

HABILITATION THESIS REVIEWER'S REPORT

Masaryk University

Faculty

Faculty of Social Studies

Applicant

Miriam Matejova

Habilitation thesis

Environmental disasters and political activism

Reviewer

Prof. Phil Orchard

Reviewer's home unit, institution

University of Wollongong Australia

I have been asked to review Dr. Miriam Matejova's Habilitation Thesis, "Environmental Disasters and Political Activism." Per the regulations, I have focused on the scholarly merit of the thesis composed of four publications.

The thesis identifies its central objective as examining the "political effects of environmental disasters as they relate to protest mobilization and public discontent in general," particularly why some major environmental disasters lead to public protests. In so doing, it continues themes of Dr. Matejova's wider work, including her co-authored 2019 book on Disaster Security with Chad Briggs and published with Cambridge University Press.

The thesis frames environmental disasters as taking place in two ways. The first is as an event in and of themselves; while the second is a longer run phenomenon in which the event is a trigger that may produce political responses and changes. To understand this second approach, Dr. Matejova explores the roles of framing processes that occur in the immediate aftermath of a disaster. While rooted in social movements, framing processes are now widely used in international relations in order to understand actors use language, pictures, and wider discourses to create understandings. Dr. Matejova's thesis contributes directly to such understanding by exploring both how framing actors operate- what are their interests and strategies- and how particular frames are effective with respect to a target audience.

The three articles within the thesis are all from widely regarded international journal with significant impact factors (all at 2.7 or above) while the book chapter is part of an edited volume published by Spring and edited by scholars based at Harvard. Each of these pieces make a significant scholarly contribution.

The first article (study 1) focuses on how examining disasters as unique events can help understand their political effects by focusing on three early prominent oil spills in the US and UK (the Torrey Canyon spill in 1967, the Santa Barbara spill in 1969, and the 1989 Exxon Valdez spill). She frames these disasters through the lens of critical junctures, leading to irreversible changes in the affected social systems. But she also notes that this is not inevitable- at least 38 major tanker oil spills had occurred in the 20th century, but these three - linked to a combination of media attention, communities and class, and wider support for pristine tourist or natural environments - that led to notable public protest and significant domestic legislative changes (and even international adaptation, such as the widespread adoption of double hulled tankers following the Valdez disaster).

The book chapter (study 2) argues for a new understanding of how disasters can create grievances. It links disasters to the question of grievances as a driver for social and protest movements. It argues disasters can create a specific form of *sudden* grievance (differentiated from longer-term structural grievances). These sudden grievances, she theorizes, are rooted in objective losses of environmental values due to damage as well as impacts on human health, life, and economies. But while these can be a mobilizing factor, grievances alone may not be enough to lead to protest. The chapter develops a dataset of 38 disasters from 1900 in large industrial democracies (framed with language of 'at least' this many- this could have had a bit more explanation for the selection criteria and in particular how effective the listed databases which were examined are at providing coverage of historical incidents). The overall argument, hypotheses, and independent and dependent variables identified are clearly persuasive, particularly the intriguing findings related to the strength of H3- that protests should not occur in remote areas with low environmental value (though with the noted caveat that this may need more cases for the claim to be made convincingly. The one question I was left with, in terms of a study seeking to go back as far as 1900, is how much of a factor time is (framed in terms of the development of the modern environmental movement), especially as no protest events are identified earlier than 1978 and perhaps could be an area for future research.

The second article (study 3) focuses on how framing actors can agenda-set through their talk about specific environmental disasters through a comparative approach, focusing on three events between 2010 and 2014 in Canada, the US, and Germany, and how these frames can relate to subsequent public protest. The article advances our understanding of framing in the contexts of disasters, arguing that three political actors tend to produce frames following such events. Activities will use frames to focus blame and propose solutions. Corporations engage in damage control and seek to maintain the policy status quo. Governments focus on preventing declines in legitimacy and, while not homogenous, furthering their own preferences. This study's methodology focuses on content analysis of newspaper coverage of the three disasters (1,500 news articles in total, 500 hand-coded following random sampling). The most common frames focused on blame assignment and around economic costs, but also that activists were featured very little in the news coverage (as were corporate statements). In particular, the lack of coverage of environmental frames – as well as other motivating frames- meant that the frames had a lesser role than is normally believed to occur. The article does note that different forms of media may have different influences- such as television coverage more often covering human rights stories- and similar possibilities may arise with social media.

The third article (study 4), and the sole co-authored publication, then focuses on how uncertainty can affect willingness to engage in political activity after disasters. The theme of uncertainty picks up on other works by Dr. Matejova not included within the thesis, including her edited volume on *Uncertainty in Global Politics* with Professor Anastasia Shesterinina. The specific argument is that uncertainty framing can trigger anxiety and other emotions, which will in turn reduce willingness to engage, particularly when factoring in existing political ideology (with stronger demobilization effects among more conservative respondents). The methodology for the article focused on both a content analysis of news coverage (following a similar approach to study 3) and an additional survey experiment (using participants from the United States) which found support for the argument.

Combined, these studies present an important development of our understanding of how and when public protest occurs following natural disasters, anchoring the notions of uncertainty and pre-existing political attitudes as key factors. They use a range of sophisticated methodological approaches, including content analysis, geospatial analysis, and quantitative analysis using survey data. Further, while this is exploratory work in the best sense of the word- using a small set of cases to test different sets of hypotheses and methods- not only are the findings in and of themselves robust, but Dr. Matejova notes (per page 12) that she is

developing a broader working dataset of over a thousand cases. As such, it is clear that this is an ongoing research agenda which will have significant findings.

Reviewer's questions for the habilitation thesis defence (number of questions up to the reviewer)

Dr. Matejova develops the concept of sudden grievances following disasters – rooted in losses of environmental values due to damage as well as impacts on human health, life, and economies – as a mobilizing factor that may lead to protest but one that may not be sufficient in itself to create protest. Thinking across the four studies, what have tended to be the other factors that have combined with sudden grievances to create protest?

With respect to study 2, should time, particularly the time before and since the rise of the modern environmental movement, be considered as a factor given no protests are identified prior to 1978?

The content analysis of news sources for coverage of disasters has generally focused on newspapers, and Dr. Matejova notes that other sources might lead to different forms of coverage (such as television news sources having more focus on human interest stories). Is social media potential a separate source which might lead to alternative findings?

The final study focuses on uncertainty as a trigger that may reduce the willingness to engage in protest, particular when linked to existing political ideology. That study is based on a survey experiment using US citizens. Is it likely that such findings will be common across industrialized democracies, or is the US a bit of an aberration given the current partisan divides there?

Conclusion

The habilitation thesis entitled Environmental Disasters and Political Activism by Miriam Matejova **fulfils** requirements expected of a habilitation thesis in the field of Political Science.

Date: 9 September 2024

Signature:

