

## Nandini Gunewardena and Mark Schuller (eds.): Capitalizing on Catastrophe: Neoliberal Strategies in Disaster Reconstruction

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William L. Alexander

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Writing on “disaster capitalism” in her book *The Shock Doctrine*, journalist and prominent voice against corporate globalization Naomi Klein (2007) has inspired applied anthropologists and others working with populations devastated and displaced by catastrophic events to document the ways in which people are re-victimized by recovery and rebuilding plans that privilege elite interests. Edited with vision and an exceptional sense of purpose by Nandini Gunewardena and Mark Schuller, the strong scholarship presented in *Capitalizing on Catastrophe: Neoliberal Strategies in Disaster Reconstruction* makes the book essential reading on this topic.

Many of the stories of gross neglect and brash opportunism are nothing short of astounding. Yet taken as a whole, the uniformity of “the neoliberal project” (privatization, trade liberalization, structural adjustment, decreased social spending, etc.) carried out in these disparate settings sets in, potentially dulling our reaction to audacious profiteering in disaster zones. Klein’s observations on how crises (whether in the form of natural disasters, wars, or terrorist activity) provide opportunities for the penetration of corporate capitalism into new areas and the restructuring of societies staggering from such traumas is no shrill conspiracy theory. With the “outsourcing of the War on Terror,” the post-tsunami selling off of untouched beaches as private resorts in Southeast Asia, and

the permanent closing of public facilities in New Orleans after Katrina, it appears to be business as usual.

The editors’ two introductory chapters refine the concepts and practices behind disaster capitalism. Using a political economy and development discourse analysis that is implicit rather than heavy handed or didactic, they frame the key processes by which assistance works against human security. This is followed by a provocative think piece by aid professional Antonio Donini who critiques humanitarianism as a dominant discourse infused with the ideology of empire building. Even as humanitarian aid provides relief and protection during times of crisis the indirect and often unwitting “metafunctions of humanitarian action” (p. 29) weaken states, impose forms of global governance, and create dependency. Having powerfully set the stage with these reflective essays, the book presents its case studies of the disempowering consequences of neoliberal recovery strategies.

Part Two’s “Tourism as Reconstruction” offers examples from Honduras, Sri Lanka, and Belize that make valuable contributions to the growing critique of tourism as a means of generating wealth for poor countries. Promoted as low cost economic development that simply requires upgraded facilities in order to attract global travelers, “eco-tourism”, is often hyped as a panacea that in relying on preservation of natural beauty can achieve the dual ends of economic development and environmental conservation. Social justice advocate and disaster scholar Susan Stonich considers the multiple ways in which reconstruction efforts after Hurricane Mitch in 1998 accelerated neoliberalism in Honduras and harmed people in the most exposed and volatile segments. Prior to Mitch there was already a push underway to open up the agricultural sector to foreign investors which was made

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W. L. Alexander (✉)  
Department of Anthropology,  
University of North Carolina Wilmington,  
Wilmington, NC 28451, USA  
e-mail: alexanderw@uncw.edu

easier in the recovery phase as poor farmers lost their land and everything else in the hurricane. Another “land grab” under the guise of economic revitalization occurred with the expansion of tourism. Ethnic tensions escalated as dark-skinned minorities lost out on the higher-paying, stable jobs in the tourist industry, in a process of economic opportunity structured by racism that is very similar to the one described by Steven Gregory in his excellent ethnography of tourism and development in the Dominican Republic *The Devil Behind the Mirror* (2006).

Also akin to Gregory’s book is the chapter by Gunewardena on Sri Lanka, where long-standing ethnic conflict between the Sinhalese majority and Tamil minority is exacerbated by the structuring of the tourist experience through fencing, policing and control of the “informal economy” in order to promote a visitor-friendly atmosphere and an idyllic island image. In the year before the Indian Ocean tsunami struck, the government was busy reconstructing the world’s view of war-torn and impoverished Sri Lanka as a modern-day *Serendib*, the Garden of Eden-like place name bestowed by early Arab mariners. Two years after the tsunami, 350,000 people were still dependent on food aid and more than 50,000 were still living in temporary housing, while in the interim disaster funds were being used to lure big business. At the center of the controversy was the buffer zone established in quick response fashion by the government to protect coastal areas. Prohibiting construction of homes and businesses within 100 m of the average sea level, the rule was much-lauded as a forward-looking, environmentally conscientious action. In Gunewardena’s estimation it was a “face saving measure for the state” (p. 77) that served to restore its credibility to its citizens and garner substantial support from international donors. The burden of this sacrifice was carried by the low-income fishing communities whose residents had lived for generations as squatters without legal title along the coastline. Once the land was cleared using police force to prevent them from rebuilding, the buffer zone’s real purpose was to facilitate the construction of new foreign-owned resort complexes. In this shameful privileging of “leisure over livelihood” Gunewardena wryly observes that the fence was yet another destructive wave that hit the island with a force the coastal poor could not withstand.

Belize is a country that has staked its future on the continued growth of ecotourism, an over reliance that in the wake of Hurricane Iris in 2001 has produced uneven results locally. Making use of a “livelihood security index” measuring household access to basic needs, Sara Alexander shows the differential impact in a village dependent upon tourist earnings. While those families that were already secure benefited from government assistance and some felt that “Iris was good for the village,” those who started from a position of disadvantage experienced increased poverty

and insecurity. For example, many small-scale businesses and families were driven out of the area after access to market transportation networks was lost when a public road was turned over to a private resort. Here it is important to recognize that although post-disaster neoliberalism produces winners as well as losers, over-saturation of tourist development and lack of livelihood diversification means greater vulnerability to future weather-related events. In all of the cases presented, redevelopment of tourist spots creates heightened long-term risk in exchange for short-term profits.

Most of the optimistic talk about New Orleans’ revitalization focused on the return of tourists and convention-goers, with far less attention paid to rebuilding a place to live and work. In the days following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, many Americans’ eyes were opened to the underclass vulnerability, double-standards of citizenship, and government negligence that the storm exposed. The three chapters in the book’s centerpiece section “Exposing Katrina” reveal the internal colonialism in New Orleans that long preceded the hurricane and that intensified during the recovery. Adolph Reed Jr.’s contribution is a compelling editorial reprinted from *The Nation* in which he describes how neoliberalism in New Orleans (“the culmination of twenty years of disparagement of any idea of public responsibility” p. 147), by diminishing government’s function to “enhancing plunder by corporation” (p. 147), both created the devastation and is fed by the reconstruction. Gentrification around the Superdome was already in progress and, as with the Sri Lankan refugees above, the clean-up was an excuse to get the poor out of the way. “(A)lready swept aside in a model of urbanization that... is predicated on their removal” (p. 148), Reid eloquently writes, the poor previously existed as only “low-wage props supporting the tourism industry’s mythos of New Orleans as the city of constant carnival” (p. 148)—again, the Sri Lankan example is recalled in this mythical image—and now “enter the public discussion only as a problem to be rectified... never as subjects of political action with their own voices and needs” (p. 148). Intersections of race and class in the unequal patterns of displacement are also dealt with in Wahneema Lubiano’s scathing account of the ways in which a private company contracted by FEMA promulgated racialized representations of survivors in the evacuation process.

Employment is a vital concern after a disaster and Gregory Button and Anthony Oliver-Smith provide eye-opening details of how the uprooting of massive numbers and the granting of no-bid contracts to non-local corporations distorted the labor market, obstructed recovery, and fomented ethnic antagonism. Seventy percent of the more than ten billion dollars in contracts were non-competitive, including a billion dollar contract given by FEMA to a Haliburton subsidiary. Along with this, a number of federal emergency measures were taken that produced an environ-

ment in which workers were exploited and contractors made a killing: Federal contractors were not required to pay even the average minimum wage when President Bush lifted the Davis-Bacon Act; to help jobless survivors who had lost documents, Homeland Security temporarily eased proof of citizenship requirements; and job safety standards were suspended by OSHA. When undocumented migrants streamed into New Orleans they were met with resentment as much of the local population was effectively excluded from employment. Great reliance on subcontractors and little transparency meant work was inefficient and at times exponentially more expensive than it should have been. Due to decreased worker protection (minimal in the states of Louisiana and Mississippi to begin with) it was not uncommon for subcontractors to skip town leaving wages unpaid. Details such as these, like the authors' discussion of how thousands of units of undamaged public housing were torn down in order to clear the way for luxury housing, make this chapter especially revelatory in a book that is filled with revelations.

Examples from New York and Bhopal in the section "Prolonging Recovery" illustrate how such failed accountability has delayed healing, renewal, and true remediation after two other very different kinds of disasters. Bettina Damiani provides evidence that federal recovery monies, in violation of government regulations, were allocated unevenly in the post-9/11 redevelopment of Manhattan. In short, gentrification was sped up and a "lopsided reconstruction strategy" allowed powerful financial and real estate interests to reap huge benefits at the expense of low-wage industries and the needs of poor and lower-middle-class residents. It has been 25 years since the "Hiroshima of the Chemical Industry" occurred in Bhopal (where an estimated 8,000 perished in the first week and 20,000 have since died), but to the city's afflicted residents (120,000 survivors are debilitated by multi-systemic illnesses related to the gas poisoning) it is a nightmare without end. Dow Chemical, which bought Union Carbide in 2001, refuses to accept liability despite some high profile public shamings in recent years by environmental justice activists. Elizabeth Guillette uncovers the extent of the company's shameless negligence, which included not only inoperative safety systems and poorly trained staff as cost-cutting measures but also the public image-minded provision of land deeds to slum colony dwellers across the street from the factory even while it failed to inform residents that the plant was producing one of the most deadly compounds industrial chemistry has ever conceived.

Chapters in "Dividends of Conflict: Reconstruction As Reform" on Haiti and Guatemala emphasize that while natural disasters and socioeconomic crises in post-conflict states stem from different "trigger events" they share the common ground of political instability, government depen-

dency on international agencies, and global neoliberal institutional responses. In "Haiti is Finished!" Schuller describes how the chaos following Aristide's exile in 2004 provided a lucrative opportunity for foreign investors. Using one of the book's more imaginative discursive frameworks, he explores his informants' perceptions of the violence they experienced as steps along the path toward the "disappearance" of the country, a sly inversion of ideological images of the progress of development. Through privatization, structural adjustment, and the end of workers' rights, Haiti is "finished" according to the development blueprint. Just as Donini examines humanitarian aid as naturalizing the re-structuring of the local and the imposition of external power, Anna Belinda Sandoval Girón in Chapter 13 unpacks the ideological underpinnings of violence prevention programs and anti-gang policies in "transition to democracy" Guatemala, a country healing from the trauma of state terrorism and genocide. Gang violence comes to be seen as a top problem standing in the way of the nation's recovery, with little attention paid to the socioeconomic structures from which it has emerged. Political pressure from the U.S. and support from the World Bank and USAID link control of violence with economic development and, in an interesting twist on stability (codeword for suppression of dissent) as a pre-requisite for foreign investment, the Central American Free Trade Agreement is endorsed as promoting the kind of transparency that will ensure domestic security.

As the duplicitous purposes of "recovery," "security," and "reform" (the last a particularly ideological term suggesting wrongdoing to be rehabilitated through structural adjustment) are exposed throughout these chapters the impossibilities of achieving justice become daunting, but the editors end on an optimistic note. The book's three-page conclusion "Envisioning Alternatives" provides seven "pragmatic proposals" which very briefly outline measures to mobilize "responsive, participatory, and inclusive disaster recovery" (p. 231) in order to guarantee real human security. These recommendations entail localizing power, promoting social inclusion, prioritizing the alleviation of poverty, preventing displacement, using culturally appropriate intervention, demanding corporate responsibility, and establishing a series of best-practice guidelines. While these concise and general suggestions are meant more to generate discussion rather than provide answers, more specific elaboration on how activists and applied scholars might put these ideas into practice would have helped guide readers left cynical and more than a little disturbed by the preceding chapters. This is a minor complaint as the book's strengths lie in the breadth of its case studies and its impressive balance between fine ethnographic detail and consistency of argument in which neither is sacrificed.

Owing to its accessible writing and analytically coherent selection of research, *Capitalizing on Catastrophe* will be of great interest to students, scholars, and general readers concerned about the insidious machinations at work in the global field of disaster capitalism (or as Schuller puts it, “the disaster *after* the disaster,” p. 17) It is both shocking and convincing.

## References

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