

Linking Broad Scale Political Economic Contexts to Fine-scale Economic Consequences in Disaster Research

By: Eric C. Jones and [Arthur D. Murphy](#)

Jones, E. C., Murphy, A. D. (2009). Linking Broad Scale Political Economic Contexts to Fine-scale Economic Consequences in Disaster Research. E. C. Jones & A. D. Murphy (Eds.), *The Political Economy of Hazards and Disasters* (pp. 3-10). Lanham: AltaMira Press.

Pages 3-10, “Linking Broad Scale Political Economic Contexts to Fine-scale Economic Consequences in Disaster Research,” by Eric C. Jones and Arthur D. Murphy, *The Political Economy of Hazards and Disasters*, edited by Eric C. Jones and Arthur D. Murphy, 2009, reproduced by permission of Rowman & Littlefield
<https://rowman.com/ISBN/9780759113091/The-Political-Economy-of-Hazards-and-Disasters>

All rights reserved. Please contact the publisher for permission to copy, distribute or reprint.

*****© Society for Economic Anthropology. Reprinted with permission. This version of the document is not the version of record. Figures and/or pictures may be missing from this format of the document. *****

Abstract:

Now that it is a confirmed generalization that vulnerability to disaster impact is mediated by larger social processes, we find it compelling to link the political economy of disaster with the daily lives of individuals, households, and communities who have experienced extreme events. Because of the ubiquity of hazards and a per capita increase in disasters in some regions of the world (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies 2003), we are called to systematically study how societies incorporate extreme events, whether chronic or one-time/short-lived, into their social, political, and ideological structure. As ethnographers, we are interested in the daily lives of people who are impacted by disasters. As students of economic dynamics, we are specifically interested in how strategies for capital accumulation construct and distribute vulnerability to hazards and cause human disasters.

Keywords: disaster | hazard vulnerability | political economy

Article:

Now that it is a confirmed generalization that vulnerability to disaster impact is mediated by larger social processes, we find it compelling to link the political economy of disaster with the daily lives of individuals, households, and communities who have experienced extreme events. Because of the ubiquity of hazards and a per capita increase in disasters in some regions of the world (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies 2003), we are called to systematically study how societies incorporate extreme events, whether chronic or one-

time/short-lived, into their social, political, and ideological structure. As ethnographers, we are interested in the daily lives of people who are impacted by disasters. As students of economic dynamics, we are specifically interested in how strategies for capital accumulation construct and distribute vulnerability to hazards and cause human disasters.

Our general interest is in how societies distribute vulnerability, and specifically how societies distribute economic vulnerability. This volume builds upon efforts within and without anthropology to address cultural aspects of disaster response. Torry's (1978, 1979:517) anthropological reviews—paralleling similar reviews in geography and sociology at the time—gave examples of the many ways in which cultural groups vary in their responses to disasters, presaging current research on resilience with his assertion that there has always been a “. . . deep and abiding anthropological interest in social system performance under chronic and acute stress.” Citing several authors from the mid-1970s, Torry (1979) also noted how economic and political changes at national and international levels were increasing the vulnerability of people in less developed countries.

Researchers have documented differential vulnerability to extreme events and many of the mechanisms that construct this phenomenon. Many researchers today, disillusioned with the lack of progress by national governments around the world in disaster mitigation, want to find ways that individuals, communities, and larger political jurisdictions—below the state level—can lessen the impact of disasters or at least recover more quickly and effectively. Hoffman (1999) theorized that—in addition to the quality of an extreme event and the researcher's time frame of interest—variation in populations' responses to disasters partially depended upon long-held beliefs and behaviors, which provide unique capacities but also specific difficulties (see also Bankoff 2003). Dyer and McGoodwin (1999) referred to this variation in group recovery efforts as “cultures of response.” Oliver-Smith (2002) added that, in addition to long-term cultural adaptations, political decision-making helps construct actual vulnerability to hazards. Wisner et al. (2004) suggest that vulnerability depends more upon political and economic factors than upon cultural and social ones—although the authors do consider local presence or lack of various characteristics at the local level as contributing to resilience.

Suitable for our purposes of political economic analysis, Wisner et al. (2004) provide a model and a detailed suite of variables that can help researchers define a range of possible responses for a given population. What should be added to the model is to more fully account for ideology in the everyday economic life of people. Rather than the reduction of ideology to the justification of a social order, ideology to us is very material in its consequences. It is the way that we organize our economic behavior, such as through rituals that celebrate productive activities, or through altruism, competition, and the reciprocity of everyday life (cf. Godelier 1999).

Taking cultural response to disaster as a point of departure, our concern in this volume is to present hazard-related and disaster-related linkages between fine-scale and broad-scale economic behavior, specifically: 1) how vulnerability is economically constructed; 2) how primary producers adapt their production regimes; 3) how traders and merchants adapt their practices; and 4) how the state's political economic objectives play out in recovery efforts. Thus, while the chapters in this volume cover many different economic aspects of disaster, the sections of this book examine class formation, production, distribution, and government intervention. Our

objective with this introduction is to provide some basic definitions for political economy and disaster, outline the foci of the volume, and highlight the 13 authors' main contributions.

Linking Elite Strategies to Daily Life

Political economy is: *strategies of the governing elite for the maintenance of power by engaging commoner populations through coherent suites of production/consumption, political focus, and ideological responsibility* (Blanton et al. 1996). Extending Blanton et al.'s (1996) analysis of Mesoamerican civilization cycles, control over production and consumption might be through a focus on elite goods, or perhaps on public goods, while a political focus can be more internal or external, and ideology may emphasize keeping the cosmos in order or insist on loyalty to kin and countrymen. Elites, in concert with the demands of commoners, fashion these foci and adhere to them until their strategies are no longer sufficiently effective at extracting surplus, organizing decision-making, or providing a framework out of which people find meaning. More specifically for the case of disasters, we want to know how various aspects of the political economy provide constraints and opportunities for individuals, households, and communities as they face both the economic impact of an event and then the politics of post-event assistance and recovery.

In addition to defining political economy, we must define disaster. Oliver-Smith, in chapter two, relies on Wisner et al. (2004) for his definition, while others in this volume generally rely on Oliver-Smith (1996, 2002) for their definitions. Combining the insights of these two authors, and adding the bias of our own interest in extreme events and collective action, we see a disaster as a tragedy experienced by a human group at the hands of an identifiable event, mitigated by local capacity and broader intervention, and measured in terms of economic, spiritual, psychological, biological, political, or social impact. The identifiable event or events may be short-lived, long-lived, or intermittent/chronic. It need not be extraordinary or extreme, but usually is. We do not present thresholds to use in deciding whether something is a disaster or not. Perhaps most useful to us is to ask whether or not there appears to be a need for recovery/adaptation. We understand that recovery may be defined in a number of ways, but we minimally understand it as a need of many people to return to a semblance of normalcy. Most of the chapters in this volume deal with recovery in terms of what kinds of economic needs, initiatives, and trajectories exist following a disaster. In more chronic situations, it is appropriate to think of adaptation rather than recovery. Resilience, even less amenable to definition, might capture the intended sense of both adaptation and recovery.

Contributions

In summary, we are looking at the economy of daily life as impacted by elite-led collective responses to disaster. In the second chapter in part I, Oliver-Smith briefly traces the history of anthropological study of disasters and addresses the political economy of disasters by analyzing two case studies. He uses the Pressure and Release model (Wisner et al. 2004) to examine how political economic behaviors and policies of governing elites are linked with the common person's experience of disaster. To our knowledge, this is the first time the model has actually been applied, rather than just used as a reminder to researchers of the types of variables that should be considered. In some sense, his chapter is about the tension between ideology and action, because ideologically and materially people face conditions that override their ability to

do what they know could reduce vulnerability at the level of root causes. Leaving aside other factors, the important economic variables in the Pressure and Release model are: 1) access to resources; 2) prevalence of economic ideology; 3) level of local investment; 4) degree of local market development; 5) government budget obligations; 6) resource productivity/degradation; 7) dependence of local jobs on extreme events; 8) income levels; and 9) assistance from local social networks or institutions (see model in Oliver-Smith). Of course, it does not make sense to analyze the economic variables without relation to the other social factors, but we list the variables here so that the reader may look out for them in the chapters that follow.

In part II, the chapters consider how economic class—a product of the larger political economy—influences vulnerability within a society. First, class can help determine who is exposed to a disaster (Williams). It can then influence who is most affected out of those exposed (Underhill). Finally, class can structure access to recovery for those who were affected (Brown-Jeffy and Kroll-Smith). Williams' paleodemographic class analysis of who was exposed to and died from the Johnstown flood includes an examination of the kind of labor force that is left to participate in recovery following a disaster. In considering who was most affected by the impacts of disaster relocation, Underhill focuses on the difference between poorer socially dependent Hurricane Katrina victims interacting with the government for financial recovery and more financially stable socially independent disaster victims interacting with the private sector (e.g., their employers and the insurance industry). Finally, Brown-Jeffy and Kroll-Smith show how, in the San Francisco fire of 1906, class determined how the recovery process unfolded, as well as how various types of recovery-related resources were accessed.

Part III covers risk-related strategies of primary agricultural production in hazardous settings, and these authors look at the economics of how hazards become disasters. All three authors consider agriculturalists' responses to hazards and how larger political economic processes are related to local production strategies. We decided to cover only one type of production so the variables and dynamics at play would be limited and covered more thoroughly. Nelson and Finan show how rural producers in Brazil proceed through a predictable set of risk-minimizing strategies as the hazard grows more extreme, eventually reaching a point where the state must intervene if tragedy is to be avoided. Jaime-Riverón and Pool investigate the diversification of stone tool manufacture activities—especially recycling and reuse—that occurs in response to major resources being cut off by volcanic activity in Mexico one to two millennia ago. Whiteford and Tobin explore how adaptation to volcanic eruptions in Ecuador is molded by the cascading impacts of one aspect of life into another in a way that may produce a disaster, depending upon both government interventions and local traditions/capacity.

Part IV investigates the challenges and opportunities faced in the marketing and distribution of goods in disaster settings. More specifically, the authors consider how traders adapt to hazardous conditions and/or take advantage of new markets in disaster-impacted settings. Matejowsky details the patterns of micro-level behaviors of Philippine street vendors whose business activities are frequently disrupted by hazards and disasters, finding adaptations to hazards include increased vigilance against thieves plus more aggressive deal-making to maintain a flow of clientele. Oka, Kusimba, and Gogte look at the political activities of international Indian Ocean traders that, in the context of hazards presented by warfare and climate change, caused cities in various locales to perish or decline in the early modern period. Finally, Brown discusses

how global competition and national marketing strategies interact with risk faced by vanilla farmers in Madagascar.

Part V of this volume more directly addresses how the state intervenes in economic recovery from disasters, including: when governments learn from past disasters (Smart and Smart), the community debate over how to support a major local industry affected by disaster (Trivedi), and what an effective mix of external and internal resources for economic recovery looks like (Dyer).

With some exceptions, particularly in the field of community psychology, very few cross-cultural studies on disasters have been undertaken (see review by Jones and Murphy 2008). Thus, we are pleased that four of the chapters in this volume (Brown-Jeffy and Kroll-Smith; Dyer; Oliver-Smith; Smart and Smart) are cross-national, allowing the authors to use the time-tested method of cross-cultural comparison to illuminate the aspects of hazard and disaster response that depend on long-standing traditions and beliefs within a society and that society's place in a larger regional or world economic system; two other chapters address cultural differences intranationally (Jaime-Riverón and Pool; Underhill).

In terms of the anthropological range of the work presented here, beyond cultural foci that are the norm for this field, two of the chapters are archaeological (Jaime-Riverón and Pool; Oka, Kusimba, and Gogte), one has a linguistic focus (Trivedi), and three others have biological foci (Smart and Smart; Whiteford and Tobin; Williams, which is also ethnohistorical).

The disaster-related events covered in this volume are quite diverse and include: hurricanes/cyclones (Brown-Jeffy and Kroll-Smith; Dyer; Matejowsky; Oliver-Smith; Trivedi; Underhill), floods (Williams), fires (Brown-Jeffy and Kroll-Smith; Smart and Smart), volcanic eruptions (Jaime-Riverón and Pool; Matejowsky; Whiteford and Tobin), drought (Nelson and Finan), warfare (Oka, Kusimba, and Gogte), infectious disease (Smart and Smart), and oil spills (Dyer). The frequency and intensity of extreme events—whether mass violence/warfare, natural hazards, mass migration, or societal crises—and the interrelation of the earth's populations importune us for greater understanding of collective human behavior when pressed to the extreme.

While disaster research has become a relatively mature field of inquiry in the last 30 years, we think greater theoretical organization of both the existing material and of future research questions would be a help. The political economy of hazards and disasters provides one such opportunity to link broader collective processes with the daily life of individuals in their households and communities in order to better understand mechanisms for the creation of vulnerability before, during, and after extreme events. Such a perspective builds upon Klein's (2007) *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, and Gunewardena and Schuller's (2007) *Capitalizing on Catastrophe: Neoliberal Strategies in Disaster Reconstruction*, which discuss the ways in which capitalist-promoting industry and governments have helped shape economies of a number of nation-states following extreme events. This current volume builds upon those works by including economic formations of various times and places, not only free-market policies and not only global capitalism. The chapters that follow provide examples of a range of disaster-related political economic activities, such that the practices of disaster

capitalism clearly find their place among the variety of political economic techniques employed by elites when faced with extreme events.

References

Bankoff, Greg

2003 *Cultures of Disaster: Society and Natural Hazard in the Philippines*. New York: Routledge.

Blanton, Richard E., Gary M. Feinman, Stephen A. Kowalewski, and Peter N. Peregrine

1996 A Dual Processual Theory for the Evolution of Mesoamerican Civilization. *Current Anthropology* 31(1):1–14.

Dyer, Christopher L., and J. R. McGoodwin

1999 The Culture of Response: The Political Ecology of Disaster Assistance and its Impact on the Fishing Communities of Florida and Louisiana after Hurricane Andrew. *In The Angry Earth: Disaster in Anthropological Perspective*. Anthony Oliver-Smith and Susanna Hoffman, eds. Pp. 211–231. New York: Routledge.

Godelier, Maurice

1999 *The Enigma of the Gift*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Gunewardena, Nandini, and Mark Schuller, editors

2008 *Capitalizing on Catastrophe: Neoliberal Strategies in Disaster Reconstruction*. Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press.

Hoffman, Susanna M.

1999 After Atlas Shrugs: Cultural Change or Persistence after a Disaster. *In The Angry Earth: Disaster in Anthropological Perspective*. Anthony Oliver-Smith and Susanna M. Hoffman, eds. Pp. 302–325. London: Routledge.

Jones, E. C., and A. D. Murphy.

2008 Review of Cross-Cultural Disaster Studies Concerning Latin American Populations. *In Libro Homenaje a Fernando Pozos*. F. Leal Carretero, ed. Guadalajara: University of Guadalajara Press.

Klein, Naomi

2007 *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, Inc.

Oliver-Smith, Anthony

1996 Anthropological Research on Hazards and Disasters. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 25:303–328.

2002 Theorizing Disasters: Nature, Culture, Power. *In Culture and Catastrophe: The Anthropology of Disaster*. Susanna M. Hoffman and Anthony Oliver-Smith, eds. Pp. 23–47. Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press.

Torry, W. I.

1978 Natural Disasters, Social Structure and Change in Traditional Societies. *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 13(3/4):167–83.

1979 Anthropological Studies in Hazardous Environments: Past Trends and New Horizons. *Current Anthropology* 20(3):517–540.

Wisner, Ben, P. Blaikie, T. Cannon, and I. Davis

2004 *At Risk: Natural Hazards, People's Vulnerability and Disasters*, 2nd edition. London: Routledge.

International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

2003 *World Disasters Report 2003: Focus on Ethics and Aid*. Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press.