up to ordinary citizens? And if so, what should we all be doing?

MALKA OLDER:

So generally, almost always, the people who do respond first, and often best, are citizens and locals to the area. You know, whether it's a tornado that cuts through one street in a town, and it's the immediate neighbors who come out and help. Or whether it's a storm surge decimating an entire town, and it's the next town over that are the first to arrive and who know what those people need and know the people and how to talk to them. It's just, purely from proximity and access, it's almost always the people who are there.

And I've seen this in the United States, I've seen it in Sri Lanka, I've seen it in Indonesia, I saw it in Japan. So it's a very well-known truism of disaster response. But part of the problem that we're talking about is that disaster response is not an immediate thing.

It's easy for neighbors to come and-- not always easy. It's an effort. But it's simple for neighbors to come and offer people rooms in their house and cook extra and support people while they're completely at the mercy of the elements and help them out in that stage. But we live in a highly complicated environment where doing things like reconnecting electricity, reconnecting water mains, building houses are complex, multi-component tasks.

Figuring out whether to relocate a town or whether to rebuild it is a complex task that, presumably with enormous effort and nothing else done for a couple of years, could be done by the community. But in the kinds of environments that we're accustomed to, it's going to be extremely difficult.

Now, I, personally, am someone who believes that the government is there to, basically, embody collective action as much as possible, to do the stuff that it is hard for us to do without that. And particularly, the very wealthy governments that we're talking about. But I accept that that's something that's up for debate.

For me, and I'm coming back to the main point of my talk here, what's important is defining that responsibility so that the people who are trying to help their neighbors have some idea of where the limits of what they have to do are, and what they can expect begins. Similarly, I see in the question that they have a lot of criticism for NGOs. And I would say it usually doesn't go quite 90% that siphoned off for administration.

But as someone who worked for NGOs, I would say that there's a lot to criticize, but there's also a lot of good that gets done. Either way, when you look at the relationship between the federal government or state governments and the American Red Cross, which is the official sort of NGO responder in US disasters, that again is very, very vague. There's not a lot of definition of what goes to one and what goes to the other.

And that means that it's ad hoc. It means that it's different in different places. It means that people are dealing with uncertainty as they're trying to figure out where they should go for help and how much to expect.

And one of the things that I've done research on and written about, and you can find this on my website in publications again, is that there's a lot of research showing that while communities tend to come together after a naturally triggered disaster, after natural hazard that leads to disaster and people kind of, we survived, we're going to help each other, you often see the opposite effect after industrial or technological disasters. And the reasons, according to the research that I studied, the reasons for this are mainly around questions of uncertainty and blame. So to take the example that I'm very familiar with, which is the Fukushima Daiichi disaster, people don't know how long they need to stay away. They don't know really what level of radiation makes it OK to move back.

And when they don't know, it means that you have different members of a family, different members of a community arguing for different things with no ability to resolve it. And at the same time, questions of, is the government at fault, is the industry at fault, are we at fault, et cetera. So these sort of things tear communities apart.

And what I argue in my paper is that uncertainty around disaster response can do the same thing. If people are not sure how much they are owed, to put it that way, how much they can expect or should expect from their government for response, if they're not sure which place to go will get them a better deal or will rebuild their house faster or will help them more with their insurance claims, and they're divided on what to do, then you're going to get that same sort of uncertainty and conflict. And that becomes long-term problematic.

CHAPPELL

I think that leads into a crucial issue for many people in this policy domain, which has to do with communication.

LAWSON:

There was a question on it. I'm going to put a twist of my own on the question. But during a disaster, sometimes the American people are meeting somebody in federal government, or even in their state government, for the very first time.

And that person has not encountered a disaster like this either. And she's talking about it on TV, she only gets one take. If there's miscommunication, it can lead to tremendous chaos and inefficiency, as well as all the internal debates within a community that you are describing. So how can we fix that problem? How can we make sure that during a disaster, there is effective communication from the government, whether it's local government, state government, the federal government, to all the people who are likely to be affected?

MALKA OLDER:

Yeah. Communication is hugely important, and came up again and again in my research. And so setting aside all the sort of tricks of communication in terms of the technical aspects of what medium you're communicating on, making sure it's accessible to people, preparing, blah, blah. You know, again, I'm going to come back to the same thing and say that we need-- the people who are going to be involved in disasters need to have some foundational understanding of what they're trying to do.

Because when I talk about comparing disasters, a lot of times people ask me, but how can you compare a hurricane and an earthquake? How can you compare this or that? But in a humanitarian response, we do, in fact, evaluate all these different disasters because what we have to do is largely the same. There are slight differences in terms of what you might be facing in the context.

But basically, you need to give people shelter. You need to give people essential goods. You need to give medical assistance as necessary. And you need to help people rebuild.

I mean, very broad strokes there. So if the people who are communicating about this-- and again, setting aside very specific communication needs, like, here is your radius of fallout. Do not go into this area.

But if the point is communicating what the government is trying to do for you in a disaster, then people need to understand, in a disaster, the government is committed to, A, sheltering everybody and feeding everybody for x amount of time, and this is how you figure out where to go. Or B, if you are desperately in need of help and have nowhere else to go, come to us. If you have some resources, go somewhere and we will try to support you better as we can. Or C, if you are in this particular class of vulnerable people that we have decided, then you go here. If you're not, then we'll mail you checks because we know that you can get along until you get it.

I mean, there are different ways to do this. And without my saying which is the absolute best, clarity about that, clarity about the basic principles for the people who are going to be doing it, is going to help them communicate what's going on to people. Because without that, you have just a lot of confusion. And you end up with things like Governor Blanco after Katrina saying that people will be shot on sight for looting.

This is not on the basis of ethical anything. This is on the basis of, I don't know what's going on. And I'm trying to protect the assets because that's the implicit message that has come in terms of what's important in a disaster.

**CHAPPELL
LAWSON:**

So I have to ask you about this question that's come up in the Q&A, but my inner economist is telling me, we have massive externalities here. And the right answer is just to solve the externalities by forcing the people who are investing in risky situations to own up to their risk, rather than assume that they're going to be bailed out or that someone owes them something when their house falls apart. And there are insurance markets for certain things, home insurance among other things. There's the FEMA flood insurance program, which with all these problems, at least follows this general idea.

Why don't we just approach disasters that way? Why do we need the state involved to the degree it is? With all the ad hoc then debates in Congress about particular disasters that will inevitably attend a major federal or even state or local bailout when there's a disaster? You know, what can we do just to make sure that everybody understands what their risks are, the government provides you with all the information, and then you buy the necessary insurance products?

MALKA OLDER: OK, I mean, so there, we already have some government intervention in terms of providing necessary information.

**CHAPPELL
LAWSON:**

Absolutely. The government's not doing nothing, right? But it's trying to remedy an externality, which is totally legitimate government operation. But it's not necessarily saying, we are the funder or resource of last resort.

MALKA OLDER: Yeah, and again, while I would like to see the government doing more, I'm not necessarily saying that that's the only answer. What I'm saying is we need clarity on this. I mean, at the moment, the government sort of like-- and again, explicitly in the Stafford Act, we should encourage people to buy insurance.

But we're also going to do all these other things, maybe, but only to help the locals who might have very different ideas about what should be done. And I do think also it's important to distinguish between some of the externalities, OK? Because as you said, we have bankers offering mortgages, we have developers going in and developing places in very risky areas that may or may not get a payout, that may go bankrupt. But you've still got these enormous buildings there that are then in danger, as well as, potentially, a source of income if they do get destroyed through insurance.

And then you have people who are living in a generational house in a place that wasn't at risk when it was bought, who cannot afford to move someplace else because nobody else wants to move there now. So yes, there are externalities. But if we're going to talk about blame, and if we're going to talk about moral hazard, which is a phrase that was brought up to me in terms of whose houses should get rebuilt on the coast of Mississippi, then we have to really think about, first of all, the information imbalances there, the power imbalances, and the questions of when people made these decisions.

CHAPPELL There's another type of moral hazard, too, that's baked into the US system, which is federalism, right?

LAWSON:

MALKA OLDER: Yes.

CHAPPELL And the expectation that the federal government would bail out the states and localities, when in fact, the way the Stafford Act, and all the other legislation is written, is that it's supposed to be the community's first and the state second. And then only afterwards is the federal government supposed to be on the hook. But very few people actually know this, and they tend to say, blame George W Bush for Katrina.

LAWSON:

Of course, he was doing exactly what the Federal government was supposed to be doing. And the governor was asking-- we can talk about Katrina specifically. But we have a governor asking the president to lend federal troops, which is a non-starter.

We don't have a check on executive with the ability to intervene without the consent of the governor. But we still have a president who is politically very vulnerable when disaster struck. And this, in theory, I mean, it allows the states and the localities to dramatically under invest in resilience and response. So you know--

MALKA OLDER: It does. But I think you can also look at it the flip. I agree, this is a serious problem. And in fact, in Katrina, I would argue that it's not only the public who misunderstood that, the government officials largely did not understand what their role was supposed to be, again, clarifying who's supposed to do what. But you come up in a problem with this situation.

So this is the way that the US disaster response and Japan and most other countries I've looked at say, OK, the locals should be in charge. And this is based on a very valid principle, that the people who are closest to the disaster best understand the needs, and they also understand the community and what should be done. But what it kind of misses is two things.

On the one hand, the money, as you mentioned. The federal government ends up sort of bailing out, as you said, communities. But the communities do not have the money that they need to do what they need to do themselves. The situation, the way that our federalism has evolved and the kinds of things that we talk about mean that there are no communities that have access to the level of funding that the federal government does for disaster preparedness or relief.

And so for example, Katrina, we know that there was a terrible situation with the Superdome, right? The city of New Orleans had actually asked for funding to conduct a study about using the Superdome as a disaster evacuation site, and what that would mean and whether it needed to be upgraded. And they couldn't get money for that study, let alone for doing the upgrading.

So the flip side of saying the federal government's going to bail people out is the federal government has control over the funding, which means that no matter how much you say, the locals are in the lead. As long as they're still subject to these contingencies into this review from other places, they are not. And there are other examples from during Katrina where people were asking for stuff from the local levels, and higher up the chain, people were saying, no, they don't need that, and not approving it.

You know, again, I come to this from a place of, we should be approaching this from a slant of generosity. And I'm coming from having been the person in the office saying, we need this, this, this. And in my experience, throwing more money at it, in a really big disaster, from the beginning, rarely goes wrong. If you're throwing money at stuff, not just saying we're going to throw a ton of cash, you figure out what to do.

But generally, asking for a lot of stuff early on, and then using it, and figuring out as you have more situational awareness because that's where the need is right at the beginning and with speed. And money is not entirely fungible at a time like that. But to go more back to your initial question, yeah, these federalism issues-- and federalism, it's a really good tool in a lot of ways. But it's a tool that we need to continue to refine and to figure out different ways to approach it.

Another thing that I saw in my research is that a lot of people at the local level did not-- they had a lot of difficulty taking control when they were in a room with four star generals who had come down to represent the federal government, or with someone down from Washington who had done a million responses. And some of those people were ready to say, no, no, you're in charge, and some of them weren't. And it's not that easy to turn around hierarchies on a dime, especially when you are exhausted and traumatized.

So there's a lot going on there. I also want to just add one thing, which is that as we see these jurisdictional issues, we have to consider the next jurisdiction up, which is as we're facing global disasters, then where are we looking for funding? Where are we looking for coordination? Because this is going to be a problem more and more as we, in our globalized world, in our increasingly disaster prone world.

**CHAPPELL
LAWSON:**

Terrific. So there was a question that mentioned New Madrid. And I just-- I can't help asking, at the very end, this is not the question. But you must have in your mind a list of the worst disasters we should expect? And I'm not talking about the asteroid hitting the Earth, but things that are actually likely to happen at some point in our lifetimes and will be truly cataclysmic?

And I mentioned New Madrid only because the nuclear power plants that are there, all the people living right along the fault line, bases. And we know that that earthquake is coming. And we know when it comes, it'll be large. But you must know, in the back of your mind-- have a kind of set of specific fears.

I mean, before Katrina, I would have said, New Orleans is going to be a disaster, right? We all know it's below sea level. We all know the levees won't hold. All we need is a direct hit from category 4 or 5 storm, and then it's going to be a disaster. New Madrid feels kind of the same way. But there may be other places on your mind.

MALKA OLDER: Yeah. Are you sure you want to hear that?

CHAPPELL At the risk of terrorizing everybody, but some people come to talks on disasters to be terrified, a little bit like a
LAWSON: horror movie. So you may as--

MALKA OLDER: Well, mute us if you don't want to be terrified. I'll wave again when we're done. But there are to that kind of sent out to me, and these are actually very like subjective and personalized.

But there's the Pacific Northwest. I've responded to tsunamis and they're just horrifying, and very, very difficult to prepare within like-- aside from moving, there's not a whole lot you can do. And that one, I think, is because of the long cycle of when earthquakes happen, there is particularly unprepared region.

The other one that was getting a lot of press when I was responding to the Tohoku earthquake, and afterwards, researching it in Japan is something called the Nankai Trough, which goes along the bottom of Honshu, meaning that an earthquake there could potentially throw a tsunami that would affect Osaka, as well as Tokyo, and a number of gas refineries and other things that are along the coast. And just in terms of population and economic activity, could potentially be really, really horrifying, and sort of an interaction with technological stuff, including nuclear plants, but also gas and other things that are extremely dangerous and damaging. So yeah, OK, done.

CHAPPELL Well, you were very good not to mention any of the regasification facilities. There's the city of Boston, so to avoid
LAWSON: terrorizing our audience further.

MALKA OLDER: There's-- I mean, one of the things that we are really seeing as an Anthropocene issue is that it's basically harder and harder for a natural hazard not to interact with an industrial hazard. And so more and more, we're getting anything that happens is going to be both. And there are a lot of people who don't have the experience for both or aren't qualified for the different types of industrial hazard that you can come across in that situation.

And it's just a whole other level of horror that, again, comes back to externalized risks and who should be taking the lead in putting some of the money into dealing with this, or how do we think about, is it really worth the risk of having gas refineries offshore when this is the kind of damage that we're talking about?

CHAPPELL So there are a number of questions that we're not going to get to, with apologies, including a couple on COVID.
LAWSON: Feel free to respond to them if you wish. But I wanted to ask you the other half of this sort of list of disasters, which as an academic, the list of dissertations you wish somebody would write because we all have that list as well.

And where do we need more-- I see graduate students on this talk as well. But where do we need more research to be done when it comes to either emergency management or disaster response?

MALKA OLDER: So I think I'm really interested, as I said, in kind of connecting-- really clarifying our attitudes, really clarifying ethics and values around disasters, and connecting what we say to what we do. Because I mentioned looking at the evaluations, and it was just amazing to me how little they told us in terms of what happened and what we wanted to happen. So there's a question in there about some of the simulations and planning and preparedness that had been done.

And so this question of connecting the things we learn, the things we study, to our actions and our funding. And I think that's a really important question for universities too, in terms of, if we are coming up with these things, if we are understanding where the risks are, if we are understanding ways to prepare better, how can we make sure that gets to policymakers with the weight that it deserves? There is a ton of work that has been done in the humanitarian community over the years that has to do with all sorts of areas of disaster preparedness and response.

And very little of it makes it back to these countries that don't expect to have to welcome in humanitarian aid because they think they're rich enough to deal with their own disasters. And so, as I said, there's all this work that went into the Sphere Guidelines of saying, what are the minimum standards for water, for latrines, for shelter? And it doesn't come back here.

There's a lot of work that's been done on participatory evaluation and monitoring on just all sorts of things. And so some of that distribution, making sure that some of that learning gets into policy. And then there's a lot of talk about community-based work. There was a lot of talk at FEMA 20 years ago, and then again, 10 years ago, and at various times. There's been a lot of talk at FEMA about communities being a part of it, and how communities prepare.

And I'd like to see a lot more work on that also, again, in that area of like, what are we saying and what are we doing? Is it like this devolution of power to the local levels where they say, oh, yeah, you're in charge, but you don't have any money and we're still going to tell you what to do. Does it give them the support that they need to be prepared communities? Or is it very much them saying, OK, you all make grab bags, and then something goes wrong you're on the hook.

And how can communities-- there's a lot of talk about community based [INAUDIBLE], but I think that there's really a long way to go in terms of thinking about what that means in this kind of environment where disasters are almost constant. One of the reasons I wrote my dissertation on what I did was because I was so concerned and sympathetic about the disaster, the Japanese local officials that I met when I was responding to the tsunami who, as I mentioned, didn't have anything really to work from, but also, were exhausted and traumatized because their hometowns had been destroyed and were trying to do what they could in this incredibly difficult situation with thousands and thousands of people displaced in the winter.

And, you know, I came to it and looked at it and said, gosh, I find disaster response really, really hard when I'm unconnected to the people that it happened to and I know I have R&R in five weeks. So when we talk about locals taking the lead, I think that we also really need to think about that element of support, and taking some of that-- how do you put them in charge without absolutely running them into the ground, and without putting them in front of these terrible ethical dilemmas around people they're going to have to live with, probably, for the rest of their lives with sort of no recourse to turn to?

So you know, I think that if that's going to be our policy, we have to really think about what that means for the people that we're pointing at and saying, yeah, you know what to do in your county when there's an incredibly massive disaster. Go for it.

**CHAPPELL
LAWSON:**

That is a great place to leave it. Thank you very much, Malka Older, for speaking with us today. Thanks to all of you for coming. And thanks to our co-sponsors, MIT's Literature Section and MIT Center for International Studies. We're really very grateful.

Let me just mention that we also have some upcoming events here for the Starr Forum, including a session on the collapse of the Soviet Empire and the seeds of a new European war. This is going to be a virtual event on Monday, April 25, between noon and 1:00. The speaker will be Vladislav Zubok, who's Professor of International History with expertise on the Cold War, the Soviet Union Stalinism, and Russia's intellectual history in the 20th century. So the details should be in the chat feature.

We hope to see you all again. And once again, thanks very much to Malka.

MALKA OLDER: Thank you. It was such a pleasure to be here. And thanks for all the excellent questions from everyone. I'm sorry we didn't have a chance to get to them all. But I'm reading through them, and thank you all for the attention and the interest.