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Economic and Natural Disasters since 1900: A Comparative History by John Singleton, Cheltenham, UK Edward Elgar 2016, vi +247 pp.

Natural and manmade disasters continue to take their toll on developing and developed nations alike. The most visible and expensive catastrophes have included the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami which took the lives of more than 280,000 across southeast Asia, the 2005 Hurricane Katrina which shut down the city of New Orleans for months, and the 2011 earthquake tsunami, and nuclear meltdowns in Tohoku, Japan which continue until this day. Unprecedented heat waves have claimed lives in Chicago and Paris while droughts have paralyzed broad areas of the Sahel in Africa.

Less obvious but more deadly disasters continue claim lives and disrupt livelihoods across the world. Tobacco, for example, kills roughly 5.5 million people a year across the globe according to the Centers for Disease Control, producing far preventable casualties more than disasters and more than HIV, tuberculosis, and malaria together. Financial disasters have wiped hundreds of billions of dollars worth of savings from families and businesses alike. Singleton's slim book tackles not just disasters resulting from extreme weather and natural events but also financial meltdowns and large scale industrial accidents. By extending his cases to include disasters beyond those caused by extreme weather, Singleton builds on recognition that the phrase "man made" or "act of God" is misleading (Steinberg 2000).

The core innovation of the book is a focus not just on the well covered moments of crisis (such as a levee breaching in New Orleans or hydrogen explosions at a the Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear reactors). He also focuses on the initiation or "trigger" moments which preceded these disasters and the recoveries, politics and blame which inevitably follow them. Singleton expands upon the simplistic disaster cycle framework of mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery endorsed by the National Governors' Association (13) to create a theoretical, historical framework for analysis of catastrophes and crises of all types. His broader model of the disaster cycle includes a triggering event, sensemaking (that is, how contemporaries understood what happened), the disaster itself, rescue and relief, allocating blame (which groups in society would be scapegoats), recovery, mitigation and regulatory change, and then warnings (that is, recognition of the pre-disaster crisis period). Using this catch-all disaster cycle as a tool, Singleton investigates a surprisingly diverse set of events.

The book tackles Hurricane Katrina,World War I, the Great Depression (alongside recent financial meltdowns in the 21st century), mining disasters at Senghenhydd Colliery and Aberfan, and also tobacco, which has been a "disaster in slow motion" (134). His selection of cases go well beyond the standard approach to "disasters" as defined by organizations such the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED) which runs the EM-DAT international disaster database. The book is stronger precisely because he links these various types of ruinous events through his expanded disaster cycle.

In all of these Singleton is careful to look for what he calls a triggering event or events, that is, choices by actors which moved the situation towards disaster. While in some cases, such as World War I, the trigger event may have been precisely that, it is not as obvious in all crises. For example, while tobacco has been used for thousands of years, the triggering event for the broader health disaster came in the 1950s through a cluster of published studies tying tobacco use to negative outcomes and casting doubt on the product's safety (142). At that moment policymakers around the world could have sought to strictly regulate tobacco use and decrease the yearly death toll and drain on national health resources. Similarly, the book argues that economic disasters result from policymakers encouraging lending (160), stoking moral hazards (163), creating lax regulation and the financial industry taking excessive risks and maintaining low ethical standards (173). That is, no single firm can be the villain because of a drive for profit and no decision maker can play a hero by rescuing or ignoring firms in crisis.

I found his argument that "disasters usually occur within periods of crisis" (7) a helpful one to keep in mind when thinking through ongoing challenges in the early 21st century, including the recent outbreaks of the Zika virus, the civil war in Syria, and the rise of ISIS and other terrorist groups. While mainstream news, with its relatively shallow and moment-centered approach, tends to represent an epidemic like Zika as a new event, Singleton's approach would push us to look into broader trends of developing coastal property by filling in swamps, the transport of biological materials via international trade and shipping, and the overuse of pesticides. So too in thinking about the visible effects of catastrophic global warming on cities such as Miami, Mumbai, and Tokyo we would need to think back to triggering events including increasing population density in coastal urban areas, the destruction of natural barriers such as mangroves and wetlands, and the lax regulation of development.

I find a few minor issues which could have used more polishing. The book does not resonate completely with the work of social scientists who have identified the factors that lead to what Singleton calls the blame game but can also lead to its opposite, elite reinvigoration (Boin, McConnell, and T' Hart 2008). That is, not every government has suffered because of their choices during and after disaster, as George Bush did after a confused federal response to Hurricane Katrina in the fall of 2005. Instead, some politicians have been re elected on their strong showings during flooding or hurricanes. I also wanted to hear more about the mitigation mechanisms for disasters, which Singleton says include insurance and perhaps more importantly social capital. A great deal of empirical research shows that trust, social ties, and collective mobilization serve as ways to blunt the impact of crises of all kinds (Aldrich 2012). Further, other scholars have illuminated the powerful role of public private partnerships in risk regulation and mitigation, as seen through mostly successful outcomes from the presence of the Federal Reserve (Abou-Bakr 2013). These concerns do not detract from the impact of the book.

Singleton says that book has a "pessimistic conclusion" (2), namely that human behavior is typically "self interested, careless, myopic and sometimes febrile" (193). Yet Singleton's insights as seen through his disaster cycle are precisely the tool we need when thinking about our current situation. No doubt many soon-to-occur disasters are currently percolating in a period of crisis. How many avoidable deaths will occur because governments focus more on post-disaster recovery than pre-disaster mitigation and adaptation will certainly be a focus for future volumes based on Singleton's disaster cycle.

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