Policy Studies Organization

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Review of Managing Disasters and Disasters and the American State

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They wonder if Strauss’s dismissal of the Platonic theory of ideas as central to Platonic thought can be sustained. They wonder if Aristotle’s science of politics can be understood apart from his teleological understanding of nature, as Strauss seemed to suggest it could. They wonder if Strauss’s understanding of the conflict between philosophy and law characteristic of medieval Islamic philosophy adversely affected his reading of the ancient Greek and Roman philosophers who had no contact with Jewish law. And they wonder if Strauss’s claim that Machiavelli was a “philosopher” in the Socratic-Platonic tradition can be accurate.

To this list of claims by Strauss that need reexamination another should be added, perhaps the most fundamental of them all from Strauss’s point of view: the assertion of an ineluctable tension between philosophy and the city, and of the related tension between Athens and Jerusalem. In fact, much of Strauss’s understanding of the history of political philosophy emerges out of these fundamental claims.

No one, of course, doubts that such tensions exist, but the question is whether Strauss has characterized them accurately. Is the city in fact well served by unquestioning faith? Plato’s ideal city teaches noble lies to its young, but its rulers are wise by hypothesis. The rulers of actual cities almost never are. To what degree were the city fathers of Athens, for example, acting wisely when they punished Socrates? How much, on the other hand, were they acting out of baser motives, ignorance, or mere superstition? How one answers such questions will determine the extent to which one considers esotericism essential to the philosophical life and to the art of philosophical writing. Finally, is the related tension Strauss seeks to restore between Athens and Jerusalem really the secret of Western civilization? Is the God of revelation as voluntaristic as Strauss claims, without any features of the transcendent idea of the Good that we find in Plato’s Republic or of Aristotle’s mind that thinks itself? And does the God of the Bible in fact demand unquestioning faith (see, e.g., Gen. 18:16–33, Job 21, 42:7, Matt. 7:7–8)?

The Zuckerts are inviting readers to learn about, consider, and even challenge Strauss’s ideas and his interpretations of ancient texts. This formidable task requires an adequate understanding of his work; Leo Strauss and the Problem of Political Philosophy is an invaluable aid in getting us there.

**AMERICAN POLITICS**


—Daniel P. Aldrich, Northeastern University

The compounded disaster in Tohoku, Japan, on March 11, 2011, showed the world how even the most advanced, industrialized countries remain vulnerable to hazards. Beyond the 18,000 lives taken by the 60+ foot tsunami that struck Japan’s northeast coast, some 40,000 residents from towns around the Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear prefecture remain evacuees four years later due to radioactive contamination. An additional 80,000 people across the region are still in temporary housing units due to a lack of permanent homes. Scholars have underscored how the economic and human costs from disasters will only continue to rise with the anthropogenic climate change and increasing urbanization in population-dense, low-lying coastal areas such as Bangladesh, Boston, Mumbai, New York, Shenzen, and Tokyo. These two new books tackle the topic of disaster management and response from very different angles but share a focus on the role of public- and private-sector institutions in managing crises. Both works suggest that the United States should attempt a more optimal balance among private, public, and local actors than can be found in current disaster management systems.

When large-scale disasters such as Hurricane Katrina strike, most U.S. residents believe that the federal government will provide medical assistance along with food, water, and recovery aid. When relevant agencies are slow to respond, standing presidents may face electoral consequences. But this was not always the case. Patrick Roberts’s Disasters and the American State shows how our expectations for the federal government’s role in disaster response and management have shifted tremendously over time. Initially, the public expected very little from the federal government in terms of its role in disaster policy. Presidents and federal agencies, for example, were not involved in responding to the 1881 Great Fire in Michigan that left 5,000 homeless or the 1889 Johnstown flood that killed more than 2,200 (more than Hurricane Katrina). In both cases, the Red Cross organized relief efforts. However, over time, the “incremental development of statutes, administrative action, and political interpretation” (p. 8) created new norms concerning disaster management. Politics and global events—especially the advent of World Wars I and II—built new “civil defense” agencies, which, while well funded, struggled to define precise goals (p. 61). Civil defense structures—many of which were built with the fallout from nuclear weapons in mind—later came to
serve “double duty” against tornadoes and other natural hazards as agency mandates expanded. Even though the actual effectiveness of many civil defense programs was low, once they were in place, path dependence, the stickiness of U.S. political institutions, and increasing federal claims about the country’s capacity to protect citizens meant that dismantling the programs was impossible. Potential victims came to see the federal government, and not themselves, private firms, or local governments, as the responsible party for responding to crises.

Beginning with the creation in 1979 of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), which combined hundreds of disaster response programs from multiple agencies into a single body, and with the passing of the Stafford Act in 1988, the government has sought to define its role in disaster response and recovery. The logic of centralization, bureaucratic autonomy, and increasing expectations institutionalized the federal government’s role in disaster in the Stafford Act: It would take on 75% of the cost of disaster response costs, with the local governments assuming the rest of the burden. Critics pointed out that, counterintuitively, the Stafford Act meant that mitigation dollars could only be spent after disaster and that FEMA itself could not deliver relief until the president made a disaster or emergency declaration. Furthermore, the actual authority for programs and decisions that decisively shape hazard exposure and risk—such as land use and zoning—sits in the hands of local and state agencies (p. 177). With the arrival of the twenty-first century, the U.S. public firmly believes that the nation-state will save us during catastrophe.

Where Roberts’s book demonstrates the source of our over-reliance on federal agencies like FEMA, Managing Disasters through Public—Private Partnerships uses historical case studies to suggest a new, more inclusive framework for approaching disaster mitigation and response. Ami Abou-Bakr’s research rests on the reality that private-sector, not public-sector, organizations control some 85% of critical infrastructure, including power plants, rail systems, hospitals, food production, financial services, telecommunications, and chemical industry facilities. Damage to any of these sectors by terrorism or natural disasters could result in widespread ripple effects across our society. Recently, the FBI has been investigating, for the eleventh time, the vandals targeting Internet traffic into San Francisco’s Bay Area; in 2013, gunmen caused more than $15 million in damage by firing automatic weapons at an electrical substation outside San Jose, California. In both cases, private firms controlled the infrastructure under attack. Further, private-sector firms and big-box retailers are often better positioned to respond to crises. During the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, for example, Wal-Mart’s highly efficient logistical infrastructure was able to deliver food, water, electrical generators, and other desperately needed supplies to its stores in and near flooded areas well before the federal government did. Wal-Mart sent some 2,500 containers of supplies along with free prescription drugs to the Gulf Coast; one Louisiana parish president publicly stated that “if [the] American government would have responded like Wal-Mart has responded, we wouldn’t be in this crisis” (Steven Horwitz, “Wal-Mart to the Rescue,” The Independent Review, 2009). Many private actors have integrated chains of command in combination with flexibility of response, allowing them to be more agile than national or state authorities in managing a crisis.

Integrating private-sector organizations like Wal-Mart into national disaster relief plans and actual responses has proven challenging, however; the current state of public—private partnerships (PPPs) in the field of disaster management is poor. To provide insights and a theoretical approach for building potentially more successful PPPs, Abou-Bakr uses case studies of two PPPs, one “responsive alliance” and one “strategic partnership”—the War Industries Board (WIB) and the Federal Reserve System (known colloquially as the Fed), respectively. She also carried out interviews with a number of relevant actors across the public and private sectors. With rich historical data on the workings of the WIB and the Fed, Abou-Bakr uses a framework of seven factors, including crisis, leadership, trust, and, to explain how these government–private sector collaborations respond to strain and shocks.

President Woodrow Wilson’s passing of the 1913 Federal Reserve Act set up the Fed as the “independent but within the government” (p. 103) central bank for North America. Built to provide financial system stability and contain financial market risk, the Fed is an organization composed of 12 regional banks that can pool resources during crises. It is interesting to note that the Fed adapted and has continued for more than a century despite some major failures, such as those on display during its response to the 1929 stock market crash when nearly 5,000 banks failed (p. 113). The WIB, in contrast, worked quite well but lasted only a short period of time—less than a full year. As the United States struggled to mobilize its manufacturing capacity during World War I, President Wilson set up the War Industries Board as an organizational framework for coordinating the wartime needs of the government for ammunition, weapons, and supplies with the private-sector manufacturing firms that focused all efforts on producing them. Wilson passed no legislation to set up the WIB, instead relying on the self-interest of the cooperating firms and the sense of urgency facing a nation at war. These two case studies demonstrate the importance of the nature of the crisis, the structure of...
the organization, and the shared benefits possible from the relationship, with organizational structure as the most important element (p. 189). Abou-Bakr argues that a successful public—private partnership in disaster response must have both goals, along with tools that can continue to manage the partnership as it evolves (p. 197). She suggests that the Fed itself may serve as a relevant and resilient model for decision makers looking to take disaster response and infrastructure protection seriously (p. 199).

Taken together, these books illuminate the shortcomings in our current system of disaster management. One way forward would draw on these insights to carry out two major shifts: First, decentralize both roles of and expectations about the federal government. Next, better incentivize and include not only the private sector but civil society as well. Local firms and entrepreneurs, along with geographically bounded social networks, play a critical role in the recovery process (see Virgil Henry Storr, Stefanie Haefele-Balch, and Laura E. Grube, Community Revival in the Wake of Disaster, 2015, and Daniel P. Aldrich, Building Resilience, 2012). Strong, local social networks provide resilience to major shocks, helping residents and business owners share information, mobilize collectively, and engage decision makers in decision making. Organizations like New Zealand’s Wellington Regional Emergency Management Office have sought to actively change people’s expectations about disaster response. WREMO personnel tell audiences that it is very unlikely that civil defense personnel will be able to reach victims of an earthquake or tsunami in Wellington quickly; instead, the community needs to take charge and embrace its likely role as the first responder. Devolving more flexibility and autonomy along with fiscal power to local decision makers could further empower these groups and remove false conceptions about the government’s role.

Moving to the national level, large private-sector firms that feel a sense of shared urgency, have autonomy from short-term, politically driven decisions, and are guaranteed transparency in interactions that would more likely assist the government in disaster planning on a volunteer basis. The biggest challenge here is manufacturing and sustaining a real sense of shared crisis: Politicians and decision makers typically respond only after a major shock, and even then in partisan ways. (See Andrew Healy and Neal Malhotra, “Myopic Voters and Natural Disaster Policy,” American Political Science Review, 2009, and Michael M. Bechtel and Jens Hainmueller, “How Lasting Is Voter Gratitude? An Analysis of the Short- and Long-Term Electoral Returns to Beneficial Policy,” American Journal of Political Science, 2011). A new organizational parallel to the Fed might be a way to keep the private sector actively engaged in the disaster management field over the long term. Given the likelihood of future disasters both “natural” and man-made, it is critical that we look for more holistic approaches to disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation.

By Tony Affigne, Evelyn Hu-DeHart, and Marion Orr, eds. New York: New York University Press, 2014. 320p. $89.00 cloth, $30.00 paper. doi:10.1017/S1537592715002050

— Benjamin Marquez, University of Wisconsin, Madison

Tony Affigne introduces this collection of essays with a remarkable finding: “before 1970, there was no interest at all, and not a single book was published anywhere in the United States in which the political behavior, policy, or political leadership of the nation’s Latino population were the subject.” (p. 11). Moreover, it was not until 1980 that any leading (Anglo) scholars of political behavior published an analysis which included Latinos (p. 15). The essays in this volume show how far survey research on Latinos has advanced since that time. Seventeen scholars contributed papers based on data from the Latino National Survey of 2006–2008. The authors address some basic and contested questions. Do Latinos constitute a distinct racial and ethnic group, and do they possess a sense of shared fate with other Latinos? Are they assimilating into American society or are they, as some have charged, a large, unincorporated group actively resisting integration? Depending on their findings, what are the political consequences? The book is divided into three sections: Latino Identity, Acculturation and Community, and Inter-Minority Relations. Each of these essays offer new and significant contributions while grappling with some of the more vexing theoretical and empirical problems that social scientists face when studying this complex racial and ethnic group.

How do Latinos identify in the United States? One set of articles reveals new directions in ethnic identity and attachments. For example, Jessica Lavareiga Monforti’s examination of the self-identity of immigrants finds a growing tendency to utilize pan-ethnic identities like Hispanic and Latino. Individuals vary in their tendency to utilize nation-specific identities like Dominican, Mexican American or Puerto Rican. At the same time, they do not see themselves as unconnected to other Latino subgroups. Lavareiga Monforti interprets this growing tendency as a response to societal hostility, political activism, and statutory recognition. Although the meaning and centrality of this category is by no means interchangeable among the various Latino subgroups, it is an increasingly important political and social concept. Gershon and Pantoja examine the question of individual identity as it applies to Latinos’ country of origin. Attachment to home country has traditionally been interpreted as a sign that individuals have yet to adjust and assimilate into American society—a point of contention in today’s divisive political climate. These ties include following events in the home country, sending remittances, participating in home country organizations, or frequent visits to the home country. Although