



Critical Disaster Studies

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCING CRITICAL DISASTER STUDIES

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Scholars have come to accept the once controversial maxim that there is no such thing as a natural disaster. The causes and consequences of disaster are not defined by an autonomous natural order, nor are they inevitable. Rather, they are bound up in human history, shaped by human action and inaction.¹ The recognition of this truth does not close the book on the study of disaster, of course. It does, however, demand new books that take it as their premise, not their argument. This is such a book.

So here is a new idea: there is no such thing as a disaster.

There are floods and earthquakes, wars and famines, engineering failures and economic collapses, but to describe any of these things as a disaster represents an act of interpretation. The first principle of critical disaster studies is the insistence that “disaster” itself is an analytical conceit.

It is a conceit that suits our age. In the context of the climate crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and a seemingly endless barrage of spectacular human failures and devastating human suffering, disasters increasingly captivate observers. They offer lenses that can bring contemporary life into clearer focus.²

This book reflects the efforts of a group of scholars to consider a new generation of research on disasters and to chart a

course for future study. We find common cause under the banner of “critical disaster studies,” even as our individual research agendas span at least seven disciplines and four continents. The “critical” part of critical disaster studies signals a critique of dominant intellectual traditions. The questions we ask, and the kinds of answers we seek, distinguish our research from the applied work in the field of disaster risk reduction and much of traditional disaster studies in general. Existing research often assumes the category of disaster as an objective given and aspires to a technical analysis of achievements and failures—while treating political and historical context as, at best, just another variable in the matrix.³ Our approach is to do the opposite. We do not take disasters, as a thing in themselves, for

granted. We find context essential. Therefore, although we often seek to understand one particular event, we do so by widening the frame to perceive the social surround.

This introductory chapter sets out three core principles of critical disaster studies, a foundation on which we hope future scholars will build: disasters are interpretive fictions, disasters are political, and disasters take place over time.

Disasters are interpretive fictions. As both events and ideas, disasters are socially constructed. Therefore, so are concepts that are closely associated with them, such as vulnerability, risk, and resilience.⁴ These all demand interrogation because, as Pranathi Diwakar shows in Chapter 6, the question of who and what are imagined as vulnerable, at risk, or resilient has

considerable political and material significance.

One of our central contributions is to demonstrate how much can be learned by bringing new tools of analysis to bear on events that have been studied mostly by people who think of themselves primarily as analysts of disaster. To be sure, we engage with the field of disaster studies, such as it is, gratefully calling on a century's worth of scholarship. Several chapters in this book—especially those by Scott Gabriel Knowles and Zachary Loeb ([Chapter 1](#)), Ryan Hagen (Chapter 2), and Kenneth Hewitt (Afterword)—describe some of the courses that tradition has taken. But we purposely have not situated ourselves in its mainstream or any of its various tributaries. The field has a set of venerable concerns, such as how to categorize

different types of disaster, how humans behave under stress, and how communities rebuild from destruction.⁵ Nonetheless, the scholars whose work comprises this book often came to the study of disasters as a way of trying to answer different, broader questions about power and inequality, community and trauma, nature and society, order and instability, and the cultural beliefs that shape people's uneven experiences of misfortune.

The breadth of the unified bibliography at the back of this volume demonstrates the disciplinary diversity that critical disaster studies brings together. As historians, we are attentive to how disasters exist in time; as geographers, we are attentive to how disasters exist in space; as anthropologists, we are attentive to how the meanings of disasters are constructed; and as

political scientists, we are attentive to how those meanings are constructed within political systems and contexts. Taken together, this collection offers a vision of critical disaster studies less as a disciplinary destination than as an interdisciplinary intersection. Disasters, so-called, should not be set aside for study only by a single subfield. Rather, they present productive occasions for scholars across the humanities and social sciences to think together.

Disasters are political. As social constructs, disaster, vulnerability, risk, and resilience shape and are shaped by contests over power.

Managers and technocrats often herald the goals of disaster response and recovery as objective, quantifiable, or self-evident.

In reality, the goals are subjective and usually contested. Take the basic concept of “restoring order”; it seems common sense until one recognizes that the existing order served some people much better than it served others, and its restoration therefore represents a power play par excellence. Critical disaster studies attends to the ways powerful people often use claims of technocratic expertise about vulnerability, risk, and resilience to maintain their power. So-called experts have politics and ideologies, just like everyone else. We can only understand their actions if we apprehend their motivations.⁶

We are especially wary of the easy technocratic solutionism that seeks engineering solutions to political questions.⁷ Many of the chapters in this volume examine the governance of

disaster and risk as a set of both practices and discourses. They demonstrate that policies that promise security for some often cause suffering for others. They demonstrate, too, how success is ideologically defined. Consider “resilience.” This is a thoroughly political concept: it asserts the goals of a community’s response to a disaster—conservative goals, to be sure, as “resilient” means a durable status quo—and also creates the conditions in which the community attempts to reach those goals. Technocratic plans promulgated in the name of “resilience” often reproduce existing inequalities, usually by design, and many such plans exacerbate them. Critical disaster scholars do not necessarily reject the goal of resilience, but we do caution against naive definitions of what the concept

entails.⁸

At the same time, critical disaster studies takes seriously the actions and ideas of those usually not considered experts. Those closest to the trouble often have the sharpest perceptions of what went wrong and what can make it better. We privilege these lived, on-the-ground, and local experiences of disasters and the lay epistemologies produced by them.⁹ Their visions of recovery are rarely narrow or technical. If resilience is to mean anything, it must be resistance; it is a political outcome, not a technocratic or biological one.¹⁰

Our scholarship is applied, but in a different way from the technocratic perspective that suffuses disaster studies.¹¹ Critical disaster studies does not aspire to bullet-pointed

knowledge of best practices. Often the best approach we can take as scholars of disaster is to understand the politics and experiences of people who are most at risk and to join their efforts to build more just, equal, and safe communities.

In declaring that not just “natural disaster” but disaster itself is an analytical construct, we do not claim that how disaster is constructed or defined does not matter. On the contrary. The consequences of “disaster” as a belief are made real in the distribution of sympathy, material resources, and state power.¹² In many polities, a legal disaster declaration can authorize emergency action and facilitate funding. Denying that legal definition effectively inhibits government action or funding. The anticipation of disaster alone can give license for state and nonstate

actions that might otherwise be absent, inform new modes of discourse and governance, and create new logics understood both by governors and the governed. To understand “disaster” as a discursive and political construction with material consequences thus heightens the need to study how the category is constructed and understood, as well as how it is instantiated by law, politics, and society.

But disaster, as a concept, is not just made in policy and politics; it is also made in personal and public imaginations. Critical disaster scholars therefore attend to how disasters are imagined and anticipated by authors and filmmakers, experts and policymakers, organizers and activists, and their various audiences.¹³ Their ideas often conflict, and the disasters they

anticipate often do not look like the ones that ultimately arrive. It is in their incompleteness, the disconnections and interstices among them, that the most powerful new ideas can emerge.

We write as the climate crisis is changing the way many people think about nature altogether. The Anthropocene idea, in particular—the claim that the relationship between humans and the natural world has fundamentally changed because humans now exert such power over the earth that it is measurable on geological scales—has unsettled a long-standing, if always fraught, philosophical division between the natural and the man-made. The Anthropocene idea also has prompted debates over the length and origins of our historical moment and the crises that seem to define it. While there is no consensus about

the ultimate utility of the Anthropocene concept, we contribute to the broader discussion by working to show how terms like “nature” can serve technopolitical ends.¹⁴ Because claims that certain kinds of inequality are “natural” often mask human responsibility for social arrangements, scholars must be skeptical of claims premised on an uncritical idea of nature. Moreover, as arguments over the length, and therefore the causes, of the Anthropocene crisis suggest, and as Dara Z. Strolovitch illustrates in a different context in Chapter 3, imagining “crisis” as acute or chronic is both analytically and politically meaningful.¹⁵

Disasters take place over time. We reject the notion that disasters are isolated events. Making sense of political and ideological contests demands seeing people in context.

The idea of disaster carries with it a theory of time and space that is often misleading. People commonly imagine disasters to be unexpected and sudden. Thus, seeing a problem as a disaster can make structural conditions appear contingent, widespread conditions appear local, and chronic conditions appear acute. In short, the disaster idea often obscures enduring social circumstances. Critical disaster studies aspires to peel away that veneer.¹⁶

Moreover, as historical processes, disasters not only reflect the social order; they can help to produce it. Scholars sometimes have been drawn to the study of disasters because they seem to offer a “window” onto—or to take one prominent example, an opportunity for an “autopsy” of—the fundamental

structures of social life.¹⁷ That can be a productive approach. Yet critical disaster studies also recognizes that “labeling something as a crisis,” as Dara Z. Strolovitch writes, “is often itself part of a political process that makes it one by transforming it from an ongoing, taken-for-granted, and naturalized condition into an intervention-worthy policy problem.” Disasters do not just reveal the world; as events and as ideas, they reorder it.

Ultimately, then, the goal of critical disaster studies is less to understand disasters per se than to understand the processes that create them as ideas, cause them as material facts, and define them as human experiences.

This book is organized into three sections. In the first, “Knowing Disaster,” the chapters consider epistemology and

definition. Scott Gabriel Knowles and Zachary Loeb follow an oil rig that came loose from its moorings during Hurricane Harvey in 2017 in order to trace how disaster scholarship can be a method to transverse scales of time and space, from immediate and contingent events to the Anthropocene. Ryan Hagen argues that disaster “is primarily a problem of knowledge”; as technologies of knowledge have changed, disasters, too, have changed from being understood and experienced as “acts of God” to “acts of man” to, finally, “acts of systems.” Dara Z. Strolovitch, in the context of what became known as the American “mortgage crisis,” considers how “disaster” (or “crisis”) is defined and the political stakes of that definition.

Chapters in the book’s second section, “Governing

Disaster,” explore how vulnerability, resilience, and risk are created—and therefore how disaster becomes a mode of governance. Claire Antone Payton shows how corruption physically cemented danger into the built environment of Port-au-Prince and so demonstrates how democratic governance is crucial to reducing vulnerability. Aaron Clark-Ginsberg’s study of Sierra Leone shows the inadequacies of democracy’s neoliberal substitute, community-based disaster risk management. Although intended to give local communities power over disaster preparedness, he argues, community-based disaster risk management in fact distracts from larger social and political root causes of vulnerability and piles more burdens onto already disadvantaged people. Likewise, Pranathi Diwakar shows how Indian

elites wield the language of vulnerability and risk against slum dwellers in Chennai. Which risks are legible to the state in a disaster framework is a political question. Finally, Rebecca Elliott examines the history of the US National Flood Insurance Program to show how notions of market and governmental “success” and “failure” are contested, political, and contingent.

The book’s third section, “Imagining Disaster,” shows how existing studies of disaster often insidiously narrow our view. More capacious understandings are more useful, especially because whether they happen or not, anticipated or imagined future disasters become social facts in the present. Susan Scott Parrish posits the novel as a genre uniquely capable of communicating the inherently social and complex risks of disaster.

Focusing on London’s bubonic plague of 1665 and Hurricane Katrina in Mississippi in 2005, she argues that unlike the official and scientific assessments they complement, novels help readers to understand how disaster feels. Kerry Smith shows how the forecasted Tōkai earthquake became Japan’s most anticipated disaster, even as other seismic disasters kept striking other parts of the country, and how its anticipation and predictability became articles of faith in Japanese culture and politics. Then, Chika Watanabe tells the story of a Japanese disaster education program that traveled to Chile. She makes the case for how incomplete translation—of programs, experiences, languages, and national imaginaries—can be generative and epistemologically productive. Taken together, these chapters

demonstrate that while technocratic accounts of disaster and recovery perform a kind of certainty, that performance is premised on—and can even encourage—a blindness to the cultures, emotions, languages, and stories that give disasters their meaning. To be useful, scholarship on disaster must foreground the fact of its ideological construction.

Finally, in the book's Afterword, Kenneth Hewitt reflects critically on the scope of disaster studies itself, especially disaster risk reduction. He makes explicit the often unspoken assumptions of a field that has tended to exclude from its purview the deadliest forms of human catastrophe: famine, accident, and war. The climate crisis and other new forms of calamity ought not to distract us from the ways that destructive violence

is, and has long been, a fact of modern life. Our reluctance to see famines and wars as disasters highlights, again, the ideology inherent in the definition of disaster.

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This book was complete, we thought, when a novel coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, began its spread around the world. The disease the virus causes, called COVID-19, has already killed millions of people. As we write these paragraphs, thousands more continue to die every day, and measures meant to slow the spread of the virus are severely disruptive. Economies are shuttered, as are borders. Much of the world's population has been ordered to stay at home.

We cannot know the future in which this book will be read,

but we do know that the insights of critical disaster studies can help to make sense of a world in crisis. The problems presented by the pandemic cross the range of human knowledge—they are at once political, economic, cultural, environmental, medical, and more—and they demand the kind of interdisciplinary examination that this book models. The chapters that follow were mostly finished before COVID-19 appeared, but we believe the questions they raise are productive ones to ask about it nonetheless. We hope that future students and scholars put this book to good use.

Many chapters in this book demonstrate, for example, that the decision to declare a problem a “disaster” or a “crisis” is an act with material and ideological consequences. Thus, students

of the pandemic should not take for granted that the COVID-19 pandemic was a disaster, but rather ask what made it so. For whom was it a disaster? What is at stake in calling it that? Critical scholars should scrutinize the contestable and contested lines between virus and disease, disease and pandemic, pandemic and disaster. They ought to ask how globalization, capitalism, nationalism, and other social and political processes shaped the various responses to and experiences of COVID-19. And they should examine how race, class, gender, and geography shaped the pandemic and its effects.¹⁸ How did the pandemic and the responses to it variously replicate, aggravate, or rupture existing inequalities?

Questions about governance ought to remain a particular

concern to students of the pandemic, as they are to the authors of this book. What role did borders play, both rhetorically and practically, as nations banned migration, immigration, and international travel?¹⁹ Scholars should interrogate the mirrored gestures of incompetence and technocracy and consider how collective actions—from social distancing to rallies demanding quick “reopening”—changed the course and politics of the pandemic. How did people use the occasion of COVID-19 to contest and reimagine the relationships and mutual obligations of citizens and states; workers and employers; spouses, parents, and children; and neighbors to each other?

Students and scholars should ask, too, how people knew and imagined this global pandemic in which much was

experienced in common but alone. Ideas and information about COVID-19 ranged across different languages and national experiences, so its students will need to consider the implications of necessarily incomplete translations. Scholars should examine how state-sponsored scientific priorities and local cultural beliefs informed medical knowledge of the disease. And they ought to ask what fiction can teach about the experiences of sickness, unemployment, isolation, fear, hope, and grief that other texts cannot.

Finally, we hope that this book will serve as a reminder that by defining certain experiences as exceptional and others as normal, conventional thinking about disaster has too often set limits on our social imaginations. At the heart of critical

disaster studies are moral questions: Whose deaths ought to inspire outrage, and whose resignation? What kinds of suffering are a legitimate cost of the status quo, and what kinds of suffering ought to suggest that the status quo itself is illegitimate?²⁰ The pandemic only makes these enduring questions more urgent, as COVID-19 joins the climate crisis and other forms of precarity and collapse—manifest in the chasm between the rich and the poor, the resurgence of authoritarianism, and seemingly endless war—in defining the rough terrain of modern life. Understanding disaster is necessary for understanding the world. A critical disaster scholarship has never been more, well, critical.