

Orleans to global culture and how past residents forged a culture resilient in the face of natural disasters, economical marginality, and political abandonment. Life has rarely been easy in the Big Easy. But, as these new studies demonstrate, New Orleans facilitates our understanding of imperialism, colonial development, and the city that helped forge the modern world.

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The Nature of Disaster in Latin America: Recent Perspectives on Catastrophe and Risk

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The Legacy of Hurricane Mitch: Lessons from Post-Disaster Reconstruction in Honduras. *Marisa Ensor, ed.*, Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2009. 240 pp.

Living under the Shadow: The Cultural Impacts of Volcanic Eruptions. *John Grattan and Robin Torrence, eds.*, Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2010. 320pp.

Capitalizing on Catastrophe: Neoliberal Strategies in Disaster Reconstruction. *Nandini Gunewardena and Mark Schuller, eds. Foreword by Alexander de Waal*, Lanham: Altamira Press, 2008. 288pp.

The social scientific literature on natural disasters in Latin America has been abun-

dant, yet uninspiring, in recent decades. When writing a book on an 18th-century earthquake in Peru, I tried to read up on this field (or fields) but found myself returning to “my story” or to other literatures. New and old work on the baroque or on female religiosity in the early modern period proved more germane and more interesting than studies of contemporary disasters in the Americas. I rationalized that this was perhaps another case of an historian eschewing theory. I realize now that while this might have been part of the explanation, equally if not more important was my impression that the literature was narrow, at times long-winded, and not particularly relevant in theoretical or practical terms. Much seemed to classify and categorize with little justification or benefit. Some of it even seemed opportunistic—disasters sparked an increase in funding so books and articles had to be written.¹

One debate that has run its course, I hope, concerns whether or not natural disasters are natural. The best scholars make the point immediately that natural phenomena prompt or spark earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, etc. but the impact of these events vary greatly according to the built environment and the reaction by state and society. Moreover, different societies or social groups understood these events in vastly diverse ways. I have not encountered an academic writer who fails to recognize that social conditions affect the event itself and that their impacts are socially constructed. Therefore, I would hope that we don’t need tortured phrases such as “[D]isasters with proximate causes that are natural events,” as suggested by Alexander de Wall in his otherwise lucid Foreword in *Capitalizing on Catastrophe* (ix). In fairness, De Wall himself

considered the phrase “awkward” and the volume he forwarded, *Capitalizing on Catastrophe*, examines human-induced catastrophes such as 9-11 and Union Carbide in Bhopal, India.

The concept of vulnerability, well developed by Anthony Oliver-Smith in an essay discussed here, allows us to understand how physically similar catastrophes can have radically different effects. For example, the concept helps explain why the death-rate and general suffering was so much higher in the January 10, 2010 Haitian earthquake than that of Chile on February 27, 2010, even though the first was believed to be a 7.0 on the Moment Magnitude Scale and the second an 8.0. Moreover, catastrophes can illuminate how entwined the natural and the social, particularly the political, are. Didier Fassin and Paula Vasquez demonstrate in the case of the calamitous flooding in Venezuela in 1999, *La Tragedia* the Venezuelan state did not impose a state of exception but built on, and to an extent orchestrated, popular demands for such an act. The separation between nature and society, never tightly drawn in the first place, tumbled down like thousands of other rickety structures.²

I begin this review on a slightly cranky note because the books examined here indicate that the quality of the studies on natural disasters in the Americas has improved greatly. These are interdisciplinary studies that don't merely categorize or brand new terms—one default mode of the social sciences that in my mind characterized some of the less interesting early work chastised above—but instead link disasters past and present with broader debates about politics and society. The best essays advance the literature while at the same time helping us understand the

horrific string of earthquakes, hurricanes, and other disasters that have beset the Americas.

Living under the Shadow: The Cultural Impacts of Volcanic Eruptions reveals how much archaeologists have to contribute to contemporary debates about disaster and society. Yet reading archaeology is challenging for this historian. Not only do they use a scientific language that many anthropologists and most historians barely speak—a gap that has only broadened in the last decade or two—but their timeframes that move over the millennium challenge even the most open-minded social scientist. Fortunately, the editors, John Grattan and Robin Torrence, make their case very well in the introduction, titled “Beyond Gloom and Doom: The Long-Term Consequences of Volcanic Disasters.” They show that archaeologists have moved beyond the lurid study of catastrophic events and instead increasingly highlight different societies' resilience to volcanoes over time. These studies confirm that volcanoes are social constructs, rather than merely physical phenomena, and illustrate convincingly how the study of volcanoes over the millennium can indicate much about the nature and impact of eruptions today. Grattan and Torrence seem to have applied their considerable editing skills—the introduction was a joy to read—to the book itself. Even when I did not grasp some of the technical material (I even had difficulty with the dating systems, a reflection of my ignorance), I understood different essays' broader arguments.

Archaeologists will no doubt think that I am showing my presentist tendencies (the present being, for our two fields, the last five hundred years or so), but I particularly liked Karen Holmberg's work

on the Barú volcano in Panama. She conducted serious bibliographical work to find out when the volcano has erupted over the last five hundred years or so, or since written records have existed. In addition to her stratiographic work in three areas, she examined the ethnographic presence of the volcano today. Many researchers would merely find amusing the ways businesses use the mountain in their ads and logos, but she pays close attention to how local people understand the volcano. Barú has a major presence in the landscape and mentalities of western Panama, a topic that Holmberg examines with the same dexterity and determination as she applies to the tephra left by multiple volcanoes. Her essay exemplifies what I see as a general tendency in the 13 essays in this book: a committed effort by archaeologists to enter into dialogue with other scholars and to link their analysis of the past with the present.

The essays in *The Legacy of Hurricane Mitch: Lessons from Post-Disaster Reconstruction in Honduras* provide a number of explanations for what everyone agrees has been a dreadful reaction to the October 1998 hurricane. As the introduction notes, the optimistic belief in the hurricane's aftermath that the storm offered an opportunity to rebuild Honduras in a more just fashion crashed to the ground. Explanations for this turn of events include apathy toward Central America in the "international community," the never-ending inequity toward poor peasants (the bulk of the victims), and development plans that focus more on boosting exports or GNP rather than creating sustainable growth. The hurricane struck near the peak of neoliberalism and the responses contained a strong pro-market content.

One depressing problem with the volume's essays is the lack of surprise. This is a reflection of our jaded times, not the ability of the editor and contributors. The powers that be (or were) in Tegucigalpa and Washington, DC were not interested in designing a new, more just Honduras, while others forgot about Honduras rather quickly. Nonetheless, the authors illuminate how local people reacted to the hurricanes and the many obstacles to reconstruction and development. In his introductory essay, "Understanding Hurricane Mitch," Oliver-Smith presents his ideas about vulnerability and the need for a political ecology approach. His publications over the years have been an important exception to the lackluster work on Latin American disasters. He sets up the book well and provides an important summary of his views.

Hurricane Mitch caught anthropologist William Loker in the tiny hamlet of Palo de Agua. He publishes his detailed field notes that not only present a lively portrait of the panicky gringo versus the seasoned campesinos, but also capture how local people responded to the disaster and its aftermath. Momentous events can provide a vivid snapshot of society and highlight its multiple tensions, a key reason why historians have turned to calamities. Loker's lively account provides a nice glimpse of Honduran peasant society and his notes portray the resilience of local people and multiple forms of solidarity.

The other essays examine the environmental causes of Hurricane Mitch and its aftermath and study it in terms of vulnerability, political change and stasis, gender, and discourse on violence and gangs. A final essay brings together the findings of the book, their significance for contemporary

Honduras and disaster studies. These are competent studies that confirm, as mentioned, the inequities and lost opportunities of the decade since Mitch. Central Americanists and those trying to understand emergency and rebuilding efforts in countries with poor infrastructure, extensive poverty, and vast socio-economic gaps will learn from these essays.

Capitalizing on Catastrophe: Neoliberal Strategies in Disaster Reconstruction builds on of Naomi Klein's influential *The Shock Doctrine*, which she first developed in a 2005 article in *The Nation*. The essays examine how the private sector has increasingly taken over disaster relief, a lucrative opportunity that has had distressing consequences for victims and civil society in general. After three introductory chapters, essays examine disasters in recent decades across the globe and how states have ceded the relief and rebuilding efforts to private groups. It's a disturbing, even grotesque tale of neoliberalism gone amok, with insider agreements, outright corruption, and, in general, terrible results. The recent earthquakes in Haiti, where heavy-handed efforts by the U.S. military impeded humanitarian work, and in Chile, where the new president, Sebastián Piñera wants to use the earthquake aftermath as a springboard for his conservative agenda, give the book a particular relevance.

The introductory essays do their job well. In his brief foreword, De Waal contextualizes the studies on "calamity capitalism" in terms of recent rethinking of disasters and humanitarianism. Nandini Gunewardena raises interesting points of inquiry for anthropologists in a struggle that she deems between security (or well being) and profits. Mark Schuller also

helps categorize and understand disaster capitalism, deftly reviewing the literature and presenting the different essays. Antonio Donini develops the ties between disaster relief and humanitarianism. I initially found his deconstruction of humanitarianism a bit precious, but ultimately learned from his analysis of the ideological bases of western views of disasters and aid.

The essays work together well and make a compelling case that disaster relief has been shanghaied by the private sector to the detriment of the well-being of victims and the security of just about everyone. The first section examines how tourism has been presented as a panacea to devastated regions in the third world. This is a well-known story, full of terrible ironies of local people not being allowed on their former land and glossy pamphlets touting "traditional" culture and untouched scenery. Essays on Honduras, Sri Lanka, and Belize show that redevelopment focused on tourism not only excluded local people from decision-making and profit-sharing, but did not even provide the boost to the national economy that supporters suggested. The Sri Lanka case, where the government banned building within 100 meters of the average tide line after the 2004 Tsunami, is particularly poignant. While fishing villages have struggled with this imposition, a high-end tourist enclave, "The Fortress," was exempted. Nandini Gunewardena examines the orientalist nature of the state-funded tourism campaign, "Serendipity," behind the hotel and other tourist developments, showing how local people have been taken out of the picture.

The section on Katrina includes two short essays, "Race, Class, and the Politics

of Death” by Wahneema Lubiano and “Class Inequality, Liberal Bad Faith, and Neoliberalism” by Adolph Reed Jr. Both are poignant critiques that read well 5 years after the horrors of the hurricane and its aftermath. I was struck by how little indignation remains in the broader public, how Katrina has become “last decade’s” disaster. I don’t mean that indignation and even rage do not circulate today in Louisiana and Mississippi but just how short the shelf life of the anger regarding the Bush administration’s mismanagement proved. Gregory Button and Anthony Oliver-Smith present a detailed study of labor markets in the Gulf Coast. In a strong piece of research-reporting, they conclude that the poor and minorities are poorer and more vulnerable than before the hurricane struck.

The volume’s next section examines two ghastly nonnatural disasters: 9–11 and the Union Carbide catastrophe in Bhopal, India. They are strong, biting essays that show the horrific cost of the state’s ceding of its prerogatives (security, planning, emergency aid, etc.) to the private sector. The final essays look at how the aftermath of conflicts such as those of Haiti in the 1990s and the long civil war in Guatemala parallel the periods following disasters. In Haiti and Guatemala, optimism about creating a new, more just society were tempered by the structural limitations to change as well as internal divisions. In Haiti, the U.S.-backed departure of Aristide enfeebled social movements while, in Guatemala, the violence of war did not go away with the end of the war. Anna Belinda Sandoval Girón examines how conservatives have created a discourse about gang warfare and crime, both rampant in Guatemala, that blames the victims.

Capitalizing on Catastrophe ends with a four-page note by Gunewardena and Schuller on “Envisioning Alternatives.” Their seven recommendations could be a guide to bucking the new world order: focus on the local and social inclusion, alleviate poverty and avoid displacement, mandate adequate trauma care and corporate responsibility, and develop clear policies for disaster reaction. They are thoughtful, and, of course, challenging goals and appropriately conclude the book. All of the authors use their ethnographic and research skills to present theoretically sophisticated studies that rethink disasters and their aftermath. The essays enter into dialogue quite well with one another.

I began the essay noting my earlier aversion to most anthropological and social scientific work on disasters in Latin America. These three edited volumes have changed my mind. They are theoretically sophisticated, interdisciplinary, and highly relevant for understanding nature and power. The time seems ripe for more comparative work that crosses disciplinary, chronological, and political borders. These books have made important inroads.

Notes

¹The serious and valuable books on Mexican earthquakes and other calamities coordinated by Virginia García Acosta are notable exceptions. For example, see her *Los sismos en la historia de México*, (Mexico City: UNAM, CIESAS, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2002).

²Didier Fassin and Paula Vasquez, “Humanitarian exception as the rule: The political theology of the 1999 *Tragedia* in Venezuela,” *American Ethnologist*, 32, 3 (2005): 389–405.