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Mind the Gap

Review by Brendan Tuttle

SUSANNA M. HOFFMAN and ROBERTO E. BARRIOS, 2020, Disaster upon Disaster: Exploring the Gap between Knowledge, Policy & Practice, New York: Berghahn Books, 343 pp., ISBN 9781789203455

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"*Disaster upon Disaster*," a collection of essays edited by Susanna Hoffman and Roberto Barrios, examines disjunctures and gaps between anthropological knowledge and the policies and practices of states and NGOs that address risk, hazards, and disasters. This volume is the latest of a series of excellent collaborative projects—*The Angry Earth* (Oliver-Smith and Hoffman, 1999), *Catastrophe and Culture* (Hoffman and Oliver-Smith, 2002), *Contextualizing Disaster* (Button and Schuller, 2016)—that have demonstrated what anthropology can offer to the study of disaster. The overriding theme of this literature is that traditional distinctions between "natural" and anthropogenic catastrophes are profoundly deceptive: even those events whose origins are most remote from human activity (volcanic eruptions, tsunamis) have deep social histories. Hazards affect communities through specific pathways of risk and vulnerability. These pathways may be broadly shaped by such general factors as latitude, elevation, and coastal proximity, but any particular disastrous outcome owes more to the unique social histories of places than to the passages worn by nature's laws. Since William Torry's 1979 review of "Anthropological Studies in Hazardous Environment," which urged applied research "to narrow information gaps," anthropologists have produced a large body of work showing how "social preconditions"—the intersections of class, gender, race, land-use and settlement patterns, and other factors—distribute risk unevenly. Yet little seems to get through to "doers on the ground,"

Hoffman observes in the book's introduction (p.3); responses led by governments, agencies, and NGOs have often not only failed to produce desired outcomes, but have also amplified risk exposure, unraveled structures of mutual aid, sharpened divisions within communities, disrupted livelihoods, undermined principals of everyday solidarity and care, and otherwise left people more vulnerable than before.

Why has so little gotten through? "*Disaster upon Disaster*" provides an extended discussion of this question through studies of the triangular relations between three broad social fields: what anthropologists have learned about hazards and disasters; what experience gets into manuals, checklists, standard operating procedures, guides, minimum standards, and policy documents; and what is actually done by people who have been given the task of responding to disasters. After an introduction (by the editor, Susanna Hoffman) the volume is divided into three parts: five chapters about disaster risk reduction and management; five chapters on the social distribution of risk; and three big-picture chapters about the future of disaster studies.

The first part consists of five essays about how the knowledge, policy, and practice of disaster risk management are connected and integrated, or not integrated, by human actors. In the first essay, Roberto Barrios describes how the Ingrid-Manuel disaster arrived by way of entanglements between local political culture and capitalist tourist development, which led officials to disregard risk maps and allow the construction of formal and informal settlements in flood-prone areas. Efforts to fill gaps can create new ones. Barrios describes how technicians attached to Mexico's National Center for Disaster Prevention and researchers from the National Autonomous University of Mexico inadvertently created gendered gaps when they sought to address a gap in governance by creating alternative connections. "A good share of my ethnographic experience involved moments of gendered bonding among predominantly male scientists whose social bonds are key to effectively disseminating and circulating disaster risk knowledge" (p.31-2). Two chapters (by Terry Jeggle and Stephen Bender, respectively) provide an overview of disaster risk management, global advocacy, efforts to institutionalize disaster risk management, and the lack of investment in risk reduction. "Few disaster defined service organizations possess sufficient political authority to command a national commitment to invoke combined interministerial actions to address broader environmental, climate, or emergent risks,"

Jeggle writes (p.61). The result is that disaster management tends to be organized around immediate relief, rather than long-term risk reduction. What disaster management services actually exist tend to be concentrated in population centers, leaving outlying areas poorly served. Two chapters explore the practical challenges faced by humanitarian workers when they attempt to connect policy and implementation. Adam Koons describes dilemmas stemming from gaps between "local context" and the guidance provided by informal mandates, policy frameworks, minimum standards in humanitarian response, and so forth, which can never address every circumstance an aid worker encounters. Some gaps, he notes, are produced by modifications made to standards to better fit them to local circumstances, available resources, and recipients' own priorities and needs. The final chapter, by Jane Murphy Thomas, an anthropologist specializing in community participation, provides a close-up view of brokering and how it can be derailed by power struggles large and small.

A second set of essays focuses on vulnerability and the distribution of risk. Two concern resettlement for risk reduction. Shirley J. Fiske and Elizabeth Marino provide a discussion about slow-onset sea level rise, which intensifies existing vulnerabilities and compounds the problem of disaster relief-oriented organizations by arriving with a slow crescendo of erosion and rising tides, rather than a crash. Despite the evident need to respond to the flood-vulnerabilities of low-lying coastal communities, actual state support for relocation or mitigation for whole communities (rather than individual property owners) is largely non-existent. Anthony Oliver Smith discusses the use of resettlement for disaster risk reduction and how top-down initiatives, (and the notion that "resettlement is … just picking up communities and setting them down somewhere else"), have led planners to "perceive the culture of uprooted people as an obstacle to success, rather than as a resource" (p.212). Brenda D. Phillips writes about how differential outcomes reveal gendered vulnerabilities, as well as some of the strategies that have been used to "disrupt" these outcomes. Ryo Morimoto discusses the surprising ways that decontamination work in the vicinity of Fukushima has "made the fact of the nuclear disaster more sensible than ever before" by making the disaster visible and containable, in black radioisotope waste bags. Mark Schuller contributes "Haitians Need to Be Patient," the final chapter in this section, which describes advocacy efforts in Washington DC and how difficulties related to language, obtaining

visas, accessing NGO funds for travel, and getting the attention of policy-makers sharply limits who ends up representing knowledge about Haiti.

The final set of three essays center on insights that anthropology can contribute to the study of disasters (Hoffman), professional divisions between academics and practitioners (Katherine Brown, Elizabeth Marino, Heather Lazrus, & Keely Maxwell), and the kinds of futures that disaster management practices are creating versus those that we might wish to create instead (Ann Bergman).

"Local participation"—or, really, the very problematic nature of this concept in contexts of disaster response—is a common theme that runs through the entire collection. Anthropologists might seem well positioned to provide an intellectual forum for thinking through some of these issues, but many are understandably reluctant to engage. Our discipline was made possible by brutal schemes of conquest, which were often justified as humanitarian undertakings. And it is not hard to see why contemporary aid often vividly recalls earlier occupations. Mark Duffield (2010) has written about the rise of "fortified aid compounds," whose well-paid residents rarely venture out, living like passengers on a ship with all their provisions carried from outside. With concertina wire, high cement walls, and sand-bagged bunkers, these structures embody an anti-democratic political structure that privileges the safety of foreign aid workers over those who reside outside the compound walls, discouraging "local participation" in decision-making, and highlighting the discrepancy between what humanitarian agencies spend on the care and protection of their foreign staff and what they spent to protect a country's other residents. There is considerable work to be done and learned here. One hopes that this volume will inspire more scholarly engagement.

"*Disaster upon Disaster*" is written in an accessible language and admirably avoids most of the features of academic discourse (reading different points of view in the least charitable ways possible) and humanitarian discourse (acronyms, impenetrable jargon) that produce and maintain gaps between academic anthropologists and their applied colleagues. Readers are presented with a fairly wide range of theoretical approaches, and the authors make a number of concrete suggestions for improvements.

References

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