

The Culture of Calamity: Disaster and the Making of Modern America. Kevin Rozario, 2007, Chicago: University of Chicago Press

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This cultural history of disasters in the United States seeks to make sense of the ubiquitous images of disaster in popular news and entertainment media, and thereby to illuminate the ways disasters have been viewed throughout our history. Of course, it does much more, adding detail and interest to the narratives of events that serve to develop and illustrate the author's points. It is thoroughly readable and exhaustively footnoted; the notes consume nearly one hundred of its 311 pages.

Rozario mentions two possible reasons for the "general psychological addiction" (p. 2) to disasters. First, there is the evolutionary psychology explanation, which relates disasters to the adrenaline rush produced by the fight or flight syndrome. The second explanation emphasizes the attraction that fantasies of destruction are believed to exert on the unconscious. He accepts that both of these explanations may have some relevance, but he seeks to explore the "catastrophic logic of modernity" (p. 10). As he puts it, the "dominant political and economic systems have long relied for their authority and legitimacy on the presence or threat of calamities and other crises" (p. 2), but the hold of disasters on the social, political and economic life of the US deserves particular attention.

It is evident that disasters have frequently had positive effects in addition to more widely recognized negative ones. However, as always, the question is who gains and who loses? Modernization promises to make us more secure, but uses boom and bust, destruction and construction patterns of development, leaving winners and losers in their wake. Politico/economic elites "have often viewed disasters as sources of moral, political, and economic renewal" (p. 3). This is not antithetical to the earlier belief that disasters are acts of God (or the gods), serving to punish wrongdoing and guide improved (more spiritual) behavior in the future.

In an eerie echo of George W. Bush's take on the events of September 11 2001, Rozario writes that disasters "make things happen. They matter. At the same time they seem to simplify an otherwise intolerably complicated world, seemingly revealing dualisms of good and evil or right and wrong that are so hard to identify in the ordinary run of events. Thus, disaster presents a chance to overcome some of the inertia that inhibits decisive action" (p. 8).

And further, "[e]ven as disasters have become entertaining spectacles, they have also laid the cultural groundwork for the expansion of a powerful national security apparatus...one of the most important developments of our time [is] the morphing of a

national security state into what might better be described as a disaster-security state in which official and semiofficial agencies have come to wield extraordinary power—all in the name of disaster prevention and relief” (p. 9). Thus emergency management is “necessary and unavoidable.”

Recognizing that the “American” view of and response to disasters is neither unique nor new, the Introduction contains an examination of the 1775 earthquake in Lisbon. This event, according to Rozario, saw the first articulation of modernity as rational improvement and as an economic organizing principle, as well as of “modernism,” a romantic interest in the sensational as an antidote to the alienation and banality of modern (secularized) life (p. 14).

The seemingly random nature of the death and destruction caused by the earthquake overturned facile acceptance of disasters as God’s will, intended to punish evil or otherwise promote his mysterious plans that are incomprehensible to mere humans. Voltaire and other humanists believed that the “only ethical response to any calamity was to act, to treat the wounds of sufferers, and to rebuild the ruins,” (p. 14)—placing the focus on individuals rather than on collective guilt or cosmic plans.

In fact, the earthquake did clear out sections of the city, leaving it ready for the Marquês de Pombal’s urban redevelopment project, including earthquake resistant buildings, broad Hausmann-style boulevards and other improvements. This reinforced Rousseau’s view that disasters could lead to social benefits even if individuals suffered. Their suffering was caused by reckless disregard of the laws of nature—evident in the crowded tall buildings Lisbon lost in the quake—rather than by God’s wrath poured out on the sinning population. The Lisbon earthquake thus illustrates three themes of modernity: “We find extravagant modern hopes for the happy and secure world that could be achieved by pitting science and reason against calamity. We find catastrophe as the projected and feared outcome of modernity. And we find a world-weariness to which exciting images of calamity would seem to promise at least a temporary release” (p. 20).

Chapters One through Three relate the first three centuries of disasters in the US, beginning in New England. Religious leaders were prone to use disasters as a way to increase devotion (and the size of their flocks)—the “fatherly correction” perspective, based on the covenant relationship of God and the Pilgrims. Some went further, subscribing to millenarian view of disasters as portents of the end times and Christ’s return.

The interpretation of the Boston fire of 1676 was contested between those who celebrated the loss of seductive material goods and the timely reminder of God’s judgment on sinners on the one hand, and those who concentrated on natural explanations (a careless apprentice combined with close crammed wooden buildings) mitigated by the divine blessing of a timely rainstorm on the other.

This and other disasters (especially fires) substantially increased the powers given to city governments in order to control such matters as building materials (brick rather than

wood, slate rather than thatched roofs), the maintenance of ladders and water, and the cleaning of chimneys. Disaster relief meanwhile served both spiritual and social purposes, by allowing the more fortunate to practice charity, thereby reducing unrest among the afflicted.

The book relates many interesting facts, such as the appropriation of fifty thousand dollars for aid to victims of a Venezuelan earthquake in 1812 in which twenty thousand people were killed. This aid, in turn, inspired relief for the New Madrid victims that would have been deemed illegal for a state (Missouri was a territory at the time). The aid was in the form of a land swap scheme that ended up helping speculators more than victims.

Even in these early days, it was evident that “disasters facilitated government activism and tipped the legal and political balance away from individual rights to a public interest defined in security terms” (p. 63). The New York fire of 1835 cleared out seventeen blocks of downtown Manhattan, allowing for the type of urban redevelopment familiar from Lisbon. The fire insurance industry was already instrumental in pushing building codes and safety standards, while continuing to promote capital accumulation and risk taking behavior.

The San Francisco earthquake and fire reinforced many of these trends. For example, the belief in destruction as a precursor to creation and an important element of capitalist economic development. This event also accelerated the trend of disasters serving as entertainment and tourism boosters, both for victims (at least those who survived and had access to resources for rebuilding) and for the consumers of disaster chronicles, disaster photographs, Coney Island’s disaster-themed rides, and the many popular reenactments, movies and lectures about disasters.

Chapter 4 relates the story, well known to most readers of this journal, of federal disaster management. Unsurprisingly, the conclusion is “Public policy has been largely improvised in response to specific calamities and in differing political contexts, and lacks an overarching coherence or clarity of purpose.” We are left with “patterns of development that create conditions for future disasters” (p. 169).

In Chapter 5, “The ends of disaster,” Rozario focuses on the meanings ascribed to 9/11 and the integration of the event into national policy in the form of a “disaster-security state” (p. 179). In spite of Anthony Lane’s protests in his *New Yorker* essay titled *This Is Not a Movie*, the event was easily incorporated into the entertainment narrative. It even prompted a revival, if any was needed, of the millenarian and jeremiad rhetoric used by evangelical Christians. This view had already been primed by the *Left Behind* series of novels and the accompanying movie to think in terms of a cosmic battle between forces of good and evil—a near Manichean theology that would have horrified earlier generations of Protestants.

Political leaders since 2001 have reified 9/11, seeking to institutionalize it and their responses to it, however ill considered. Indeed, the flood of media coverage following the

events of September 11th 2001 did not diminish the ignorance and naiveté of US citizens. This was partly because the media were crippled by their own prior decisions to reduce news staff and partly because they quickly found that the most jingoistic reading of 9/11 sold well.

Finally, the epilogue covers Hurricane Katrina and provides one more narrative of the ideologically driven incompetence that caused the disaster, and hampered effective emergency response and recovery. Interestingly, we have come to a new understanding of disasters as consequences of sin, this time sins against the earth rather than sins against heaven. Thus, many authors have linked the tragic results of Katrina to the misguided policies of the Army Corps of Engineers and the overly developmentalist policies of state and local government. We now await the political reckoning called for by, of all things, *US News and World Report*, following the indictment of economic modernization policies driven by the promotion of consumption coupled with the withering away of the government and its power to provide for the common welfare. Ironically, the latter is being brought about not by the arrival of a communist utopia but by the triumph of unfettered capitalism.

This is one of the most interesting books on disasters in recent years and must be added to the shelf of any serious disaster researcher. It is appropriate for graduate-level courses and will be consulted and re-read many times by scholars of disasters as well as of US history.