

Aftershocks: Earthquakes and Popular Politics in Latin America

Jürgen Buchenau and Lyman L. Johnson, editors

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REVIEW

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Latin America and the Caribbean have experienced hurricanes, floods, droughts, earthquakes and tsunamis since before European conquest. Historians, however, have largely neglected or ignored using these natural phenomena as a window into the relationship between state and society. Up and down the Ring of Fire's eastern border, earthquakes have made the largest impact in terms of human loss and material damage than any other type of catastrophe in the region.

This anthology comes out of a panel on earthquakes at the Latin American Studies Association meeting in San Juan, Puerto Rico, in March 2006. Jürgen Buchenau and Lyman Johnson have written an engaging introduction that outlines a comparative and longitudinal framework for the compiled essays on devastating quakes that have struck Argentina (1944), Chile (1906), Guatemala (1976), Mexico (1985), Nicaragua (1972), Peru (1746), and Venezuela (1812).

Since 1990, social scientists and increasingly historians have examined the state's and society's response to natural disasters. The scholarly treatment of natural disasters generally falls into two categories. Some historians and social scientists focus on the human costs and the politics of relief and rebuilding based on survivor accounts. Other scholars argue that catastrophes strip away the political, social, and cultural layers that obscure the underpinnings of the state and society.

Disasters test a government's legitimacy and the state's capacity and resources. During the colonial period, catastrophes presented a problem for a bureaucracy that functioned through family and social networks. The colonial bureaucracy was not prepared to meet the population's demands for quick and decisive measures that deviated from local customs or imperial policies. Colonial authorities often lacked adequate fiscal resources or a long delay, if they waited for instructions from Spain. By the end of the nineteenth century, republican governments became more responsive to the public's needs. A quick response was required if authorities hoped to maintain or gain the support of popular

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opinion. At the same time, politicians could also find themselves being blamed, the government de-legitimized, and face public demands for regime change because of perceived administrative incompetence or allegations of corruption.

This anthology congeals around three issues: reconstruction plans, religious meaning, and socio-economic fault lines. During the colonial and national period, Latin American elites blocked the relocation of cities because it threatened their economic interests. As survivors crawled out from underneath the rubble, they looked heavenward to make sense of the death and destruction that surrounded them. Finally, catastrophes do not affect all sectors of society equally. Many times, aid goes to the regime's political supporters and a few wealthy elite profit from the relief effort and reconstruction. The inequality of aid distribution and the neglect of the popular masses often results in their mobilization against the government. Authorities were often overly concerned with maintaining order, even though extraordinary disaster communities sometimes formed to mutually aid survivors of any class.

Elites often objected to reconstructing cities on new sites or proposed regulations that impinged on their wealth and power during both the colonial and national periods. Samuel J. Martland notes that planners after the 1906 Valparaíso earthquake called for the expropriation of land to redo the streets in the city's wealthy Almendral district. The elite property owners opposed the general expropriation and appealed the central government to scale back the city councils plans. Mark Healey's study of the 1944 San Juan earthquake shows that the city's winery elite blunted Juan Perón's most radical and transformative visions for reconstruction. Perón wanted to remake the city to reflect his new national program of social justice. Local elites, however, blamed the destruction on the use of adobe as the principal building material. They called for a strictly enforced building code that only allowed structures built with reinforced concrete, an expensive proposition for many *sanjuaninos*. After 1948, the building code was eased, allowing the countryside to be rebuilt with adobe. While concrete buildings helped to modernize the provincial capital, the country side's use of adobe deepened the divide between the urban and rural sectors. Paul J. Dosal demonstrates that the Somoza regime viewed the 1972 Managua earthquake as a means to free them from old traditions and an opportunity for small businesses to be established, detached from the wealthy downtown business owners. This new decentralized Managua, proposed by Somoza also happened to politically and economically enrich the ruling family. Louise E. Walker, using newly declassified Federal Security documents shows how the middle-class residents of Tlatelolco mobilized to gain a greater voice in rebuilding after the 1985 Mexico City earthquake. Inhabitants reached an agreement with the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) that allowed the residents input on which buildings should be demolished, those that would be repaired, and the pace of reconstruction.

Disaster survivors often look to religion for meaning, comfort, or to make sense of such a materially and humanly destructive event. After the 1746 earthquake, Limeños interpreted the event as God's punishment for the sinful ways of the wealthy and governing classes. Charles Walker, using inquisition records, examines the visions of religious women that prophesied the future destruction of Lima because the city had not heeded the 1746 quake as a warning. Historians have interpreted this religious outpouring as a manifestation of the cities baroque religiosity

and declining political and economic position. Contemporary accounts, according to Walker, note that Limeños blamed the political and social stagnation of the city and its possible future destruction on the urban center's sinful lifestyle. The women's visions created a panic but were not millenarian or political in nature. Instead these premonitions expressed great concern about women's independent ways and risqué clothing and the religious orders decadence. Similarly, Stuart McCook notes that the temblor that struck newly independent Venezuela in 1812 during the wars for independence unleashed a wave of religious fervor on both the royalist and patriot sides. Both parties attempted to politicize the religious exuberance but ultimately failed. A purely religious explanation for the shift in the population's loyalties after the tremor from patriot to royalist ignores material incentives. McCook argues that a string of royalist victories brought them more support; the independent Venezuelan government already faced financial pressures and was unable to provide sufficient relief due to the lack of resources; and the temblor led to the suspension of congress and the rise of Francisco Miranda's dictatorial powers that broke up the fragile republic coalition. The essays on Valparaíso, San Juan, Managua, and Mexico City earthquakes highlights the transition from religious to secular understandings of disasters during the twentieth century, Guatemalans, by contrast, continued to view the 1976 earthquake through a religious lens. The conservative Catholic Church hierarchy interpreted the 1976 temblor as God's punishment for the popular masses participation in demonstrations, strikes, and radical mobilizations against the government. Many Guatemalans echoed these conclusions. The archbishop worried that the activist Catholic clergy and lay grass roots organizations would spread liberation theology among the poor. As a result, the archbishop channeled Catholic relief through traditional organizations that did not reach the rural poor or urban workers. In addition, the government's repression of Catholic activist clergy and laity also helped to push many rural Guatemalans into the arms of United States based Protestant groups. The migration to urban areas also contributed to the growth of evangelical churches because they were one of the few voluntary associations open to the masses that provided assistance and adjustment to city life.

Catastrophes also reveal social and economic fault lines. Martland notes the Chilean authorities' fear of a general social uprising in the aftermath of the 1906 Valparaíso quake. The government harshly cracked down on any suspected and or convicted criminals. Porteño society also formed extraordinary disaster communities. Survivor accounts noted some cooperation between rich and poor to care for the injured, provide basic services, and rebuild the city. The potential for social upheaval and tumult spurred state authorities to provide prompt assistance. Natural disasters do not affect all classes of society equally and have political and social consequences. The 1972 Managua earthquake highlighted the inefficient, corrupt and repressive response of the Somoza clan, which quickly turned the middle class from supporters of the regime into either bystanders or pushed them into the Sandinista camp. Garrard-Burnett points out that the 1976 Guatemalan earthquake served "as a detonator of revolution" (p. 162). The Guatemalan government through the bureaucracy, private groups, and wealthy families distributed relief to maintain the regime's loyal supporters. The armed left used the disaster as an opportunity to gain new recruits and revitalize the guerrilla movement in areas most neglected by the government. The 1985 Mexico City earthquake also revealed tensions within the popular protest movement, as poor and working-class neighborhoods felt forgotten because the media focused on middle-class areas. Furthermore, the middle class looked down on the urban proletariat and the workers often

viewed the middle class as having a sense entitlement. The PRI, however, worried most about the middle class deserting the party because of the austerity program implemented to deal with Mexico's debt crisis and their political mobilization against the government because of its poor response to the relief effort and reconstruction plans.

This anthology is a welcome addition to the growing literature on disasters in Latin America. It takes a number of regional case studies and places them in a larger comparative and longitudinal framework. As a result, this volume illuminates historical trends such as the development of the state, the continuities between a government's poor disaster response and political mobilization of the masses, and religious explanations of natural disasters. This historical perspective not only adds to various national historiographies and the burgeoning field of environmental history but contributes to the disasters studies literature where projects often analyze lonely case studies that isolate disasters as singular events.